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## Communities Moving Past the Daddy Daughter Dance: Adapting Gender-Exclusive Events for the 21st Century

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# GENDER-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY EVENTS

Communities Moving Past the *Daddy  
Daughter Dance*:

Adapting Gender-Exclusive Events for the  
21st Century



Ezra Temko, Emily Love,  
Destiny Baxter, Heidi  
Masching, & Adam Loesch

August 26, 2022

**SIUe**  
SOCIOLOGY

**Y•E•O**  
NETWORK

**PEOPLE  
FOR THE  
AMERICAN  
WAY  
FOUNDATION**



*Policy Toolkit*

Dear Friends,

The Young Elected Officials (Y.E.O.) Network is committed to supporting Y.E.O.s in bringing freedom, fairness, and opportunity to their communities. In order to further improve and focus the policy impact of Network members, we ensure that YEOs have the policy resources necessary to further an agenda reflective of the needs of their communities and all Americans.

The Y.E.O. Network collaborates with our strategic partners to provide policy resources to our members. Drafted by a Network partner, this toolkit highlights a policy to help build an inclusive society. We encourage you to contact our team if we can be of support or connect you with the authors of this toolkit. We look forward to seeing the impact we can make when we harness our collective energy of Y.E.O.s across the country.

Yours in service and solidarity,

Raquel Jones  
Director of Y.E.O. Network

Alana Byrd  
Policy Coordinator

**About the Y.E.O. Network**

The Y.E.O. Network (<https://www.yeonetwork.org/>), a nonpartisan program of People For the American Way Foundation (<http://www.pfaw.org/>), is the first and only national initiative to provide a network of support to the newest generation of progressive leaders at every level of elected office. The Network was founded in 2005 with the mission to unite and support elected leaders ages 35 and under who share a passion for building communities that reflect values of freedom, fairness, and opportunity for all. Since then, the Network has grown to include more than 1,300 elected officials across the country in offices ranging from local school boards to the United States Congress.

The Network, which is committed to being “of, by, and for” young electeds, is unique in addressing self-identified needs and using a holistic and participatory model of leadership development. We provide cutting edge programming, investing in the full pipeline of progressive leadership and building sustained relationships with our members. We provide the resources young elected officials need to effectively impact policy, foster their own development and professional growth, and elevate their leadership in the broader progressive movement.

We provide our members with access to a nationwide network, policy resources and support, and continued leadership development. We empower our members to transform their political vision into progressive action, both individually and collectively.

The Y.E.O. Network serves to connect the progressive agenda at community levels across the country. Our purpose is to create an enduring pipeline of courageous and visionary leaders to change the world.

The Y.E.O. Network is a program of the People for the American Way Foundation. People For the American Way Foundation and its affiliate, People For the American Way, are progressive advocacy organizations founded to fight right-wing extremism and build a democratic society that implements the ideals of freedom, equality, opportunity, and justice for all. We encourage civic participation, defend fundamental rights, and fight to dismantle systemic barriers to equitable opportunity.

### **About our partner**

The Sociology Department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (S.I.U.E.) (<https://www.siue.edu/artsandsciences/sociology/>) seeks to empower our diverse and intersectional community to develop, critically analyze, and apply our sociological imagination to serve the public good. Applied political sociologist Ezra Temko manages the department's diversity and social justice specialization. Ezra was a member of the Y.E.O. Network from 2008 to 2012. This report was also researched by and co-authored with S.I.U.E. sociology students Emily Love, Destiny Baxter, Heidi Masching, and Adam Loesch. Sociology student Erika Ahart is also acknowledged for her research contributions, as well as sociology student Sam Meeker for cover design.

SIUE is a nationally recognized university that provides students with a high-quality education that powerfully transforms the lives of all individuals who seek something greater. A premier metropolitan university, SIUE is creating social and economic mobility for individuals while also powering the workforce of the future. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the S.I.U.E. campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 13,000.

### **Methods**

This toolkit is based on information, archival, and interview research. The research team began with archival research, analyzing primary sources such as newspapers, articles, and websites relevant to the topic, in particular identifying communities that have had challenges with their gender-specific events and learning more about the contexts of the conflicts. The team then conducted over a dozen in-depth interviews with people across the country involved in the topic, such as principals, school board members, parents, and advocates, with a focus on communities that have changed their policies or events to be more inclusive. This research was reviewed and approved by the S.I.U.E. Institutional Review Board (I.R.B. #249). The research team would like to thank the interview participants for their time and insights into this issue.

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## Executive Summary

Parent-child community events like father-daughter dances are a celebrated tradition in many communities. However, when these events specify the gender of who can participate, they exclude many families. They also tend to reinforce gender stereotypes (e.g., a dance for girls and a sports event for boys), and are legally questionable for public school and associated P.T.A./P.T.O. sponsors that may be violating federal Title IX requirements and for local governments that may be violating the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause.

Contemporary U.S. society is made up of families that come in diverse forms and structures. Two-parent households may have a working mother and stay-at-home father or two parents of the same gender. Some children live with only one parent, sometimes due to factors such as deployment, death, divorce, and incarceration. Excluding families from these events prevents them from participating in community events meant to foster and celebrate family bonds, ultimately adding unnecessary stressors and stigmatizing these families and children.

To address these concerns, over the past decade a growing number of communities across the United States have adapted their family events to make them gender inclusive. From Rhode Island to North Carolina to Wisconsin to Oregon, schools, local governments, and other sponsors of gender-exclusive parent-child events have adapted their events to be welcoming and inclusive. These communities strive to ensure the whole community is represented, and that they bring families in the community together, providing equal access to community events. *Daddy Daughter Dances* become *Family Dances* or *Spring Flings*. *Me and My Son Bowling* becomes a *Bowling Bonanza*. These events have been expanded to preserve the opportunity for parents and children to bond, including for fathers with their daughters, while also ensuring that girls who like bowling, boys who like dancing, nonbinary children, widowed parents otherwise considered the “wrong” gender, and other community members are able to participate in events that are designed for the community of which they are a part.

A number of organizations, from the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) to the American Association of University Women (A.A.U.W.) to PFLAG National to the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (N.C.W.G.E.), support communities making these events gender inclusive. However, these changes have not occurred without resistance, often rooted in an attachment to tradition, a desire to enforce values and normative gender roles in our society, and a fear that inclusive policies are part of a cultural politics they find troubling. However, public institutions have responded that they should serve their entire constituency, regardless of any staff or politician's personal views. Regardless of who lives in their community, communities that have adapted their events seek to serve all the children and families who live there.

Being inclusive does not mean ending a tradition; it means finding a way to continue a tradition and bring more people into the celebration. A family dance that used to be a *Daddy Daughter Dance* still welcomes fathers and daughters to attend together. Families and community leaders seeking change want to be able to participate in community traditions with their family and for these events to be welcoming to their neighbors.

Across the country, gender-exclusive community events are being challenged. Some have changed and become gender inclusive. Others continue to exclude members of the public. Advocates, community leaders, and decision-makers in communities with gender-exclusive events seeking to create equal access to these community events can advocate for and adopt changes to specific events or broader inclusive policies that requires these events be inclusive. Community leaders can work to create inclusive policies that represent their whole community and bring families of all kinds together.

## The Problem: Gender-Exclusive Community Events



Brookshire Elementary School in Winter Park, Florida used to have a father-daughter dance. However, Riley, a Brookshire student, was not welcome at this event. Riley's dad had passed away from a brain tumor, so this event served as yet another cause of isolation, challenge, and exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Riley's mom, Caroline Johnson, said that "the loss that a child feels after the passing of a parent is one of the most indescribable emotional events that leaves deep emotional scars." Caroline wanted her daughter included rather than made to "feel less than... because of an absence in her life which she had zero control over." While initially rebuffed, Caroline succeeded in getting Brookshire Elementary to change their event from a *Father Daughter Dance* to a *Spring Fling* so that it could "support all families." The community event now welcomes children and adult family members from across the diverse family structures that exist in the community the school is supposed to serve.<sup>2</sup>



### *Historical Context*

In the United States, women were initially excluded from basic rights and responsibilities. A century ago, in 1920, U.S. women gained the right to vote after the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the federal constitution was ratified. From the 1960s into the 1980s, national and state laws were enacted to protect women from discrimination and remove discriminatory laws in areas such as employment, housing, public accommodations, banking, and education.<sup>3,4</sup> Women historically were not legally autonomous citizens, especially if they were married. In 1981, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a Louisiana law that made a husband "head and master" of all marital property, meaning prior to the court decision a husband had sole and independent control over property without needing to inform or obtain his wife's consent.<sup>4,5</sup>

**We should not be taking regressive steps backwards and telling students that they cannot be pursuing their interests based solely on their gender and... regressive gender roles.**  
-Hillary Davis, ACLU of Rhode Island<sup>6</sup>

Women's lack of ownership over themselves is represented in the cultural tradition of fathers "giving" daughters away at weddings. Historically, this act of giving the daughter away included dowries, walking the daughter down the aisle, and the father-daughter wedding dance. This cultural tradition is held together with gender roles and restrictions. While many gendered traditions have changed as women's position in society has undergone a cultural and legal change, the tradition of being "given away" is still widely celebrated. Some believe the father-daughter wedding dance inspired the new tradition of father-daughter dances held as community events.

### **The American Purity Ball**

In 1998, Randy and Lisa Wilson created the American Purity Ball. The Purity Ball is a formal father-daughter dance where fathers take a vow to protect the chastity of their "regal princesses." In return, the daughters, who range from four years old to college age, take a vow to remain sexually pure until marriage. There are now annual Purity Balls held in 48 states.<sup>7</sup> These events can implicitly teach patriarchal norms.<sup>8</sup>





"Daughter Ball" in Duluth, MN, 2011<sup>9</sup>

This new tradition has been extended to sometimes include mother-son community events, and occasionally father-son or mother-daughter events. These events celebrate the parent-child relationship, which is important for cognitive and social development.<sup>10</sup> Communities usually hold these events to support, uplift, and celebrate family bonds. However, many of these events are gender exclusive. A gender-exclusive event (e.g., a father-daughter dance, a mother-son sports outing) is one that determines who can attend the event based solely on their gender identification. This can be specified for the

parent, child, both the parent and child, or for other family members. These events also tend to follow gender stereotypes, with girls being invited to events like a father-daughter dance or a formal tea, and boys being invited to events involving sports.

Social exclusion occurs when the institutions that allocate resources and assign value operate in ways that systematically deny some groups the resources and recognition that would allow them to participate fully in social life. -World Bank publication<sup>11</sup>

**Father Daughter Dance**  
On Friday, April 25, 2014, Farm Hill invites you to:

**Butterfly Kisses**

\*Grandpas, Uncles, Father Figures, etc. all welcome!

Where: Farm Hill Elementary School Gym  
Time: 6:30pm-8:30pm  
Price: \$10 per couple, \$5 each additional child  
Photos will be available for purchase, more info on packages soon...  
Parents K-2: Consider making a dessert donation and/or volunteering!  
Parents 3-5: Consider making a (non-dessert) snack donation and/or volunteering!

Please return form to school in envelope labeled "Father Daughter Dance" by Monday, April 14<sup>th</sup>

Name/Grade of Child(ren) Attending: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Adult Attending: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please make checks payable to "Farm Hill PTA")  
Amount Enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteering/Donating Snacks:  
 I want to volunteer to help plan/set up!  
 I want to make a food donation: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (renamed the



*Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act* in 2002) prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding. However, a number of exceptions were written into the law, including "father-son and mother-daughter activities at education institutions." Title IX requires these parent-child events that specify a child's sex to "have reasonably comparable activities... for students of the other sex."<sup>13</sup> In 2014, the Department of Education issued guidance that, to be in compliance with Title IX, public schools with gender-exclusive extracurricular activities (like father-daughter dances) must

<sup>14</sup> "not 'rely on overly broad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of either sex'" and must justify the events as meeting an important educational objective that could not be met absent gender segregation. It is unlikely that holding a dance for girls and a sports event for boys would meet this threshold. Local governments also have a legal threshold for holding such events, as the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause has been interpreted as requiring governments to justify gender-based discrimination as being necessary to achieve important governmental objectives.<sup>15</sup> More information on the legality of gender-exclusive community events can be found in the subsection "Ensuring events are legal and nondiscriminatory."

## ***Diverse Family Structures***

Gender-exclusive parent-child community events have not adapted to serve the diversity of families in our communities. Supporting and uplifting family bonds is important. However, the structure of gender-exclusive events ostracize diverse and non-conventional families.

We've heard from single moms who feel that their families have been unfairly singled out and made to feel like their families are less than other people's families. -Carolyn Mark, Rhode Island N.O.W.<sup>6</sup>

Family demographics in the United States have changed over time. In 1960, almost 90% of all children lived with two parents. As of 2016, less than 70% of all children live with two parents.<sup>16</sup> The majority of families today are not the traditional nuclear family with a breadwinner working father, stay-at-home mother, and two children. Instead, a multitude of diverse family structures exist, such as those consisting of mother-father households, single parents, stay-at-home fathers, L.G.B.T.Q.+ parents, and adoptive parents.

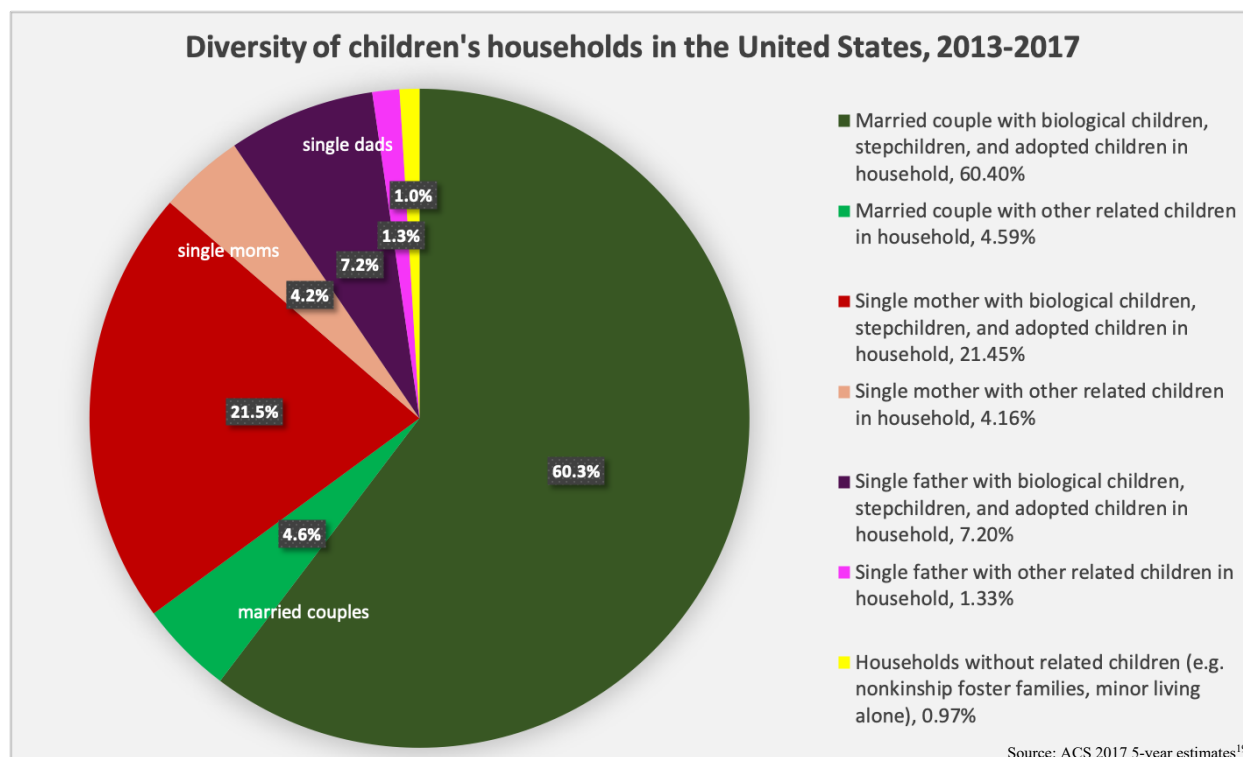


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The people of Cranston realized... that society has changed dramatically over the years in terms of what constitutes a family.... Let's make sure that these events are appreciated and enjoyed by the family, so to speak, whatever that family consists of. -Michael Traficante, School Committee Member, Cranston Public Schools, explaining why Cranston's *Me and My Guy* dance needed to be adapted for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

From 1970 to 2016, single-mother households almost doubled and single-father households increased over 250%.<sup>16</sup> There are over 400,000 children in the United States in the foster care system. Over 60,000 children have been adopted by L.G.B.T.Q.+ parents, with over 2 million L.G.B.T.Q.+ parents indicating serious interest in adoption.<sup>18</sup>

The figure below shows the Census Bureau's estimates for U.S. households with children, based on 2013-2017 American Community Survey data.<sup>19</sup>



The *Moms and Dads Weekends* is a very traditional, nuclear family, 1950s way of thinking about things. But it's... almost going to be the 2020s, and change had to happen soon to be more welcoming of people who, maybe, you know, their parents have passed on, or they were adopted, or there are so many different stories and ways to view family. And by intentionally using the word *family*, it could also be a family of choice. -Curtis Orona, Program Council Director, Oregon State University, on O.S.U.'s change to holding *Fall and Spring Family Weekends*

While family structures in our society have diversified, community events are still catching up. Gender-specific events, such as father-daughter dances, exclude some children and leave out whole families.

### Deployed Parents

Over 200,000 military children in the United States have a parent who is currently deployed.<sup>20</sup> Military children with a deployed parent are more likely to have increased stress and anxiety, increased depressive symptoms, increased behavioral issues, and decreased academic performance in school.<sup>21</sup> Extracurricular activities can help military children with coping and resiliency.<sup>22</sup> However, family events that highlight a father or mother can add additional stress to children and families with a parental figure absent due to their deployment.

In Oklahoma, Ashley Spells-Hayes tried to take her daughter to a *Daddy-Daughter Dance* because her daughter's father was in the military and out of state. Ashley herself is retired military and had taken her daughter to father-daughter dances before when she was stationed in Texas. At the door, Ashley was told she could not come in because mothers were not allowed inside.<sup>23,24</sup>

In some cases, families with deployed fathers have tried to mitigate the stress father-daughter dances can cause by making alternative arrangements to ensure their daughters can still participate. In El Paso, Texas, a deployed father arranged for the character Beast from the film *Beauty and the Beast* to escort his daughter to her father-daughter dance.<sup>25</sup> In Licking County, Ohio, a young girl attended a father-daughter dance with her friend and her friend's father.<sup>26</sup> In Winthrop Harbor, Illinois, a Kindergarten girl whose father had passed away while stationed in Hawaii nine months prior attended a father-daughter dance accompanied by a National Guardsman.<sup>27</sup> In these cases, families and communities had to take additional steps to ensure these children were not excluded from the events and to try to diminish feelings of distress from not having their parents present.



