

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

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# Contents

<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>AIM</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>METHOD</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Study design, setting and sample .....	6
Recruitment and data collection procedures.....	6
Measures .....	6
Ethics approval .....	8
<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>8</b>
School sample and characteristics .....	8
Alcohol at events .....	8
Principals’ level of agreement with adults consuming alcohol .....	10
Awareness of policies/guidelines .....	11
Support available to principals .....	12
<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Further research/projects .....	13
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>15</b>

## Summary

The widespread use of alcohol is associated with significant harm for young people. Schools are important in the socialisation of children and host many events that connect the wider community with students. While most Australian states and territories have policies addressing the issue of adults' alcohol use at such events, they vary widely. There are anecdotal reports that adults' consume alcohol at these events but to date, this has not been quantified. 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.

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.

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.

## Introduction

Widespread use of alcohol is associated with significant harm for young people. In 2013, 26 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and older reported being a victim of an alcohol-related harm (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2014). Thirty-one per cent of Australian children under 18 years of age lived in a household with a risky drinker and 22 per cent of children were affected by the drinking of others (Laslett et al., 2015). While national surveys do not ask about the presence of children, there is substantial evidence that when parents are risky drinkers, their children are more likely to have developmental and behavioural problems and early initiation to alcohol (Dawe et al., 2007).

Schools are highly influential in the socialisation of children and provide opportunities for parents and the wider community to connect and support the physical and emotional wellbeing of their children (Ager, 2013). In Australia, this influence includes curriculum-based programs that are associated with a reduction in adolescents' alcohol use (Teesson, Newton, & Barrett, 2012). Schools also play a role in the socialisation of children to alcohol use through school policies and practices that focus on the consumption of alcohol by adults in the presence of children (Ward et al., 2014). Given the potential negative modelling impact of alcohol consumption by adults in the school environment, Australian guidelines recommend that children not be exposed to or involved in alcohol fundraising in schools (Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD), 2011). There are reports of parents expressing their concern over adults' use of alcohol at school events when children are present; with a recent survey of 479 New South Wales parents reporting that 60 per cent disagreed with adults purchasing and consuming alcohol at primary school fundraising events (Ward et al., 2015).

Australian state and territory government policies on adults' use of alcohol at school events when students are present vary widely. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DE&C) policy states: "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" (DE&C, July 2010). In contrast, the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T) policy states: "Schools must obtain school council approval before alcohol may be consumed on school premises or at school approved activities." If approval is granted, school councils "must ensure adherence to the responsible service of alcohol requirements" (DE&T, 2014a). This leaves much of the responsibility for decision-making on this issue with principals and school councils (Ward et al., 2014).

Qualitative research with 14 Victorian school principals suggests that school policies and practices regarding this issue differ (Ward, et al., under review). Ten of the principals reported adults' use of alcohol at school events when students were present. Twelve of the principals expressed concern about adults using alcohol at school events, with seven of the principals making changes to alcohol policies in recent years to remove or reduce the availability of alcohol for adults' consumption, including two who no longer allowed alcohol at any school events. Principals reported resistance from parents about changes to alcohol policies (Ward et al., under review). This is consistent with the findings of a national survey of 218 secondary school principals who reported that adult drinkers were often undesirable role models for students and that there was a need to change the culture of drinking among some parents (John K See Consulting, 2013).

## Aim

The extent to which alcohol consumption by adults occurs in the presence of school children has not been systematically quantified, nor has the extent of principal agreement or disagreement with this practice. Given this evidence gap and the contrast in policy approaches, a study was undertaken to a) quantify and compare the extent to which alcohol is used at New South Wales and Victorian school events when students are present; b) examine principals' level of agreement with these practices, and c) their awareness and support of state policies on this issue.

