

Don't Bring Alcohol to School Campuses

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Imagine a community that is ranked as the healthiest community in the state. Marin County is that community, ranked number one in health time and time again. Yet hidden behind this picture of “health,” there is a health crisis – teen drinking. The 2013-14 California Healthy Kids Survey found that 41% of 11th graders reported having at least one alcoholic drink over a 30 day period. Of those, 30% reported binge drinking (5 or more drinks in a row). The Marin County Civil Grand Jury issued a report in 2012, *The Marin Youth Alcohol Crisis: One City's Response*, citing the need to eliminate the crisis of underage drinking and reporting that 74% of American youth ages 12 to 17 identified their parents as the leading influence in their behavior related to alcohol.

On January 1, 2015, a new law was passed that allows school districts to serve alcohol at social events held on campus as long as students are not present. The bill's author, Assembly Member Frank Bigelow, cited a need for this law to enable schools to raise money by renting out facilities and hosting PTA fundraisers “to help benefit our community during these economically challenging times.”

While I agree that our schools are in need of additional funds, I cannot help but wonder if this law is sending a mixed message to our students and community. Adolescents are especially attuned to the ideas of fairness and hypocrisy. How will the typical 14 year old view school authorities who discipline students for possession or use of alcohol at a school dance or football game, then throw open the doors for their parents to have a party with alcohol at the very same school? Kids do not respond well to “do as I say, not as I do.” In a community where 37 percent of fatal car accidents are alcohol related, offering more opportunities to consume alcohol on school grounds after hours is also unsafe.

Additionally, Marin County schools, law enforcement agencies, and the Department of Health and Human Services have spent countless hours collaborating with community coalitions and parents to address underage alcohol abuse and its consequences. All cities, towns, and unincorporated areas of Marin County have adopted the Social Host Ordinance to reduce youth access to alcohol in homes. The Marin County Board of Education adopted a drug and alcohol prevention policy that established substance abuse prevention instruction, intervention, and enforcement. These are just a few of the messages that are being shared in our community to prevent underage drinking, prompted by the data on underage drinking within our community. Marin County leaders, parents and students have invested time, resources, and energy over the last decade to shift our community's social norms regarding the use of alcohol. We have worked hard to tackle the teen binge drinking crisis so that our children and youth will not believe that “everyone does it” and “it's no big deal” to use alcohol at every social event. The precious years from Kindergarten to 12th grade shape the future. We need to strive and be ever vigilant to keep our schools the special, safe, and healthy places that children can count on all the time – not just until the final bell rings.