A father with his daughter after nine months of being deployed to Afghanistan, 2013<sup>28</sup>

### Stepparents

It is increasingly common for children to be part of stepfamilies. A minority of U.S. children live with two biological parents.<sup>29,30</sup> Half of children (12 years of age or younger) live with one biological parent and that parent's partner.<sup>30</sup> Over one out of every seven children live in a household with a stepparent, stepsibling, or halfsibling.<sup>29</sup> Children who are part of stepfamilies often face various challenges.<sup>31</sup> Stepfamilies come about as a result of some form of loss. Emotional ties between a stepparent and stepchild can take time to develop.<sup>32</sup> Stepfamilies can encounter stressful challenges navigating what roles various family members will play, how they will relate to one another, what names and labels should be given to different family members, and how to introduce stepparents. For example, a boy playing with friends in a park saw his stepfather passing by. He wanted to call out to his stepfather, who he usually called Neal, but he did not feel comfortable doing that in front of his friends, since it would make him seem different. So, he called out "Dad," but Neal did not react.<sup>33</sup> Some children attending or considering attending father-daughter dances with their stepfathers have similar discomfort and anxiety navigating their interactions with their peers and other adults at dances that are specifically designated for fathers.

Decisions about community event attendance can be especially emotional and complicated for stepfamilies who have to negotiate among different parental figures.<sup>33</sup> For example, a divorced father was quite upset when his daughter wanted to take her stepfather to her school's *Daddy/Daughter* dance instead of him.<sup>34</sup> This tension exists in part due to the use of the term "Daddy" or "Father" in the title of these events. Some families are able to work through the issue. For example, in Texas a biological father and soon-to-be stepfather jointly took their daughter/soon-to-be-stepdaughter to their local Daddy Daughter dance.<sup>35</sup> However, it is usually not that simple. It is important for schools to recognize that many children live in stepfamilies and not to treat stepfamilies as less than or abnormal. Rather, children who live in stepfamilies may need additional and tailored support.<sup>36</sup> Gender-exclusive parent-child community events present challenges to many stepfamilies as they navigate celebrating their family. From juggling

schedules to navigating family dynamics and labels, gender-exclusive events add unnecessary stress to stepfamilies and stepchildren's lives.

### **Transgender kids and/or parents**

Transgender is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. "Trans" is often used as shorthand for transgender. -National Center for the Transgender Equality<sup>37</sup>

We can be 95% confident that as of 2014, somewhere between 850,000 and 2.3 million (0.36% to 0.95%) U.S. adults identify as transgender (sample proportion 0.58%), with younger adults more likely to identify as transgender compared to older adults.<sup>38</sup> A 2017 U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention study found that approximately 1.8% of high school students identify as transgender, though the percentage of high school students who are gender-diverse is likely much higher.<sup>39</sup> Generally, one's sense of gender identity occurs prior to the age that kids start Kindergarten.<sup>40</sup>

The majority of transgender individuals identify as a boy/man or girl/woman.<sup>41</sup> Transgender boys, girls, mothers, and fathers should be able to attend gender-exclusive events when their gender identity matches the event's restrictions. However, prejudice in our society means trans individuals may not have an affirming experience at an event that is restricted by gender. For example, Oklahoma fifth grader Maddie Kleeman Rose, a transgender girl, was publicly outed by a teacher who had looked at her school records. Thereafter, Maddie was harassed with ongoing, violent threats. When Maddie's dad took her to a father-daughter dance, an adult man confronted Maddie, repeatedly asking her if she was a boy.<sup>42</sup>

Gender-exclusive events can be problematic for individuals whose gender presentation does not conform to societal norms about what men and women should look like, whether they are a transgender man or woman, nonbinary (someone who identifies as outside the dichotomous construct of being either a boy/man or a girl/woman), or cisgender (someone whose gender identity matches the gender identity typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth). For example, Donovan Ackley III, a transgender man, skipped his six-year-old daughter's father-daughter dance out of fear for their safety. Born intersex, Donovan had been socially and medically raised to be a girl/woman, but had recently affirmed his gender as a man. While Donovan formally fit into the binary father-daughter dance, he understood that his "in-between" transitional appearance at a father-daughter dance could result in violence against him, and that "young children would be the ones caught in the crossfire." Despite his daughter's tears and insistence that her father bring her to the event (e.g., repeatedly begging "Why, Daddy, why?"), Donovan chose safety. The next year, when his appearance was more gender-normative, Donovan was able to take his daughter to the dance.<sup>43,44</sup>

Gender-exclusive events that are set up for boys or girls and/or fathers or mothers structurally exclude nonbinary individuals. Among the U.S. transgender population, approximately over one-third (35%) identify as nonbinary or genderqueer, as opposed to identifying as men, trans men, women, or trans women. The number of U.S. adults identifying as nonbinary or genderqueer in 2020 is therefore estimated to be over 475,000.<sup>41</sup> For many nonbinary adults in the United States, their gender identity is their legal gender. Currently 20 states, as well as Washington, D.C., accounting for over one-third of the U.S. population, have identity documents such as driver's

licenses that allow a third gender X option in addition to the M or F options.<sup>45</sup> Even with this legal status, nonbinary community members remain excluded from events that are segregated using a binary conception of gender. Unlike family events or parent-child events, father-daughter, mother-son, and other gender-specific events exclude people who do not fall into those roles or labels. Nonbinary parents are excluded from community events that require the adult to be a man or woman.

Seven year-old Anika of Boston, Massachusetts has a mother (“Mom”), Sunnie, and a parent (“Baba”), Tori Kaufmann-Paulman, who is gender nonconforming. Anika had an invitation to her Girl Scouts’ *Family Square Dance*. The event name included asterisks with a note that it was formerly a father-daughter dance. Tori felt that this meant that although they were formally allowed to attend, in intention and effect the event would still be a father-daughter dance. Therefore, given Tori’s gender presentation, a father-daughter dance might end up with Tori having to explain their presence to attendees their family did not already know. Tori shared, I explained how I thought it might evolve and asked her if she wanted to go, and she didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to participate. But had it really been a family dance, where she didn’t feel like that extra edge, she probably would have wanted to go... Just renaming something doesn’t necessarily take away the meaning of it that everybody secretly knows.<sup>46</sup>

Nonbinary kids are often subject to spaces that are gender-segregated, leading to stigma and exclusion. This gets exacerbated without intentional planning. For example, during an active shooter drill at a Virginia middle school, while students took cover in the boys and girls locker rooms, a nonbinary student was told she could not go into either locker room, and to sit in the gym with a teacher during the drill. The educators then decided the student should sit alone in the locker room hallway.<sup>47</sup> Gender-specific community events that are for only boys, girls, men, and/or women exclude parents and children who fall outside those labels.

Gender-exclusive events can also put a school in the position of attempting to tell a child what their gender identity is. For example, when Dex Frier, a transgender student in Georgia, was nominated for prom king, his school decided to remove him from the ballot and tell him he could run for prom queen instead.<sup>48</sup> This prompted backlash, and the school ended up making their prom court gender-neutral, with two “Royal Knight” titles (named after the school’s mascot) rather than a “prom king” and “prom queen.”<sup>49</sup>

Having gender-exclusive events puts schools in the position of gender policing. If they enforce the event structure, they have to determine who is and who is not a man, woman, boy, girl, or someone who does not fit into those categories. This is a problematic place for schools to be. People may be born intersex, assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth, have gender identities that match or differ from the gender identity typically associated with their assigned sex, and/or have gender expressions that are more or less normative for their sex and/or gender identities. Gender-exclusive events attempt to ignore gender diversity and require classifying people into categories that are limited in coverage. A school with a gender-exclusive event that chooses to respect or disrespect children or parents’ gender identities can lead to controversy that can be avoided by having gender-inclusive events.

### **Incarcerated parents**

The majority of adults in prison are parents. As of 2007, 744,200 fathers and 65,600 mothers in the United States were in prison. Over 1 in 50 children (2.3% of children under the age of 18, about 1.7 million children) had an incarcerated parent.<sup>50</sup> As of 2012, approximately 1 in 14 children (nearly 7%) have had an incarcerated parent at some point over the course of their childhood.<sup>51</sup>

While parental incarceration impacts children across demographic groups, it disproportionately impacts children in poverty, children with parents who have less formal education, and children in rural areas.<sup>51</sup> Parental incarceration also disproportionately impacts children of color due to racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In the United States, for nearly half (46%) of children who have a father in prison, their father is black. This drops to 28% for mothers; for nearly half (48%) of children who have a mother in prison, their mother is white. However, this still represents an overrepresentation of incarcerated black mothers compared to national demographics. Over 1 in 20 black children (6.7%) have a parent in prison, compared to over 1 in 50 Hispanic children (2.4%), and about 1 in 100 white children (0.9%).<sup>50</sup>

Children who have or have had incarcerated parents are more likely than children who have never had incarcerated parents to already have additional stressors and hardships, including living in neighborhoods with higher rates of violence and a higher likelihood of being in homes with substance abuse; domestic abuse; parental divorce, separation, or death; mental illness; and poverty. Parental incarceration can be traumatic for children. It can directly impact children through a loved one being removed or absent from their lives. Parental incarceration can also result in a loss of income, increasing a family's financial struggles and the likelihood of being in poverty. Children with incarcerated parents, on average, encounter more social exclusion, experience worse physical and mental health, display more emotional difficulties and behavioral problems, and do worse in school than similar children without incarcerated parents.<sup>51</sup>

One best practice towards countering these stressors is to reduce the stigma children encounter,<sup>51</sup> such as that produced by gender-exclusive events.<sup>52</sup> Parents who are incarcerated do not live with their child(ren), making it difficult for children to attend events designated for a particular parent. For example, children with an incarcerated father cannot go with their dad to a father-daughter dance. Their only options are to not attend or to potentially bring another adult man to fill the role, both of which could result in feelings of awkwardness or exclusion. These gender-exclusive events can therefore create additional stress for children in this situation.

Because children with incarcerated parents are excluded from attending community gender-exclusive dances with that parent, states such as Michigan, Virginia, and Nebraska have begun hosting gender-specific father-daughter events specifically for incarcerated parents.<sup>53,54,55</sup> Recently, the National Institute of Corrections began a pilot program in Connecticut, which is slated to expand to New York, Wisconsin, Texas, and Oregon, hosting a gender-inclusive family dance for incarcerated parents.<sup>56,57,58</sup> These events are an attempt to provide an opportunity for family bonding. However, they do not address the exclusion children with incarcerated parents still encounter from gender-exclusive events in their own community.

## Same-gender parents and single parents

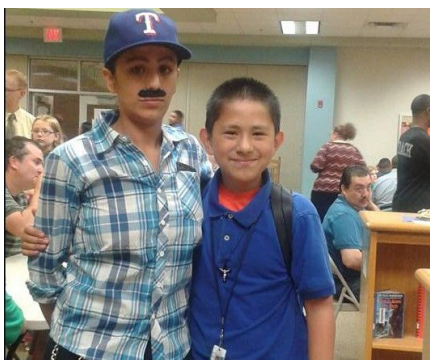
Gender-exclusive community events usually invite either a mother or a father. These events exclude same-gender parents and single parents if their family does not have an available parent that matches the gender specified for the event.

### *Single Parents*

About one-quarter of children in the United States live in a single-parent household.<sup>59</sup> Single-parent households may deal with stressors such as financial insecurity, conflict between parents (including visitation and custody issues), and less time for the parent to spend with their child(ren).<sup>60</sup>

Single mother Linda Balsamo's daughter brought home an invitation to a father-daughter dance that explicitly stated, "No moms allowed." Her daughter was not sure what to do. Linda told her daughter she could take her grandfather or an uncle, but her daughter wanted her parent there. While Linda felt she should be able to go, she tried to explain to her daughter that the event was for "making a special memory with a significant fatherly figure in your life." Nevertheless, her daughter insisted her mother attend with her. Linda felt these events should be focused on what children are comfortable with and how they feel, with children allowed to bring the person they want to spend that special time with. Linda shared that "The definition of who and what makes a parent is a personal decision and up to the family that is involved."<sup>61</sup>

When Georgia Kindergartener Gracie brought home a flyer for a father-daughter dance, she asked her single mom Amy Peterson to be her date. Amy agreed, and even decided to get into character, wearing men's clothing and painting on a beard with mascara. The principal heard Amy might be attending, and an hour before the dance called Amy and told her that she was not allowed to attend, and that other single mothers in the same situation had also been told they could not attend. The principal suggested finding a male adult to take Gracie, but Gracie's uncle had work and children of his own, and Gracie's grandfather, who was on dialysis, lived over two hours away. While many of Gracie's friends got dressed up and attended the dance, Gracie was excluded from the event because the school decided only girls who had a father or male adult to take them could go. Amy said seeing her daughter emotionally distraught over this was "absolutely heartbreaking."<sup>62</sup>



In Texas, single mother Yvette Vasquez had better luck attending her son Elijah's school's *Donuts with Dad* event. In the past, Elijah had "that sad look on his face" when he missed out on school activities involving fathers, so Yvette was determined to "do whatever it takes to put a smile on that face." Donning a fake mustache, a plaid button-down, and with her hair tucked under a baseball cap, Yvette went to the event. Elijah was "really excited" and thankful to have his mom there."<sup>63,64</sup>



### *Same-gender parents*

As of 2019, there are an estimated 191,000 children in the United States who live with same-sex parents.<sup>65</sup> Families with same-gender parents can encounter increased stress and anxiety due to stigma and discrimination.<sup>66</sup>

Emily McGranachan, who grew up with two moms,<sup>67</sup> shared her experience and perspective that, Gendered and named spaces like Mother's Day, Father's Day, or like *Daddy-Daughter Dances*, oh gosh, those made me so uncomfortable growing up, and I found them so stressful. But even if you have a family where one person identifies as male and female, but that's not your names, or you're genderqueer, it just gets so—it just pushes people out. And I think all these events were intended to be a bringing together of families sort of moment, and I think we're just at the point that you don't see that anymore. The families look so different. They've got grandparents, they've got a parent who's a widow, you never know. So I get the feeling that it no longer brings people in, and by gendering events like that, you're only keeping people out.<sup>46</sup>



Erik and Mark Sosa-Kibby's sons missed out on their Wisconsin elementary school's Lego mother-son event because they have two dads. The school eventually changed the event to make it more inclusive, though it was too late for Erik and Mark's children.<sup>68,69</sup>

Because gender-exclusive events like father-daughter dances exclude certain parents based on their gender, they can add stress for single parents, same-gender parents, and their children.

Ezra Temko, an author on this report, first encountered the stress and challenges gender-exclusive events can bring when he and his husband, Drew Temko, were foster parents to two elementary school-aged girls. When the girls first entered foster care with them, their birth mother and birth father were incarcerated. Less than three months after the girls began living with them, the Parks and Recreation Department in their New Hampshire town hosted a *Daddy Daughter Date Night*. Flyers were sent home to students through the elementary school.



Ezra shared,

The girls had only lived with us for a couple months at this point. They wanted to attend the dance. The older daughter, however, wanted to attend the *Daddy-Daughter Dance* with her family, and she did not consider us family. Indeed, the first thing she had said to us when we met was that last time she was in foster care she had to call her foster parents mom and dad and she hated it because they were not her mom and dad.

Her dad could not take her. We ended up being able to arrange for the girls to go with their two uncles (who lived in another state), but approval and logistics were not a given. The state had to evaluate whether or not the uncles could take the girls to the dance, including whether they could drive them there and attend absent supervision. The girls did not know what was going to happen, and neither did we, until we eventually received permission within days of the dance.

The Recreation Department later hosted a *Mommy and Me Tea*. The girls would have loved to go with their mom, but while she was no longer incarcerated, all visits were supervised, so if they took their mom it would have to be with supervision. While they would not want their foster fathers taking them to a *Mommy and Me Tea* event that was “For Mothers & Daughters of all ages,” this technically was not allowed anyway; the event specified that they could bring “their mother, grandmother, aunt or special female friend.”

**Mommy & Me Tea**  
for Mothers & Daughters of all ages Celebrating Life & Spring

What could be a better gift this Mother's Day than an experience both mother and daughter can share together? We are excited to invite Mothers and their daughter/s to our Third Annual Mommy & Me Tea. This is the Social Spring Event of the Season!

**Saturday, May 9th**  
11:30 am to 2:00pm at the Newmarket Community Center.

**~ Tea Time:** Refreshments will feature an assortment of sweets, savories and bite size sandwich corners, as well as plenty of tea, sugar/cream and, of course, lemonade. This year our tea etiquette instruction will be performed by a surprise guest!

**~ Celebrate Spring Fashion Show:** Guests will either be entertained and/or be the entertained's with a "Celebrate Spring" fashion show. We're encouraging all the ladies, young and old, to really get into the spirit of the tea and come dressed in something spring like, floral, or maybe even wear a hat. The option to walk the runway will be up to you! But really, can't you just picture you and/or your daughter walking the runway... how cute is that? Plus, an "in-action" walkway photo will be taken of all walkway participants by a professional photographer which are available for purchase. (All shots on this page were taken at last year's tea, compliments of Love Grows Photography. Please see their advertisement below.)

**Girls' Girl Booths and Little Girl Crafts Room:** We will also have "Girls' Girl" Booths & Vendor Tables to visit. So far we have LaCount Photography, 20 Below Boutique, Scentsy, Origami Owl, Jafra Cosmetics. Please call ASAP if you wish to be a vendor as vendor space is limited.

**Iguana Make a Camp Child Smile:** The money we raise from our fundraising raffle table will once again help subsidize the Camp Wanna Iguana Child Smile Scholarship Fund. Each year many camp children are unable to attend field trips because some parents cannot afford the extra fees for these trips. This year's fundraising campaign will once again focus on the local level.

**Mommy and Me Tea-tails:**  
The event is for girls & women of all ages! Last year we attracted multiple generations of women! Please note all children 12 and under must be accompanied by their mother, grandmother, or special female friend.

**Ticket Prices:** \$24 / Mother & One Daughter (3 years + and up)\*  
Additional child \$6/each, Additional Adult Family Member is \$20/each  
\*Daughters 0 - 2 years will be considered lap children (no ticket purchase required).  
Tickets are now on sale and will be available up until 5/8. (one seating is limited)

Word on the girl's girl street is that we are going to sell out, especially with only one seating this year!  
Tickets are available at the Newmarket Recreation Department located in the Community Center.  
Call 659-8581 for questions, or if you would like to help in anyway!

**Raffle Table**  
We are gratefully accepting donations for our fund-raiser raffle prize table. If you would like to a monetary donation, a "theme spring" basket or any other item you think Mother/Daughters would love, please call 659-8581 or drop by anytime 5/10.

**Vendors Wanted**  
Do you have a craft or item that caters to a Girl's Girl crowd? Please call 659-8581 for vendor table pricing. Limited table spaces available.

