



Former Liberal High School grad Casey Widener, left, stands at attention in his full dress uniform as an active duty airman in the U.S. Air Force April 20 as his sister, Courtney Widener, purple dress, walks the red carpet with a friend to the front door of LHS for prom night. Courtney was refused her request to have her 22-year-old brother who had just returned from duty in Afghanistan walk her down the red carpet to the doors. Her request was denied because of rules established a decade ago denying anyone 21 or older to be a part of prom. Principal Keith Adams interpreted that to include promenade, which is the walk to the door. A meeting Monday afternoon between the family and school officials has brought a consensus the policy may be changed in the near future. Photo courtesy Courtney Widener

By EARL WATT • Leader & Times A policy that prevented a member of the military from escorting his younger sister to prom at Liberal High School April 20 may be changing soon.

A YouTube video showing Courtney Widener's brother, Casey, standing at the end of the red carpet while his sister made her way to the entrance without him, and a letter to the editor from Courtney sharing her disappointment, set off a national firestorm that involved Fox News, CNN, Wichita television stations and a barrage of comments on social media web sites.

Both sides came together Monday afternoon to try to bring an end to the spectacle, and it included an apology to Airman Casey Widener from LHS Principal Keith Adams.

"I am sorry that Casey Widener was offended or dishonored in any way," Adams said. "That was not our intent."

Both sides received criticism from around the nation.

"There's one from New York," Adams said as he checked his e-mail on his iPhone while meeting with Widener, her parents, Superintendent Lance Stout and Deputy Superintendent

Paul Larkin. The meeting was requested by Courtney and was facilitated by board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott.

Neither side was attempting to discredit the other, and Courtney wanted to meet with her principal to bring an end to the criticism of him, the district and of her disappointment. Adams agreed, and the discussion became a two-hour meeting that involved other parties including a television crew and other members of the media.

“We are willing to work and find a remedy to this,” Stout said. “It is impossible to go back, but what we can do is make it better for the future.”

Courtney’s father, Roby, agreed.

“We want to move forward, and hopefully, if there is another situation that comes up like this, we can remedy it,” he said. “The policy can remedy it.”

The group discussed several ways that the principal can be given greater latitude in allowing those that don’t meet the current guidelines, which does not allow anyone 21-years-old or older to participate in prom activities.

“We want the public to know we are not bickering,” Roby said. “We want to defuse it and make it a positive for the community.”

When Courtney’s original request was denied, Roby did not know why until he met with Adams.

“I didn’t understand how strict of a box you were in,” he said to Adams. “I can see this (request), and it makes total sense, even if it wasn’t my son.”

But by policy, Adams had to refuse the request since Courtney’s brother Casey was 22.

“The policy was not intended to disrespect anybody,” Adams said. “And certainly not from my point of view. My job is to follow a standard procedure, and he didn’t meet eligibility. It sounds crude, but I have 1,200 kids and a lot of times they want to go around the rules.”

Having a more flexible policy would allow Adams the opportunity to allow situations like Courtney’s to be approved.

“I would appreciate having the flexibility in the future to make that decision,” Adams said.

Roby defended the existing policy when it came to keeping students protected from those too old to attend the prom.

“I don’t want some 35-year-old in there with my 17-year-old daughter,” he said. “I don’t mean to denigrate the policy. I appreciate it. But I do think this is an old policy, and it needs to be reviewed.”

School district representatives agreed.

Stout also encouraged Courtney to continue to help frame the new policy.

“I would like to know that next year when prom rolls around, this wouldn’t be an issue,” Courtney said. “And not just brothers and sisters but mothers and fathers. I would like to know there is a policy but that this would not be a problem for someone else.”

“I respect that,” Stout said. “You have a voice in this.”

Both sides also agreed to try to end the social media attacks and try to be respectful of each side.

“She still has to go to school next year,” Courtney’s mother, Tiffany Brady, said.

The group agreed to continue the discussion so that by next week’s regularly scheduled school board meeting, a revision to the policy can be presented that would insure similar situations in the future would not happen again.