## Method

### Study design, setting and sample

A cross-sectional study was undertaken in the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria in November 2014. In New South Wales and Victoria there are 2,218 and 1,526 government schools respectively. This includes 398 New South Wales and 395 Victorian secondary schools that include a range of schooling year levels from 7-12 (equivalent to 12-19 years of age) (DE&C, August 2014; DE&T, 2014b). We excluded schools located in Australian Standards Geographical Location Classification (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011); remote areas (NSW=13; VIC=6) (Australian Curriculum, 2014; Australian Schools Directory, 2014) and the Victorian schools that had been invited to or had participated in previous qualitative research by the same authors on this topic (Ward et al., under review). From the remaining 385 New South Wales and 329 Victorian schools, the sample was drawn in two stages: an initial sample of 140 randomly selected schools in each state and a second randomly selected sample of 150 and 137 schools in New South Wales and Victoria respectively. Schools in the sample were stratified to be representative of counts of 'metropolitan' and 'non-metropolitan' postal areas within each state (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011).

Of the 567 (NSW=290; VIC=277) randomly sampled schools, 124 (43 per cent) New South Wales and 117 (42 per cent) Victorian schools consented to participate, providing a total sample of 241 (43 per cent) schools.

### Recruitment and data collection procedures

A pre-survey letter was posted to introduce, explain and solicit support for the study prior to contact. Five trained interviewers made up to six telephone calls to each selected school to establish contact and up to five additional calls to gain agreement to participate in a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). For each school, the principal or their delegate was invited to participate in the interview. Where there was an answering machine response a scripted message was left. All calls were made between 9am and 5:30pm.

### Measures

In the absence of published quantitative literature regarding this topic, the questionnaire was developed based on policy documents and previous qualitative research involving secondary school principals (Munro et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2014; Ward et al., under review). The questionnaire was tailored for schools with different year levels and included skip functions where relevant.

The survey was pre-tested by the researchers and piloted with nine principals in New South Wales and Victoria to assess face and content validity.

In addition to sociodemographic data about the school and characteristics of the principal, the interview addressed the following domains:

- Consumption of alcohol by adults at school events.

Principals or their delegates were asked to report on the use of alcohol at the school in the last 12 months or in the number of months they had worked at the school if less than 12. The items were:

“For each of the following, (Fete or fair; Sports day or other school sporting events such as rowing regattas or cricket matches; Graduation or valedictory dinner for students in Year 10; Graduation or valedictory dinner for students in Year 12; Debutante ball; School camp held in Australia for students in Years 7 to 8; School camp held in Australia for students in Year 9 to 10; School camp held in Australia for students in Year 11 to 12), please indicate whether, to your knowledge, alcohol has been *consumed* by adults at any of the following functions organised by your school, either on or off school premises.”

Possible responses included yes/no/don't know. Where the response was “yes”, principals were asked if the alcohol was bring your own (BYO) and/or sold and/or freely given (yes/no).

For each of the possible events all principals were asked “On a scale of one to five, do you agree or disagree with the practice of adults being allowed to consume alcohol at (specified event)?”

- Alcohol offered in a raffle or part of a prize.

Principals were asked: “In the past 12 months (or months if less than a year), has alcohol (e.g. bottled wine or beer) been offered as a prize or part of a prize for school fundraising (e.g. raffles, hampers etc)?” Possible responses included yes/no/don't know.

Principals were then asked: “At some secondary school fundraising events adults are able to purchase and consume alcohol in the presence of students. On a scale of one to five, do you agree or disagree with this practice?”

- Policy and guidelines.

Principals were asked the following:

“As far as you are aware, does your state education department have a policy or guidelines in place regarding alcohol consumption at school functions at which students are present?”

“Does your school have a policy or guidelines in place regarding alcohol use at school functions at which students are present?”

“Does your school policy or guidelines: prohibit the consumption of alcohol at all school functions at which students are present allow the consumption of alcohol by adults with school council approval; allow the consumption of alcohol by adults at the discretion of the principal?”

“Do you believe that your state education department should have a policy that prohibits the consumption of alcohol at all school functions at which students are present?”

Possible responses included yes/no/don't know.

- Adequacy of, and need for information and resources.

Principals were asked:

“On a scale of one to five, do you feel you have adequate information to make decisions about the consumptions of alcohol at school functions?”

After data collection commenced, a subset of these (201) were asked: “Would you, your school council or board like additional information and/or skills to help you make decisions about adults' use of alcohol at school events (including staff events)?”

These principals were also asked the likelihood they would use additional information if made available by the following methods: face-to-face, online, by phone/ipad/other app, telephone support or mail-out information (reported on a five point Likert scale).