### ***The problem with gender-exclusive events***

Gender-exclusive events stigmatize, exclude, and create genuine hardships for children and their families. From schools and P.T.A.s to local government recreation departments, many public institutions across the country host gender-exclusive parent-child events that reflect an outdated idea of family composition. Parents and children encounter hardship and feel ostracized by the very institutions that are supposed to respond to their needs. Caroline, a single-parent widow, encountered a father-daughter dance at her daughter's elementary school in Florida; her daughter's father had previously passed away due to a brain tumor. Jennifer, a single mom who has a "contentious relationship" with her children's father, attended a local father-daughter dance in Vermont with her boyfriend. Although Jennifer's boyfriend could have taken her daughter to the dance alone, Jennifer decided to attend to prevent any potential problems with her daughter's father. She was kicked out of the dance. Erik and Mark, a two-dad household, had two adopted sons and no daughters. Their children were therefore excluded from both their Wisconsin school's father-daughter dance and its mother-son outing. Gender-exclusive events exclude a diversity of families and create hardship for them. They often promote gender stereotypes, stigmatize particular kids, and send a message about whose families are valued and whose families are not valued.

### **Promoting Gender Stereotypes**

Gender-exclusive events tend to promote gender stereotypes. Most events created for girls are dances; other events may include activities such as fashion shows, quilt making, tea time, or spa nights. On the other hand, events for boys usually include activities such as bowling, sports events, fishing tournaments, laser tag, arcade games, and science experiments. The idea that a fun night for young girls involves getting dolled up and taken on a 'date' reinforces the stereotype that girls and women should be focused on their physical looks, while the idea that a fun night for boys involves sports reinforces the stereotype that boys and men should be focused on physicality and competition. Gender-typed gender-exclusive events thus communicate that dances are a feminine domain, and not for boys, and similarly that sports is a masculine domain, and not for girls.<sup>72</sup> Public schools holding gender-exclusive events with gender-stereotyped focuses are in violation of Title IX requirements.<sup>15</sup>

What we see when we talk about gender-segregated events is events that very often run [along] conventional or traditional gender roles. That's why dances tend to be for girls and sporting events tend to be for boys. So inevitably what we will see with passage of this legislation is girls—Home Ec., boys—science clubs, girls—dances, boys—softball games will continue, and you will have students who want to go to these events who will be excluded solely because of their gender. -Hillary Davis of the American Civil Liberties Union, testifying against Rhode Island bill that would allow schools to host gender-exclusive community events<sup>6</sup>

These are stereotypes that do not reflect natural human proclivities.<sup>73,74,75</sup> They may not even broadly reflect students' actual socialized interests. For example, while gender-exclusive dances are usually only held for girls, when the Atkinson Elementary P.T.O. in North Andover, Massachusetts sponsored a mother-son dance, the 100 boys there had a great time. Mother Cheryl Means, the dance committee chair and PTO president, shared, "What made it all worthwhile for me... was my ride home with my son, who I previously thought of as a nondancer, sports-only child. He said, 'Mom, this was the best. Can we do it every year?'"<sup>76</sup>

**Public perceptions:**

*Some people find father-daughter dances heartwarming. Others find them creepy.*

It is important to be aware that father-daughter dances often generate strong feelings, independent of any discussion about whether they exclude some families.

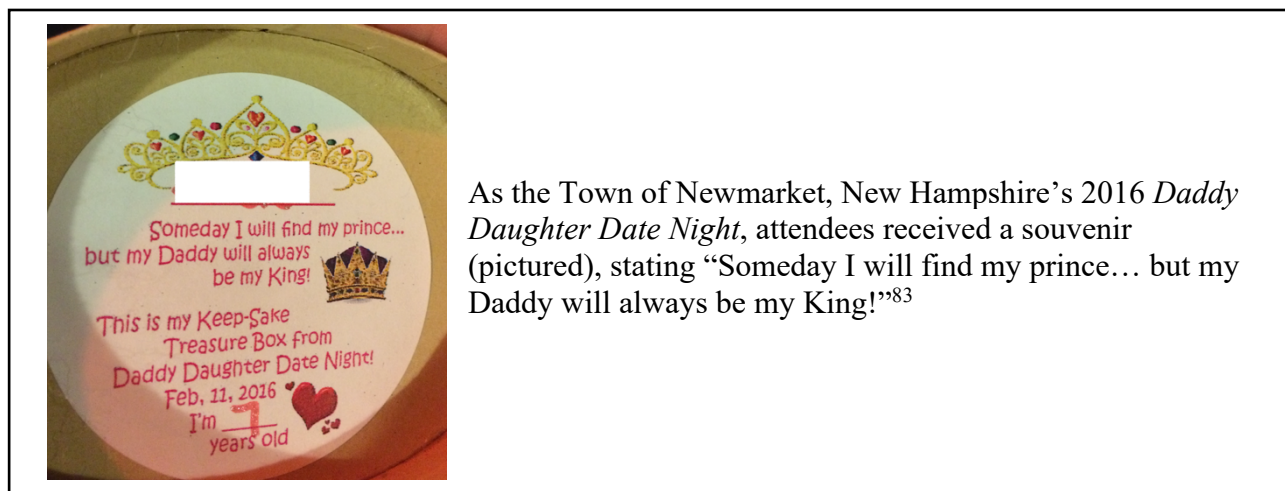
People who love father-daughter dances usually believe they offer a moment for fathers and daughters to build a special bond together, carving out time to create unique memories. Historically, fathers in households with both a father and mother were often the family's breadwinner, potentially to the exclusion of the father taking time to intentionally and personally connect with their children in the manner a father-daughter dance may help facilitate.<sup>77</sup> However, mothers in the United States are the majority earner for 40% of families with children (as of 2016), up from just 11% in 1950.<sup>16</sup> As of 2019, among families with children and married-couple parents, over 60% were families where both parents were employed.<sup>78</sup> Some people do not think a special event is necessary to bring fathers and daughters together, believing that fathers should be part of their children's lives intentionally and regularly.<sup>79</sup>

Some people support father-daughter dances because they perceive them as enabling fathers to provide an example to daughters of how a man should treat them.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, some people oppose father-daughter dances because they find them creepy. They argue that our culture fetishizes the father-daughter relationship, and that this "date-like" event romanticizes and sexualizes father-daughter relationships.<sup>81</sup> Others argue these events reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is the only normal sexuality, and reinforce gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideas about gender relations and parenting.<sup>77,82</sup>

Father-daughter dances are also complicated when they are gender exclusive because not every family situation allows for such a "couple" to attend a dance. To combat this, some community institutions ensure parents know that kids can attend their events with any special man or woman in their life. For example, Carolyn Mock of the Rhode Island National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) shared an experience from one of their members. She said,

This Rhode Island N.O.W. member grew up with a single mom, and whenever the father-daughter dance would come up, her mother would find some guy in the neighborhood to take her daughter to the dance. And then you can imagine, when they get to the slow dance, this young girl is thrust into this situation of intimacy with this stranger who her mom said, "Oh, he's a nice guy, he lives in the neighborhood. He's willing to take you to the dance because you need to have a man to take you to the dance."

Carolyn felt it was an inappropriate imposition for the school to discriminate on the basis of gender and create this situation. However, she does not think fathers and daughters going to a dance together is inherently problematic. Carolyn said that her husband had taken their daughter to an inclusive "kids choose" family event and they had had a great time.<sup>6</sup> However, families without an available parent of the "correct" gender are forced to draw on their local social networks if they want their child to be included in these events.



As the Town of Newmarket, New Hampshire's 2016 *Daddy Daughter Date Night*, attendees received a souvenir (pictured), stating "Someday I will find my prince... but my Daddy will always be my King!"<sup>83</sup>

## Stigma

Riley's father had died from a brain tumor. Riley's mother, Caroline Johnson, felt she should be able to take her daughter to their Florida school's *Father Daughter Dance*. She explained, "It is my community, and children should not feel isolated and feel that they are less than somebody else's family."

Stigma is a process of othering people by applying negative stereotypes to them that brand them in a way that discredits their humanity.<sup>84</sup> Gender-exclusive events foster stigma rather than egalitarianism. They stigmatize children and families that do not fit into the mold of the specific parent-child pairing around which the event is titled. Gender-exclusive events communicate implicit messages about children who do not fit into the event, telling them, as well as their peers and community, that their family is not equally valued—that there is something wrong with their family. This can lead to a decline in children's mental health, foster peer bullying, and other negative consequences.<sup>85</sup>

Gender-exclusive events can feel isolating to children and families. They can contribute towards children not feeling like they fit in with their peers. In Sacramento, California, elementary student Claire has two moms, so she went to a father-daughter dance with her friend's father. One of her mothers, Dr. Emilie Mitchell, said, "I'd be lying if I said it didn't put her in an awkward position."<sup>86</sup> She said that while everyone made an attempt to include Claire, the exclusive structure of these events can still make it feel like you are

on the outside looking in.... When everyone else, right, is "We're going to dinner," and it's special and everybody's buying an outfit, and in one case you know, the dad's got a limousine to take their daughters. When your kid is not a part of that party, and these are your friends, cause those were all her friends, right? And they're all lovely, wonderful people who never thought twice about, "Well, Claire will just go with us." Okay, but that's not exactly the same. It really can feel like you just don't belong.

Erik Sosa-Kibby, a parent in a same-gender marriage with two sons, also felt concern for his sons over their exclusion, sharing,

Kids in school are cliquy enough, especially at those ages where kids start to bond relationships. And you know, most kids bond during events: after-school events, parties. And so I think it's

kind of unfortunate that my kids are missing out on an event where they could be having serious bonding time with some other students—just because they don't have a mother. It wasn't so much about me not being able to go to a dance; it was about my sons not being able to have a socializing moment with their peers.

Shelly Pearson, a mother in Springfield, Illinois, shared how stigma impacted her family. Shelly's partner is a woman and together they have fostered multiple children, including their nine-year-old daughter. Shelly said her daughter felt left out of gender-exclusive school events. She said the events make kids like her foster daughter, who

feel like they are different already.... feel excluded from doing all of the things that their friends can do.... When they had a *Father-Daughter Dance*, she couldn't go to it because she did not have a father. A lot of the stuff that they had, you know—*Donuts with Dad*,... she really couldn't do them, because she was different than other kids. If she did, per se, *Reading with Mom*, she could have taken one mom or the other mom, but there were many, many events and one time she may [take] this mom, the next time she may take this mom, and other kids wouldn't understand why she has two different moms.



Richardson Elementary School in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, is one of many schools that host a *Donuts with Dad!* event.<sup>87</sup>

In Covington, Georgia, elementary student Skylar was stood up by her father for their school's father-daughter dance. The next year, Skylar came to her mother ahead of time and insisted that her father take her, saying, "Mommy, I want my dad to come with me to the dance. I don't want Grandpa. I want my dad. I want everyone to know I have a dad." Skylar felt left out and diminished because while the event was a "father-daughter dance," she could not bring her father.<sup>88</sup> Even when father-daughter dances explicitly allow other men to attend, or will make exceptions for families who ask, when an event is framed as a dance for fathers, children who bring other adults can still feel stigmatized.

People without particular marginalized identities or experiences may not consider or be aware that something is stigmatizing or understand what it is like to be stigmatized in a particular way. When people enter a stigmatized status, they may newly feel and understand how a context they previously did not question can be problematic.<sup>89,90</sup> For example, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook Chief Operating Officer and former Chief of Staff to the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, shared how after losing her husband, she suddenly had insight into the experience of being a single mother that she had previously been unaware of, including how gender-exclusive events at schools can impact families. Sandberg shared,

I never understood how often the world would remind my children and me of what we don't have—from father-daughter dances to Parent Night at school. Until we lost Dave, my brother said that he too did not realize how many 'father' events there were at their public school in Houston and how hard they must be for the many children without fathers.<sup>91</sup>

### **Lack of Representation**

Representation is a symbolic acknowledgment of value. It provides role models, gives people an image they can see themselves in, and shifts how people think about themselves.<sup>92</sup>

Correspondingly, a lack of representation also has symbolic meaning, expressing that there is something wrong with the marginalized group, both to that group and to the dominant group that is represented.<sup>93,94</sup> People have mental images or representations of roles, occupations, and institutions, and these stereotypes depend on people's observations of norms and expectations, of symbols and visual representations. The name of an event, the titles of people named for that event, the type of event, who actually attends the event, and who is captured in photos and media around the event all contribute to people's perceptions of family, what it means to be a girl or a boy or nonbinary, and what their city, school, or community is all about. The forms these representations take impacts people's perceptions, value judgments, and preferences. As people repeatedly encounter the same particular representation or model, their mental images of associated roles, occupations, and institutions become more stable, and in the case of biased models, solidify narrow conceptions and stereotypes.<sup>95,96,97</sup>

Gender-exclusive parent-child events portray a particular narrow symbolic representation of family and what is normal. Excluding particular community members, children, and families from events meant to celebrate family and bring people together sends a message that certain children and families do not have families that are worth being included.<sup>93</sup> Children who are excluded because of their gender or family structure observe their peers getting excited about family events being put on by central institutions in their life, and they witness their friends attending these events, and they simultaneously see themselves not being represented in these community events. Their symbolic exclusion affects their cognitive self-concept; children benefit from seeing themselves represented in community and family events.<sup>98,99</sup>

School social functions in elementary school like Donuts With Dads, Muffins With Moms, Father-Daughter Dances and other functions, were clear messages to me that my family, and those of others in my circle, were not invited to be a thread in the larger fabric of the school community. -Sophia Arredondo, a queer parent from Queens, New York<sup>100</sup>

Public policy that impacts representation can influence people's perceptions and the mental representations they have of groups and of themselves, changing people's attitudes.<sup>95,96,99</sup> While a father-daughter dance and a mother-son sports outing communicate particular gender-biased messages about boys, girls, dancing, and sports, a *Family Sweetheart Dance* and a *City/School Sports Outing* instead communicate messages free from gender-bias.

Symbolic landscapes reflect how people understand their world and others in it, but they can also be significant shapers of these worlds when they establish and legitimate particular normative standards and power relations within and between groups. -Political scientist Marc Howard Ross<sup>101</sup>

Psychology professor Dr. Emilie Mitchell is a parent in the Sacramento City (California) Unified School District. Emilie is a lesbian; her children have two moms. Crocker/Riverside Elementary had a father-daughter dance while her daughter was in school there, and she witnessed the school make the event more inclusive while her son was at the school. Emilie found the more inclusive event validating. She shared that when events are structured in a way that excludes certain children and their families, it can be alienating and make children feel like they do not belong. She shared, “If you don’t see representation of yourself that validates your world, your family, the way you live in the world, it is very hard to imagine your place in it.”

For children and families that are left out, their exclusion can also impact their trust in the institution itself (e.g., in their school, their P.T.A., their city government, etc.).<sup>94</sup> While institutions like schools and city governments may be assumed to be unbiased and gender-neutral, beneath the surface practices like what types of community events are and are not offered often reveal that they are indeed biased, preferential, and gendered institutions.<sup>94,102,103</sup> Embedded in community events, with their particular designations of who can and should attend, are values that are both consciously and unconsciously taught. Exclusive events can reproduce and perpetuate existing social inequalities and hierarchies.<sup>104,105</sup> An institution’s operations may unintentionally exclude and invalidate members it is supposed to serve. This is particularly problematic for public institutions intended to represent all of their constituents and that require trust and connections between the full community and the institution to be most effective.<sup>106,107,108,109,99</sup>

Dr. Daniel McCord, principal at Crocker/Riverside Elementary, spoke about how what he heard from parents led him to support adapting their gender-exclusive events to match the diversity of families at the school. Daniel shared, “This is causing me grief—that my child’s at a school where they might have this kind of event, and I’m not sure we fit.”

Gender-exclusive events, as well as changes to make them more inclusive, can be controversial because they include and exclude people based on their family structures. In doing so, these events function as social commentary on social hierarchies and inequalities. As political scientist Marc Howard Ross writes,

Inclusion and exclusion are often powerfully expressed through the restriction or expansion of a society’s symbolic landscape. Exclusion of groups from the symbolic landscape is an explicit form of denial and assertion of power. In contrast, a more inclusive symbolic landscape is a powerful expression of societal inclusion that communicates a mutuality and shared stake in society. It renders the previously unseen visible, gives voice to those once voiceless, and can offer powerful messages to young people and help to reshape relations between groups.... Inclusion offers acceptance and legitimation that can reflect and promote change in intergroup relationships.<sup>101</sup>

### **Exacerbating stressors**

While community events can benefit children and their families, in many cases gender-exclusive community events create actual hardship for families and children. They also create logistical issues that exacerbate rather than mitigate existing issues.

For example, in 2019, six year-old Skylar got dressed up and ready to go to her Covington, Georgia school’s father-daughter dance. Her father did not show up to bring her. The next year,



the same thing happened again. Skylar’s mother, Trelysia Hamerter, said her daughter “cried because she had her heart set on going. I felt so bad because there was nothing I could do because I’m not a male.” Luckily, Skylar had an older (11 year-old) brother who stepped in to take her, enabling her to attend the event with a family member.<sup>88</sup> While Skylar wanted to attend the event with her father, he did not show up, causing Skylar distress. If the event were gender inclusive, her mother could have taken her instead, mitigating some of that distress. However, the event being gender exclusive constrained Trelysia’s options for making the best out of the situation.



Jennifer Meade of Lebanon, New Hampshire, has a five-year-old daughter Addison and a seven-year-old son Brody. She has a boyfriend and is not married. Jennifer had attended a *Dance for Daughters* before in another town, without encountering any problems. However, her experience the following year in her hometown went quite differently.

Jennifer felt having her boyfriend take her daughter to the local *Father & Daughter Valentines Dance* by himself would anger her daughter’s father, with whom she already has a contentious relationship, so it was better for her to also be there. Therefore, Jennifer went to the dance with her family—together with her daughter, son, and boyfriend. She paid the \$30 admission fee (“\$15/couple”<sup>111</sup>), and their family began to enjoy the event.

However, about 20 minutes later, a staff member told Jennifer she could not be at the dance—because she is a woman. While her son would be allowed to stay, Jennifer felt it would be unsafe to leave him there without her; her son has Joubert Syndrome, a rare genetic condition that for Brody includes epilepsy.

Having to leave the event was traumatic. Jennifer shared, “My kids were visibly upset. My daughter was crying. She didn’t want to leave.”<sup>112,113</sup>

Jennifer shared that the *Father & Daughter Valentines Dance* event being gender exclusive negatively impacts other families, too. Jennifer’s friend, a mother struggling against cancer, shared with Jennifer how one of her sons would have enjoyed going to the dance, and she herself would have loved to have such a special and fun bonding moment with her son.

Gender-exclusive events can exacerbate stressors for unmarried, separated, or divorced parents with custody or communication issues. They can add to the difficulty a child already faces with

having an incarcerated parent. Designating that a particular parent attend an event can exclude families in which a particular parent is deployed, or has to work an evening or weekend shift that is during the event. Children who live in single-parent households or go through foster care are more likely to encounter unique obstacles and are often among the children who would benefit most from community events, support, and resources. Gender-exclusive events keep some of these children from participating, adding additional stressors rather than mitigating the ones they are already encountering.

