

The Current

New truckers in Canada aren't being trained well enough. How do we fix that?

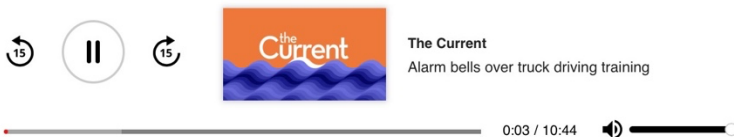
Insurance Bureau of Canada VP hopes this is a 'wake-up call' to the trucking industry and oversight bodies



[Jonathan Ore](#) · CBC Radio · Posted: Apr 25, 2024 3:00 AM CDT | Last Updated: April 25



A new report suggests there's an 'urgent' need to improve training for truck drivers, and that new drivers who have not received adequate training are making Canada's roads less safe. (Trevor Pritchard/CBC)



Twenty years ago, you'd find trucker Jacques Picotte pushing his limits — driving 16 hours straight, with only water and a bag of chips in the cab before resting at a pit stop.

Now, he's a truck driving instructor at College Boreal in Timmins, Ont. And he's proud to have built a reputation as one of its toughest teachers — even though there's wider pressure to train up and approve licences as quickly as possible to address the trucker shortage.

"We need schools that take pride in their training and put out a better driver — that's plain and simple," he told *Ideas'* Tom Howell in the radio documentary *The Way of the Trucker*.

He's not the only one. The Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC) [released](#) a report earlier this month saying similarly: that Canada needs more and better training for truck drivers — and that new drivers who haven't received adequate training are making the country's roads less safe.

Driving has become riskier over the years, Liam McGuinty, IBC's vice-president of strategy, told *The Current's* Matt Galloway. Conversations between the bureau, insurance companies and truck drivers spurred the latest report.

"We're hoping the report serves as a bit of a wake-up call on, first and foremost, inadequate training," he said.

Calls for training standardization

McGuinty said there's been an alarming trend in both the frequency and severity of collisions on the roads.

The report, released April 9, found that drivers with less training — and especially those with less than three years of experience — were more likely to be involved in collisions that also ended up in costly insurance claims, compared to those with more training and experience.



Jacques Picotte trains new truck drivers at a Timmins college for four weeks before testing them. If they pass the test, they get the 'AZ' license required to drive big trucks like this one. (Tom Howell/CBC)

It recommended better and more consistent training at truck driving schools across Canada, the adoption of a graduated licensing system, and increased use of telematics — technology such as electronic logging devices — that collect valuable data on drivers' behaviour or performance on the road.

It also noted that Mandatory Entry-Level Training (MELT), a loosely defined minimum amount for training for all truck drivers, has been implemented in some provinces, but not all of Canada.

Those minimum standards were established in [response](#) to the 2018 Humboldt Broncos crash, where a collision between the junior hockey team's bus and a semi-trailer killed 16 people.

MELT program

While experts have applauded the implementation of MELT requirements, many say that's only the first step to forging the safest possible truck driver workforce.

Its standards are only meant to enforce a mandatory minimum of training, and depending on the province, could only require a minimum number of hours behind the wheel before qualifying for a licence.

"In some jurisdictions, that's as low as 100 hours," McGuinty said.

McGuinty recommended that MELT requirements should be combined with further training regimens — such as paying a mentor driver to accompany new drivers for a period of time.

"Those entry-level training programs were never designed to fully prepare drivers for operating heavy trucks in all conditions. They just don't cover that full range of competencies required to be, you know, what we would say is road-ready."

- **Semi-trailer trucks have hit B.C. overpasses 29 times in 2 years. Most drivers just received tickets**

- **Truckers group concerned about rising collisions in north wants Ontario to crack down on its own industry**

One of MELT's weaknesses is that it's implemented provincially — but truck drivers typically travel across the country and even the continent, said Alexander Crizzle, associate professor at the University of Saskatchewan. That means they may encounter vastly different driving conditions than those in which they were initially trained.

