

# THE TIMES

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## Students get the message loud and clear: Don't text and drive

By *editor*

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By Jon Baker

 [1021LINC HS NO TEXT STOP SIGN.jpg](#) [1]

LINCOLN --- It was rather by accident how Lincoln High School Resource Officer Dave Waycott developed the idea of conducting a "Driving While Texting Awareness" program for students with licenses.

"We were doing a safety fair here at school about two weeks ago, and one student – Kyle Sexton – helped me out with it," Waycott grinned. "While we were waiting for people to come into the old middle school gym, he was in one of our carts, texting away.

"That's when a little bulb went off in my head, and I thought, 'Let's use the carts from our Drunk Busters' program (where students are shown the hazards of drinking and driving) and do another one about texting,'" he added. "I checked with the Chief (Brian Sullivan), and then (LHS Principal) Kevin McNamara. They both thought it was a great idea."

If Old River Road passers-by wondered what was happening at the main entrance Wednesday morning, it was simple, really: Waycott asked dozens of juniors and seniors, those who own licenses, to use a pedal go-cart to manage a narrow course he created, then timed them via stopwatch.

Included on that course were two stop signs, a blocked portion (due to "roadway maintenance") and a serpentine (call it a series of snake-like curves).

He then told the teens to do the same while texting, "In Rhode Island, texting while driving is illegal. Drive now, text later."

Naturally, those latter times were 20-50 seconds slower.

"The kids like this because it gets them out of class," Waycott joked during one session, attended by over 30 students as part of their scheduled physical education/health class. "It gives them a change of pace, but it's also critically important."

He cited 2008 statistics conducted by National Highway Traffic Safety Administration officials. That data revealed 5,870 people nationwide died and approximately 500,000 were injured in crashes that involved distraction.

"I had two groups come through here already, and the kids admitted they had an idea there was such a state law, but they didn't know much about it," offered Waycott, also the Lions' varsity head football coach. "They also didn't know it included texting while at a stop sign or a red light, or that the time you should remain stopped at a stop sign is three seconds.

"Most of them came through the course with no distractions – without texting – in about a minute and 10 seconds or 1:20," he added. "While texting, it added – for some – 45 seconds to a minute to their time. This is a controlled environment, and the kids have some fun, but they need to know when they use cellphones or texts, iPods or Garmin (GPS) devices in the real world, it

adds up to trouble. It could even cost you your life.

"I also explained to them that if I'm an officer on the road and see them cruise through a stop sign, and his head is off to the side, I know they're texting. I also will cite them for obedience to a stop sign, which is \$85, and for texting, which can be up to \$125. On top of that, their insurance rates will go through the roof."

He indicated the program is all about raising awareness about how dangerous texting is.

"A car weighs what? Two tons?" he stated. "They need to know they don't have full focus on the road, or of an uncoming vehicle, while texting and driving."

Senior Kristin Robinson elected to be the first of this particular group to "get behind the wheel," and Waycott clocked her at 1:17.12 for her controlled trek. As she drove with a cellphone in her palm, he timed her in 1:54.32 – and she slid through the first stop sign, then struck two small orange pylons.

PE/health teacher Mike Bedrossian called those pylons "pedestrians."

"It's definitely a bad idea," Robinson explained. "It's more of a distraction, and there are so many people doing that now on the roads. This was weird, even though I've never texted and driven, but I have used a cellphone" while behind the wheel.

"On this course, there are a lot less distractions than there are on real roads," she added. "The whole idea is, you can wait to text someone, so I think (this program) is a good idea. It lets the kids know how serious it can be. Having a police officer conduct it makes it real."

Mike Main, another senior, achieved a time of 1:21.00 during his first ride through the course.

With a cellphone in hand, however, he had more trouble, finishing in 1:49.22.

"This was different, and kind of weird," Main mentioned. "I've never driven and texted before, but that's because I know how dangerous it can be. When I first heard about this project, I thought it was stupid, but I learned a lot.

"The only time I ever use my cellphone (while driving) is when my mom calls, but she'll ask if I'm driving; she'll explain to me in a few seconds what she wants so I can get off the phone. I'll be driving and see other kids texting. I definitely notice how erratic they're going."

Jim Frost, the LHS Physical Education/Health Department Head, helped organize the program with Waycott, and he stated the tandem incorporated the new law in their lesson.

"Health and safety is part of our curriculum, and so is drunken driving," he said. "The new big thing for teens now is texting and driving. I mean, it's how kids communicate today. They don't talk on cellphones as much anymore, they're texting.

"They even write papers using that text, abbreviated language, and – as a teacher – it drives you crazy," he continued. "We're trying to get through to them they shouldn't be doing this; it's against the law. They're not being focused. I think Dave's done a great job with this. He set up the course, and he even created forms so each student knows how they did.

"When you run down the leading causes of death – heart disease, stroke and cancer – that doesn't really affect these kids. They don't think it can happen to them. This, though, is much more tangible for them. They think, 'This is something that can impact me.'"

Stated Waycott: "Hands-on stuff like this is how the kids really learn. If you're up in front of a class and teach this, kids think you're preaching to them. But when you explain it to them, and they can do it first-hand, it makes more of an impact."

Senior Aaron Gonzalez seemed to get the point.

"This scared me," he said. "It's a huge distraction. Concentrating on staying between the cones and texting, it's doable, but you shouldn't be doing it because it's not safe. You could hurt yourself or someone else (driving). This opened my eyes a lot more."

To further cement the lesson, he handed out keychains with the phrase, "Drive now, text later," and a bookmark telling students, "Any person under 18 years old who drives while using a cellphone will be fined \$50. It's the law!" and "There is a new texting law in Rhode Island ... effective Nov. 2009."

"I think it's sunk in," Waycott said as the kids trudged back to a classroom setting. "If it hasn't, they'll learn with a ticket. There are no excuses."

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