Community events can be a community resource that invites all children and their families in. Gender-exclusive events, however, present challenges for many families.

### **Ostracization**

Gender-exclusive events promote stereotypes, stigmatize children, provide narrow models of representation, and exacerbate stressors. In a number of cases, they also involve the outright exclusion of parents or children from attending community events. For example, in Yukon, Oklahoma, mother Ashley Spells-Hayes, whose husband was in the military and out-of-state, tried to take her daughter to the city's father-daughter dance, but was told she was not allowed to attend. Another mother, whose husband had recently passed away, tried to take her daughter and was also turned away.<sup>23</sup> In Bristol, Wisconsin, Erik and Mark Sosa-Kibby's sons were excluded by their school from participating in both the school's father-daughter dance and mother-son Lego event based on the gender of the parents and children.<sup>68</sup>

*I have a niece and nephew that their father just passed away, and so the daughter can't take Daddy to the dance now. -Shelly Pearson, foster parent in same-gender marriage*

Social exclusion causes emotional pain, which often mimics physical pain and distress. Individuals who feel ostracized tend to avoid connecting with others to avoid painful social situations. Individuals who feel they are likely to be rejected are more likely to distance themselves from social connections and gatherings in order to proactively protect themselves from potential rejection. For children, feeling socially accepted can impact their sense of security and emotional stability. Experiencing social rejection can lead children to perceive the world around them as more hostile, dangerous, or unfriendly.<sup>114</sup>

## The Solution: Gender-Inclusive Community Events

Community events should serve the community, bringing families together with equal access to a public good.



An inclusive *Family Dance* hosted by Lewis Elementary School in Portland, Oregon.<sup>115</sup>

### ***Historical Context: Gender-Inclusive Events as a Public Issue***

Some communities have traditionally put on gender-inclusive events. Recently, more communities with gender-exclusive events have begun to transition to inclusive ones. One factor that contributed to this trend was the actions and subsequent national attention brought to the issue in two cases, first in Rhode Island in 2012 and then in New York City in 2018.

#### **2012: Rhode Island**

Rhode Island had a very public conversation about gender-exclusive events beginning in 2012. The attention to this issue raised awareness of the issues involved and laid groundwork for change in other communities across the country.

The 1972 federal Title IX law requires that educational institutions that receive federal funding not exclude anyone from participation based on their gender. Gender-exclusive events at schools are among the listed exceptions, so long as “students of the other sex” are given “opportunities for reasonably comparable activities.”<sup>113</sup> In Rhode Island, a state law passed in 1985 barred gender discrimination in schools, including for extracurricular activities, and family events like father-daughter dances were not among the listed exceptions.<sup>116</sup>

In the city of Cranston, Rhode Island, Stadium Elementary School had held inclusive family dances for at least a decade, when in 2012 the school decided they wanted to host a gender-specific *Me and My Guy* dance instead. Melissa, a single mother in the community, expressed her concern about the event being exclusive. After changes were not made within the school, Melissa contacted the Rhode Island American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) and the Rhode Island National Organization for Women (N.O.W.). The school still hosted the dance, while allowing Melissa to attend with her daughter, but the school district reiterated that such events were not legal and could not occur.

A candidate for state representative who was running against a school committee member decided to make this a campaign issue, and it became a hot button issue at the state level, with legislation introduced to make these events an exception to the state’s non-discrimination laws.<sup>117,118</sup> The National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education joined the A.C.L.U. and N.O.W. in opposing changing the state’s law, but eventually it was modified to allow for events that specified student sex, while requiring that “reasonably comparable activities shall be provided for students of the other sex.” Before the legislation passed, it was also amended to require that while parent-child events can exclude students based on sex, they cannot exclude adults on this basis.<sup>119,120,121</sup>

The Rhode Island A.C.L.U. maintained that even with this change, events such as Cranston’s *Me and My Guy* dinner dance still violated federal and state law, because there was not a similar event for boys. In 2015, the Rhode Island A.C.L.U. put together a report evaluating gender-exclusive public school-sponsored events in Rhode Island, detailing how gender-exclusive events tended to differ based on gender stereotypes, with “reasonably comparable events” not being offered.<sup>72</sup> While the new law meant schools could host exclusively father-daughter and mother-son activities, Cranston area public schools including Stadium Elementary have decided to continue to host gender-inclusive events. They have family outings and activities rather than father-daughter dances and mother-son activities.

In 2016, the Rhode Island Department of Education released “Guidance for Rhode Island Schools on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students: Creating Safe and Supportive School Environments.” The guidelines state,

**OTHER GENDER-BASED ACTIVITIES, RULES, POLICIES, AND PRACTICES**

As a general matter, schools should evaluate all gender-based policies, rules, and practices and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose. For example, rather than divide or group students on the basis of biological sex (e.g. boys and girls), educators could employ other creative strategies to create teams to work on problems or projects. Gender-based policies, rules, and practices can have the effect of marginalizing, stigmatizing, and excluding students, whether they are gender non-conforming or not. In some circumstances, these policies, rules, and practices may violate federal and state law. For these reasons, schools should consider alternatives to such policies, rules and practices.<sup>122</sup>

**2013: Model Policy: Evaluate Gender-Based Policies**

This 2016 Rhode Island Department of Education guidance on gender-based activities comes from a model policy jointly released by GLSEN (formerly the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) and the National Center for Transgender Equality (N.C.T.E.).



In 2011, GLSEN and N.C.T.E. developed a model policy for school districts on transgender and gender nonconforming students.<sup>123</sup> Their 2013 through 2018 versions<sup>124,125,126,127</sup> included the following language:

**Other Gender-Based Activities, Rules, Policies and Practices**

As a general matter, schools should evaluate all gender-based activities, rules, policies, and practices — including but [sic] classroom activities, school ceremonies, and school photos — and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose. Students shall be permitted to participate in any such activities or conform to any such rule, policy, or practice consistent with their gender identity.

The 2013 through 2018 policies also contained the following note:

This provision is consistent with federal Title IX requirements which require such an evaluation in many instances, and also helps ensure that school practices to [sic] not reinforce gender stereotypes or create uncomfortable situations for transgender or gender nonconforming students.

Since its publication, this language, and modified versions of it, have been adopted across the country. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and Office of Safe and Healthy Students published a resource entitled, “Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students.” This resource poses the question, “What can schools do to make transgender students comfortable in the classroom?” and a corresponding answer that, “Classroom practices that do not distinguish or differentiate students based on their gender are the most inclusive for all students, including transgender students.” Four state/city education department policies are then provided as examples, including Washington, D.C.’s guidance that “wherever arbitrary gender dividers can be avoided, they should be eliminated” and Massachusetts’ guidance that “as a general matter, schools should

evaluate all gender-based policies, rules, and practices and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose.”<sup>128</sup>

Similar policies and guidelines that discuss evaluating gender-based practices have been adopted across the country, including in:

- Washington, D.C.,<sup>129</sup>

states such as

- Alaska,<sup>130</sup>
- California,<sup>131</sup>
- Illinois,<sup>132</sup>
- Massachusetts,<sup>133</sup>
- Michigan,<sup>134</sup>
- New York,<sup>135</sup>
- Rhode Island,<sup>122</sup>
- Virginia,<sup>136</sup>

large districts such as

- Albuquerque (N.M.) Public Schools,<sup>137</sup>
- Anne Arundel (M.D.) Public Schools,<sup>138</sup>
- Broward County (F.L.) Public Schools,<sup>139</sup>
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C. and S.C.) Schools,<sup>140</sup>
- Chicago (I.L.) Public Schools,<sup>141,142</sup>
- Jeffco (Jefferson County, C.O.) Public Schools,<sup>143</sup>
- Miami-Dade County (F.L.) Schools,<sup>144</sup>
- Montgomery County (M.D.) Public Schools,<sup>145</sup>
- The New York City (N.Y.C.) Department of Education,<sup>146</sup>
- Palm Beach County (F.L.) School District,<sup>147</sup>
- The School District of Philadelphia (P.A.),<sup>148</sup>
- Portland (O.R.) Schools,<sup>149</sup>
- Providence (R.I.) Public Schools,<sup>150</sup>

and smaller districts such as

- Barrington (R.I.) School Department,<sup>151</sup>
- Buncombe County (N.C.) Schools,<sup>152</sup>
- Cambridge (M.A.) Public Schools,<sup>153</sup>
- Evanston/Skokie Community Consolidated (I.L.) School District 65,<sup>154</sup>
- Iowa City Community (I.A.) School District,<sup>155</sup>
- Mabel-Canton (M.N.) Public School,<sup>156</sup>
- Lake County Community Consolidated (I.L.) School District #46,<sup>157</sup>
- Weston (M.A.) Public Schools.<sup>158</sup>

### 2018: New York City Department of Education

Based on State of New York (2015)<sup>159,135</sup> and City of New York (2017)<sup>160</sup> Department of Education guidance on gender-based activities, in 2018 a Staten Island elementary school adapted its annual father-daughter and mother-son events to be gender-inclusive. An upset parent with connections to Fox News turned the decision into a media story and brought attention, discussion, and controversy to the change and the issue. In 2019 the New York City Department of Education (N.Y.C.D.O.E.) released new guidelines<sup>161,146</sup> that explicitly stated, “Schools should also avoid gender-based events such as father-daughter dances.”

### *New York State Education Department*



In 2010, the Dignity for All Students Act (D.A.S.A.) became state law, explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the basis of “actual or perceived sex” as well “gender identity or expression” and requiring schools take affirmative steps to comply. Following the law’s enactment, the New York Civil Liberties Union (N.Y.C.L.U.) began receiving legal assistance requests from transgender and gender nonconforming students and families encountering illegal discrimination.

In June 2015, the N.Y.C.L.U. released a report documenting “the discrimination, harassment, and violence that transgender kids experience in New York public schools,” and named part of the problem as the state’s lack of guidance regarding how to comply with and implement D.A.S.A. The report, “*Dignity For All? Discrimination Against Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students in New York State*,” included a “Model Policy for Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students” that N.Y.C.L.U. had developed in concert with the Empire Justice Center and Empire State Pride Agenda.<sup>162</sup>

The model policy included a section on “Other Gender-Based Activities, Rules, Policies and Practices,” which gave examples such as gender-based dress codes and having students line up by gender, and stated,

As a general matter, schools should evaluate all gender-based policies, rules and practices and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose. Gender-based policies, rules and practices can have the effect of marginalizing, stigmatizing and excluding students, whether they are transgender or GNC [gender nonconforming] or not. In some circumstances, these policies, rules and practices may violate federal and state law. For these reasons, schools should consider alternatives to them....

The Dignity Act provides a good opportunity for schools to review their gender-distinct policies.... Schools should eliminate gendered policies and practices such as these [gender-based dress codes], or open up options that were previously gender-based to all students.<sup>163</sup>

The day after the report was released, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo directed the State Education Department to address the report’s findings. That next month (July 2015), the department released their own “guidance document,” which mirrored the N.Y.C.L.U.’s model policy.<sup>159,163</sup> Titled “Guidance to School Districts for Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment For Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students,” the state resource was meant “to assist school districts in offering an educational environment for all students that is

safe and free from discrimination—regardless of sex, gender identity, or expression” and to aid in legal compliance with relevant federal, state, and local laws, including D.A.S.A.

The guidance included the following language pertinent to gender-exclusive events, with much of the language, including the given example, a verbatim copy of the N.Y.C.L.U. model policy:

### **3: Gender-Based Activities, Rules, Policies, and Practices**

Gender-based policies, rules, and practices can have the effect of marginalizing, stigmatizing, stereotyping and excluding students, whether they are transgender or GNC [gender nonconforming] or not. For these reasons, school districts should consult with their attorneys to review such policies, rules and practices, and should eliminate any that do not serve a clear pedagogical purpose.

#### **EXAMPLE:**

One school that previously had blue graduation gowns for boys and white ones for girls switched to blue gowns for all graduates. The school also changed its gender-based dress code for the National Honor Society ceremony, which had required girls to wear dresses.<sup>135</sup>

In 2012, the North Salem Central (N.Y.) School District developed and adopted a district policy as part of their efforts to implement D.A.S.A. The policy included that students not be subjected to discrimination or harassment based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation, including at school functions.<sup>164</sup> The Pequenakonck Elementary School P.T.O. and school administration began discussing their gender-exclusive *Snowflake Ball* (for “girls and an adult”) that was held at the school and their *Bowl-O-Rama* event (for “boys and an adult”). These events had previously been father-daughter and mother-son events, but in recent years they had changed the language to allow for “any adult... important to the child” to attend. In 2018 the school district’s attorney opined that the P.T.O. could no longer hold these events in their current form, as they violated the district’s D.A.S.A. policy as well as state and federal law. The P.T.O. was not interested in adapting these events to make them non-discriminatory, and instead planned to come up with a new family event to host. Independent of the P.T.O., one of the P.T.O. co-presidents worked with other parents to privately host the *Snowflake Ball* for area K-5 girls. In addition to non-discrimination laws, New York state law requires that privately held events on school grounds be open the public, so the event was held and has continued to be privately hosted at the Salem Golf Club. No one was interested in volunteering to privately organize the boys bowling event.<sup>165,166,167,168,169</sup>

#### *New York City Department of Education*

N.Y.C.D.O.E. is the most populated school district in the United States, with over one million students, representing over 40% of New York K-12 public school students.<sup>170,171</sup> In March 2017, as part of N.Y.C.D.O.E.’s work to address bullying and create a safe school climate, the department released an update of their 2014 “Transgender Student Guidelines.”<sup>172,173</sup> The new “Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines” included a section on “Gender Segregation on Other Areas” that passed on the state’s guidance for school districts to the school level. It read,

Gender-based policies, rules, and practices can have the effect of marginalizing, stigmatizing, stereotyping and excluding students, whether or not they are transgender or gender nonconforming. For these reasons, schools should review such policies, rules and practices, and should eliminate any that do not serve a clear pedagogical purpose. Examples may include such



practices as gender-based graduation gowns, lines, and/or attire for yearbook pictures.<sup>160</sup>

In January 2016, the N.Y.C.D.O.E. had hired their first ever L.G.B.T.Q. Community Liaison (later Associate Director for L.G.B.T.Q. Equity), Jared Fox. As part of their job, Jared provided education to principals, educators, and the broader community about how to support L.G.B.T.Q.+ students and families and create an ecosystem of equity. Their trainings included education about the city’s transgender student guidelines, including avoiding gender-based practices that did not have a pedagogical purpose such as having boy/girl lines. When Jared would get asked about father-daughter dances, they would respond that these events were not allowed. N.Y.C.D.O.E. legal counsel also included a reminder in the department newsletter *P-Weekly* that goes out to all principals that schools cannot host these gender-exclusive events.



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Staten Island Community Superintendent Anthony Lodico invited Jared to do a training for Staten Island schools with principals and at least one other individual from each school. Following the training, when the P.S. (Public School) 65 P.T.A. president presented school principal Sophie Scamardella with their plans and flyer for an upcoming February 2018 father-daughter dance, Sophie responded that they were not allowed to have a gender-exclusive father-daughter dance. The parent asked why and the principal responded that it was due to the city’s “transgender guidelines.” While the city’s transgender guidelines were not alone responsible for why the event could not occur, as the city’s guidelines were connected to other federal, state, and city policies, it was the policy at the closest level to schools and that Jared had covered in their training.

The P.T.A. president then posted to their private parent Facebook group something along the lines of that they would have to postpone the event because of transgender people until they determined what they were legally allowed to do. Jared recalls that things “blew up” from there. A parent with a connection to Fox News helped the controversy go national. The school ended up holding a gender-inclusive dance the following month.<sup>175,176</sup>

At this point, Jared began to tell schools that if they planned to have gender-based activities they needed to contact their senior field counsel, the attorney that supports their school. When Jared received questions from schools about these events, they would ask that school’s senior field counsel to return the call.

Some schools got fully on board with gender-inclusive events. Jared recalls,

I think what was really incredible was that it allowed me to see some of the principals that really were thinking about it the right way. They were like, “Well, let’s just call it a Royal Family Ball—we will still have a family dance, but we’ll have a family dance together, not a father-daughter dance.” And there was a lot of empathy building I think that happened which was really important to the change.

Other schools still held gender-exclusive events “on the sly,” and did not seem to understand the reasons for the department guidance. Jared found that people who supported continuing gender-exclusive activities tended to see the district’s push as being solely about transgender students

rather than as a policy about school inclusion more broadly. “It didn’t click for them,” Jared related. Jared’s experience working with schools was that while the department’s policy regarding gender-inclusive events was implicitly stated in the transgender student guidelines (in the “Gender Inclusion in other areas” section), some schools dismissed the policy because it was not explicit, due to overt cissexism/transphobia, or because they did not think the guidelines applied to them if they were not aware that their school had any (openly) transgender students.

Based on these experiences and the controversy with the P.S. 63’s father-daughter dance, Jared began work with Kim Shannon, who had been hired as N.Y.C.D.O.E.’s first-ever Gender Equity Coordinator in December 2016,<sup>177,178</sup> to both update the 2017 “Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines” and to establish separate guidelines focused on gender inclusion more broadly. Jared recalls,

It was important for us that [the gender inclusion guidelines] lived on its own separate pages [from the transgender and gender nonconforming guidelines], that they have separate contact people, that they look and sound like two very different things. Because the people who were so transphobic that they couldn’t even look at the transgender guidelines—the word gender just sounded more palatable to them.

Based on input they received from students and community-based organizations, Kim, Jared, and other members of the N.Y.C.D.O.E, worked together to update the “Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines” (re-named “Guidelines to Support Transgender and Gender Expansive Students”) and develop the new “Guidelines on Gender Inclusion.” The department ultimately adopted the guidelines in May 2019. The gender inclusion guidelines state that “schools should also avoid gender-based events such as father daughter dances.”<sup>161,146</sup>

### **Relevant Laws and Policies in Other Jurisdictions**

Other states and localities may also have laws or policies that prohibit or condition gender-exclusive events, whether in the form of nondiscrimination laws regarding sex and/or gender pertaining to education, local government, and/or public accommodations. While some states have gender nondiscrimination laws that conditionally exempt gender-exclusive parent-child events (e.g., New York’s D.A.S.A. law does not “prohibit... exclusion... based on a person’s gender that would be permissible under... title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972”),<sup>179</sup> other states have no such exemptions (e.g., Connecticut law requires that “each such child shall have... an equal opportunity to participate in the activities, programs, and courses of study offered in such public schools... without discrimination on account of... sex, gender identity or expression,... or sexual orientation,” and does not contain an exception for parent-child events).<sup>180,181</sup> You can investigate the specific laws and guidance in your jurisdictions. Your state or local human rights agency,<sup>182</sup> state attorney general’s office,<sup>183</sup> and/or state education department<sup>184</sup> may be able to assist with this.<sup>185</sup> Below are a few examples of relevant state/jurisdictional laws/guidance.