"You can get trained in Nova Scotia, but be driving in the Northwest Territories in severe ice and snow conditions, in the mountains, et cetera," said Crizzle, who's also the director of the university's Driving Research and Simulation Laboratory.



The highway from Sudbury to Timmins, Ont., has some risky spots for truckers who must use every inch of their lane to handle curves in the road. But not every truck driver may be trained to handle all the types of dangerous road conditions across Canada, says Alexander Crizzle. (Tom Howell/CBC)

One "consistent program across Canada," he said, might better prepare new drivers for the challenges. He also said virtual driving simulations might help bridge the gap, although he noted that they would not completely replicate driving in real-life challenging road conditions.

Geoff Wood, senior vice-president of policy at the Canadian Trucking Alliance, said many of the report's recommendations are being implemented to varying degrees in the country, while broadly agreeing with its overall call to action.

"You know, we can always improve... There's a lot of good work that's already been done," Wood said.

- [Alberta truck training program is 'woefully inadequate,' says Canada's insurance bureau](#)
- [P.E.I. truckers want harsher fines for firms hiring independent contractors](#)

Trucker shortage in Canada

The call for improved trucking comes amid a years-long shortage of truck drivers in Canada, that some industry watchers speculate could have fuelled a race to certify as many drivers as possible.

The country had over 20,000 vacant driver positions last year, noted a 2023 [white paper](#) by PwC Canada, with that figure predicted to rise to 30,000 vacancies. In February 2023, then-transport minister Omar Alghabra [announced](#) a federal investment of up to \$46.3 million towards truck driver training and recruitment efforts.

The paper cited an aging workforce, demand for higher pay and difficulty attracting youth and women to the profession as the main reasons for the shortage.



Over-height vehicles have struck overpasses in B.C. 35 times since 2021, according to data from that province. (Miller Capilano Highway Services/Twitter)

As for Picotte, the trucker turned driving instructor, many of his recent students have come to Canada from overseas countries like India, Ukraine and Zimbabwe. Local trucking companies in Timmins, he said, might even pay their \$6,000 tuition — in exchange, those students agree to fill a job vacancy with the company once they're qualified.

"The college had a bad reputation before I came in. You pay the \$6,000, you get a licence," he said. "And then people started to not be happy when I started failing [students]."

Picotte emphasizes one insight in his teaching above all, obvious though it might seem: An 18-wheeler is not a small car, and should not be driven like one, even when it comes equipped with an automatic transmission and cruise control.

"You're still an 80,000-pound missile, right? That you have to take care of at all times."

With files from Arman Aghbali and Tom Howell

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/truck-driver-training-insurance-bureau-canada-1.7183448>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/humboldt-broncos-truck-driver-deportation-1.7167176>

Deportation hearing set for truck driver in Humboldt Broncos bus crash [in May]

Sidhu was sentenced to 8 years for causing 2018 crash in Saskatchewan

If anybody should be “deported,” it is the people who put Jaskirat Singh Sidhu, novice driver, behind the wheel of an ‘80,000-pound missile” and set him up for this horror. Mr. Sidhu was just doing what thousands like him had done before, trusting that he had been properly prepared for such a responsibility. Why was he to believe his fears, that he was any less capable than the many of his peers who had successfully become heavy truck drivers? I have driven big trucks, and it frightens me to see so many barreling down highways with so many drivers new to this context or of uncertain capacities.

Mr. Sidhu has a wife who has stuck by him while establishing herself in Canada. He has shown genuine remorse and conducted himself as well as anyone so challenged could ever manage. He can live out the rest of his lifelong “sentence” of guilt and censure amongst us; here he will always be known as that “negligent driver who killed all those boys.” Why penalize his wife or him any further by sending them back? His crime is more our “crime” than his. Any good he can do in trying to make amends he can do here. He looks like the kind of person who would sincerely try to do so.

TJB