
Auditor's Summary

Audit of the Department of Education and the Department of Transportation's Administration of Driver Education Programs

Report No. 25-06



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TEENS UNDER 18 have been required to complete State-certified driver education to qualify for driver's licenses since January 2001. However, as noted in House Concurrent Resolution No. 125 (2022 Regular Session), many students have been unable to enroll in driver education – particularly students from neighbor islands. According to the resolution, limited opportunities have led some neighbor island students to travel to O'ahu to take driver education, while other prospective drivers delay getting their licenses until after they turn 18. The resolution asked the Auditor to examine the backlog of driver education opportunities and programs, including insufficient instructors and courses, to determine why many teens are unable to enroll in driver education, considering the Department of Education (DOE) offers driver education at public high schools throughout the state. Driver education courses are also available through commercial driving schools, but at a much higher cost: DOE charges \$10 for classroom instruction and behind-the-wheel training, while commercial schools can charge as much as \$550 to teach the same curriculum.

The resolution points out that two agencies are involved in high school driver education – DOE provides classroom instruction and behind-the-wheel training to students, and the Department of Transportation (DOT) certifies the curriculum

Without administrative rules, DOE's driver education program remains structurally incomplete, with none of the necessary details about how the department intends to provide instruction at its high schools.

used in those courses and the instructors (DOE teachers and instructors teaching at commercial driving schools) qualified to teach it. Because the two departments have distinctly different roles and responsibilities in the State's driver education program, we audited them separately, although our analyses address certain issues relevant to both departments.

Department Of Education

DOE's driver education program is incomplete, a loosely organized and inconsistent collection of school-level practices, that is incapable of being meaningfully evaluated.

DOE has offered driver education to Hawai'i teenagers for more than a half-century. When it established a statewide driver education program in 1966, the Legislature deemed the need for such instruction to be a "matter of urgency," a legislative "imperative," citing the "needless loss of human life on the highways" and noting that there is clear-cut evidence that driver education and training can reduce such loss.

The Legislature authorized DOE to establish and administer a driver education program "at each public high school in the State" through Act 42, Session Laws of Hawai'i (SLH) 1966. Such courses must be open to all state residents under age 19, including public and private school students, home-schooled teenagers, and age-eligible residents who have already graduated or are no longer in school. But the concisely worded act included none of the details necessary for the department to oversee the program. Instead, the Legislature instructed the department to provide those details, filling in the broad program outlined in the act through administrative rules.

What we found

We found, nearly 60 years later, DOE has yet to act as the Legislature directed – and expected. It has neither promulgated administrative rules that would complete the program, nor developed comprehensive internal regulations or procedures to guide its internal operations. Notably, DOE did not promulgate rules after the enactment of Act 175, SLH 1999, which changed its voluntary high school driver education program into a mandatory course for prospective drivers, thereby increasing demand. As a result, DOE's high school driver education program is incomplete, lacking adequate direction and detail. The failure to adopt rules compromises program transparency, accountability, consistency, and fairness. For example, during our audit, 35 of DOE's 68 public high schools offered driver education courses, and we found there were 35 different ways that the instruction is made available to interested students.

We additionally found DOE has no way to measure demand for its courses, which prevents the department from meeting its mandate to employ "necessary instructors" who have met all certification requirements. To calculate the number of necessary instructors, DOE would first need to set targets for how many students it intends to teach and how many classes are needed to accommodate them, as well as take into consideration areas where the classes are needed. That policy needs to be developed through rulemaking.

Why do these problems matter?

Without a complete program, there is no centralized administration and leadership. DOE has yet to establish how it intends and expects driver education to be offered at its high schools. For instance, there are no policies and procedures describing how schools ensure enrollment in the driver education program is equitable to all eligible residents, including those who do not attend the school offering the course.

The absence of consistent guidance has left schools to figure out for themselves whether to offer driver education. Surveys and interviews with principals, school-level coordinators, and driver education instructors, as well as reviews of school websites, revealed an array of different strategies for enrolling students. The distributed nature of the program has rendered DOE unable to estimate the demand for driver education, or to identify and quantify a backlog of students wanting to enroll in a driver education class.

We recommend, among other things, that DOE promulgate administrative rules that articulate the department's policy with respect to driver education in its high schools, including how it intends to provide instruction to age-eligible students, the priorities and prerequisites for enrollment, how individuals apply to enroll in a course, and consistent application procedures, including how to maintain waitlists.