#### **1975: Washington**

The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction’s guidelines for schools to prohibit discrimination specifies that “Under Washington law, school districts may not provide any course, program, or activity separately based on sex” unless it is 1) for physical education classes and meets specific criteria, 2) for human sexuality classes, or 3) for “choir, when based on vocal range or quality.”

These guidelines reflect the Washington state and administrative code.<sup>186</sup> In 1975 Washington adopted a law, reflecting the state constitution's requirement of "equal treatment of all citizens regardless of sex," that prohibited "inequality in the educational opportunities afforded women and girls at all levels of the public schools in Washington state" and "discrimination on the basis of sex for any student in grades K-12 of the Washington public schools." The law specified that "all schools shall be required to... provide the same opportunities for advancement to males and females" and that outside of exceptions related to sex education, gym classes, and athletic teams, "recreational... activities... shall be offered to all students without regard to sex" and "with respect to course offerings, all classes shall be required to be available to all students without regard to sex."<sup>187</sup>

### **1976, 2018: Hawaii**

In 1976, the Hawaii legislature adopted legislation declaring "the ideal of equal access to education in our public school system cannot be achieved when our students are required to assume stereotyped sexual roles" and that "Curricular and extracurricular activities in our schools must be accessible to all students. It should be the goal of our public schools to allow each individual to develop his or her particular talents or interests." The legislation prohibited sex discrimination in schools, stating, "No person in the State, on the basis of sex, shall be excluded from participation in, or be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational or recreational program or activity receiving state or county financial assistance or utilizing state or county facilities."<sup>188</sup> In 2008, the Hawaii State Board of Education adopted an "anti-harassment, anti-bullying and anti-discrimination against student(s) by employees policy" that included sex as a protected category and specified that "A student shall not be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to harassment, bullying, or discrimination under any program, services, or activity of the Department of Education."<sup>189</sup>

In 2018, the Hawaii legislature adopted legislation to address sex discrimination and contribute towards realizing the vision of Title IX by establishing "a state corollary to Title IX that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, including gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation, in any state educational program or activity [public schools, including the university], or in any educational program or activity that receives state financial assistance.... in any amount, for any purpose."<sup>190</sup> The legislature thereafter realized they had not included any exemptions, and so the following year (2019) amended the law to allow for discrimination in some cases found in the federal Title IX. These included fraternities, sororities, and voluntary youth service organizations, living facilities, and financial scholarships/awards. The federal parent-child activities conditional exception was not included in Hawaii's legislation.<sup>191</sup>

### **1977, 2015: Washington, D.C.**

Washington, D.C.'s Human Rights Act of 1977 prohibited discrimination based on sex for public educational institutions, including for facility use and for services. Gender-exclusive parent-child events were not among its exemptions.<sup>192</sup> The law was since amended to also prohibit discrimination for public education "programs, or benefits of any program or activity" and to also prohibit discrimination for "sexual orientation, gender identity or expression."<sup>193</sup> In 2015, D.C. Public Schools adopted "Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Policy Guidance" that

states, "Wherever arbitrary gender dividers can be avoided, they should be eliminated" and notes that avoiding language like "boys and girls... [can] actually make a notable difference to students who feel alienated because they may not identify as being part of either of the two binary categories."<sup>129</sup>

### 1978: Iowa

Iowa's nondiscrimination law for education does not allow schools to exclude someone from an event based on their sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Initially, the Iowa Civil Rights Act (I.C.R.A.), adopted in 1965, included nondiscrimination measures in the area of public accommodations and employment, but it did not include sex/gender or education.<sup>194</sup> With the support of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women (C.S.W.),<sup>195,196</sup> in 1970 the I.C.R.A. was amended to include sex as a protected group.<sup>197</sup> In 1974, with the help of both the Iowa C.S.W. and the Iowa Women's Political Caucus, a bill regarding school curriculum requirements was amended before adoption to include a requirement that women's history be taught and a clause about discrimination in education that stated, "The board of directors of a public school district shall not allow discrimination in any educational program on the basis of race, color, creed, sex or place of national origin."<sup>198,199</sup>

Next, in 1978 the I.C.R.A. was expanded to include education, including prohibiting public preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools from, "On the basis of sex, exclusion of a person or persons from participation in, denial of the benefits of, or subjection to discrimination in any academic, extracurricular, research, occupational training, or other program or activity." Athletics was an exception that instead required "comparable opportunity," and bathrooms, locker rooms, and living facilities were also exceptions that instead required "comparable facilities." There were no exceptions for events like father-daughter dances.<sup>200</sup> In 1985 this section on nondiscrimination in education was expanded to include public colleges and universities.<sup>201</sup> In 2007 gender identity and sexual orientation were added as protected groups under the I.C.R.A.<sup>194</sup> The Iowa Civil Rights Commission is responsible for enforcing the I.C.R.A.<sup>202</sup>

In February 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Education shared this infographic on its social media.<sup>204</sup> The department's Press & Communications Office created the graphic and corresponding content in support of the department's Office for Safe Schools' inclusion and equity work.

These more informal gender-exclusive events like *Donuts with Dad* or *Muffins with Mom* can be adapted to be more inclusive through simple language changes, such as *Donuts with Grownups* or *Muffins in the Morning*. These changes help include all students, ensuring they are able to bring a special person to the event without encountering explicit ostracization or stigma.

### **1982: Nebraska**

In 1982, Nebraska adopted the Nebraska Equal Opportunity in Education Act. The law states it shall be an unfair or discriminatory practice for any educational institution to discriminate on the basis of sex in any program or activity... [including] exclusion of a person or persons from participation in, denial of the benefits of, or subjection to discrimination in any academic, extracurricular, occupational training, or other program or activity, except athletic programs.<sup>204,205</sup>

### **2014: Los Angeles Unified (C.A.) School District**

Los Angeles Unified School District adopted a policy for ensuring equity and nondiscrimination for transgender students in 2014 that includes the below clause. Italicized words are 2019 revisions.

School Activities and Programs Students have the right to equitable access to activities and programs in their school. Students may not be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to harassment or other forms of discrimination on the basis of *their actual or perceived gender identity or expression* in any program or activity. These activities and programs may include, but are not limited to, cheer class, homecoming, prom, spirit day, celebrations, assemblies, acknowledgments, after school activities and programs, and all extracurricular activities.<sup>206,207</sup>

### **2017: Minnesota**

The Minnesota Department of Education's 2017 "Toolkit for Ensuring Safe and Supportive Schools for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students" includes the following policy:

Schools should not exclude any student from participation in a school-affiliated activity based on a student's gender identity or transgender status. Schools should not treat students differently on the basis of sex, including gender identity, in any school activities or the application of any school rule. Schools must provide the same opportunities to transgender and gender nonconforming students that they provide to all students. Transgender or gender nonconforming students should be able to participate in activities in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity.<sup>208</sup>

### **2018: Clark County (N.V.) School District**

In 2018, Clark County School District adopted a policy "addressing the rights and needs of students with diverse gender identities or expressions." The policy includes that "Physical education, assemblies, dances, ceremonies, and other school activities shall be appropriate for students with diverse gender identities or expressions and not discriminate or segregate according to gender identity or expression."<sup>209</sup>

### **2020: Illinois**

The Illinois Human Rights Act, which first went into effect in 1980, currently prohibits public schools and public school employees from denying or refusing "full and equal enjoyment of... facilities, goods, and services" on the basis of discrimination of an individual's sex, gender-related identity, or sexual orientation, with exemptions for private facilities such as bathrooms and living quarters.<sup>210</sup>

However, a conditional exception exists for gender-exclusive parent-child events. The School Code, while generally prohibiting sex discrimination, segregation, and exclusion, has provisions noting, "Except as specifically stated in this section, equal access [based on sex] to programs

supported by school district funds and comparable programs will be defined in rules promulgated by the State Board of Education.”<sup>211</sup> Corresponding with this authorization, the Illinois Administrative Code, while generally prohibiting sex discrimination for public school activities, allows public K-12 schools to have gender-exclusive events with conditions similar to the federal Title IX requirements, as well as an added requirement that single-parent families be accommodated. The code reads, “If a system sponsors mother-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, or father-son activities, comparable activities shall be available for both sexes, and the special needs of children from single-parent families shall be accommodated.” Comparable is defined as “similar in quality and quantity, taking into consideration all relevant facts and circumstances.”<sup>212</sup>

In 2020 the Illinois State Board of Education released “Non-Regulatory Guidance” entitled, “Supporting Transgender, Nonbinary, and Gender Nonconforming Students.”<sup>132</sup> The guidance references the Illinois Human Rights Act and includes the following language that encourages activities to be gender-neutral in content and language.

#### **H. Sports, Clubs, and Events**

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming students often face barriers to participation in school activities and athletics and districts should work to maximize each student’s ability to participate in any desired activities and athletics....

*H-2. What are the best practices for ensuring that transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming students are able to fully participate in school-sponsored events, athletics and clubs?....*

Review and reframe gender-based activities. Districts should evaluate all gender-based activities, rules, policies, traditions, and practices—including classroom activities, school ceremonies, athletics, dances, proms, school photos—and eliminate or reframe them to be gender-neutral. For example, replacing “prom king and queen” with “prom royalty” or providing school awards to any set of two students instead of “best male/female. If certain gender-specific activities do continue, students shall be permitted to participate consistent with their gender identity. For example, allowing students to self-select into a “girls in STEM” program....

*L-2. What are the best practices for parent and guardian engagement when providing support to transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming students?....*

Auxiliary groups should adopt inclusive policies and language. Districts should ensure any auxiliary groups, including but not limited to parent-teacher associations, booster clubs, and club sports organizations, have inclusive policies and language in their organizing documents.

Adjust school language to be inclusive towards diverse families. Districts should ensure forms are inclusive of different family structures. For example, forms requiring signatures should indicate “Parent/Guardian” rather than “Mother/Father.” Invitations should indicate “Families are welcome” rather than “We invite your mom, dad, sisters, or brothers.”

## Why having gender-inclusive events matters

Social inclusion [is] the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society. -World Bank publication<sup>99</sup>

Gender-inclusive events (e.g., a *Family Dance*) have non-gendered guidelines for attendees to follow, welcoming more diverse family structures and avoiding reinforcing gendered stereotypes (e.g., a tea event exclusively for daughters and a bowling event exclusively for sons). For example, at gender-inclusive events sponsored by a New Hampshire elementary school P.T.A., any student who wants to can attend any of their events, and students can bring any “one special adult” with them.

The figure below compares who is invited to attend a gender-exclusive event in comparison to a gender-inclusive event.

<b>Daddy Daughter Dance</b>	<b>Family Dance</b>	<b>Mother Son Bowlarama</b>	<b>Family Bowlarama</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dads, daughters, and men in girls' lives can attend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dads and daughters</li> <li>• Moms in two-mom households</li> <li>• Moms if dad is incarcerated</li> <li>• Moms who are widows</li> <li>• Single women in kids' lives (e.g. moms, grandmoms)</li> <li>• Nonbinary kids</li> <li>• Nonbinary parents</li> <li>• Sons who like dances</li> <li>• Moms whose daughters want them to attend with her</li> <li>• Adoptive dads, stepdads, foster dads, uncles (w/o stigma)</li> <li>• Moms if dad is deployed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mothers, sons, and women in boys' lives can attend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moms and sons</li> <li>• Dads in two-dad households</li> <li>• Dads if mom is incarcerated</li> <li>• Dads who are widowers</li> <li>• Single men in kids' lives (e.g. dads, granddads)</li> <li>• Nonbinary kids</li> <li>• Nonbinary parents</li> <li>• Daughters who like bowling</li> <li>• Dads whose sons want them to attend with him</li> <li>• Adoptive moms, stepmoms, foster moms, aunts (w/o stigma)</li> <li>• Dads if mom is deployed</li> </ul>

Gender-inclusive events foster a sense of inclusion and belonging, in contrast to the stigma and ostracization that gender-exclusive events can bring. Gender-inclusive events help ensure children feel welcomed and supported, leading to the best academic and social outcomes for them.

I hope that we help create schools where young people... can show up as their full authentic selves without fear or concern or suspense of isolation. -Nat Duran, Youth Engagement Manager, The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, speaking about how gender-inclusive events can help students and their families have a structure that best enables them to thrive

Gender-inclusive events give families the most expansive toolbox to figure out what works best for them. This empowers families, and avoids placing hardships and added burden on them that can come with gender-exclusive events. A gender-inclusive event, in contrast to a father-daughter dance, avoids further triggering a child who is already sad about the loss of living without a father (whether through divorce, death, incarceration, etc.). A gender-inclusive event helps ensure a child who moved across country (likely not of their own volition) and does not have adult relatives or close like-family adults of a particular gender in their new location can still attend school and community events with their loved ones.

Expanding school and community events to be inclusive of all types of families and identities does no harm to families who fit a more traditional mold and helps those who do not. At a gender-inclusive family dance, daughters can still attend the event with their fathers. At a gender-inclusive bowling outing, sons can still attend the event with their mothers.

Gender-inclusive events mean that school and community events that are created for children and their families welcome all children and families, across community members' diverse identities and family structures.

Daniel McCord, school principal, speaking about transitioning their gender-exclusive events to inclusive family events, asked, "Is it an event that all students would feel comfortable coming to?... That... all students would feel comfortable bringing someone to?" Daniel wanted to ensure that kids did not have to be concerned with, "Well, I'm not sure that this fits my family profile or not."

Gender-inclusive events reframe parental expectations. Traditionally, father-daughter dances have intentionally played a role in ensuring there is a particular time in which fathers have an expectation of connecting with their daughters. Instead, gender-inclusive events recognize that parents can be part of their children's lives regardless of these events and regardless of their gender, with these events then serving as one additional opportunity for parents and children to bond and connect within an inclusive community environment. Families are enabled to make their own decisions about what best works for their family and for fostering family and community connections.

Gender-inclusive events avoid stereotyping children by gender. They do not communicate to children that their gender should determine what they like or do. Instead, gender-inclusive events enable children to attend the events they and their families want to attend.

Existing laws and policies make it difficult if not impossible for public bodies to hold legally compliant gender-exclusive events. Gender-inclusive events inherently do not discriminate on the basis of sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.



## *Your Role: Spaces for Change*

The table below discusses spaces and agents for change.

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Relevant Role</i>	<i>What can they do?</i>
Parent teacher organizations and associations (P.T.O.s and P.T.A.s)	Local P.T.A.s/P.T.O.s often plan school events and bring community concerns to school officials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan gender-inclusive events, adapt gender-exclusive events to be gender inclusive.</li> <li>• Adopt a policy that all P.T.O./P.T.A. events be gender inclusive.</li> <li>• Gather and share parent concerns about gender-exclusive events with schools. Ask schools, districts, and local governments to ensure their events are gender inclusive and legally compliant.</li> </ul>
School Boards	School boards set policies for school districts, which cover school events, events held on school grounds, and events held by P.T.A.s/P.T.O.s that use school resources. School boards respond to community concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and adopt gender-inclusive policies for school events.</li> <li>• Ensure existing school events are legally compliant.</li> <li>• Foster community conversations on school events and community needs. Give constituents a platform to share their concerns, and then address those concerns.</li> </ul>
School District Administrators	School districts develop regulations that apply to all schools in the district. They also provide and share best practices and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure existing events are legally compliant, and ensure schools are aware of their legal responsibilities (including but not limited to Title IX).</li> <li>• Develop gender-inclusive regulations and guidance for school events.</li> <li>• Share best practices and resources (even names and graphics can help), provide relevant professional development to schools, and support schools that adapt their events.</li> </ul>
Local Government elected officials and administrators	Local laws regarding gender discrimination impact the parameters of what public schools and local governments can and cannot do regarding community events. Local governments often plan and sponsor community events, especially through recreation departments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and adopt a gender-inclusive policy for community events hosted or sponsored by the local jurisdiction.</li> <li>• Ensure existing events are legally compliant.</li> <li>• Plan gender-inclusive events, adapt gender-exclusive events to be gender inclusive.</li> <li>• Foster community conversations on community events and needs. Give constituents a platform to share their concerns, and then address those concerns.</li> </ul>
State Government elected officials and administrators	State laws regarding gender discrimination impact the parameters of what public schools and local governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure school districts and local governments are aware of existing legal requirements regarding community events. Provide</li> </ul>

	<p>can and cannot do regarding community events. State education departments and governing bodies provide policies, guidance, and best practice resources.</p>	<p>resources and training regarding Title IX and other relevant laws and policies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share best practices and resources (even names and graphics can help), provide relevant professional development to school districts and local governments, and highlight positive examples of gender-inclusive community events from across the state.</li> <li>• Strengthen laws, regulations, and guidance to support gender inclusion. Remove exceptions to gender nondiscrimination laws and regulations that explicitly allow public gender-exclusive events or give blanket deference to federal Title IX exceptions.</li> </ul>
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# PTO TODAY®

P.T.O. Today recommends that parent groups can host “sweetheart dances” in order to **“dress up and have fun,.... provide a special family bonding opportunity,... and help build a sense of community at school.”** According to P.T.O. Today, “For decades, sweetheart dances (or similar variations) have given children the chance to go on a fancy ‘date’ with a parent or a special adult in their lives and have left families with long-lasting memories.”

