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Learners can win training package

— NIC WHITE

TOWNSVILLE high school students will get a head start on their driving hours thanks to a safe driving program.

Leighton Contractors Youth Drive Safe Initiative aims to cut Queensland's youth road toll by giving 625 learner drivers, including 125 in Townsville, five hours of RACQ professional driver training worth about \$250.

Students with valid learner's permits who turn 16 after July 15 can enter a lottery to win one of the training packages.

Professional driving sessions are worth three times the hours of other supervising drivers but cost as much as \$60 each, something many families cannot afford.

"This will take some of the pressure off families and give mum and dad some of their time back," Leighton northern region general manager Darren Weir said.

"It's also better that young drivers learn from professionals because most drivers will pass on bad habits."

Mr Weir said the program was a call to action in addressing the 'leading national issue' of road deaths among those aged 17-24, who accounted for a disproportionate 22 per cent of all Queensland fatalities last year.

"The initiative aims to create safer roads and communities by offering young learner drivers the essential practical skills and knowledge before gaining their driver's licence," he said.

Mr Weir was confident the program was making a difference, citing independent research that found last year's pilot program improved the driving ability and road safety awareness of more than 90 per cent of participants and 66 per cent were less likely to speed.

Leighton, the company that build the V8 Supercar track, hoped to expand the program across the nation.

"There's no limit to the program's growth, as long as the graph keeps going up we'll keep doing it," Mr Weir said.

Queensland Main Roads Minister Craig Wallace and Townsville City councillor Tony Parsons will launch the initiative at Townsville Civic Centre on August 7.



WHAT A FEELING . . . Claire Fallon, 16, from Townsville State High School jumps with joy at the prospect of free driving lessons as Heath Ward and Paul Spina look on *Photo: SCOTT RADFORD-CHISHOLM*