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...from the
director's chair

Weighing in on MELT

There was much fist-pumping and high-fiving when Steven Del Duca, Ontario's Minister of Transportation, announced last month that the province will be moving forward with mandatory entry-level training for Class A truck drivers. For the pro-mandatory training lobby, this long sought-after commitment was heralded as a watershed moment for the trucking industry. Del Duca's announcement came just days after the Toronto Star published a two-part story exposing the province's cut-rate driving schools which offer just enough instruction to pass the licensing test.

These so-called licence mills offer driving courses for \$999 or less, which puts them just under the \$1,000 threshold Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has set for regulated vocational training courses. This loophole exempts them from government oversight, and they flourish, many crossing the line of legality by tacking on an extra \$350 for shifting, say, or \$150 for air brake endorsement.

The government is well aware of what's happening; it has taken action against 40 or so illegal businesses in the past five years, but ministry sanctions aren't much of a deterrent. The Star's investigator found at least four of these schools still in operation; others simply close down and re-open under a new name.

The government dumps some of the blame on students who haven't checked the Ministry's Web site, where the names of illegal schools are published, to verify which ones are accredited by the province.

Blaming the student is a bit disingenuous. With the prospect of up to 33,000 job vacancies in the next five years, it's almost a no-brainer when an aspiring driver weighs the choices: a few days with 10 hours in the truck for less than a thousand bucks, or a 200-hour course, including 50 hours on-road instruction, for anywhere from \$6,000 to \$10,000?

And in any case, it's not the school that hands the driver his or her Class A licence.

The ticket to a trucking future is handed out

by the Ministry of Transportation at its DriveTest centres, in sometimes less than an hour.

In Ontario, like every other Canadian jurisdiction, testing and licensing is the responsibility of the government transportation ministry. And when you walk through the door of your local test facility, it doesn't matter whether you've graduated from the best school in the country, or from a licensing mill, because no jurisdiction has a requirement for formal driving instruction. In fact, more than half of Canada's entry-level drivers get their licence without having attended any school at all.

The Star investigator staked out the province's Woodbridge DriveTest location just north of Mississauga, the only test centre in the province dedicated exclusively to commercial trucking. There, he followed, photographed, and videotaped tractor-trailer road tests conducted over a period of weeks. His exposé, geared largely toward an ill-informed readership, was scary for even the most seasoned professionals in the industry.

"Tractor-trailer drivers earning their licenses at Ontario's busiest truck testing centre without being taken on a major expressway," the headlines screamed. According to the Star, examiners routinely take tractor-trailer drivers into quiet, low-speed industrial loops, and on no roads with speed limits 80 km/h or higher. The driving portion of the test takes only about 15 minutes, with another 45 minutes or so spent back at the facility assessing skills such as uncoupling the trailer and backing up.

The Star didn't report on the quality of the written knowledge test, the second component of the licensing exam, but any experienced driver will tell you that come renewal time, the only "knowledge" tested is whether or not you can provide the correct answers to Ontario's outdated and inadequate questions.

Licensing requirements vary across the country, and many are appallingly low. This was highlighted in research carried out several years ago by the Canadian Trucking



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Human Resources Council where they examined the commercial driver licensing regime of each Canadian jurisdiction.

The analysis was comprehensive, covering everything from medical requirements, to driver handbooks, and qualifications of the driver examiners, as well as written knowledge exams and road tests. When the results were compared against the National Occupational Standard (NOS) for an entry level driver, every province came up short. These standards, which were developed by CTHRC, describe the tasks that industry deems to be the minimum required to do the job.

Recognizing that among the thousands of skilled professionals on the road are a whole whack of incompetent others, it's hard to argue against better training. But whether or not it should be mandatory is a subject that's been long debated, and will continue to be for some time. Even if everyone votes "yes" there are so many other questions – who sets the standards, who enforces them, who pays – that I think it's safe to say we won't see mandatory entry-level training anytime soon. Bummer.

But there is one thing we shouldn't lose sight of while we're waiting. Nothing should let the provinces off the hook from fixing what's broken in their own backyards. More diligent oversight of training facilities, to be sure, and certainly more rigorous procedures when it comes to doling out Class A licences. A test tough enough to rule out those who don't have the knowledge and ability to do the job would be a good place to start.

To be fair, some provinces, notably Alberta and B.C., have recognized their shortcomings are working toward improvement. And Ontario, bless their hearts, did close the loophole that made it possible to take the road test using a pickup truck with a fifth wheel and a horse trailer.

This article first appeared in the December 2014 edition of *Truck News* and *Truck West* magazines