

Are there more positive alternative celebration opportunities to Schoolies Week?

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‘Schoolies’ week, also known as leavers’ week and ‘leavers’, has now become a November institution for many Australian students to celebrate the completion of their secondary school education. Hard work over several years accompanied by a high degree of stress is seen as a good reason to celebrate by engaging in relaxation and fun.

Schoolies week is purported to have started in 1979 on the Gold Coast by graduates of private single-sex schools.* During the early 1980s the Gold Coast attracted schoolies from all over Australia, with this phenomena spreading to many popular tourist spots around the country, and more recently to overseas destinations, especially Bali.^{1,2} Over the years schoolies week has become synonymous with beaches, sun, alcohol, drugs and sex – and also community concern, thanks to the high media presence it attracts.

It has become fashionable to debate the worth of this event, and whether more attention should be given to alternative ways to ‘celebrate’ graduation from high school and the rite of passage to adulthood.³ However, whatever alternatives are developed, it is likely that schoolies week will be around for many years.

There is no doubt that schoolies weeks have some redeeming features. Many school students look forward to the event with great anticipation, and often plan for it years ahead.⁴ Positive aspects of schoolies nominated by participants were ‘beach’, ‘partying’, ‘socialising’, ‘meeting new people’ and ‘being with friends’, and most young people appear prepared to pay for the activities themselves.^{5–7} Commercial outlets too stand to gain through the sales of alcohol, food, travel, condoms and accommodation. However, there are also many costs to the community not the least policing and public health-type interventions funded by public taxes.

From a public health perspective, schoolies weeks are associated with binge drinking, unprotected sex, violence and illicit drug use with significant social harms and negative health consequences reported at many of the schoolies destinations.^{6,7}

Studies indicate strong links between expectations of schoolies and actual outcomes. Although many expect to get drunk, even

more reported experiencing drunkenness. Many expect to have sex but only about half of these reported having sex, with many reporting non-use of protective measures.⁶ Violence, sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse are also experienced, although seem to be more linked to older non-schoolies groups (‘toolies’!) who are attracted to the venues.

Binge drinking is what attracts the most concern as a large proportion of schoolies are under the legal drinking age of 18 years. This concern is understandable as there is ample evidence that young people drink at levels that put them at risk. In Australia, 18–25 year olds have the highest levels of alcohol consumption, and 18% of 14–19 year olds consume alcohol at risky levels that could result in acute harms at least weekly (10 drinks a day for males, and five to six drinks a day for females).⁸ In a recent evaluation of schoolies week in Victoria⁹ almost half of the participants (46%) reported typically consuming five or more drinks on one occasion. They generally reported consuming more alcohol at schoolies than they typically drink, and most claimed that their parents and friends were accepting of their drinking behaviour. Relatively little illicit drug use was reported by these ex-students, with cannabis most frequently cited as being used.⁹ The same study reported that alcohol and drug use were less frequent at Victorian schoolies than at the Gold Coast schoolies in 2009. Reports of some parents providing large amounts of alcohol for their children further tarnish the image of schoolies week and raises questions about influences of social and cultural norms.⁸

Off-shore locations such as Bali, where there is cheap and accessible alcohol with few restrictions, now attract several thousand leavers. These international locations bring added concerns with reports of methanol-tainted drinks¹ and traffic injuries, especially from motor scooters ridden by inexperienced riders having minimal consideration for safety.

A popular Facebook page called ‘WA Leavers Embarrassing Moments’ now exists, introducing yet another potential problem. Leavers have been warned against posting graphic and inappropriate photos of their antics that could come back to haunt them later, such as in relation to applications for jobs.¹⁰

*CB cites students from wealthier families renting accommodation on Rottnest Island in 1960 and drinking themselves stupid for a week.

In response to community concerns about the potential negative effects of schoolies weeks, planning and coordination have been undertaken by coalitions of state government departments, local governments, non-government agencies, other community groups and volunteers in each state. The focus has been mainly on risk management and harm-minimisation strategies, but with increasing attempts to engage the young people in positive activities and projects. Evaluations of these initiatives suggest they are worthwhile.^{5,7,9,11} However, the 'usual' expectations continue with the concept of 'fun' integrally tied to excessive drinking by a large proportion of the youth, along with sex and some drug use.

Should schoolies week continue or is it time for the various authorities to take steps to bring it to an end? This may be difficult as there are now many vested interests that are likely to put up a fight to ensure it continues. Continuation, embracing more of the positive events already implemented with more emphasis on strategies that see alcohol and drug use further minimised is likely. Attention to alternatives rather than the traditional beach resort schoolies weeks that aim to take the focus away from self-indulgence hold great promise.

Voluntary community work by school students at the end of their final year is not new. In the early 1970s two rural New Zealand schools in low-income communities (Greymouth High School and Westland High School) conducted schemes supervised by teachers and community volunteers where senior students spent the final few weeks of their school life, post examinations, undertaking gardening for residents in need, as well as carrying out beautification projects in local parks, reserves and historical sites (G. Howat, pers. comm.). Some Western Australian private and public schools are now involved in programs where their students travel overseas to East Timor and Cambodia to carry out volunteer work. As with the New Zealand scheme** before them, these programs offer favourable returns through improved self-esteem, teamwork, leadership development and skill building for the young people,

as well as benefits to disadvantaged communities. Such positive approaches offer alternative life experiences and should be considered far better for all Australians than a week of partying and drinking by our young people!

Opportunities for the health promotion fraternity abound in the quest to continue the positive redirection of schoolies week.

Limitations of this commentary

Evaluations of schoolies weeks have been conducted especially in Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. However, a literature search revealed relatively few peer reviewed papers or reports on schoolies weeks. Hence, data on the effectiveness of public health interventions is limited.

References

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**PH was one of the co-organisers of the New Zealand 'schemes' in the early 1970s.