

Many teens wish for a more inclusive prom experience

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The prom court and guests attend BuzzFeed's Inaugural Queer Prom at Siren Studios on May 13, 2017, in Los Angeles, California. The event honored every student's right to experience the prom. BuzzFeed selected six high school students from across the country to join the festivities. Other guests included LGBT high school seniors, celebrities, performers and advocates in the L.A. area. Photo: Jordan Strauss/Invision for BuzzFeed/AP Images

To see how teens today feel about gender and sexuality, look no further than the spectacle of prom coronations. In Mississippi, a lesbian couple lobbied to become prom king and queen. In Georgia, the class president, who is gay, started a petition to change prom court titles to the more inclusive "Prom Royalty." Some transgender students are pushing schools to re-imagine what teen nobility looks like.

The prom has historically been a stronghold of stereotypical gender roles. The girl in a beautiful gown, the boy in a tux. Prom king is a guy, prom queen is a girl. However, in 2018, more and more students are pushing for gender-neutral prom courts, signaling how millennials are treating fundamental questions about identity and inclusion.

"Prom has reflected American adolescence, and it usually contains and magnifies the features of whatever is going on with that age cohort at the time. As the millennium changed over, and we're

in a different generation now, there's just much more acceptance of gender fluidity," said Ann Anderson, author of "High School Prom: Marketing, Morals and the American Teen."

A More Inclusive Prom Event

Carter Hebert, a senior at Chattahoochee High School in Johns Creek, Georgia, was nominated for prom king along with his former boyfriend. The school's current voting process permits one male and one female to win. However, Hebert said the two wanted to be able to win together, as a couple.

Hebert, who is class president, said the school has a track record of being inclusive, so when they brought their request to administration, they were stunned when it was not granted. Hebert said the school cited "tradition" as well as time limits. He said he was "confused" and "upset" by the response.

A statement from the school district said that "because nominations have been made and the process is underway, the school administration is not in a position to make changes at this time." To formally change the process, it said, student leaders should submit a proposal.

Hebert started a petition on Change.org to change court titles from "prom king and queen" to "prom royalty." It now has nearly 5,000 signatures. He said he is shifting his efforts away from changing this year's prom — taking place in late April — and toward making the prom court more inclusive for future classes.

"What we were hoping for was to make a change not just for our school, but for schools across the nation," he said.

Schools Are Slow To Adapt

Hebert's school is one of many working to adapt to changing attitudes about gender. Some students wish their schools would evolve more quickly, though.

When Al Martinez, a transgender teen at Brooke Point High in Stafford, Virginia, was nominated for this year's prom king, he said the school called his parents to make sure they were OK with it. He said he found the call troubling because he imagined what could happen to a student who was not "out" as transgender at home. He also did not think it was necessary for his parents to "approve" his gender identity or expression.

"It's not their decision ultimately," he said, "and it shouldn't be."

USA Today reached out to Brooke Point High for a comment, but officials did not respond by the time of publication.

"We Want Equality"

There are still areas of the country where ideas about the prom are firmly established. In some parts of the country, girls are forbidden to wear suits, gay proms are unheard of and same-sex dates are out of the question. However, as more and more teens embrace gender fluidity and are open about their sexual orientation, more and more schools will be forced to look at how some prom traditions might need to be updated.

Anderson said some would suggest that the prom is a rehearsal for life. If that is the case, then many teens are sending clear signals as to what kind of world they would like to live in as adults.

"We just want the same opportunities," Hebert said, adding, "We want equality. We understand that you may not have the same views as us, you may not understand what we're going through but we just want you to be open, and give us the opportunities that y'all have."

Quiz

- 1 The CENTRAL idea of the article is developed by ____.
- (A) comparing how different schools have encouraged their students to rethink stereotypical gender roles at the prom
 - (B) identifying the opinions of several experts about what else teens can do to get their school to change the prom rules
 - (C) describing the stories of specific students as examples of how attitudes about gender and proms are changing
 - (D) estimating the likelihood of success for those kids who want to change the gender rules on prom king and queen nominations
- 2 If the author had to edit the article to make it shorter, which sentence from the article would be the MOST important to keep?
- (A) However, in 2018, more and more students are pushing for gender-neutral prom courts, signaling how millennials are treating fundamental questions about identity and inclusion.
 - (B) Hebert, who is class president, said the school has a track record of being inclusive, so when they brought their request to administration, they were stunned when it was not granted.
 - (C) A statement from the school district said that "because nominations have been made and the process is underway, the school administration is not in a position to make changes at this time."
 - (D) In some parts of the country, girls are forbidden to wear suits, gay proms are unheard of and same-sex dates are out of the question.
- 3 Which answer choice BEST describes Al Martinez's reaction to the school calling his parents?
- (A) Martinez was disturbed by the call because he believes it is unnecessary and possibly dangerous for a school to discuss students' gender identity with their parents.
 - (B) Martinez was troubled by the call because he suspected that it meant that the school did not approve of his gender expression as prom king at school.
 - (C) Martinez was upset by the call because he was not "out" as transgender at home and he did not want his parents to find out from his school.
 - (D) Martinez was confused by the call because his school has a history of allowing students to make decisions about the prom without parents' permission.
- 4 According to the article, how are today's teens compared to the generations that came before them?
- (A) Today's teens are for the most part less interested in discussing the gender identity and expression of others than generations before them.
 - (B) Today's teens are for the most part committed to teaching older generations that their traditional ideas about gender are inaccurate.
 - (C) Today's teens for the most part believe that acceptance on a prom court is the best way to educate others about gender fluidity.
 - (D) Today's teens are for the most part more accepting of gender fluidity and gender expression than generations before them.