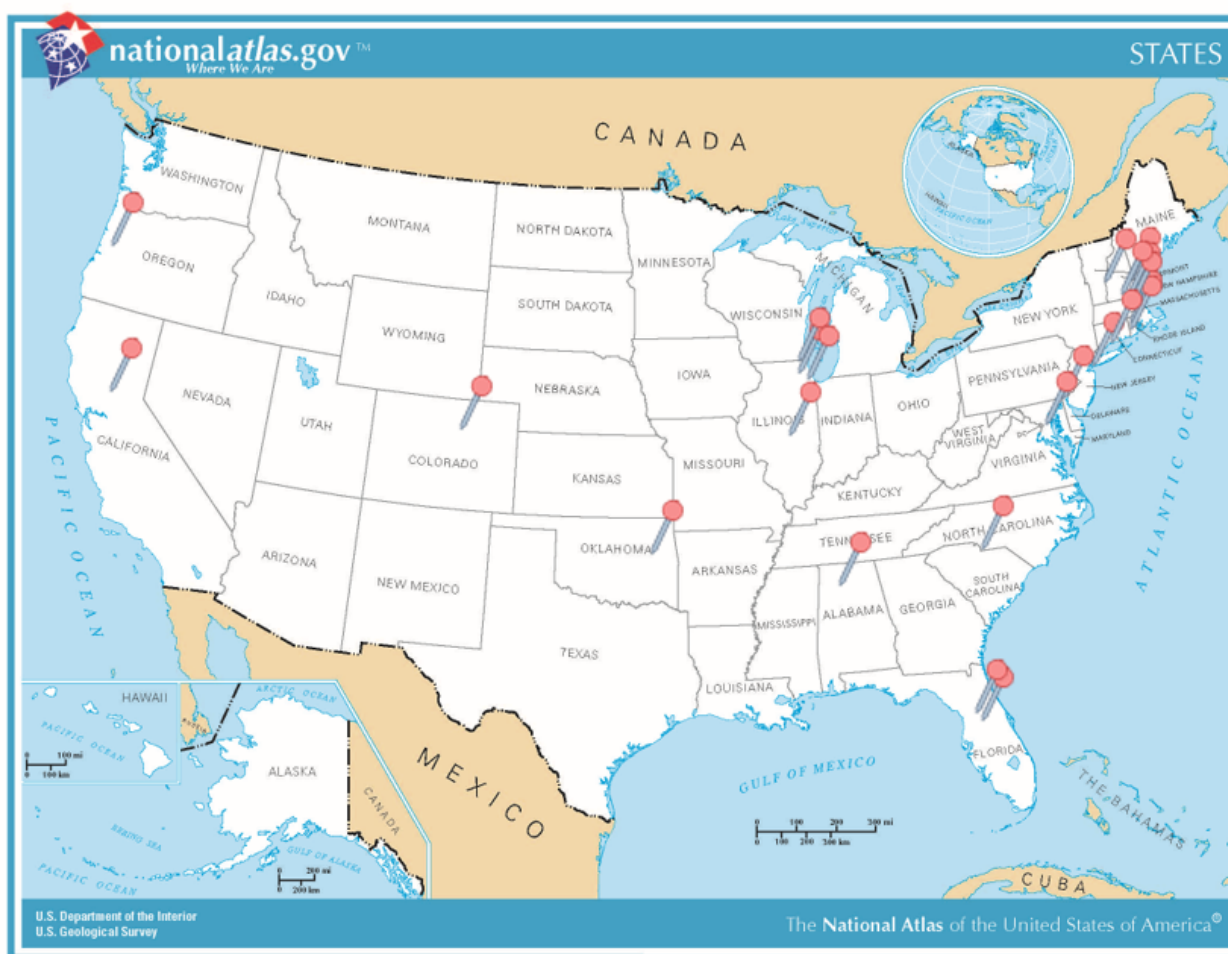
P.T.O. Today recommends not leaving anyone out, and offers this advice about making school events inclusive:

**Steer clear of calling your event “father-daughter” or “mother-son.”** Although these have come to be classic event names, it’s important to be inclusive of all types of families. In your event marketing and naming, make it clear that any special adult in a student’s life is welcome as children may have been raised by a single mother or father, grandparents, or other adult. Children may also want to bring an older brother, uncle, or family friend who is an important figure in their life.

Some suggested names for gender-inclusive dances include: Family Sweetheart Dance, VIP Dance, Kids’ Choice Dance, Family Gala, Family Ball, Tall and Small Ball, Short and Tall Dance, KISS (Kids Invite Someone Special) Dance, and Stand By Me Dance.<sup>213</sup>

## Community Case Studies

A number of communities have adapted their gender-exclusive events for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is no full list or database of communities that have adapted their events to make them gender-inclusive. This section provides examples of communities identified as previously having a gender-exclusive event that now have a fully gender-inclusive event. The map below shows the locations of these events.



214,215

### 2012: Cranston, Rhode Island

In 1985, Rhode Island passed a law barring general gender discrimination in school activities as well as extracurricular activities and events, with minor exceptions, mainly regarding sports.<sup>116</sup> In 2012, Stadium School decided to host a gender-exclusive father-daughter dance instead of a family dance, upsetting Melissa, a single mother who had hoped to attend the event with her daughter. Melissa contacted the school district, but the event was not changed, leading her to reach out to the Rhode Island National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) and Rhode Island chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.). These organizations sent a letter to the school superintendent explaining that the event was prohibited under federal Title IX rules, resulting in Stadium's P.T.O. still hosting the dance but allowing Melissa to attend with her

daughter. The school district reiterated that such events were out of compliance with state law and could not occur. A candidate for state representative who was running against a school committee member decided to make this a campaign issue, and it became a hot button issue<sup>117,118</sup> Eventually the state adopted a law to allow schools to host gender-specific events, so long as if an event is held exclusively for boys or girls, a “comparable” activity is also provided for the other gender, and requiring that the events allow and notify students that they can bring any adult their parent/guardian chooses to the event (regardless of gender).<sup>120,121</sup> Despite the change to state law, from the following school year through the present (as of 2021), Stadium School’s practice has been to have family events and not hold any gender-exclusive events or activities.

#### **2014: Dover, New Hampshire**

Initially, Garrison Elementary School P.T.A. held two gender-exclusive social events: a *Daddy Daughter Dance* and a *Mother Son Bowling* event. The P.T.A. changed the events to a *Sweetheart Social* for girls and a *Bowling Bonanza* for boys, where students could take any “special adult.” To be more gender inclusive, in 2014 the P.T.A. began allowing students to pick either event to attend, regardless of gender.<sup>216</sup> The open format of the events was well-received within a few years of making the changes.

#### **2015: Boulder, Colorado**

The Boulder Parks and Recreation Department formerly held an annual father-daughter dance. In 2015 the event was changed from a *Father and Daughter Valentine’s Dance*<sup>217,218</sup> to a *Sweetheart Valentine’s Dance*, for any child and a special adult in their life. The change was made to be more inclusive and align with the department’s goal to serve the entire community.”<sup>219</sup>

#### **2015: Gurnee, Illinois**

The Gurnee Park District (a municipal governing agency) began holding annual father-daughter dances in the 1990s. Beginning in 2008, after receiving phone calls from community members asking to bring other family members, the dance was unofficially opened up to be more inclusive of the diversity of families in Gurnee. As of 2015, the district rebranded the events as gender inclusive, making sure all families were welcome to attend. For example, their 2020 dance was called *Enchanted Evening* and was billed as a “kid-friendly” event where kids should “bring a special adult along.”<sup>220</sup>

#### **2015: Palatine, Illinois**

As of 2015, Virginia Lake Elementary changed their gender-exclusive *Moms and Muffins* and *Dads and Donuts* events respectively to *Morning Muffins* (now *Muffins with Munchkins*) and *Doughnut Day*. The P.T.A. explicitly welcomes students to “bring a guest of their choice: mom, dad, uncle, aunt, [or] special friend” to have breakfast before school.<sup>221,222</sup>

#### **2015: Wilmington, Delaware**

In 2015, the Linden Hill Elementary P.T.A. decided to change their father-daughter dance to a *Sweetheart Social* in order to be more inclusive. Children can bring any “special adult” or make it a family event. There has not been any public disagreement with the decision.

### **2016: Bristol, Wisconsin**

Bristol Elementary School used to host father-daughter and mother-son events. Fathers Erik and Mark Sosa-Kibby reached out to the school with their concerns about their sons' exclusion from the events. The school's father-daughter dance excluded their sons, while Erik and Mark were excluded from the mother-son Lego event. Erik said getting Bristol Elementary School to be responsive to their concern and change the event was "like pulling teeth," but in 2016 the school made the change to hosting gender-inclusive events, including adapting their father-daughter dance into a *Sweetheart Dance*.<sup>68,223</sup>

### **2016: Corvallis, Oregon**

Oregon State University began its *Moms Weekend* event in 1924 and added a *Dads Weekend* in 1934. In 2016, the university's administrator responsible for student affairs, responding to feedback encouraging the events to be more inclusive, decided to adapt the traditions into *Fall and Spring Family Weekends*. Students' whole families, as well as the area community, are now invited to attend these weekends. While there was some initial pushback, and some fraternities and sororities still promote the events as separate *Moms* and *Dads Weekends*, overall, the result has been increased and more diverse participation.<sup>224,225</sup>

### **2016: Moulton, Alabama**

Friends of the Lawrence County Public library began hosting a social tea in 2006 as a fundraiser where individuals enjoy high tea in a garden setting. The event started out as a *Mother/Daughter Tea*, then was adapted into a *Women's Garden Tea* for all girls/women. In 2016, the event marked its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary by adapting to be gender-inclusive and changing its name to *The Library Tea*.<sup>226,227,228</sup>

### **2017: Champaign, Illinois**

The public Urbana Park District had hosted a *Daddy Daughter Date Night* for 18 years when in 2017 community program coordinator Erica Cooper-Peyton decided it was time to open up the event to welcome anyone who wanted to attend. The adapted *Family Date Night* welcomes any child to bring any one or more adult or guardian. Erica, who had planned the event for the past decade, had decided it was time to make sure that "all families... feel included and welcome." Erica shared, "I don't want to exclude... anyone who would like to enjoy a special night with their child." Erica did not receive any initial complaints about the change. She did observe a greater diversity of families sign up to attend the adapted event.<sup>229</sup>

### **2017: Hampton, New Hampshire**

The Hampton P.T.A. used to hold a *Father/Daughter Dance* and a *Moms and Sons* event. In 2016 the P.T.A. changed the former event to *Daughter's Choice Dance* to make the event more inclusive. The mother-son event did not change. Then, in Fall 2017, the Hampton P.T.A. voted to change their events to be gender inclusive, as they wanted to ensure their events included and welcomed all children. Since then the Hampton P.T.A. hosted a fall *Halloween Fest* and a spring *Family Dance*. Some parents supported the change and felt the school should be inclusive across gender identities and not segregate students in their experiences. Other parents were upset about the change, because they worried it would change the culture of the event away from being a special night. A group of fathers who were upset about the change organized and in 2018 privately organized and hosted their own *Daughter's Choice Dance* for children in grades K-8.

Their organizer spoke supportively of the P.T.A.'s *Family Dance*, but said he wanted to “add new traditions, while keeping the old ones.... [and] bring the ever traditional Father Daughter dance back.” He shared, “I feel as it is an important relationship to be shared between a father and his daughter. As this is the first time a little girl is taken out on a date by a ‘man’ and who better man than her father!” While the private event was intended to be annual, so far it was only hosted in 2018. The Hampton P.T.A. has stuck with their decision to only host gender-inclusive events, and some P.T.A. members have noted that, even with the name change and new welcoming policy, fathers can still have a special evening with their daughters at the P.T.A.'s *Family Dance*.<sup>230,231,232,233,234</sup>

### **2017: Sacramento, California**

Crocker/Riverside Elementary School's P.T.A. hosts a variety of family-sponsored fundraiser events, and sometimes these were gender-exclusive, such as a *Father/Daughter Dance*, *Mother/Son Hike*, *Mother-Daughter Roller Skating*, *Dad's Poker Night*, and *Mom vs. Kids Laser Tag*. The Father/Daughter Dance began around 2010 and became an annual event. Parents began expressing concerns to the P.T.A. and to Principal Daniel McCord that these “pigeonholed” events excluded families and that they would rather have gender-inclusive events. Daniel said these conversations were an “aha moment” for him that the events should be inclusive for families, “however that family is defined by the student.” In 2016 the school decided to make its father-daughter dance gender inclusive. That year's P.T.A. president, Patrick Kuske, who had taken his own daughters to the dance before and “enjoyed it very much,” felt that “A father-daughter dance doesn't represent who our parents are anymore.... We have a lot of single parents, two moms, two dads.” Because the father-daughter dance had already been promoted, they decided to fully roll out the change in 2017, which included changing the name to *Family Dance* and ensuring that going forward all P.T.A. events were gender-inclusive. Daniel shared that pushback only came from outside the community. The Crocker/Riverside community supports diversity and inclusion, so the transition to gender-inclusive events was well-received by the school community.<sup>86,235,236,237</sup>

### **2017: Warwick, Rhode Island**

Cedar Hill Elementary school had hosted an annual father-daughter dance for over thirty years. In response to parents explaining that their families were being left out, including families with two moms, two dads, or only one parent, Warwick Public Schools decided the event needed to change. The event became the *Sweetheart Dance* in 2017. While still primarily attended by girls and their fathers, any student is now welcome to attend along with the “sweetheart of their choice.”<sup>238</sup>

### **2018: Andover, Massachusetts**

The Bancroft Elementary School P.T.O. used to hold a *Father/Daughter Dance* and a *Mother/Son Movie Night*. The P.T.O. adapted their events to be gender inclusive over a handful of years. In 2014 the P.T.O. adapted the events to allow any designated adult to participate. The names changed to *Spring Fling Dance* and *Movie Fun Night*, and girls could bring and their “dad or other special dancer” to the *Spring Fling* while boys could bring “their moms or other special ladies” to the *Movie Fun Night*. For the May 2017 *Spring Fling Dance*, the language changed to girls and “a special adult.” The following academic year (2017/2018) the P.T.O. adapted their events to be fully gender inclusive. “To include all of Bancroft's students,” the P.T.O. hosted a

movie night in the fall for “children in grades K-2, and one in the Spring for children in grades 3-5” to attend with their “special guests.” The *Spring Fling* was also opened up that spring (May 2018) to all “students” to attend with their “favorite adult dancer or two.” Currently the Bancroft P.T.O. uses the language of “students” and “parents/special guests” for their *Spring Fling* dance and *Dave & Busters Night* of games and dinner.<sup>239</sup>

### **2018: Staten Island, New York**

P.S. (Public School) 65 in Staten Island used to host gender-exclusive events, including a mother-son bowling event and father-daughter dance. In 2018, the P.T.A. changed their *Father/Best Guy & Daughter Dance* to a gender-inclusive *Dolphin Dance* because the principal understood the event as being out of compliance with N.Y.C.D.O.E. guidelines that had been adopted the previous spring. The change was politically controversial and made national news.<sup>175</sup> The following year N.Y.C.D.O.E. released new and updated guidelines that made it explicitly clear that public schools should not host gender-exclusive events.<sup>161</sup>

### **2018: Wagoner, Oklahoma**

Wagoner County L.A.U.N.C.H. (Linking Action and Unmet Needs in Children's Health) began a *Sweetheart Dance* in 2016, hosting a father-daughter dance for “girls” and their “important male role models” at the local middle school. When that organization folded, dance organizer Nancy Thomasson found a sponsor for it with her daughters’ Wagoner Girl Scout Troop 1329, which took on the event and hosted it at the Wagoner Civic Center. In 2018, the event became gender inclusive to explicitly welcome mother-son pairings, grandparent-grandchildren pairings, or any other child with their special adult. Nancy shared, “We decided to open it up last year. We know we have a lot of single parents, children with absentee moms or dads or are being raised by grandparents. Anybody can buy a ticket. We don't tell anyone no, because we know they're making a memory and that's important for helping our children shape their future.” The event is now sponsored by Help-in-Crisis and is supported by the Girl Scout troop and the county sheriff’s office.<sup>240,241,242,243</sup>

### **2019: Winter Park, Florida**

In 2015, Brookshire Elementary PTO planned to host a father-daughter dance. Caroline Johnson, a widowed mother, wanted to bring her daughter to the dance. After writing a letter to the school and sharing it on Facebook, a reporter saw the letter and the story made local news. While the school never responded directly to Caroline, they did change the event from a father-daughter dance to a *Spring Fling*, making the event more welcoming and gender-inclusive.<sup>1</sup> In the following years, the PTO made the event gender-specific for children but open for adults, hosting a “Girls Spring Fling” as well as a “Brookshire Boys Bowling Night.” However, in 2019 the PTO changed the dance to a Family Dance and has since continued to only host events for children that welcome them across gender.<sup>244</sup>

### **2019: Grantham, New Hampshire**

After noticing attendance for their annual father-daughter dance was declining, the Town of Grantham, New Hampshire decided to change their event to a family dance. Jamielynn Garland, Grantham events coordinator, shared that the change was also made to ensure mothers and sons were not being excluded. She shared, “You have to be open to everybody, and it’s not new. We’ve always had these dynamics in families.”<sup>113</sup>

### **2019: Matthews, North Carolina**

Although the Town of Matthews, North Carolina had always allowed mothers and sons to attend their father-daughter dance, the town's Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources Department decided that they wanted to make sure the dance was clearly promoted as inclusive. In 2019 they changed the event from a *Father-Daughter Valentine Dance* to a *Valentine Dance* that welcomed "any significant adult and child combo" to attend. The gender-inclusive event sold out in its first year.<sup>245</sup>

### **2019: New Haven, Connecticut**

An elementary school in the New Haven area has been sponsoring a *Sweetheart Social* that only allowed girls to bring their father or "a special male adult," but prohibited them from bringing their mothers, regardless of circumstance. In 2019, when the P.T.A. was reviewing upcoming events, members expressed their concern and decided to open the event up to mothers. Following this, the P.T.A. president began receiving e-mails and calls imploring the P.T.A. to go further, noting the event still excluded boys and gender nonconforming children. She researched the issue, and found out from the Connecticut State Department of Education that public school-sponsored gender-exclusive events violate Title IX. The P.T.A. subsequently decided to make the event fully gender inclusive, both to benefit "children's emotional well-being" and because they "became aware holding a girl-only event is discrimination." While a few people did not like the change, overwhelmingly the community responded positively to the change.<sup>246</sup>

### **2020: Annapolis, Maryland**

The City of Annapolis used to hold an annual *Daddy Daughter Dance* (for "little girls... with their special guy – DAD!"). The Recreation & Parks Department also tried to host a *Mother/Son Dance* for a few years, but not enough people registered. In 2020 the city decided to combine these events and rebrand them as a *Sweetheart Dance*. The city made the change to include children left out under the previous iteration due to their family structures. Now "whole families" are invited—"Mothers, fathers, caregivers, and children." The Recreation & Parks Department reports that the adapted event is very successful, with a diversity of children and families enjoying the evening.<sup>247</sup>

### **2020: Orlando, Florida**

The International Management Group began an annual *Father/Son Challenge* golf tournament in 1995, held in Orlando, Florida since 2003. Daughters and granddaughters began participating, and in 2019 a woman professional golfer played with her father. The following year, the event was rebranded to be gender inclusive, and with PNC Bank as a sponsor, re-named *The PNC Championship* to "reflect the high level of competition and the field composition while still celebrating the family relationships."<sup>248</sup>

### **2021: Portsmouth, New Hampshire**

The City of Portsmouth's Recreation Department began hosting an annual *Father/Daughter Valentine Dance* and *Mother/Son Mother's Day Dance* in the 1990s. The city began working to be more inclusive with its father-daughter dance, including advertising that mothers and other significant adult role models were welcome. However, the city wanted to do more to make sure mothers and sons knew they were welcome at the Valentine Dance, especially with the mother-



son dance struggling to generate enough attendance to keep putting it on. For 2021, the city decided to merge the events together into a *Be My Valentine Dance* for girls, boys, and “that special adult in their lives.” While the event was ultimately canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city’s current plans are to invite everyone again the next time they host a Valentine Dance or similar event and ensure all families in the community are welcome.<sup>230,249</sup>

### **Gender-Inclusive Homecoming/Prom Courts**

Along with communities adapting events like father-daughter dances to make them gender inclusive, a number of communities are changing their homecoming courts to be more inclusive. Below are a few examples.

