Established in 2002 as a pilot program to facilitate and support a peer-to-peer traffic safety intervention at a high school in San Antonio, Texas, the Teens in the Driver Seat (TDS) program has evolved to include a junior high component as well as a college edition, U in the Drivers Seat (UDS). While TDS has reached students at over 850 Texas schools, the program has also been activated in 38 other states with the largest concentration in Georgia, Nebraska, Colorado, and California. The initiative has reached more than 1.3 million youth. UDS, meanwhile, is currently active on 22 college/university campuses across Texas, led by more than 550 students who are engaging with approximately 267,000 of their peers.

This peer-to-peer initiative is administered and managed by the Youth Transportation Safety (YTS) program, with funding from several state Safety Offices and DOTs, State Farm, local metropolitan planning organizations, and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

The objective of all YTS Program elements is to leverage the influence peers have with each other to increase awareness of the primary teen driving risks or behaviors — distraction caused by electronic devices and other young passengers, driving at night/driver fatigue, speeding, lack of seat belt use, and driving impaired by alcohol and/or other drugs — as well as their inexperience in the driving environment and how to take action to protect themselves.

TDS and UDS are fully youth-led, year-round initiatives that are grounded in positive peer-to-peer messaging that promotes community service and leadership along with the use of incentives to reward good driver and passenger behavior. The programs do not employ scare tactics and use only positive, teen-driven and delivered messaging. While regional YTS staff are available to provide help and guidance upon request, the goal is to minimize the adult fingerprints so the program remains credible to teens.

Teens also guide the programs’ future direction and content through TDS and UDS advisory boards composed of high school and college students. Any new program initiatives either originate from or are thoroughly vetted by these boards prior to implementation. TDS’ 70 board members (representing eight states) meet quarterly and at the annual TDS Summit, while UDS’ 10 board members (all Texas-based) meet monthly via conference call or Skype.

Incentives and competitions help generate excitement and bolster teen engagement. For example, student teams earn points for school and community-based activities they lead and/or participate in over a 12-month period. That includes use of the TDS app, which enables users to earn points for miles they log as undistracted drivers.
The TDS Program is having a positive influence among teens at schools where the program has longevity and consistent activity. While the general levels of improvement over time are positive, there is still substantial room for improving upon this progress.

The programs’ effectiveness in achieving its objectives is gauged annually through completion of a voluntary and anonymous survey that assesses student awareness of the top teen driving risks along with self-reported driving behavior. The survey has been conducted since 2007 and is the largest data set of its kind in the nation. Using strict criteria, YTS conducted an analysis of survey data (school years 2007–2015) for seven geographically diverse schools in Texas and found statistically significant improvement in risk awareness and self-reported driving behavior in nearly all areas, with the exception of driving under the influence of alcohol. The results led TDS director, Russell Henk, to conclude, “The TDS Program is having a positive influence among teens at schools where the program has longevity and consistent activity. While the general levels of improvement over time are positive, there is still substantial room for improving upon this progress.”

YTS has also been analyzing teen-collected pre- and post-observational seat belt and electronic device use data through a TDS initiative. The teen-led project includes a pre-observation, messaging and outreach, followed by a post-observation. YTS provides the data collection sheet along with technical guidance. Schools that complete and return all pre- and post-observation data receive a gift card and a customized report summarizing their results.

Data analysis indicates that both interventions are having a positive impact. Schools involved in the seat belt project for multiple years have higher pre-intervention use levels and continue to increase their belt use rates. At the same time, schools involved in the distracted driving activity for several years have lower pre-observation rates than first year schools. Analysis of data associated with the distracted driving app has indicated a statistically significant decrease in distracted driving (Munira et al., 2017).

The effectiveness of the TDS program in raising teen awareness of top driving risks, seat belt and cell phone use, and transporting their peers, along with its impact on reducing the frequency of teen driver crashes was assessed through peer reviewed research conducted by TTI staff. The analysis found significant gains in awareness and reductions in risky behaviors, along with a nearly 15 percent reduction in teen driver crashes (Geedipally et al., 2012). As a result, TDS has been honored with 10 national awards and recognized as a best safety practice for much of the past decade.