

# Review of policies and guidelines concerning adults' alcohol consumption and promotion in Australian government schools

**Bernadette M. Ward<sup>A,B,E</sup>, Penelope Buykx<sup>A,B</sup>, Geoff Munro<sup>C</sup>, Katrin Hausdorf<sup>C</sup> and John Wiggers<sup>D</sup>**

<sup>A</sup>School of Rural Health, Monash University, PO Box 666, Bendigo, Vic. 3552, Australia.

<sup>B</sup>Centre of Research Excellence in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care, Monash University, PO Box 666, Bendigo, Vic. 3552, Australia.

<sup>C</sup>Australian Drug Foundation, PO Box 818, North Melbourne, Vic. 3051, Australia.

<sup>D</sup>School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Newcastle, Locked Bag 10, Wallsend, NSW 2287, Australia.

<sup>E</sup>Corresponding author. Email: bernadette.ward@monash.edu

## Abstract

**Issue addressed:** Schools are recognised as important settings for promoting student and community wellbeing through education, policies and the modelling of behaviour. Recently, there has been controversy regarding the promotion and use of alcohol by adults at school events. The aim of this study was to examine the policy approach of all Australian jurisdictions to the possession and use of alcohol, by adults, at government school events when students are present.

**Methods:** A desktop review of Australian governments' alcohol in schools policy/guidelines documents was undertaken.

**Results:** Eighteen documents across eight jurisdictions were retrieved. There were inconsistencies between jurisdictions and lack of policy clarity regarding the promotion and/or use of alcohol by adults at events organised by schools for recreation, celebration and fundraising purposes.

**Discussion and conclusions:** Clarity is needed about the role of alcohol in Australian schools, particularly in relation to its use of alcohol when there is a duty of care to children. The possession and/or use of alcohol by adults at school events may contribute to the pervasive role of drinking in Australian social life.

**So what?** Clear and evidence-based guidelines are needed to inform school policies across all jurisdictions as to whether, when and under which circumstances it is appropriate for schools to promote and/or supply alcohol. This would also strengthen the ability of school principals and communities to make appropriate evidence-based decisions that focus on the interests of children.

**Key words:** schools, parents, children, alcohol.

Received 4 March 2014, accepted 13 July 2014, published online 9 September 2014

## Introduction

Alcohol is a causal factor in more than 60 major disease groups<sup>1</sup> and accounts for 10% of mental and substance use disorders disability-adjusted life years.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, the societal cost of alcohol-related problems is estimated to be \$15.3 billion annually.<sup>3</sup> The younger the age of initiation to alcohol use, the greater the likelihood of ongoing use, dependence and harms later in adult life.<sup>4</sup> Abstinence from alcohol is recommended as the safest option for young people under the age of 18 years.<sup>5</sup>

Environmental and societal factors that model and encourage the consumption of alcohol are significant determinants of the likelihood of an adolescent initiating and consuming alcohol.<sup>6</sup> Exposure to alcohol promotion increases the likelihood that young people will

commence or increase alcohol use.<sup>6</sup> Adult role-modelling of alcohol consumption is significantly associated with both earlier initiation and later elevated levels of alcohol use by adolescents.<sup>7</sup> Schools are recognised as important settings for promoting student and community wellbeing through both education, policies and the modelling of behaviour,<sup>8</sup> although education-focused school-based programs have limited effectiveness in reducing alcohol use by adolescents.<sup>9</sup> A broad approach<sup>10</sup> that addresses the school environment as well as the curriculum is most effective in supporting students to adopt health promoting behaviours and in reducing alcohol misuse.<sup>9</sup> The behaviours of others, and of the school organisation itself through its policies and practices, may be important factors in the success of schools in positively influencing the behaviours of students.<sup>11</sup>

A key issue for governments is establishing appropriate policies and practices with regard to alcohol use in schools.<sup>12</sup> Alcohol has a distinct presence in Australian schools and is used to generate revenue, celebrate events and for recreational purposes.<sup>12–14</sup> However, there is a lack of clear guidance regarding alcohol use in schools in order to avoid any negative influences on students. The Australian National Council on Drugs suggests that children under the age of 18 years should not be involved in alcohol fundraising,<sup>12</sup> and there is disagreement regarding the appropriateness of promotion and use of alcohol by staff and other adults at events organised by the school or in the school's name.<sup>13,14</sup> A systematic search of the literature failed to identify evidence about how current Australian state and territory education department policies address these concerns. This study was therefore undertaken to examine the policy approach of all Australian jurisdictions to the possession and use of alcohol by adults at government school events.