#### **2016: Skokie, Illinois**

In an effort to be mindful of gender and sexual identities, Niles West High School introduced the term “homecoming royalty” to replace the gendered titles of queen, king, prince, and princess.<sup>250</sup>



*Niles West Homecoming Royalty*<sup>251</sup>

#### **2017: Chicago, Illinois**

The Northwestern University Homecoming Committee changed their court leader Homecoming King and Queen titles to “Homecoming Wildcat” (named after the school’s mascot). The Homecoming Wildcat can choose between a crown, tiara, or something gender neutral to wear at Homecoming Court. Homecoming Court was also opened up to no longer require it to consist of six men and six women. These changes were made to adapt the event to be more inclusive of gender and sexual diversity.<sup>252</sup>

#### **2018: Evanston, Illinois**

Evanston Township High School adopted the term “Homecoming Royalty” for their homecoming court winners, who can be of any gender.<sup>253</sup>

#### **2018: Lower Merion, Pennsylvania**

For 12 years, Harriton High School had a satirical pageant competition, *Mr. Harriton*, in which only boys ever competed. Lower Merion High School had a similar *Mr. Lower Merion* contest. After receiving complaints about the events being exclusive and promoting negative gender stereotypes, the school district required the schools to change the event names. They are now known as *Mx. Harrington* and *Amazing Ace*.<sup>254</sup>

#### **2018: West Lafayette, Indiana**

As part of a student-led effort to generate more interest in the homecoming court tradition and to make it more inclusive, Purdue University introduced a gender-neutral homecoming court, no longer requiring it to consist of man-woman pairs. The King and Queen honorifics were also changed to a gender-inclusive “Homecoming Royalty.”<sup>255</sup>

## Advocacy & Implementation: Considerations and Resources

This section includes sample policies and considerations regarding how to proceed forward, a one-page fact sheet, guidance for finding allies and support, and useful communication messages, as well as what you might hear from opponents and guidance on how to respond.

### *Sample Policies*

Prior to advocating for a new policy or specific change, it may be useful to check if there are already applicable relevant state or local laws, regulations, or guidance.

#### *Policy vs. Specific Change*

While umbrella policies regarding gender inclusion have led to event changes (e.g., in Rhode Island and New York City), in many cases events were adapted as a result of individuals advocating for change for a particular event. Adopting a broader policy about gender inclusion and community events reflects good governance, but it may be more difficult to get such a policy adopted compared to getting a particular event to become gender inclusive. Adapting specific community events can sometimes be accomplished through a particular decisionmaker agreeing and deciding the event should be inclusive, or in some cases may still require public votes, but can center the discussion on the actual issues and opportunities at hand. Adapting individual events can still result in a de facto situation in which your community's informal "policy" becomes holding community events that are gender inclusive.

If your community has one or more gender-exclusive events, an initial step could be holding a conversation with the decisionmaker, sponsor, or host of the event(s), whether that is a P.T.A. or a Parks and Recreation director. Some decision-makers may be reticent to change or ask for direction from a governing body. Some communities may be ripe and ready for broader policy adoption. Policies are harder to change after passage. While generally the direction of change for these types of community events is unidirectional, from exclusive to more inclusive, this is not always the case. In 2012, Rhode Island changed its state law that had prohibited gender-specific events to allow for gender-exclusive extracurriculars if they offer "reasonably comparative activities" for all students and did not restrict the gender of the adult accompanying students to parent-child events.<sup>121</sup>

Jared Fox, Associate Director of L.G.B.T.Q. Equity for N.Y.C.D.O.E., shared that they felt that accomplishing meaningful change quietly was sometimes the most effective option. Jared shared, "I think the quiet sort of under-the-table way of change, I think is sometimes more proactive... It allows us to do it without the haters.... When you make it a big thing it becomes performative and it feels less genuine because you are trying to make a show of it. So always the Chancellor would be like, the press office would be like, 'Let's do a press release. Are you doing anything?' And I'd be like, 'Yeah, no. We are just—we're quiet over here. We're cool.' Because they wanted to like beat the drum of inclusivity. And I'm over here like, 'I don't need any more haters over here emailing me. I get enough shit to worry about. Let me just do my work in my corner.'"

### *Partial versus Complete Changes*

Some communities have opted to make their events more inclusive while keeping them gender-specific. Though not universal, it is relatively common for events, even those that are gender exclusive, to proactively state that, depending on the event, other women special adults or men special adults may also attend, sometimes listing examples such as grandmother or uncle. Some communities go a step further to ensure the titles of their events allow for a broader scope of ‘parental figures’ while remaining gender specific (e.g., a *Me and My Guy* dance, *She and Me* event, etc.). Occasionally communities explicitly open up the adult category to proactively allow for gender inclusion, but as an alternative. For example, prior to making their event fully gender-inclusive a couple years later, Portsmouth, New Hampshire’s Recreation Department began explicitly advertising that their *Father/Daughter Valentine Day Dance* event was open to mothers and other adult role models in addition to fathers by stating in the event description that “The Portsmouth Recreation Department cordially invites all girls in grades K-5 and their dads (or any other special adult!) to attend.”<sup>230,255</sup>

These attempts at inclusion are positive, and recognize that not all children can (or should) bring a particular parent figure to an event. Expanding who is invited to a community event may be what a particular community is ready for, and may create space for a conversation about future changes. Nevertheless, these partial changes still exclude some children and families based on gender, and still foster stigma around some children’s family statuses and relationships.

Here are a few examples of communities that have partially adapted their family events to make them more inclusive:

- In 2016, Lake Forest (Illinois) Country Day School readily changed their annual *Mother-Son Bowling* event to a *VIP and Son Bowling* event to make it more inclusive, in response to a request from a student’s father who was in a two-father household.<sup>68</sup>
- In Yukon, Oklahoma, a mother who had been turned away from the city’s *Daddy-Daughter Dance* and had heard from other community members who also felt left out of the city’s dance hosted a gender-inclusive *Little Sweethearts Dance* in 2017 and 2018, as “an opportunity for everyone to celebrate their children.” The City of Yukon still hosts its *Daddy-Daughter Dance*, but in 2018 changed their policy to specify that no one will be excluded on the basis of their gender.<sup>23</sup>
- In 2018, Rollinsford (New Hampshire) Grade School changed their father-daughter dance to a *Daughter’s Choice* dance. It was adapted with the intention to “ensure that every family was included.”<sup>230</sup>
- The Ben Franklin Academy PTO formerly hosted a *Father-Daughter Event* and a *Mother-Son Event*. In 2019, the school in Highlands Ranch, Colorado rebranded the events to a *Sweetheart Ball* and *Spring Social*. The events remain gender-specific for children (designated for girls/daughters or boys/sons), but are now framed as being for any “special adult” in that child’s life.<sup>256</sup>
- Sandown (New Hampshire) North Elementary formerly held mother-son and father-daughter dances. Although invitations had always been extended to everyone, after families reached out and explained they were not able to attend the dances due to their family dynamics, in 2019 the school decided to make the shift to adopt gender-inclusive dance names. In order to be inclusive of all students, including gender nonconforming students and those who may not

have a father or mother, the school took on dance names like *Jedi's Choice* and *Cowboy's Choice* that allow any student to bring the special person of their choice.

- In 2019, following public news stories about a mother being kicked out of the Carter Community Building Association's father-daughter Valentine's dance, the non-profit community recreation organization in Lebanon, New Hampshire decided to complement their gender-exclusive events with a new dance, the *Fall Festival Family Dance*, that welcomes all families.<sup>257,258</sup>
- In 2019 and 2020, Toll Gate Elementary School P.T.O. changed their Pickerington, Ohio *Father-Daughter Dance* and *Mom & Son Event* to *Girls Night Out* and *Boys Night Out*. These adapted events are set up so that while girls can still have an event with their father and boys with their mother, kids are also explicitly invited to bring the adult they prefer to bring.<sup>259</sup> The P.T.O. also adapted the events by intentionally using decorations and colors that were not gender-typed. The P.T.O. changed these events as part of a broader effort to be more inclusive in terms of gender and special needs.
- The City of University Place, Washington began holding an annual *Daddy Daughter Dance* in 2004. In 2015, the University City School District took over the event. The Curtis High School Associated Student Body began to host the dance at the high school cafeteria "for dads and daughters of all ages." The event was open to "all girls," and in addition to fathers, "uncles, grandfathers, big brothers and even mom is welcome to accompany their little princess." In 2019 the name was changed to *Sweetheart Dance* to make it more inclusive for community members, and the description of invited adults expanded to include "uncles, grandfathers, big brothers, mom, grandmas and even aunts."<sup>260,261</sup>

Because these events remain gender-exclusive, they still have the same problems with exclusion and gender stereotype promotion. The best public policy option is to make all sponsored events completely gender inclusive.

*Sample specific motion for government-sponsored event(s):*

I move that, going forward, the [insert local government's name]'s [insert name of gender-exclusive events] be gender inclusive in who it welcomes to attend, and that the names of these events formally change to reflect this inclusion.

*Sample specific motion for government-affiliated event(s):*

I move that we encourage the [insert name of affiliated group, e.g., the P.T.A.] to consider making [insert event names] gender inclusive, and that we inform them that because [insert government name] is committed to gender non-discrimination, [insert government name] will no longer promote, sponsor, or otherwise formally support gender-exclusive extracurricular activities, whether organized by the [insert name of affiliated group] or other organizations. We are thankful for the [insert name of affiliated group]'s work and look forward to continuing to support those activities that align with our non-discrimination principles.

*Sample broad policy motion:*

I move that, in keeping with [insert local government's name] commitment against sex and gender discrimination, sex and gender discrimination be prohibited for community events that are supported by [insert local government's name]. This policy does not prohibit consideration of gender as a topic or theme for events that have a primary aim of taking action towards remedying

sex and gender discrimination, so long as events comply with all federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

***Fact Sheet***

The fact sheet is on its own on the next page, for reproduction purposes.

## Gender-Inclusive Community Events

Communities across the country are adapting community events for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, changing gender-exclusive events like *Daddy Daughter Dances* and *Mommy and Me Teas* to gender-inclusive events like *Family Dances* and *Bowling Bonanzas*. For example, in Champaign, IL, a park district changed their *Daddy Daughter Date Night* to a *Family Date Night* to be more inclusive. In NYC, the Department of Education updated their gender inclusion guidelines to instruct schools to avoid gender-based events such as father-daughter dances.

**Gender-inclusive events ensure children from the diverse forms of families in a community all have access to community events and can participate in coming together to celebrate family and community.**

Daddy Daughter Dance	Family Dance	Mother Son Bowlarama	Family Bowlarama
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dads, daughters, and men in girls' lives can attend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dads and daughters</li> <li>Moms in two-mom households</li> <li>Moms if dad is incarcerated</li> <li>Moms who are widows</li> <li>Single women in kids' lives (e.g. moms, grandmoms)</li> <li>Nonbinary kids</li> <li>Nonbinary parents</li> <li>Sons who like dances</li> <li>Moms whose daughters want them to attend with her</li> <li>Adoptive dads, stepdads, foster dads, uncles (w/o stigma)</li> <li>Moms if dad is deployed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mothers, sons, and women in boys' lives can attend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moms and sons</li> <li>Dads in two-dad households</li> <li>Dads if mom is incarcerated</li> <li>Dads who are widowers</li> <li>Single men in kids' lives (e.g. dads, granddads)</li> <li>Nonbinary kids</li> <li>Nonbinary parents</li> <li>Daughters who like bowling</li> <li>Dads whose sons want them to attend with him</li> <li>Adoptive moms, stepmoms, foster moms, aunts (w/o stigma)</li> <li>Dads if mom is deployed</li> </ul>



### Gender-inclusive events

#### help counter gender stereotypes.

They enable children and families to go to the events that fit their interests, rather than formally reproducing gender stereotypes through these events. Title IX requires public schools that offer parent-child events for boys to offer reasonably comparable events for girls, and vice versa.



### Addressing Potential Concerns

*I like the tradition we have.*

Making these events more inclusive helps preserve these traditions by adapting them so they don't exclude parts of the community. Adapting gender-exclusive events enables diverse families to participate in community traditions.

*These events are a wonderful opportunity for fathers and daughters to bond.*

Fathers and daughters are still welcome at these events! Caregivers and families can decide what is best for them in terms of participating in these events and fostering their family bond.

*Issues like marriage equality and transgender rights are controversial in my community, viewed as part of a radical new-age agenda.*

Making events gender inclusive does not change who families are or what they look like in any community. It just helps ensure that community events serve their whole community and do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize children or their families who are part of the community. Public institutions and their leaders in particular have a professional responsibility put personal beliefs and prejudices aside and serve all of their constituents, particularly since they are using public resources to put these events on.





### ***Finding allies***

Many gender-exclusive events across the country changed as the end result of one individual advocating for the change, usually because of the effect of gender-exclusive events on their own family.

However, you do not need to go it alone. Start a conversation with potential allies. Find other people in your community that can support your efforts. If there is a public hearing, the most powerful voices are going to be affected community members who tell their stories. Even without a public hearing, you can still bring forward individual stories through multiple mediums (letters, videos, e-mails, lobbying, etc.).

There are a number of organizations that are supportive. These organizations may have local members that can lend their voices as individuals or may otherwise be able to internally communicate to their activists to enlarge your active support.

In 2013, the National Coalition for Women & Girls in Education (N.C.W.G.E.) publicly supported Rhode Island continuing to prohibit gender-segregated extracurricular events in its public schools. Together with other organizations, N.C.W.G.E. sent a letter to Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee asking the governor to veto legislation that would conditionally make gender-exclusive events legal in public schools.<sup>262</sup>



The following N.C.W.G.E. member organizations<sup>263</sup> independently signed on to the letter:<sup>262</sup>





*Women's Law Project*



The following organizations, which are not N.C.W.G.E. members,<sup>263</sup> signed on to the letter:<sup>262</sup>



**NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF PUERTO RICAN WOMEN**



The following organizations are N.C.W.G.E. members<sup>263</sup> but were not separate signatories to the letter:<sup>262</sup>





**AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION**



*Association  
of American  
Colleges and  
Universities*

**AWIS**  
ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE



**Business and  
Professional  
Women's  
Foundation**



**girls  
inc.**



**GLSEN**<sup>®</sup>



**Healthy Teen Network**



**INSTITUTE  
FOR WOMEN'S  
POLICY  
RESEARCH**





Family Equality, an L.G.B.T.Q.+ advocacy organization, discusses gender-inclusive events on their website, with a list parents can use to assess whether their school is L.G.B.T.Q.+ friendly,<sup>264</sup> as well as a sample letter<sup>265</sup> and e-mail<sup>266</sup> parents can send to their school.



The list of “LGBTQ+ friendly classroom policies and practices” includes looking for “school or district policies addressing discrimination... [on the basis of] gender identity/expression” and an ask to “Look at the type of events your school district hosts. If there are unnecessarily gendered activities such as Father/Daughter Dances, work to make them gender-neutral and more

inclusive.”<sup>264</sup> The sample letter and e-mail includes families making an ask to schools about adapting gender-exclusive events, providing the following language: “Ensure that all activities are welcoming and inclusive for all. For example, if your school has a Father/Daughter dance, transition to a Family Dance or Bigs/Littles Dance.”<sup>265,266</sup>

You may also find support from your state Department of Education, local school district, or local government, especially from Title IX or L.G.B.T.Q.+ coordinators and offices. Some state and local governments have citizen committees that serve in an advisory or even regulatory capacity that may serve as a source for support, such as Human Rights Commissions, Commissions on the Status of Women, or other commissions that focus on L.G.B.T.Q.+ issues, youth, etc. If you are formally introducing a policy or putting forward an idea about adapting gender-exclusive events and your jurisdiction has a body like one of these, one useful tactic may be to refer the issue to such an office or commission for its review and recommendation.

Also consider whether there are other organizations in your community that might be able to provide support, including women’s or gender rights organizations, L.G.B.T.Q.+ organizations (including school-sponsored Gay-Straight or Gender-Sexuality Alliances), and organizations related to issues such as substance use, domestic abuse, incarceration, foster care/adoption, single parents, or the military. National organizations without local chapters may have databases with geographic information that can enable them to reach out to their members and activists who live in your area.

You may think that certain community leaders are going to be opponents, especially if they are socially conservative, but this is not always the case. Community leaders who grew up with or have nontraditional families (or who have family members, friends, or other close contacts with nontraditional families) may be supportive even if they are not always allies on other issues you care about.

### ***Considerations: Frames & Talking Points***

Adapting gender-exclusive community events for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is about inclusion, fairness, and equal opportunity for the diversity of families in your community, from children with single, deployed, or incarcerated parents to L.G.B.T.Q.+ families. It is a policy focused on children, families, and their wellbeing. It is good public policy and a legally sound choice to avoid gender discrimination and stigmatization.

Should we, as a community of parents, sponsor an event that creates feelings of loss or exclusion for any child?... We want our children to feel welcome and safe.... I am proud to be a part of a community that is so thoughtful and invested in our children's emotional well-being. -A P.T.A. president who helped lead the transition of her elementary school's *Sweetheart Social* to be gender inclusive<sup>246</sup>

Changing the status quo is difficult. There are likely going to be people who resist this change or get mad about it. But the change is also important, and you will have advocates and allies who will support your efforts.

As you consider who your opposition might be, also consider how you can be strategic. For example, if a group that opposes L.G.B.T.Q.+ rights has substantial power in your community, you may want to lean heavily on the public vs. private framing outlined below, be very clear on the scope of the change, including who is and is not impacted by the change, and ensure you bring up family diversity with a variety of messengers—including people whose identities your potential opposition does not oppose.

This section is meant to help prepare you to know what may be coming, give you ideas about how to respond, and help you be proactive in your advocacy and messaging. It is substantially based on interviews with people who have been on the front lines of these events and advocating for changes to them, as well as based on data from news articles, social media posts, and other forums where people have expressed why they support or oppose change on this issue. We highlight what people who have been through this have said has worked for them, as well as common areas of resistance they have encountered.

This section covers the following areas:

#### *Public Events: An obligation to serve the whole community* (p.58)

Public bodies have a responsibility to serve all their constituents. While some people may disagree with gender-inclusive events or with how families are composed and how individuals identify, it is the responsibility of public bodies to serve all their constituents and not discriminate and exclude some based on one's own personal beliefs or identity.

#### *Ensuring events are legal and nondiscriminatory* (p.61)

Holding gender-inclusive events is good public policy. It's the most straightforward way to ensure we are complying with the law and not practicing gender discrimination, and that we have a policy we can judiciously implement. By expanding gender-exclusive events to include all families, we can ensure legal compliance and preserve the opportunity for children and families to participate in traditions they love—boys will still be able to attend sports events and fathers will still be able to take their daughters to dances.

*Preserving traditions by adapting them to serve your community's children and families* (p.68)

Making community events gender inclusive is about how we can continue to bring family together and celebrate family bonds, while following best practices to make these events inclusive of all forms of family that are in our community. A common source of pushback is that adapting gender-exclusive events is taking away community traditions. However, adapting these events is actually about welcoming children and families to also participate in important community traditions.

