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SWR seniors learn dangers of texting while driving

By [Samantha Brix](#) | May 25, 2011 in [Education](#), [Featured Stories](#), [News](#)

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SAMANTHA BRIX PHOTO | Shoreham-Wading River senior Ben Dalecki tries to send a text message while driving a golf cart as Tracy Mathis of the Third Precinct yells out distracting comments from the passenger seat as part of "Driving While Informed," a program that simulates the dangers of driving while texting or intoxicated.

Ben Dalecki was cruising through the parking lot outside Shoreham-Wading River High School Tuesday when a text message popped up on his cell phone's front screen.

With one hand he clutched the wheel and with the other he flipped open his phone.

"Are you going to the prom tonight?" the text read.

He swerved in the parking lot, glancing up at the road and down at his phone while typing back "Ye10," instead of "Yes."

Fortunately for Mr. Dalecki, he wasn't driving his Chevy Astro van while texting — a move that could get him slapped with a \$150 fine and two points on his license if he was caught by a police officer.

He was driving a golf cart through a course set up in the school's parking lot during "Driving While Informed," a program that simulates the dangers of driving while texting or intoxicated.

Nearly 250 seniors drove a golf cart, with a Suffolk County police officer in the passenger seat, while wearing glasses that simulate a .125 blood alcohol level — more than three times the legal limit.

They drove through the course again while receiving text messages from another student and attempted to respond while the police officer in the passenger seat yelled "floor it!" and "turn here!" to distract the student drivers much like a friend might.

"People are texting and driving at epidemic levels," said criminal justice teacher Ruth Squillace, who developed the program with the Suffolk County Police Department's COPE Unit. "Many a student has almost taken me out in this very parking lot due to texting and driving."



SAMANTHA BRIX PHOTO | Shoreham-Wading River senior Ali Davis tries to send a text message while driving a golf cart.

Ms. Squillace ran the program for the first time last spring, but added the texting component this year.

"Though drinking and driving is a very serious issue, I feel that texting and driving is more prevalent," she explained.

Seventh Precinct school resources officer Louis Lioio said he's seen teens die after getting into car accidents caused by texting and hopes the program's hands-on experience will stop students from trying it.

"In my view, if I save one kid from dying in a car accident I've done my job," Officer Lioio said.

Police officers from the county's Highway Patrol Bureau gave students field sobriety tests and checked their blood alcohol levels using an intoxicology instrument to give students a taste of what would happen if they were caught driving while intoxicated.

Prior to the driving portion of the event, Mr. Lioio and students in Ms. Squillace's criminal justice class gave a presentation on the legal consequences of distracted and drunk driving, and how each impairs

driving abilities.

Students told their peers that distracted drivers account for 80 percent of car accidents in the state, and 33 percent of accidents involve a drunk driver. They said drivers are four times more likely to crash their cars and cause injuries to themselves and others when they're texting.

Ben said he never texts while he drives and he pledged not to since he saw an episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" examining the dangers of using cell phones while driving. But a bunch of his friends send text messages while driving, and he said this program will likely make them think twice.

"It's one thing to hear statistics and hear stories about people texting and driving, but it's another to actually text and drive," he said, as classmates in golf carts demolished orange cones while trying to text. "I think this will scare people out of it."

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 **OTTER** | 1 day ago

I think this effort will help young drivers get the message. It has to start with the end user, the driver...deciding not to partake in distracted driving and this will help drive that message home.

I also decided to do something about teen (and adult) distracted driving after my three year old daughter was nearly run down right in front of me by a texting driver. Instead of a shackle that locks down phones and alienates the user (especially teens) I built a tool for teens and their parents called OTTER that is a simple, GPS based, texting auto reply app for smartphones. It also silences call ringtones while driving unless you have a bluetooth enabled. I think if we can empower the individual then change will come to our highways now and not just our laws.

Erik Wood, owner
OTTER LLC
OTTER app

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