## Method

A desktop review of Australian state and territory education department alcohol policy/guidelines documents for government schools was undertaken. We excluded documents relating to events held on school grounds but not organised by, or held in the name of, the school. Policy documents from Australian state and territory government education departments were sought from the internet using the name of the jurisdiction and the search terms 'alcohol', 'drug', 'policy', 'education' and 'school'. 'Snowball' and 'pearling' approaches<sup>15,16</sup> were used to locate further related documents and websites. Each education department was then telephoned to confirm whether we had the correct version of each policy document, or any other relevant policy/legal documents. Using content analysis techniques,<sup>17</sup> two researchers (authors 1 and 2) independently reviewed the identified documents.

## Results

Eighteen documents relevant to the use, supply and/or sale of alcohol in school settings in eight government jurisdictions were located (ACT, Australian Capital Territory;<sup>18,19</sup> NSW, New South Wales;<sup>20,21</sup> NT, Northern Territory;<sup>22,23</sup> Qld, Queensland;<sup>24–26</sup> SA, South Australia;<sup>27,28</sup> Tas, Tasmania;<sup>29,30</sup> Vic, Victoria;<sup>31–33</sup> WA, Western Australia<sup>34</sup>). The documents include legislation, policies, procedures, guidelines, and frameworks. Document analysis identified four non-mutually exclusive categories related to the use of alcohol in schools: (1) the use of alcohol on school premises; (2) the use of alcohol for recreation purposes; (3) the use of alcohol for school celebrations and fundraising; and (4) roles and responsibilities related to alcohol use in schools.

Documents from all jurisdictions refer to adults' use of alcohol on school premises. NSW policy is the most restrictive, stating:

Alcohol must not be consumed or brought to school premises during school hours. This includes employees, students and

visitors and other people who use school premises. The consumption of alcohol is not permitted at any school function (including those conducted outside school premises) at any time when school students, from any school are present.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, Qld is the least restrictive; under 2013 legislation, alcohol is able to be supplied at some events such as school fetes without a liquor permit.<sup>25</sup> In the other jurisdictions alcohol use by adults at school functions is not explicitly prohibited, but varying guidance is provided. According to ACT, NT and Tas policy, when alcohol is used at social or fundraising events after hours, any students present are the responsibility of parents.<sup>18,29,22</sup> Victorian policy refers primarily to the use of alcohol by students, not adults,<sup>31</sup> while in WA 'in general, it is not appropriate to permit alcohol to be used on school premises, especially when children are present ... the availability and consumption of alcohol ... needs to be carefully managed.'<sup>34</sup> The SA document provides points and principles for school decision-makers to consider regarding adults' use of alcohol in schools.<sup>27</sup> Of the jurisdictions that include Aboriginal, Torres Strait and/or South Sea Islander communities with geographically defined alcohol-restricted areas (NSW, NT, Qld, SA, WA), only the NT policy explicitly bans alcohol consumption under any circumstances in schools in these communities.<sup>22</sup>

Policy in the ACT, NT, Tas, Vic and WA addresses the use of alcohol for recreation purposes, primarily in relation to school staff and/or adults with a student supervisory role. In WA, 'Schools have a duty to ensure that the supervision of children is appropriate at all times and that the reputation of the school is not damaged by inappropriate behaviour at social occasions.'<sup>34</sup> However, 'appropriateness' is subject to interpretation. In ACT, NT, and Tas staff cannot use alcohol when they have responsibility for students during or outside normal school hours (on or off school premises). In Vic, in relation to school camps, staff are advised to '... act in accordance to their duty of care to students and be aware that alcohol consumption ... is considered unwise'.<sup>31</sup>

In the ACT, NT, SA, Tas, Qld, Vic and WA, policies regarding the use of alcohol for school celebrations and fundraising are variable. Documents indicate that alcohol may be made available to parents and staff under a variety of specific conditions, such as when the principal or school council gives written approval, when relevant liquor permits are obtained and when other legal requirements such as the responsible service of alcohol are met. In Qld schools are able to supply and/or sell alcohol without a permit, during limited hours and for a period not exceeding a total of 8 hrs.<sup>25</sup>

