

## Driving schools are put to the test



PHOTO COURTESY OF DRIVE FOR LIFE

At Drive For Life, students are run through a simulated course that often ends in a virtual crash; the goal is to allow them to learn from their mistakes.

### The key to getting and keeping your license may be picking the right instructor

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

There are a lot of driving schools out there, from large, name-brand ones to those advertising on flyers in bus shelters. But quality varies considerably, the experts warn, so do your homework before deciding. Even if you've been driving for decades, don't rest on your laurels. All drivers can benefit from advanced training, skid school and winter driving classes. Information on how to enter Ontario's Graduated Licensing System – which requires two stages to earn full driving privileges – can be found on the Ministry of Transportation's (MTO) website, or by visiting a licensing office. It's not mandatory that you learn at a school, but it's highly recommended; well-meaning parents or friends often pass along bad habits.

Many people choose by price, but be very cautious, warns **Tom Blyth**. Instructors at his school, ExExaminers, were all MTO driver examiners, and they've seen the results of cut-rate training. "You can trust the big companies, like Young Drivers of Canada, CAA, or us," he says. "They charge the most money, but they deliver the best goods. If a price is too good to be true, then it is. If it's not at least \$700, then red flags should go up." A \$199 course doesn't even cover the school's costs, he warns, and hidden fees will quickly make up the difference.

**Blyth says** a reputable school will have an MTO licence, a business licence, a clean and spacious classroom, teachers who all have valid instructor's licences from the MTO, and a car that carries a city- or region-issued plate identifying it as a driving-school vehicle. A student should be able to stay with the same instructor throughout the course. An MTO-approved course requires 25 hours of classroom time and 10 hours behind the wheel. Schools aren't required to provide you with a car in which to take your test, so ask if it's included in the price, and make sure you'll be able to drive the same car on which you learned. Warning signs can include classrooms in private homes or classes held in the car; instructors who talk on cellphones, eat in the car or who don't display their licence and picture; extra charges for gas or insurance; insufficient highway driving (a minimum of 10 times on and off is necessary, **Blyth** says); and other people in the car during the lesson.

The MTO's website has a list of schools that offer ministry-approved courses, along with those that have had their approval status revoked. If you're a new Canadian, check with MTO. Canada has reciprocal agreements on licensing standards with several countries, and you may not need to take a road test. Driver training isn't quick or cheap, but it makes a difference. Spend the extra to keep your car – and you – in one piece.

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