## Ethics approval

Approval was granted by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, the Victorian Department of Education and Training, the Australian Drug Foundation, Curtin University, the University of Newcastle and Monash University.

## Results

### School sample and characteristics

Of the 241 participating schools, 124 (51%) were in New South Wales and 117 (49%) in Victoria. Just under half (44 per cent) of all schools within each state were in metropolitan postal areas (Sydney = 54; Melbourne = 51), and 56 per cent (NSW=70; VIC=66) were in non-metropolitan postal areas. The majority (94 per cent) of participating schools involved school Years 7-12 where students were aged approximately between 12 and 19. Eighty-one per cent of participants were principals, 15 per cent were deputy/assistant principals and four per cent were senior teachers (hereafter referred to as ‘principals’). Of these, 61 per cent were male and 67 per cent were aged 50 years or more. The mean length of employment at the school was 8.6 years.

### Alcohol at events

Principals reported 100 (NSW=20; VIC=80) events where alcohol was consumed in the presence of students in the previous 12 months at 86 (36 per cent) of schools (see Table 1). This included 20 events at 15 per cent of New South Wales schools and 80 events at 57 per cent of the Victorian schools.

In schools where this occurred, 73 schools (NSW=15%; VIC=47%) reported only one event, 12 schools (NSW=<1%; VIC=9%) reported two events and one Victorian school reported three events.

Seventy-eight per cent of events were Year 12 graduation/valedictory dinners (NSW=15%; VIC=51%) and 18 per cent were debutante balls (NSW=<1%; VIC=15%). One Victorian principal reported alcohol consumption at a fete, and two Victorian principals reported alcohol consumption at a Year 10 graduation. One New South Wales principal reported alcohol consumption at a Year 7/8 camp. No alcohol consumption was reported at sporting events, Year 9/10 or 11/12 camps.



Overall, alcohol was sold at 85 per cent (NSW=80%; VIC=88%), freely given at nine per cent (NSW=15%; VIC=8%) and BYO at six per cent (NSW=5%; VIC=6%) events, where one Victorian Year 12 graduation included sold and free alcohol. Alcohol was sold at 77 per cent (NSW=83%; VIC=92%) of these Year 12 graduations, 72 per cent (NSW=100%, only 1; VIC=71%) of these debutante balls and at the only reported fete in Victoria. There were 42 reports of alcohol being offered as a prize for a school fundraiser. Sixty per cent (25) of these were in New South Wales.

**Table 1. Principals' reports of alcohol at school events when children are present by state.**

		NSW (n=124*)	VIC (n=117*)
Fetes	Yes	0	1
	No	120	110
	Don't know	0	1
Sports days	Yes	0	0
	No	124	117
	Don't know	0	0
Year 10 graduations	Yes	0	2
	No	108	105
	Don't know	0	2
Year 12 graduations	Yes	18	60
	No	102	46
	Don't know	0	0
Debutante balls	Yes	1	17
	No	89	77
	Don't know	4	3
Year 7/8 camp	Yes	1	0
	No	115	111
	Don't know	1	0
Year 9/10 camp	Yes	0	0
	No	117	115
	Don't know	0	0
Year 11/12 camp	Yes	0	0
	No	118	105
	Don't know	1	0

\*Not all principals responded to all questions.

## Principals' level of agreement with adults consuming alcohol at school events when students are present

Overall, Victorian principals were more likely to agree with adults' use of alcohol at school events (Table 2). Nearly half (48.5 per cent) of Victorian principals strongly agreed/agreed with the practice at Year 12 graduations, compared to 7.6 per cent of New South Wales principals. Victorian principals were also more likely to strongly agree/agree with alcohol being consumed at debutante balls than their counterparts in New South Wales, 11.1 per cent compared to 2.5 per cent respectively. The majority of principals strongly disagreed/disagreed with adults' use of alcohol at Year 10 graduations, sporting events and school camps.

