
How to Have an Inclusive Prom

A Guide for School Dance Organizers



A prom or other school dance can be a significant milestone in a person's life. It is a time to socialize with friends and fellow students, and can create lasting memories of one's teenage years. As it is a school-sponsored activity, it should be open and accessible to every student in the school community, including those who have disabilities and may receive special education services. A separate prom or school dance for students with disabilities can be discriminatory, and it sends the message that all students are not welcome at school events.

Under the IDEA law, students receiving special education services have full rights to participate in the extracurricular activities their schools offer for kids of their grade level. In order for school-sponsored activities, like proms and other school dances, to be welcoming and accessible for students of all abilities, some preparations need to be made. This guide will show you how to make your event a success for all students.

This guide includes:

- An **introduction** to the challenges and opportunities
- Tips for **promoting** the event
- A **checklist** for securing an accessible facility
- A sample **non-discrimination policy** for school boards to adopt

We hope that your school community will use this guide to create events that everyone can take part in, which will strengthen the inclusive culture of the school and create great memories for all students.

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An Introduction



When Stephen, the author of this document (a former special education student who struggled in the social realm), first heard the term “prom”, he didn’t understand that it was a dance. His first definition was “programmable read only memory”, a type of computer chip on a circuit board. This definition was derived from an electronics book when he was in elementary school. Persons with certain disabilities may struggle some in understanding the knowledge and terminology of the social scene, which many other young people simply pick up from their friends.

Friendships and dating may be more difficult for students with disabilities. In some cases, the school district policies and practices can inadvertently undermine their socialization potential (due to isolated rooms, or poor access to extracurricular and passing time).

Let’s overcome outdated special education policies that may inadvertently undermine one’s access to extracurricular activities, including prom.

Did you know that passing periods represent over 105 hours of social time during the school year where students can walk and talk with their friends? Lunch represents another 90 hours of opportunity for social time. The more time students have to be around each other and interact, the more they develop important social skills that will serve them throughout their life. Let’s not deny students receiving special education services the opportunity to develop their social skills in these informal, unstructured times of the school day.

Often, barriers to participation for people with disabilities are created by the systems in our world. By changing the systems and structures, we can promote more access to the community. Special education in schools is a system that is often outdated, and is undergoing a lot of change in many states. As schools move to more inclusive models, everyone has an opportunity to reconsider the practices of the school that can lead to either more isolation, or more inclusion. A prom or school dance is an opportunity to promote inclusion over isolation.

For students with disabilities, being isolated in separate classrooms, separate hallways and with different passing periods, lunch and release times offers the least amount of opportunity to interact with the full school community. The more time students with and without disabilities have to interact with each other, the better for everyone.

**So, how can we make sure your prom is inclusive?
Let’s get started!**

Quick-Step Guide to an Inclusive Prom

To establish your prom as an inclusive event from the beginning, consider all of these steps in your planning. More detail about specific things to look for and standards to follow can be found on the following pages.

Step 1: Select an accessible venue

Consider ADA compliance, space capacity, wheelchair accessibility, and other factors that may affect someone's ability to participate at the event.

Step 2: Choose a caterer with inclusive hospitality standards

Make sure the food & beverage vendor has a philosophy of accommodating all dietary needs & restrictions. They should also be mindful of the accessibility of all their tables and service areas. NOTE: Sometimes the venue/facility limits what vendors you can choose from – if this is the case, be sure to be specific about your inclusive standard when selecting your vendor.

Step 3: Promote the event

Be creative and think of different ways you can promote the event so that every student has access to the information and knows they can attend.

Step 4: Set the scene

Now it's time to choose the DJ and get into all the fun details for the event (like music, lighting, room set-up). In this stage of the planning, be mindful of the different sensory sensitivities some students may have and thus make ambience/entertainment decisions with these needs in mind.

Step 5: Find some good helpers

Every fun event needs people to oversee it to make sure things don't get out of hand and to maintain a safe but fun environment. Look for chaperones who are responsible and whom you have confidence will help make the event a success.

