

## Would-be drivers shop for easy road tests



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

The DriveTest centre in Brampton has the highest failure rate in Ontario — 48.3 per cent — among those trying to get their driver's licence.

### [FAILURE RATES AT DRIVER TEST CENTRES \(MAP\)](#)

**Documents show failure rates vary wildly, from 48.3% in Brampton to 9.9% in the Soo** Dec 07, 2008 04:30 AM **DANIEL DALE** STAFF REPORTER

Ontario drivers who take their road tests in Brampton fail at nearly five times the rate of drivers in Sault Ste. Marie. Drivers who test in Oakville fail at twice the rate of drivers in Kingston. Drivers who test in north Toronto fail at twice the rate of drivers in Sarnia. Even within the GTA, drivers who test at some locations fail significantly more often than drivers at others.

The rumours that have circulated for years among the province's driver's ed students are correct: there is indeed such a thing as a relatively easy or relatively difficult place to take a road test, government figures obtained via a freedom of information request confirm. Between 2006 and the first three weeks of 2008, seven DriveTest locations in the GTA were among the 10 in the province that passed the lowest percentage of drivers.

Failure rates were highest in Brampton (48 per cent), at a since-moved location in Scarborough (47 per cent), and in Oakville (45 per cent). They were substantially lower in Oshawa (32 per cent), Burlington (27 per cent) and several non-GTA locations within easy driving distance of Toronto, such as Orillia (23 per cent) and Barrie (22 per cent).

On Nov. 18 the Liberal provincial government said it would toughen rules for young drivers. But variations in difficulty at test locations create a potentially dangerous loophole in the province's road safety regime, said driving instructors and Brian Patterson, president of the Ontario Safety League.

Since Ontario residents can take their road tests anywhere they choose, drivers can shop around for a location at which they are most likely to pass – even if driving conditions near that location are less challenging than the conditions in which they will regularly drive.

"You get a 17-year-old or 18-year-old. Just like everybody else, just like you and me, they want to pass their test. They go up to Aurora, because they hear there are a couple easy examiners, or just the test or the route itself is easy," said **Tom Blyth**, a former examiner and now owner of driving school **ExExaminers.com**.

"So they pass their test. Now they come back to Toronto after being tested in Aurora. They're immediately eligible for the 401. Even jumping onto the 400 heading south on your way home from the test in Aurora – that's not a parallel thing. That's very different."

In an email, the ministry of transportation did not agree the variation in failure rates makes the province's streets more dangerous, saying Ontario has some of the highest testing standards in the world. Drivers still have to go through all the manoeuvres and all the requirements, whether they happen to be in one part of the province or another, Transportation Minister Jim Bradley said in an interview.

Ontario drivers are required to take G1 and G2 road tests, which have been conducted since 2003 by a subsidiary of a British company. The extent to which drivers are selecting locations based on their perceived ease is difficult to determine, but five GTA instructors said a large percentage of their students do so.

More than half of 10,000 G2 tests at two non-GTA locations in 2006 were taken by GTA drivers, the provincial auditor wrote in 2007, and 66 drivers tried both locations even though they are over 300 kilometres apart. Patterson of the Ontario Safety League said some instructors talk immigrant students into paying expensive fees to rent their cars to drive to far-flung easy locations.

Some instructors even offer bad advice. Hyla Zeifman's told her to take the G1 test in Scarborough, where the failure rate was higher than it was in nearby Downsview or Aurora. "I passed," said Zeifman, 19, a Carleton University student from Thornhill. "I think I even hit a curb."

Failure rates may vary for several reasons. Most significant are differences in traffic between areas, the ministry said. Demographic factors may also contribute: GTA locations test more immigrants, some of whom struggle with Canadian driving rules. But tests themselves can also vary in difficulty. For example, some locations may run tests shorter than ministry standards, while some require parallel parking in tighter quarters, instructors said.

Patterson said he has asked the ministry "at least three times" to require drivers to take tests at locations near their homes. Ministry staff said they were unaware of talks with him and were not considering the proposal.

But Bradley said, "We would certainly not actively rule it out by any means," though he remained noncommittal.

"There's certainly an advantage for any one of us, if the test is available, to try to take it in the area in which we live because that's where we're likely to be driving most often," said Bradley, whose government was heavily criticized after announcing strict new rules for young drivers.

He added: "When safety advocates and people involved in driver training ... make suggestions to us, we take them very seriously." Ontario outsourced driver testing in 2003 to Serco Group, a British corporation that signed a 10-year, \$138 million contract with the Progressive Conservative government.

The contract requires Serco, which declined to comment for this article, to maintain a monthly failure rate within four percentage points of the average pre-agreement failure rate for that month. But the government does not force Serco to maintain specific rates at individual testing centres, the ministry said, since such rules could be perceived as quotas and cause examiners to bias their judgments.

Nonetheless, the ministry said it is working with Serco to create target failure rate ranges for each centre. The province-wide failure rate was 38 per cent for G1 tests, 32 per cent for G2 tests. Drivers' chances, however, varied depending not only on where they were tested but on which of the province's 300-odd examiners tested them.

In Brampton, for example, one examiner failed 71 per cent of G1 drivers, another examiner 44 per cent. At Downsview, one failed 61 per cent, another 23 per cent.