In most jurisdictions, responsibility for decisions regarding the use of alcohol in the school rests with the principal. In Vic, these responsibilities are devolved to school councils.<sup>31</sup>

## Discussion

This study demonstrates a diverse policy approach across Australian jurisdictions to the possession and use of alcohol by adults at

government schools and events. While alcohol during school events is broadly speaking 'not permitted', many jurisdictions allow exemptions. While there is no empirical evidence regarding the extent of alcohol use by adults, or harms associated with alcohol use, at Australian government school events, recent reports suggest that this is an emerging concern that deserves further investigation.<sup>13,14</sup>

Policies in most jurisdictions do not clearly differentiate between circumstances when a duty of care to students does or does not exist. The directives regarding the use of alcohol at celebratory or recreational events are similarly unclear. For example, in the ACT schools are encouraged to seek 'parents' views on the provision of alcohol' when an event is being planned<sup>18</sup> and in Tasmania, parents should be advised whether 'alcohol will be offered'.<sup>29</sup> However, no guidance is provided for the implementation of these suggestions and it is unclear how school councils ensure that 'all legal requirements' are met when alcohol is used at school events.

The extent to which school principals and councils are equipped to make decisions regarding alcohol use or consider the available policy documents to be a sufficient basis for decision-making is unknown, nor is there evidence of specific procedures. It is of concern that much of the responsibility for interpreting the policies and guidelines rest with individuals who may not necessarily have sufficient knowledge, understanding or support to make decisions about minimum standards for the responsible service of alcohol. The Commonwealth Empowering Local Schools initiative provides financial incentives for leaders in school communities who accept increased local decision-making responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> Such a strategy may need to be complemented with investment in the training of school leaders or, at the least, practice guidelines regarding the risks associated with alcohol use. In the absence of such support, schools may be ill-equipped to manage the potential negative outcomes that may arise from adults' misuse of alcohol at school events.

Internationally, there is policy support for maximising opportunities to promote health and wellbeing in relation to the role of alcohol that extend beyond the school curriculum.<sup>36–38</sup> The findings of this study suggest that clarity is needed about the role of alcohol in Australian schools, particularly in relation to the use of alcohol when there is a duty of care to children. While there is a plethora of alcohol education programs in government school curriculums there is consensus that these alone have limited effectiveness<sup>9</sup> and that broader cultural norms about alcohol, that are reflected through adult role modelling, strongly influence young people's attitudes and use of alcohol.<sup>7</sup>

This study was restricted to documents pertaining to government schools which are currently attended by 65% of Australian school students.<sup>39</sup> Further research is needed to determine if these findings are reflected in Catholic and independent school settings. Further, the documents included in the review apply at the state or territory level which may or may not reflect policy and practice at the individual school level. Empirical evidence from both principals and school communities is needed to determine the extent of adults' use

alcohol in schools when children are present, whether schools have their own policies regarding this practice, and to what extent these are consistent with relevant education department policies and guidelines.

The documents that currently guide the use and promotion of alcohol at Australian government school events are inconsistent, ambiguous, and difficult to interpret. A consistent approach is needed to guide school communities to ensure that (1) members of school communities are able to make decisions about whether, when and under which circumstances it is appropriate for schools to promote and/or supply alcohol and (2) school principals and communities are able to make appropriate evidence-based decisions that focus on the interests of children.

## Acknowledgements

The authors thank Julie Rae for her review of an earlier version of this paper.