Effective Event Promotion



1) **Don't rely on banners and the loudspeaker alone.**

Putting up banners and announcing the prom on the loudspeaker or school advisory video is a good strategy to reach most students, but the prom committee should take additional action to reach the special education population. It is important to understand that some students may not understand what a prom actually is, or what the terms mean in the advertising. Consider passing out fliers describing the event in more detail to students and parents, or have someone from the committee go to classrooms and explain to students who may need more detailed information.

2) **Make sure that posters and banners are placed in view of all students.**

If the school has special education classrooms in a wing or bungalow that is not traversed by general education students, make sure the news reaches the special education students in their part of the school. If banners or posters are used, place one or more close to the special education classrooms of the school. It is very important to allow students in the hallways to view these banners as they go to class, and not have adults interfere with reading the banners on the wall.

3) **Promote the event using multiple modalities.**

Some students will be able to read the information on posters; some with visual disabilities may need to hear it auditorily. Promoting the event using multiple methods can create the most access to the information.

4) **Reach out to teachers.**

Let special education teachers know that all students are invited to the prom. Enlist their help in promoting the event, encouraging students to attend, and teaching the skills necessary for enjoying the prom. Some students may need to learn the popular dances, formal meal etiquette, how to find a date, and what clothing is appropriate. Special education teachers can help provide this instruction and can support students in having a successful experience. Stephen attended his high school's homecoming dance as one of his IEP goals, to help him develop social skills. This meant he had access to support for attending the dance.

Guideline Checklist for Inclusive Venues and Vendors



First and foremost, the facility that is used for the event should be accessible to all students. Use this checklist to select a venue and vendors that will ensure an accessible physical and sensory environment.

Venue:

- Venue should meet all ADA accessibility guidelines (learn more here <http://www.ada.gov/racheck.pdf>).
- Space shall be big enough to accommodate entire senior/junior class.
- Those with wheelchairs/gait trainers should be able to access all of the following:
 - Dance floor
 - Tables for socializing and eating
 - ADA accessible entrances, hallways, foyers, corridors, etc. from entrance/parking lot to prom area
 - Food & beverage tables/stations, concession booths (if food is served buffet style)
 - DJ/song request booth
 - Stage (if used)
 - Check-in area
 - ADA accessible restrooms (both sexes)
 - Parking lot/structure
 - Drop off area
 - Photo booth or picture area (including an accessible path to it)
 - Vendor, prize, or souvenir distribution area
- If prom is being held in room(s) above the ground or entry floor, the venue shall include an elevator that includes stops providing access to the floor(s) the prom is being held on, and a stop at the entrance or parking lot exit floor and an accessible path to the room(s) the prom is being held in.
- Company or organization that owns the venue should be in compliance with all equal opportunity employer regulations and disability rights laws.
- Venue owner and its staff should have no record of any discrimination or civil rights violations against disabilities, minorities, LGBT, or any other sector of the population in the last two years.

Inclusive Catering Standards:

- If a buffet (or snack table) is used, it should be wheelchair accessible.
- If a sit-down style dinner is being catered, the tables should be accessible where those with wheelchairs can sit with their friends or dates.
- If there are people with food allergies or special dietary needs (e.g., low sodium, peanut free, gluten free, kosher, etc.) attending, alternate food menu or snack choices that comply with the person's dietary needs should be provided and precautions should be taken to minimize cross contamination, when possible.
- Water should be provided free of charge to keep hydrated after dancing or when a break is required.
- Ensure height of tables and buffet are accessible to people using wheelchairs (not just belly bars, for instance).

