

While most teenagers might prefer a sleep-in instead of an early morning workout, a ground-breaking program is bringing high school students in Corio together with police to break down barriers — and it's all being done before breakfast.

The Blue EDGE program, delivered by Blue Light Victoria, was first introduced in Fitzroy, Ballarat, Shepparton and Macleod in 2019, giving students aged 12 to 17 the opportunity to take part in physical training, mentoring and personal development sessions for eight weeks of the school year.

The pilot program received an overwhelmingly positive response from both students and schools, prompting Blue Light Victoria to facilitate Blue EDGE programs in four additional locations across the state.

Now the program taking place at Northern Bay College in Corio is joining the initiative's growing list of success stories.

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning, 22 students arrive at school bright and early to participate in a physical training session delivered by local fitness professionals.

The activities start at 7.15am on the dot, giving the kids between 30 and 45 minutes to participate in anything from team sports to gym classes alongside their peers.

But it's not just the students who get to work on their handball or fine-tune their forehand volley.

Blue EDGE police custodian Senior Sergeant Janet Gleeson said officers from Corio Police Station participate in every facet of the program.

"We do everything that we ask the kids to do," Sen Sgt Gleeson said.

"I'm a big believer of leading by example."

Participating officers are committed to their role as mentors, providing support, advice and guidance to the students both on and off the field.

"The physical training sessions are followed by a sit-down breakfast," Sen Sgt Gleeson said.

"It's during this time that we really get the chance to interact with the students, many of whom are dealing with complex problems in their personal lives."

Students also hear from a wide variety of guest speakers over the course of the program.

"The presentations aim to increase the kids' self-esteem, resilience and wellbeing by teaching them valuable life skills," Sen Sgt Gleeson said.

"Whether it's a session on career planning, a visit from Highway Patrol, or a discussion led by a member of the Victoria Police senior leadership team, the students are always keen to participate."

Sen Sgt Gleeson is proud of the students' efforts and has seen a significant change in their attitudes towards police over the course of the school term.

"There is definitely a shift in the students' body language between the beginning of the program and the end," she said.

"That in itself has been extremely rewarding to watch."

Blue Light Victoria president and Western Division Commander Debra Robertson said the Blue EDGE program has been a huge success so far.

"As a former student of the area, I am very proud to see such a positive response to the program," Cmdr Robertson said.

"Hearing stories about some of the adversities that the young people are experiencing is heart-breaking, but on the other hand, hearing about how this program is helping them with their confidence, friendships, schooling and family life is just amazing. Not to mention the students' change in attitude and thinking toward police. It has also been surprising to see the mental health benefit to all of the police members involved.

"A big thank you to everyone who has made this possible."

Blue Light Victoria has engaged 126 students in the Blue EDGE program so far, with plans to increase the number of schools and community partners involved over the next two years.

Image **Breaking down barriers**
Sen Sgt Janet Gleeson (second row, second from right) and her colleagues at Corio Police Station have thoroughly enjoyed participating in the Blue EDGE Program at Northern Bay College.

Editorial: **Lane Mihaljevic**
Photography: **Supplied**

