

25th May 2011

Dear Parents / Caregivers of Year 12 and 13 Students

I am writing to clarify the school's position on the Senior Ball and after-ball parties. This is an area that has attracted a great deal of debate and interest over the past 12 months.

On Saturday 25th June we will be holding the annual Thames High School Senior Ball. This function is traditionally the highlight of the social calendar for our year 12 and 13 students, and we typically cater for 200 students to attend.

The Ball is a school function and as such normal school rules apply. This includes the function being smoke, alcohol and drug free. This year we are particularly serious about distancing the Ball from association with alcohol and we have told students of our intention to breath-test all students, with any students who return a positive test being denied entry to the Ball. We also intend to randomly test students during the course of the evening to guard against students 'smuggling' alcohol into the function.

If students are not able to comply with the condition that the Ball is smoke, alcohol and drug free then they should not buy a ticket.

The format for the Ball in 2011 is that there will be a catered, sit down dinner prior to the dancing part of the evening. Formalities such as the announcement of the King, Queen, Prince and Princess will happen over dinner, followed by formal dancing after dinner. Over the next few weeks we have a dance teacher coming to school to teach formal (e.g. waltz, foxtrot) dance to our senior students. Following on from that will be contemporary music and dancing for the remainder of the evening.

As in the past, there will be photo stations set up at the venue, where professional photographers will be on hand throughout the evening to photograph individuals and groups of students.

A high level of security is provided by the school as part of the function. Students are required to be in the hall by a specified time (7.15pm) and are not permitted to leave early (prior to 12.00am) unless a parent arrives to collect them. Outside partners (i.e. who are not students of Thames High School) are carefully vetted by me to ensure that they are appropriate to attend the function.

During the six years I have been associated with the Senior Ball I have found it to be a fun, enjoyable evening where our students have really enjoyed themselves. The student Ball Committee goes to a great deal of trouble in decorating the venue, designing and printing invitations, and selecting and booking caterers, DJs, and photographers. Our students, without exception, go to a great deal of trouble and expense in dressing up for the occasion.

In the past (and certainly for the past six years of my association with the function) there has been a Safe After-Ball Party. This has been organised by a student committee supported by parents and community health providers. This function was organised following Alcoholic Liquor Advisory Council (ALAC) guidelines, and

included strict limits on the type and quantity of alcohol that students could take into the function, a high level of security being provided, entry restricted to students who had attended the Ball, food and non-alcoholic drinks being provided, and transport provided to and from the venue (so that no students were driving).

Over the past two years the context for such functions has changed. Police no longer support this concept, particularly because it is now considered to breach the law in relation to students under the legal age being supplied with alcohol, and a place to consume alcohol. Attached is a copy of an article that appeared in the NZ Herald last week which summarises this.

At a meeting earlier this week a representative from the Police outlined to students the reasons why After-Ball Parties (such as the one that was held last year) are not permissible. It is clear that any such function, should the Police become aware of it, will be closed down with the strong possibility of organisers being prosecuted for breaking the law.

The holding of a Dance Party, free of alcohol and drugs, was discussed at the meeting. This concept was subsequently voted on and approved by students. It was apparent in statements made by student organisers that it is expected that students will have been drinking prior to arriving at such a party, and that breath testing or searches of bags would not occur. I believe that this is a thinly-veiled attempt to circumvent the law and I do not support this.

Thames High School's position is that the school cannot support an After-Ball Party where alcohol is available to students. The Senior Ball is a school function that has traditionally been provided for students, but it is not the reason or excuse for any other function. The school will not accept responsibility for students or outside partners beyond the Senior Ball, and I advise parents and caregivers that any notice from an 'organising committee' which suggests otherwise is disregarded. The Ball as a major social event should be able to stand alone and be enjoyed for what it is.

In the 'Herald' article a number of schools are quoted as having cancelled their school ball in the face of students organising clandestine functions. I believe that the vast majority of our students are happy to proceed with the Senior Ball under the conditions outlined in this letter, and I am unwilling to penalise them by simply cancelling the Ball as a way of avoiding a problem.

I hope that this letter makes the school's position clear. If you have any queries or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Dave Sim
Principal