Inclusive Sensory Environment Standards:

- DJ booth should be accessible.
- Volume level should not exceed safe hearing standards or lower if a person with sensory issues attends.
- Arrange speakers so there is a portion of the dance floor in which is not close to the speakers for people more sensitive to sound to enjoy.
- Music played should comply with the school's policy on acceptable music and should not contain inappropriate or offensive material.
- It is a good idea to balance fast and slow music to support various sensory levels.
- If persons with epilepsy are attending, the use of strobe or flashing lights should be minimized or at least include a block of time during the prom when they are not used and steady, no-flash lighting is used instead, or lighting that doesn't cause the person to get a seizure.
- Some people are allergic or sensitive to fragrances, so it's a good idea to ask attendees to refrain from wearing strong lotions or perfumes.

Chaperone Standards:

- Chaperones should be trained in safe dance behavior.
 - At least one chaperone should be trained in first aid/CPR.
 - Chaperones should know how to assist someone in a wheelchair if they need help being transported in, out, or to the restroom.
 - If a student doesn't know how to dance, it is recommended that at least one of the chaperones know some of the common dance moves for the types of dances and music being played.
 - Criminal background checks could be considered.
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Sample Non-Discrimination Policy

Inclusive Event Non-Discrimination Policy

Definitions

“School sponsored dance”: A dance that is organized and operated by the school, school district (in the case of a public school), school charter organization (in the case of a public charter school), or the group, organization, or company in charge of operating the school (in the case of a private school). The school that organizes the dance is responsible for organizing it and paying the vendors involved.

“School affiliated dance” is a dance for the students of a specific school, and is marketed to the students of the school. It is not directly organized, funded, or operated by the school, school district, school charter organization, or the like, and instead is sponsored and operated by a student organization, the school’s PTA, or a group or company outside of the school. The private outside organization, company, or group is responsible for organizing the dance and paying its vendors.

Any school sponsored or school affiliated dance must meet the guidelines below in order to do any of the following:

- Use any facility located on school or school district property to host the dance.
- Use the school’s name, logo, or mascot when advertising the dance or event.
- Advertise the dance on school property in any form.
- Display banners on or within 500 feet of school property that advertise or promote the dance.
- Distribute flyers to students advertising or promoting the dance.
- Advertise or promote the dance on the school’s web page, social media pages, message sign, school announcement bulletin, loudspeaker/intercom/PA system, or other electronic medium the school owns or operates.
- Have the dance featured or advertised in the school newspaper or any school or school district sponsored or affiliated publication.
- Be provided the school roster for distributing any advertising of the dance by mail, flyer hand out in classes, and/or extracurricular events or other means to students, faculty, or parents.

Guidelines for an inclusive dance policy

- 1) The school or dance sponsoring organization shall choose an accessible venue for the dance (see our accessible venue guidelines for more information).
- 2) The school or dance sponsoring organization shall invite all students of the grade level(s) appropriate for the dance at the school.

- 3) No student of the grade levels the school sponsored or school affiliated dance applies to who are enrolled in that school shall be denied the opportunity to attend (if free) or purchase a ticket to attend the dance (if admission fee is charged), unless the student is not eligible to attend because the student is suspended from attending extracurricular activities, according to school policy (due to discipline or grades, see below).
- 4) Dance date policy should be within an age range appropriate for the event, as determined by school policies.
- 5) School sponsored or school affiliated dance operators are prohibited from denying admission to or denying the sale or purchase of an admission ticket to the dance based on a student's race, color, sex, religion, sexual orientation, culture, disability, socioeconomic status, IEP status, 504 plan status, special education status, or national origin. This policy applies to both students and their dates.
- 6) If any student attending the dance has an IEP or 504 Plan, any accommodations, modifications, assistive technology, supports, or related services the person receives in their IEP or 504 plan that are relevant to dances, extracurricular activities, and/or social skills shall be provided free of charge. IEP goals and objectives relevant to dances, extracurricular activities, and/or social skills in the student's IEP should be followed while at the dance when possible and appropriate.
- 7) If a child attending the dance is non-verbal, or is a person who uses a communication device as their primary method of communication, dance policy for electronic devices shall allow for the use of such devices while at the dance for those that need them.
- 8) Students with IEPs that require direct instruction related to learning skills for the dance prior to the event shall be provided the needed instruction before the dance happens. Such skills may include how to dance, how to get a date for the dance, and how to prepare for the dance, and others. The school can, at its discretion, provide this instruction to all students, including those without IEPs if desired, via classroom, lunchtime, and/or extracurricular instruction.
- 9) When students with special dietary needs are present at a dance, and catering or snacks are provided at the dance, the dance operator, caterer or food service team shall provide meals and/or snacks in which the student(s) who have special dietary needs can eat without major reaction. This includes but is not limited to peanut free, gluten free, vegetarian, etc.