**Table 2. Principals' level of agreement with adults' use of alcohol at school events (when children are present) by state.**

	n*		Strongly agree/ agree (%)		Neither agree nor disagree (%)		Strongly disagree/ disagree (%)	
	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC
Year 12 graduation	118	101	7.6	48.5	4.2	12.9	88.1	38.6
Debutante ball	118	108	2.5	11.1	8.5	9.3	89.0	79.6
Year 10 graduation	114	103	0.0	1.9	0.0	1.0	100.0	97.1
Year 7/8 camp	115	105	0.9	0.0	1.7	0.0	97.4	100.0
Year 9/10 camp	115	109	0.9	0.0	1.7	0.0	97.4	100.0
Year 11/12 camp	118	101	0.8	0.0	2.5	0.0	96.6	100.0
Fete	121	110	0.0	1.8	1.7	9.1	98.3	89.1
Purchased and consumed at fundraising events	124	117	4.0	10.3	6.5	11.1	89.5	53.0
Sporting events	121	110	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	100.0	100.0

\*Not all principals responded to all questions.

## Awareness of policies/guidelines

New South Wales and Victorian principals differed in their awareness and use of policies and guidelines regarding adults' consumption of alcohol at school events (see Table 3). New South Wales participants were more likely to know of Department of Education and Communities policy, have a school policy, prohibit alcohol at school functions when students are present and believe that the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities policy should prohibit alcohol at these occasions.

**Table 3. Principals' awareness and use of policy/guidelines regarding adults' consumption of alcohol at school functions at which students are present.**

In regard to adults' consumption of alcohol at school functions at which students are present:	n*		Yes (%)		No (%)		Don't know/refused (%)	
	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC
As far as you are aware does your education department have a policy or guidelines?	124	117	97	76	1	9	2	15
Does your school have a policy or guidelines?	124	117	68	47	30	47	2	6
Does your school policy prohibit at all school functions? #	84	55	96	64	3	35	1	1
Does your school policy allow with discretion of the principal? # **	84	55	19	29	80	66	1	5
Does your school policy allow with school council approval? # **	84	55	10	56	80	35	10	9
Do you believe that the education department should have a policy/guidelines that prohibits alcohol at all school functions?	124	117	92	54	7	42	1	4

\* Not all principals responded to all questions

# Total n=139 as this question only applies to schools that have a policy.

\*\* In Victoria, the Department of Education and Training policy gives the principal/school council discretion.

## Support available to principals

Overall, 159 (66 per cent) of principals reported they had completely adequate information to make decisions about this issue but this differed between states (NSW=100, 81%; VIC=59, 50%). An additional 72 (30 per cent) of participants reported that they had somewhat adequate information (NSW=22,18%; VIC=50,43%). The remaining ten principals reported that they were not sure/did not have enough information to make decisions about alcohol at school functions.

The final 201 interviews included questions about information preferences to help support decisions about adults' use of alcohol at school events (including staff events). Overall, 34 per cent of principals reported they would like additional information (NSW=24%; VIC=44%) (see Table 4).

The likely/very likely use of a range of modalities was as follows: 18 per cent (NSW=11%, VIC=26%) favoured face-to-face; 66 per cent (NSW=57%; VIC=75%) online; 37 per cent (NSW=33%; VIC=40%) phone/ipad/other computer application; 51 per cent (NSW=45%; VIC=57%) telephone information for you to call; 18 per cent (NSW=13%; VIC=23%) worker to call you at pre-arranged time; 49 per cent (NSW=35%; VIC=54%) mail-out resources.

**Table 4. Principals' views on likely use of selected modalities to assist them when making decisions about alcohol consumption at school functions.**

Likely use:	n*		Likely/ very likely (%)		Unsure (%)		Unlikely/ very unlikely (%)	
	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC
Online information package	101	100	57.4	75.0	8.9	6.0	33.7	19.0
Telephone information-you call	101	100	44.6	57.0	7.9	6.0	47.5	37.0
Mailout information package	101	100	44.6	54.0	5.9	10.0	49.5	36.0
Phone/ipad/other 'app'	101	99	33.7	40.4	6.9	14.1	59.4	45.5
Face-to-face session	101	100	10.9	26.0	6.9	12.0	82.2	62.0
Telephone information-calls you	101	100	12.9	23.0	5.9	9.0	81.2	68.0

\*Not all principals responded to all questions.

