

Area students take impaired driving test

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Ridgeview High School drivers education instructor Mike Ayers holds on as sophomore Eryka Lastra drives an obstacle course wearing vision impairment goggles to simulate conditions experienced when impaired by alcohol or drugs. (The Pantagraph/STEVE SMEDLEY)

COLFAX -- During homecoming party and dance season, school administrators and state police are giving students firsthand reminders about driving safely.

Trooper Joe Dittmer, in a Drive for Life program tour of area high schools that included Lexington, Tri-Point in Cullom and Ridgeview in Colfax, let students get behind the wheel - impaired - to see what it was like.

The wheel belonged to a golf cart on the football field, and the impairment was a pair of goggles designed to simulate driving at or near the legal limit for blood alcohol for adults.

Ridgeview sophomore Treavor Taylor of Colfax said at Friday's visit to his school that he could tell the difference immediately when he put on the goggles.

"You could tell right away. It was really hard to see," the 15-year-old said.

Unimpaired, he drove a golf cart flawlessly through an obstacle course of orange cones. When he put on the goggles and tried again, down went some cones.

Some students drove over five or six cones, which Dittmer said represented lives.

Dittmer, an Illinois State Police education officer, said he sees similar results whenever he takes the program to high schools.

All 18 Ridgeview students taking driver's education at the school got a turn behind the wheel. Taking it all in from the football field's stands were the rest of the school's high school students.

Cathy Weber, assistant Ridgeview high school principal, said the event was planned in conjunction with the homecoming festivities. About 200 students and guests are expected at the homecoming dance tonight, and she wanted students to be reminded about driving safely.

She said her school held a mock accident a couple of years ago, and it tries to have such an event for the entire high school every two years to draw dramatic attention to the need for safe driving. If they happened more often, students would lose interest, she said.

Dittmer said most requests from high schools for demonstrations come during homecoming season in the early fall and again at prom time in the spring.

This week he also will visit Normal Community West High School with the "seat belt" convincer, a device that mimics an accident and reminds students of the importance of wearing seat belts. It's part of Operation Cool, which encourages safe driving practices among teens.

While the focus of the events near homecoming is on drunken driving, Dittmer reminds students of the dangers of driving distracted, which could include texting and talking on a cell phone.

The police use a variety of simulators to give the students a firsthand experience without getting hurt.

"It teaches you a lot," said Eryka Lastra, 15 a Ridgeview sophomore who tried driving the golf cart with the impairment goggles.