- 10) If a school has a policy denying dance admission to students with poor academic performance, this same policy shall apply to students with special needs, with one exception. If a student with special needs or an IEP is receiving a differentiated, modified, and/or alternative curriculum and/or assessments, grades relevant to the curriculum the student is learning and the assignments, tests, or homework assigned to that particular student shall be used to determine eligibility for attending the dance. Dance operators shall use a 2.0 or a "C" grade point average as the eligibility criteria when this policy is in effect for all students.
- 11) If a school has a policy requiring a student to be at school a certain number of hours (or the entire school day) on the day of the dance, this can apply to persons with special needs, with one exception. Students who receive special education services or classes, speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, adaptive PE, or other special education services or off-campus instruction (such as work experience) as part of their day, the alternative instruction or time rendered in the special education services that student receives in the normal course of their school day shall count as "in class" for dance eligibility (even if it causes one to miss a general education class that others attend) if the student's schedule is correct for that particular child due to IEP accommodations or placement.
- 12) School and school affiliated dance operators and their vendors must comply with the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and all other federal, state, and local laws related to civil rights, disability rights, non-discrimination and equal access. Dance operators who have employees shall implement non-discriminatory hiring policies, consistent with the equal opportunity employer policies.
- 13) The school, PTA, or school affiliated dance operator who is hosting the dance shall provide a discount or scholarship fund so students who are from families with low socioeconomic status can afford to attend, if an admission fee is being charged and the cost would be too great for some students. Use of a fundraiser is acceptable for this as well. A suggested eligibility formula for discounted or scholarship prices shall be the same eligibility criteria that apply to students receiving free or reduced cost lunch at the school.
- 14) The school district shall not loan, donate, rent, lease, or allow the use of any school owned facility (including but not limited to cafeterias, gymnasiums, dance studios, ballrooms, multipurpose rooms, stages, auditoriums, outdoor quads, commons, classrooms, or playing fields) to any organization for dances or any other extracurricular events, public functions, or other uses that do not comply with the non-discriminatory admission regulations above.

- 15) School policy prohibits the use of school, PTA, school club, student organization, booster club, or school affiliated student organization funds for the purpose of renting, leasing, or arranging for the use of any non-school owned facility or venue for a dance or other event that does not comply with the non-discrimination policy or accessibility guidelines.
- 16) Any violation of this agreement by a school employee (for school sponsored dances) will result in disciplinary action by the school administration and/or school board, consistent with the district personnel disciplinary action policy. Any violation of this agreement by a school affiliated dance operator will result in contract cancellation, event cancellation (if on school property), and the event organizers will be barred from coming on school property, or advertising their dance through school channels, and a communication will be sent out from the school administration to parents saying any event they organized is no longer a school sponsored or affiliated event, and as the result must immediately cease the use of any school names, mascots, or logos. Any school, PTA, or student club funds used for a school affiliated dance in violation of this policy must be refunded immediately and could result in the organization that organized the dance to lose their school affiliation and may be subject to disciplinary actions by school administration, and/or the school board. Additionally, any dance operator not complying with these guidelines who fails to return any funds could be exposed to legal and/or debt collection actions with regard to the money spent on the event.

School affiliated dance operators must sign a contract saying they will agree with the non-discrimination guidelines above in order to advertise or market on school property or school social media, or use a school facility to host their dance.