## References

1. World Health Organization. Global status report on alcohol and health. Geneva: WHO; 2011.
2. Degenhardt L, Whiteford HA, Ferrari AJ, Baxter AJ, Charlson FJ, Hall WD, et al. Global burden of disease attributable to illicit drug use and dependence: findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2010. *Lancet* 2013; **382**(9904): 1564–74. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61530-5
3. Collins D, Lapsley H. Counting the costs of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse to Australian society. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2008.
4. Viner RM, Taylor B. Adult outcomes of binge drinking in adolescence: findings from a UK national birth cohort. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2007; **61**: 902–7. doi:10.1136/jech.2005.038117
5. National Health and Medical Research Council. Australian Guidelines to reduce health risks from Drinking Alcohol. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2009.
6. Smith L, Foxcroft D. The effect of alcohol advertising, marketing and portrayal on drinking behaviour in young people: systematic review of prospective cohort studies. *BMC Public Health* 2009; **9**: 51. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-9-51
7. Ryan SM, Jorm AF, Lubman DL. Parenting factors associated with reduced adolescent alcohol use: a systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 2010; **44**(9): 774–83. doi:10.1080/00048674.2010.501759
8. Stewart-Brown S. What is the evidence on school health promotion in improving health or preventing disease and, specifically, what is the effectiveness of the health promoting schools approach? Copenhagen: WHO; 2006.
9. Foxcroft D, Tsertsvadze A. Universal school-based prevention programs for alcohol misuse in young people. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* CD009113. doi:10.1002/14651858.CD009113
10. Deschesnes M, Martin C, Hill AJ. Comprehensive approaches to school health promotion: how to achieve broader implementation? *Health Promot Int* 2003; **18**(4): 387–96. doi:10.1093/heapro/dag410
11. Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. Revised Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education: Foundation to Year 10. Sydney: ACARA, 2013.
12. Australian National Council on Drugs. School fundraising and alcohol Canberra: ANCD; 2011.
13. Munro G, Buykx P, Ward B, Rae J, Wiggers J. Adult drinking in Australian schools. *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2014; **38**(3): 205–6. doi:10.1111/1753-6405.12178
14. Critchley C. A beer in there. *Health Sun*, 4 August 2013: 41.
15. Horsley T, Dingwall O, Sampson M. Checking reference lists to find additional studies for systematic reviews. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2011; (86): MR000026.
16. Wong G, Pawson R, Owen L. Policy guidance on threats to legislative interventions in public health: a realist synthesis. *BMC Public Health* 2011; **11**(1): 222. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-11-222
17. Bergman M. Hermeneutic Content Analysis: Textual and Audiovisual Analyses within a Mixed Methods Framework. In: Tashakkori A, Teddlie C, editors. *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioural Research*. 2nd ed. California: Sage; 2010. pp. 385–94.

18. Australian Capital Territory Government Department of Education and Training. Policy Statement: Alcohol – Possession and Consumption in Schools and at School Related Activities Canberra, ACT, 2013.
19. *Australian Capital Territory Liquor Act 2010*.
20. Education & Communities. Drugs in School Policy. Sydney: NSW Government July 2010.
21. *New South Wales Liquor Act 2007*.
22. Department of Education and Children's Services. Alcohol consumption on Department of Education and Children's Services Premises. Darwin: Northern Territory Government, April 2013.
23. *Northern Territory of Australia Liquor Act 2012*.
24. Department of Education, Training and Employment. Drug Education and Intervention in Schools. Brisbane: Queensland Government, July 2012.
25. Liquor and Gaming (Red Tape Reduction) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2013, (2013).
26. *Queensland Liquor Act 1992*.
27. Department of Education and Children's Services. Intervention matters. Adelaide: State of South Australia; 2011.
28. *South Australian Liquor Licensing Act 1997*.
29. Department of Education. Alcohol - Schools: Tasmanian government, October 2012.
30. *Tasmanian Liquor Licensing Act 1990*.
31. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Alcohol. Melbourne: Victorian Government 2012. Available from: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/safety/Pages/alcohol.aspx> [Verified October 2013].
32. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Gifts, Benefits and Hospitality Policy. Melbourne: Victorian Government; 2013.
33. *Victorian Liquor Control Reform Act 1998*.
34. Department of Education. Alcohol on school premises. Perth: Government of Western Australia, 2011.
35. Council of Australian Governments. National Partnership Agreement on Empowering Local Schools, 2012.
36. WHO. Framework for alcohol policy in the WHO European Region. Denmark: WHO, 2006.
37. Duncan HTP, Luckenbill D, Robinson J, Wheeler L, Wooley S. Health, Mental Health and Safety Guidelines for Schools. Illinois 2004.
38. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. School-based interventions on alcohol: NICE public health guidance 72007.
39. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Students ABS. 2013. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4221.0~2013~Main+Features~Students?OpenDocument> [Verified 7 February 2014].