# Principals’ reports of adults’ alcohol use in Australian secondary schools

## Researchers

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## Summary

The aim of this study was to: quantify and compare the extent to which alcohol is used at secondary school events when students are present; examine principals’ level of agreement with these practices; and their awareness of and support for state policies on this issue. A cross-sectional survey of 241 state government secondary school principals in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria (VIC) was conducted in November 2014 via computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

## Outcomes

Principals reported 100 events where alcohol was consumed in the presence of students at 86 schools in the previous 12 months. Twenty events were held at 15 per cent of New South Wales schools and 80 events at 57 per cent of the Victorian schools. Of the 100 reported events, 78 per cent were Year 12 graduation/valedictory dinners and 18 per cent were debutante balls. Other events included Year 10 graduations, a camp and a fete. There were an additional 42 reports of alcohol being offered as a prize for a school fundraiser. Alcohol was sold at 85 per cent, freely given at nine per cent and ‘bring your own’ (BYO) at six per cent of events.

Overall, Victorian principals were more likely to agree with adults’ use of alcohol at school events. A third of principals reported they had somewhat adequate information or were not sure they had enough information to make decisions about alcohol at school functions. Principals’ awareness, use and support of education department policy guidelines on adults’ use of alcohol at school functions were associated with the prevalence and support for such practices. New South Wales principals were more likely to be aware of the education department policy, have a policy at their own school than their Victorian counterparts. Similarly, the New South Wales principals’ reports that they have completely adequate information to make decisions about this issue were linked to reduced prevalence and support for adults’ use of alcohol at school events.

## Recommendations

This study provides valuable insights into adults’ use of alcohol at secondary school events. The differences in prevalence and support for these practices in New South Wales and Victoria may reflect the Victorian policy that provides different guidelines for functions that are held on or off school premises. In contrast, the policy in New South Wales does not permit alcohol at any school function at any time when children are present and does not differentiate between functions on or off school premises. Irrespective of the location of the event, school staff have a duty of care to ensure that students are safe; where adults are not role modelling risky drinking such as that reported at some school events. It is likely there is underreporting of adult drinking at secondary school functions when children are present because of a social desirability bias by those who did/not participate. Qualitative reports from Victorian secondary school principals suggest that adults’ alcohol use at Catholic and primary school functions may be higher than in secondary schools. Further research is needed to examine the extent of alcohol use at school events across all Australian states and territories, the extent to which safeguards are in place to protect the wellbeing of children and the effectiveness of education materials in assisting principals managing this issue.

Education departments have an important role in supporting principals’ evidence-based decision-making on this issue. The existing Australian state and territory policies about adults’ use of alcohol at school events are conflicting. Jurisdictional autonomy may be a barrier to the development of standardised liquor licencing regulations in schools. However, the development of education materials and evidence-based national guidelines could inform state and territory policies and principals seeking information and guidance on this issue.

[view the report](https://www.fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Principals-reports-of-adults-alcohol-use-in-Australian-secondary-schools.pdf)

[view the media release](https://www.fare.org.au/victorian-high-school-principals-short-served-on-alcohol-guidance/)