Department Of Transportation

A lack of meaningful management oversight and interest in DOT's driver education program resulted in an unequal certification process for instructors and impeded efforts to expand access to students statewide.

Act 175, SLH 1999, gave DOT new responsibilities related to high school driver education, tasking the department with ensuring instruction was appropriate and standardized, and certifying driver education instructors who have fulfilled all legal requirements. DOT promulgated administrative rules that outline how student, instructor, and master trainer curricula are to be selected and certified, which went into effect in 2006. Among other things, the rules require the DOT Director to appoint task forces to select and recommend student and instructor curricula for certification, while the DOT Director has sole discretion for certifying curricula used to teach master trainers who train new instructors.

DOT is also responsible for certifying driver education instructors who have met all requirements in accordance with the department's rules, which include completion of a DOT-certified course for new instructors. DOT also processes instructors' annual and 5-year renewal applications.

What we found

Not only has the DOT Director neglected to form the required task forces, during the audit period, the director had not certified any driver education course curricula – not the student curriculum; not the instructor curriculum; and not the master trainer curriculum. The curricula are fundamental to and necessary for

the department to perform its primary responsibility of certifying instructors and ensuring students receive appropriate driver education instruction. Without any certified course curricula, DOT cannot fully comply with other legal requirements, such as issuing certificates to driver education instructors who have “successfully completed a training class certified or subsequently certified by the department.”

The lack of certified curricula created a void that a lower-level Highway Safety Specialist stepped in to fill. A lack of internal controls – along with inaction and inattention from management – enabled the specialist to perform tasks assigned explicitly to the director, exercising authority well-beyond that conferred to the department. For instance, the specialist created requirements for master trainers that effectively eliminated DOE’s internal training program, then designated three other individuals to be master trainers despite the absence of a DOT Director-certified curriculum. We were told one of the three trainers was romantically involved with the specialist; property records show the two purchased a home together in 2023.

From 2022 until the Highway Safety Specialist abruptly resigned in August 2024, those three trainers, along with the specialist, controlled who could, and could not, teach driver education in Hawai‘i. This limited DOE’s ability to have new instructors trained, and inflated DOE’s costs to do so. The specialist also intruded on how DOE could offer instruction, such as prohibiting the use of substitute teachers and imposing a 14-student cap on virtual classes. House Concurrent Resolution No. 125 specifically called out DOT’s flexibility – or lack thereof – regarding virtual classes that could expand access to driver education courses, especially for neighbor island residents.

We found insufficient supervision allowed for unequal treatment of instructors seeking renewed certificates; instructors were suspended for late renewals, or for making minor mistakes on student certificates, and were required to take a paid course from one of the specialist’s designated trainers for reinstatement. In addition to suspending instructors, the specialist directed county examiners of drivers to turn away students who presented certificates issued by suspended instructors – even certificates that had been issued while an instructor’s certification was current. When a DOE coordinator attempted to assist students whose certificates of completion had been voided, the specialist responded by first suspending, then terminating the coordinator. After a delayed and flawed proceeding, the coordinator’s termination was reversed by the DOT Director without explanation.

Why do these problems matter?

The Highway Safety Specialist’s unauthorized and unsupervised activities created havoc at both DOT and DOE. Her unequal treatment of instructors seeking renewed certificates led to reduced income for some driver education instructors, and financial gains for the three individuals she chose to be master trainers. As we reported, the Highway Safety Specialist required instructors she disciplined to pay her designated master trainers up to \$200 for refresher courses to continue their driver education jobs. The Highway Safety Specialist’s actions against instructors

also impacted students who had completed a driver education under a certified instructor who was subsequently suspended, delaying their ability to obtain a driver's license.

The Highway Safety Specialist also impeded DOE's ability to increase driver education opportunities by eliminating its internal master training program, which forced DOE to pay the DOT master trainers for new instructor training. This raised DOE's costs for training new instructors, which is paid out of the driver education fund, a special fund that uses \$2 collected from each insured vehicle in Hawai'i to support DOE's driver education and traffic safety programs.

While DOT claimed to have tried to rein in its employee, we recommend defining clearly, in writing, the roles, responsibilities, and limits of authority, as well as the Motor Vehicle Safety Office Administrator's supervisory responsibilities over anyone administering the program.

The Highway Safety Specialist's misuse of her position undermined the integrity of the program; however, just as damaging and maybe more concerning is the DOT administration's lack of presence and awareness, which allowed her to operate unchecked for so long.



[Link to the complete report:](https://files.hawaii.gov/auditor/Reports/2025/25-06.pdf)

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