

Tractor Trailer Driver Training Schools and Finishing Programs

This Reference Note discusses driver training schools and driver finishing programs operated by trucking companies.

Truck driver training schools have been in place for many years. Some schools are associated with community colleges, while others are private, for profit companies. For the most part, these operations are professionally run and turn out new drivers who have basic driving skills. Graduates can shift, steer, back, turn, and generally maneuver their truck or tractor trailer combination unit. Truck driver training schools typically prepare the student to take their Commercial Drivers License (CDL) test(s).

Basic Driver Training

Carriers should assure that the schools they hire from are certified by the Professional Truck Driver Institute (PTDI). The PTDI maintains rigid certification standards and the schools undergo periodic audits of their programs to be sure they meet those standards.

Most schools require approximately 5 to 11 weeks to complete the training. Regardless of the length of the program, certified programs must offer over 100 hours of classroom time and over 40 hours of actual behind-the-wheel driving per student. The following is representative of the curriculum at schools offering a comprehensive PTDI certified program.

Basic Operation of the Vehicle

- Introduction to trucking
- Control systems
- Vehicle inspections
- Shifting
- Backing and docking

- Coupling and uncoupling
- Vehicle systems
- Basic Controls

Safe Operating Practices

- Visual search
- Speed management
- Space management
- Night operations
- Extreme conditions

Advanced Operating Practices

- Hazard awareness
- Emergency maneuvers
- Skid control and recovery
- Passive (uncontrolled) railroad crossings

Vehicle Maintenance

- Preventative maintenance
- Diagnosing and reporting malfunctions

Non-Vehicle Programs

- Cargo handling and documentation
- Environmental issues
- Hours of service
- Accident/crash procedures
- Trip planning
- Personal health and safety
- Public and employer relations

As is evident, individuals who successfully complete this PTDI curriculum and successfully pass their CDL test(s), have a good foundation of knowledge upon which to begin their career in trucking.

Driver Finishing Programs – What Happens After Driver Training School

Driver training schools graduate individuals who are not completely “ready” to take on the job of an over the road driver. Progressive trucking companies have initiated comprehensive, formally designed, finishing programs for drivers they hire who have just obtained their CDL. A critical need is for trucking companies to carefully examine the new graduate’s background and not rely solely on the driving school’s driver qualification check.

Voluntary driver finishing standards recently established by the PTDI require:

- at least 240 hours of instruction with at least 200 of those hours on the road
- 100 hours under the direct supervision of a driver trainer in the vehicle
- driver trainers must have at least one year experience as a successful driver
- driver trainers must have competed at least 24 hours of instruction on how to train

The truck driver shortage of the late ‘90’s will undoubtedly extend into the new millennium. The Department of Labor estimates that by 2005, at least 80,000 new drivers will be needed each year to handle expected increases in shipping and retirements of baby boomers.

The Impact of Driver Finishing Programs on Turnover

Effective driver finishing programs are also important for driver retention. Placing new drivers on the road, without an effective program to introduce them to their new lifestyle and assure their competency, may be setting the new driver up for failure. Or, to leave and join another trucking company.

It is critical that in addition to the “standard” skills training during the finishing period, carriers use this time to instill safe driving habits in the new driver. The attitude of the driver trainer during the finishing period is important as well. It can establish the new driver’s attitude towards safety and the company now and in the future.

Companies that have effective finishing programs show the new driver the importance they place on quality training and safety. This goes a long way to making the new employee understand that their employer truly cares about their safety and their future.

The Importance of Qualifying Drivers Hired From Driving Schools

Some trucking companies assume that, because an individual has graduated from a driver training school, they do not need to complete their “normal” driver qualification checks. Do not make the mistaken assumption that the school, because of its own entry standards, has pre-qualified the driver.

In late 2000, a very serious crash occurred where a newly hired driver was found to have high levels of cocaine in his system. Further investigation revealed that the driver had a serious drug problem and multiple past driving offenses. Because he was hired out of a driving school, and already had his DOT medical certificate, the trucking company did not put him through their usual qualification and background checks. The loss costs on this case will be in the millions of dollars and it is expected that punitive damages will be even higher.

Trucking companies must maintain rigorous driver selection and hiring standards regardless of where their applicants come from.

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