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Gays attend prom for Bountiful High

Practice is becoming more common along the Wasatch Front

By [Deborah Bulkeley](#)

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BOUNTIFUL — As Bountiful High School students filed into their prom Saturday night, few gave a second glance to two boys holding hands. In fact, while the couple got a few glances, most walked past without even noticing B.J. Olsen or his date and best friend, former Skyline High School student James Manning.

"We just want to have fun like everyone else," Olsen said before the prom at the Little America Hotel. However, both Olsen and Manning were a bit nervous. It was the first time either of them had gone to a school-sponsored prom.

They had, however, attended a Christmas formal together earlier this school year. At that dance, they said some students seemed to make it a point to stare at them. "We were like the red dot in the middle of the crowd," Olsen said.

After the prom, Olsen said this weekend's dance wasn't much different. He said he and his date were stared at all night, and one student threatened them.

Bountiful assistant principal Steve Hill said when Olsen reported the threat he talked to the student to work out the situation. He said that verbal confrontations often arise at dances for a variety of reasons.

"It really wasn't anything out of the norm," Hill said. "It's usually just a word exchanged here and there."



B.J. Olsen, left, and his date, James Manning, stand together in the hallway as they attend Bountiful High School's prom at the Little America Hotel Saturday night. Olsen said he and his date were stared at all night.

Scott G. Winterton, Deseret Morning News

Same-sex couples are becoming more common at high school dances, said Dani Eyer, executive director of the Utah American Civil Liberties Union.

Olsen said the administration didn't try to bar him from the dance. However, sometimes — as at Provo High School recently — students can't get permission to go and ask the ACLU to step in, Eyer said. At Provo, the same-sex couple was eventually given permission to attend the prom.

Eyer said school administrations "can't prevent kids from participating in a high school activity based upon race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, it's the same context."

Richard Gomez, educational equity coordinator for the State Office of Education, said the federal Title 9 "prohibits discrimination based on sex, and sexual orientation may be part of that."

He said his office hasn't gotten a complaint based on sexual orientation, nor has the Office of Civil Rights in Denver, which reports school-related complaints to Gomez's office.

"I think the general pattern . . . has been to try and solve it at the local level," he said, noting that if a discrimination lawsuit is filed, the case is no longer under his purview.

The issue of sexual orientation at high schools isn't a new one, according to Eyer, but it is one that has recently drawn media attention. Some recent events include:

- A lesbian couple was voted "cutest couple" for this year's Murray High School yearbook.
- Copper Hills High School principal Tom Worlton opted last fall to require permission slips for same-sex couples to attend dances but later retracted that decision.
- Students at Hillcrest contacted the ACLU and protested last spring when they weren't allowed to wear "Queers Kick Ash" T-shirts as part of an anti-smoking campaign.

Olsen said he wanted to go to his school's prom because "I am a senior, and it is my school.

Hill said many of his students probably disagree philosophically with Olsen's sexual orientation but they are "pretty tolerant."

"I think we've educated our students. For the most part, they know they can't make direct statements," he said. "I think we have a population that's more tolerant than ever in the past. On the other hand, we have those that are just intolerant. . . . We don't tolerate harassment of any kind."

The Deseret Morning News was denied access to the prom. However, some Bountiful students on their way in acknowledged Olsen's right to go but said they'd prefer it if he stayed away. Some said they thought he was just trying to make a point. "I think it makes the rest of us a little uncomfortable," said Steven Gould.

Other students said they were fine with same-sex couples at their prom.

"I think it's cool if he's going to come and not be embarrassed," said Lara Hamrick, a Hunter High School sophomore who attended the Bountiful dance.

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