

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

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## 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.

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## 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.

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