## Discussion

To date there have been few publications reporting on the prevalence of alcohol use at secondary school functions when children are present (Munro et al., 2014). Therefore, this study provides valuable insights into this field, particularly within the Australian context. In this survey of state government secondary schools, principals reported 100 events where alcohol was consumed in the presence of students at 86 schools across New South Wales and Victoria in the previous 12 months. Among participating schools, 96 per cent of the events were annual functions such as Year 12 celebratory dinners and debutante balls and 80 per cent of these were in Victoria. Nearly half of Victorian schools principals strongly agreed/agreed with this practice at Year 12 dinners and 11 per cent supported it at debutante balls.

These state differences may be a reflection of the Victorian Department of Education and Training policy which provides different guidelines for functions that are held on or off school premises. When Victorian school functions are held at licensed premises, students may be present under the supervision of a parent/guardian (DE&T, 2014a). In contrast, the Department of Education and Communities 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 (DE&C, July 2010). In Victoria, principals report that these events are held at off-site licensed premises (Ward et al., under review) where the responsibility for meeting liquor licensing requirements does not sit with the school. Nevertheless, 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 (Munro et al., 2014; Ward et al., under review).

The Australian National Council on Drugs guidelines recommend children not be exposed to alcohol fundraising in schools (ANCD, February 2011). While 17 per cent of principals in this study reported alcohol being used for fundraising, it is not clear whether this involved children. However, nine per cent of Victoria's and two per cent of New South Wales' principals report that they neither agree/nor disagree with the practice (when children are present) and a further two per cent of Victorian principals strongly agree/agree with the practice. The Victorian Department of Education and Training policy is explicit that "students should not be involved in fundraising events which have an alcoholic beverage as a prize" (DE&T, 2014a), and while the use of alcohol in school fundraising is not explicit in the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities policy, as outlined above, the broader policy is much more specific than in Victoria. Given the relative autonomy that Victorian principals have on this issue, their personal beliefs may be predictors of adults' use of alcohol at school events.

## Further research/projects

It is likely there is under-reporting of adult drinking at secondary school functions when children are present because of a social desirability bias by those who did/not participate. Unsurprisingly, a large number of schools that were contacted refused to participate (NSW=69; VIC=43) or exhausted all call back attempts to reach a relevant respondent (NSW=100; VIC=113). While this is typical of school-based surveys (White & Bariola, 2012), it may also reflect a reluctance to report adult drinking at secondary school functions when children are present. Our survey was limited to government secondary schools in these two Australian states. Qualitative reports from Victoria's secondary school principals suggest that adults' alcohol use at Catholic and primary school functions may be higher than in secondary schools (Ward et al., under review). Primary schools are more likely to host events where adults *and* children are involved (such as fetes, school concerts) where adults may regularly use alcohol in the presence of young children. 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 other community members and the effectiveness of education materials in assisting principals charged with responsibility for this issue.

## Implications for policy

In this study, 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 and prohibit such use than their Victorian counterparts (see Table 3). Similarly, the principals' reports that they have completely adequate information to make decisions about this issue also were more likely not to support adults' use of alcohol at school events. A third of principals in this study reported they had somewhat adequate information or were not sure they had enough information to make decisions about alcohol at school functions. Many school principals may be seeking information to assist them in their decision-making about the pros and cons of exposing students to alcohol at school events.

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 (Ward et al., 2014). Jurisdictional autonomy may be a barrier to the development of standardised liquor licensing regulations in schools. However, the development of education materials and evidence-based national guidelines similar to those on the use of alcohol for fundraising in schools (ANCD, February 2011), could inform state and territory policies and principals seeking information and guidance on this issue. Specifically, the guidelines could include current evidence on the significant alcohol-related harm that children are exposed to; the role of advertising; adult drinking and implicit memories of alcohol in young people's intention to consume alcohol; and the risks for school principals who choose to allow the consumption of alcohol at school events.

## Conclusion

Many Australian children are negatively affected by adults' use of alcohol. The availability and use of alcohol at social occasions is widespread and children's exposure to alcohol advertising has been associated with early initiation to and elevated use of alcohol. Education department policies and school principals' practices can influence the degree to which children (and their parents) are exposed to community events where alcohol is available. This research demonstrates that alcohol is being used at school events when children are present. Principals' level of agreement with these practices, awareness and support for policies on the issue are associated with students' exposure to adults' alcohol use at school events. There is a need for educators and policymakers to respond to principals' practices and reports of information seeking on this issue.

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