*Providing a tangible improvement for children's wellbeing* (p.77)

Center your advocacy around supporting children and countering exclusion that can cause distress and harm. You may encounter pushback stating that these events are a non-issue, or not important, or that making these events inclusive is part of some misplaced war for political correctness. Respond by staying focused on the event(s) at hand and how adapting them will have concrete benefits for community members you serve. Indeed, because diverse family structures cross ideological lines, supporters of making this change also cross ideological lines. Based on demographics, every community has children and families that are affected by gender-exclusive events, whether or not decision-makers have considered the issue or spoken with those families about the issue. If you can, bring together community members to share their stories. In response to attacks, keep the focus on how the change you are proposing is a relatively simple and straightforward way to benefit children and families' wellbeing.

While this report contains a lot of advice and information around customizable best practices, the biggest determinant that makes a difference is whether or not you lean in and try to make a change. Plenty of change happens with mistakes and imperfections along the way, but change only happens if you try. The number one best practice is to speak up and try to make change. Not doing so because you worry about your political skill or whether you will say something wrong only prevents change from happening—just try your best to authentically communicate your values, message, and story. If you believe that having gender-inclusive events would be a positive step forward for your community, consider what you can do to raise the issue and try to advance the cause. Families in our communities are relying on you to be their advocates.

**Public Events: An obligation to serve the whole community**

*Message: Public bodies have a responsibility to serve all their constituents.*

(Note: for private organizations, the messaging is similar, e.g., *Our organization [school, church, etc.] should serve all our members.*)

Social inclusion is also at its core about accountability of the state to its citizens. -World Bank publication<sup>99</sup>

Public bodies have a responsibility to serve their entire constituency. Many gender-exclusive community events are hosted by public schools or by local governments. These public bodies are funded by taxpayers and are meant to be accountable to the populations they serve. If a public body is using public resources to put on an event for the public, they should not be excluding certain members of that same public that is funding them and that they are meant to serve.

If it's a public school—I can't speak for anything else. If it is a public school, to me... it is all about the students, and is that something that, you know, every student can feel comfortable to [attend]?... At our school... it would be something... not gender-specific or parent gender-specific. -Daniel McCord, school principal

**What you might hear (pushback):** Opponents presenting their personal views as conflicting with more inclusive dances, e.g., *I don't support same-sex marriage. We should not be changing our events to promote that.*

**What not to do:** Do not use this as a forum to try to convince opponents that they are wrong about their social beliefs, even if you disagree with them.

**How to respond:** *Community events are meant to serve everyone in our community. We have an obligation to serve every student / taxpayer, and not discriminate against them or exclude them because they are different. They are still a member of our community and have the right to participate in events meant for our student body / the public at large.*

Depending on what is said, you may feel it necessary to affirm your or your organization/jurisdiction's commitment to inclusion and equity. If you do so, just take care to pivot back to the above message, e.g. *I heard a few people tonight speak out against marriage equality. I support our L.G.B.T.Q. + community and am proud of our city's commitment to inclusion and equity. Regardless, community events are meant to serve everyone...*

Adapting community events involves many people who suggest, discuss, adopt, and implement the changes. They may have varying views on the change. However, one value that repeatedly came up in our interviews was the separation of professional actions from personal opinions. For example, educators and education administrators have a responsibility to perform due diligence for all the families they serve. They have a professional duty to serve all their students, including children of same-gender parents, children in single family households, children with an incarcerated parent, children with stepparents, children with abusive parents, nonbinary children, children with otherwise absent parents, etc. Regardless of how they may feel about a particular student or family (for any number of reasons), or how they feel about gender-inclusive events, they are bound to support all students' emotional health and wellbeing. Even if someone personally believes gender-exclusive events are appropriate, or personally disagrees with the types of families that may attend a gender-inclusive dance or with any potential changes to the dynamics of a father-daughter dance, they may still support adapting the event to make it gender inclusive because of their professional obligations to their constituency.

Look, I'm a devout Catholic. I truly believe in the Catholic doctrine about a man and a woman create, you know, constitute a marriage. I want to start with that principle. But I do understand that over the past decade or so... lifestyles have changed. Mores [social norms subject to social sanction] have changed. And as a school committee member you got to maintain the fact that even though you believe in a certain doctrine that... there are principles that gotta be addressed.... Being a public figure,... being a public servant,... I have to address what is realistic in society.... We had to conform to the fact that... these are realistic things that we gotta address. -Michael Traficante, School Committee Member, Cranston Public Schools



***Being proactive:***

This type of messaging is a proactive way to avoid letting this issue become a vote on ‘values’ surrounding normative ideas about family. It also gives people who have to vote or take action on this issue who may not seem like obvious allies or for whom the issue would be controversial among their constituency a rationale and pathway to vote for change. They can justify their actions and feel good about it.

These funds are for everybody, not just a specific group of people... Some parents were like, “I don’t know,... We are just going to keep this tradition. This is our school tradition... People can be biased,... but what they couldn’t get away from is the fact that these were public funds.” -Erik Sosa-Kibby, discussing one reason Bristol Elementary School adapted their events to make them gender inclusive

***Other considerations:***

Private institutions do not have the same public obligations. Some private organizations may also have particular belief structures that can either make the process of adapting gender-exclusive events easier or more challenging. However, private organizations still try to serve their constituencies, which are diverse in many ways. Even if an issue like same-gender parents might be tricky in a particular space, the organization’s constituency may still include other non-normative families with parents who are widows, single parents, military spouses, etc.

While schools are planning events for their students, municipalities and counties are planning events for their broader communities. There are adult community members who live in communities that do not have any family members in their geographic community, whether these community members are college students living away from home, young professionals, unmarried adults, older retirees, or other community members. This report speaks to inclusion. If you are part of a local government, do you offer events for all the various demographics of your community? It may be useful to consider the goals for your planned events, for example evaluating whether it would make sense to expand a particular event that is oriented towards families to make it welcoming to additional members of your community.

Nat Duran, Youth Engagement Manager for The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, shared that making the personal belief vs. professional responsibility distinction is “one of the most useful tools that I have found.” Nat shared that in their organization’s work,

We changed our professional development and workshop so that one of the first slides addresses the distinction and difference between personal beliefs and professional expectations or professional responsibility... To say like, “We recognize that everyone in this room has different personal beliefs... around L.G.B.T.Q.+ identities. We also recognize [that] being an adult working in school systems [means] accepting the expectations of that professional responsibility. And schools are spaces for learning, so we need to make sure that learning can happen for each one of our students...”

And we think that that provides a strong foundation for adults who work [in] the school system, because it stops the argument before you can even make it. It also provides a really helpful stopping point for administrators if they're worried about community pushback, because someone calls the school [against a policy... and administrators can respond], “Well, thank you... Be true to your personal belief. We honor your personal belief. As educators in a school system we have a responsibility of making sure that all students can attend.”

## **Ensuring events are legal and nondiscriminatory**

**Message:** *Holding gender-inclusive events is good public policy. It's the most straightforward way to ensure we are complying with the law and not practicing gender discrimination.*

**What you might hear (pushback):** *I believe father-daughter dances are a time-honored way to promote the bond between fathers and daughters. I don't see anything wrong with having dances and teas for girls and sports events for boys. [Schools / government] should not be trying to socially engineer society. Those are the things boys and girls like.*

**What not to do:** If you are leading efforts to change these events, regardless of your personal feelings, do not criticize the idea of fathers and daughters attending events together or disparage father-daughter dances as 'creepy.' Doing so will distract from your primary message and may create unnecessary division, including among potential supporters. It is also counterproductive to try to frame making changes to gender-inclusive events as a great way to socially engineer gender equality.

While legal compliance may be an effective argument for public and elected officials, focusing solely on legal compliance can make community members with concerns feel dismissed. Do not limit your conversation to your legal obligations; make sure to listen to concerned constituents, engage them in conversation, and demonstrate empathy.

**How to respond:** Ensure community members are aware of legal obligations that your jurisdiction needs to comply with.

Yes—and. *You are right. Many boys do like sports. But if a girl is into sports, should we be excluding her from participating in the only sports event we host for families?*

Parents also wrote with concerns about gender stereotypes: What are we teaching when we create events where girls dress up and do crafts and boys are excluded from attending? Would we recognize the gender discrimination if only boys were permitted to attend *Science and Math Night*? -A P.T.A. president, sharing concerns raised in her community about their elementary school's gender-exclusive *Sweetheart Social*<sup>246</sup>

*Making events gender inclusive means boys can still attend sports events, girls can still attend dances, and fathers can still attend dances with their daughters. (If a public school): If schools want to hold gender-exclusive events, we are legally required to offer "reasonably comparable" events for boys and girls, whether you think that's the best thing for us to do or not. By making events gender inclusive, we are ensuring that boys who want to go to dances or girls who want to bowl can do so. We are not requiring any families or children to attend any particular event. This actually takes us out of the business of telling families what events they can and cannot attend or telling children what they should or should not like based on their gender. Who is at these events will only change if there are currently excluded students and families who want to attend the events.*

Mother Lisa Leech's daughters went to a Delaware elementary school where the P.T.A. held an inclusive family dance called the *Sweetheart Social*. She remembers that "the first year that my

girls were in school my husband took the girls as like a daddy-daughter thing... We did it that way for something for Dad to do with my girls.” Based on her experience as a parent and as P.T.A. president, Lisa shared why she thought the P.T.A. had made the right decision five years prior, stating that,

[The *Sweetheart Social* has] been a great dance for us... We found that it's much better not to leave somebody out, let's just put it that way. You wouldn't wanna leave somebody out. The whole point of a social dance is to create a special event for these kids, and their families, than to leave somebody out or to make somebody feel like they can't participate. So—more upside in that respect than downside, because the fathers can always choose, like my husband did, they can always choose to still make it a daddy-daughter thing, and still choose to make it a special day for dad with the girls and dress up, but it doesn't have to be that way.

### ***Being proactive:***

Requesting legal guidance can help move the conversation or change forward.

You may want to request a memo (or have someone in a position to do so request a memo) from your counsel (or another trusted source for your decision-making body) outlining what is and is not allowed regarding gender discrimination and/or Title IX. You may ask something more specific, for example for your school district attorney to review a particular event’s legal compliance. Many public schools are likely out of compliance with Title IX and unaware of what it requires regarding gendered events.

If you are not in a position to make such a request, reaching out to an allied legal organization like the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.), Legal Momentum, or National Women’s Law Center (N.W.L.C.). A letter from an organization like one of these may be sufficient for your body to either consider acting or to request their own letter from counsel.

You can also reach out to Title IX Coordinators for guidance/information and/or you or a community member can file a Title IX complaint. All school districts are required to have a Title IX coordinator who is responsible for coordinating Title IX compliance and investigating complaints about Title IX noncompliance. The U.S. Department of Education recommends this person be involved in assessing whether gender-exclusive events can be offered and in their periodic review.<sup>15</sup> A district Title IX coordinator could be a good resource, though in some districts this position may be under-resourced. For example, until 2020 N.Y.C.D.O.E. only had one Title IX Coordinator<sup>267</sup> to serve over one million students,<sup>170</sup> and now has one or two Title IX liaisons for each of its five boroughs.<sup>267</sup> If you do not receive a satisfactory response at the local level, you may want to consider filing a Title IX complaint at the national level.<sup>268</sup> The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (O.C.R.) has authority to investigate potential Title IX violations. The O.C.R. states that parents, students, or other members of the public with a “question or concern about a particular single-sex offering” can contact the OCR regional enforcement office for their jurisdiction.<sup>15</sup> The list of regional offices is available at <<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/addresses.html>>.

If you want to file a complaint at the federal level regarding a federally assisted local government program, you can either file the complaint with the funding agency or with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Coordination and Compliance Section, which will refer your complaint to the correct agency.<sup>185</sup> Their website for reporting civil rights violations is <<https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs>>.

The Department of Justice also has independent authority to enforce Title IX and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause.<sup>15</sup>

Depending on where you live, state and local laws may also prohibit or condition gender-exclusive parent-child events. You may be able to obtain assistance in finding out about relevant laws and policies from your state or local human rights agency,<sup>182</sup> state attorney general's office,<sup>183</sup> and/or state education department or local school district.<sup>185</sup> If there are applicable laws and/or regulations, you can file a complaint. All states and a number of local jurisdictions have some form of public division or human/civil rights commission that hears complaints or allows you to file charges related to state/local civil rights laws.<sup>182</sup>

### ***Other considerations:***

Publicly hosted gender-exclusive events generally run afoul of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and when hosted by public schools generally violate Title IX requirements. This section summarizes relevant law, regulation, and guidance.

#### *Title IX: Statute*

The federal Title IX law requires that educational institutions that receive federal funding may not exclude anyone from participation based on their gender. However, the law also carves out a number of "exceptions" to this "prohibition against discrimination," including for "father-son and mother-daughter activities at educational institutions." This exception is conditional—these events are only legally allowed (though obviously not required to be held) as an exception on the condition that "if such activities are provided for students of one sex, opportunities for reasonably comparable activities shall be provided for students of the other sex."<sup>13</sup> Title IX protects parents and guardians from discrimination, not just students.<sup>269</sup>

### **§ 1681. Sex**

#### **(a) Prohibition against discrimination; exceptions**

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance, except that:...

#### **(8) Father-son or mother-daughter activities at educational institutions**

this section shall not preclude father-son or mother-daughter activities at an educational institution, but if such activities are provided for students of one sex, opportunities for reasonably comparable activities shall be provided for students of the other sex.

-Excerpt from Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972<sup>13</sup>

As outlined in a 2015 A.C.L.U. of Rhode Island report evaluating gender-exclusive school sponsored events in Rhode Island, many schools do not hold "reasonably comparable activities." They tend to offer gender stereotyped events, with boys' events more often around sports and girls' events more often around dance or aesthetics. The A.C.L.U. filed an open records request and collected information about P.T.O.-organized student activities at 40 elementary schools across the state. The A.C.L.U. found that while "gender exclusive extracurricular activities" are only legally allowed "if 'reasonably comparable' activities are offered to the other gender, the events documented by the ACLU emphasize a rigid adherence to antiquated gender norms when it comes to organizing and promoting exclusive events for boys and girls." For example, the Washington Oak Elementary School P.T.A. in Coventry, Rhode Island hosted two gender-

exclusive events: a “Boys Wanna Have Fun Event” on December 6, 2013, and then two months later a “Girls Just Want to Have Fun Event” on February 8, 2014—the boys attended a “Mad Science” show and the girls made throw blankets.<sup>72</sup>

The easiest way to ensure compliance (and to ensure events are not promoting gender stereotypes) is to make events gender inclusive.

#### *Title IX: Regulations and Guidance*

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (O.C.R.) issued a “significant guidance document” clarifying the requirements for schools that are subject to Title IX (which includes all public schools) that “choose to offer single-sex classes and extracurricular activities.” If you or others look at this guidance, it is important to note that while much of it seems to be referring to classes, gender-exclusive events fall under this language. The report states, “For simplicity, OCR generally uses the term ‘classes’ or ‘classes and activities’ to refer to ‘classes and extracurricular activities.’”<sup>15</sup> The guidance reflects Department of Education regulations.<sup>270</sup>

According to the guidance, gender-exclusive events must have an “important objective” that will “provide diverse educational opportunities” or “meet the particular, identified educational needs of its students,” and that objective must be “substantially related” to having the event be “single-sex,” meaning the school cannot otherwise meet that student need through a coeducational event. The school must specifically be able to justify not only that the event is effective as a single-sex event, but that it being single-sex benefits students, and that “the exclusion of the other sex was necessary to make the strategy effective or, at the least, substantially more effective.” “The justification may ‘not rely on overboard generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of’ either sex.” O.C.R. recommends that school districts/schools “consult with legal counsel” prior to having gender-exclusive events. If justification is not documented prior to offering the event, the O.C.R. assumes the justification was made afterwards as “an after-the-fact explanation prepared in response to the complaint or investigation” rather than as “the actual reason that motivated the offering.” Gender-exclusive events must be evaluated for Title IX compliance at least every two years.

Additionally, if a school event is going to be gender-exclusive, the school must also “provide a substantially equal coeducational” event “in the same subject” and “substantially equal... range and content of curriculum,”<sup>15</sup> or, as stated in the regulations, the school must provide “to all other students, including students of the excluded sex, a substantially equal coeducational class or extracurricular activity in the same subject or activity.”<sup>270</sup>

Schools are also required to implement their objective with “evenhandedness,” meaning they “must provide equal educational opportunities to students regardless of their sex, with... substantially equal” extracurricular offerings. Generally speaking, if a school has a father-daughter dance, they must justify how offering it to only girls meets an educational objective that would not be met by allowing it to all students, and the school needs to offer a substantially similar event that is gender-inclusive, and for evenhandedness may also need to offer a similar event for boys.

Public schools also cannot offer events that are gender-typed based on stereotypes. The guidance states that single-sex extracurricular activities must be “operated in a manner that does not ‘rely on overly broad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of either sex.’” If the type of the event was determined based on gender, “the risk of sex stereotypes is at its greatest because methods and strategies that are based on sex ignore the differences among students of the same sex.” Therefore, justification requires showing that a particular event will be more effective for one sex or in a single-sex setting, and this justification cannot rely on generalizations about gender differences, even if they are empirically accurate, since those generalizations ignore intra-gender differences.<sup>15</sup> For example, a school might try to justify holding a gender-exclusive father-daughter dance by stating that daughters, compared to sons, tend to have less connection with their fathers. Even if this was broadly accurate (research does not consistently back up this claim),<sup>271,272</sup> it is still a generalization that ignores intra-group variation—some daughters have stronger connections with their father than some sons—and therefore it would not legally justify gender-based discrimination.

### *Equal Protection Clause, 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment*

No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

-Excerpt from the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution<sup>273</sup>

The U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause as requiring that a government “seek[ing] to defend gender-based government action... must demonstrate an exceedingly persuasive justification for that action.” The government “must show at least that the challenged classification serves important governmental objectives and that the discriminatory means employed are substantially related to the achievement of those objectives.”<sup>15</sup>

The United States v. Virginia 518 U.S. 515 case, initiated in 1990 and decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1996, clarified the meaning of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause as it relates to government-sponsored gender-based segregation. The Supreme Court considered whether the single-sex Virginia Military Institute (V.M.I.) could be for men only, including if a parallel Virginia Women’s Institute for Leadership (V.W.I.L.) was created at Mary Baldwin College. Justice Clarence Thomas recused himself since his son was enrolled at V.M.I. at the time. The court decided by a 7-1 vote that the V.M.I. admission policy excluding women was unconstitutional.<sup>274</sup>

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg delivered the Court’s opinion, noting that some women were qualified and capable based on V.M.I.’s standards, would want to attend V.M.I. if allowed, and, while most women may not prefer V.M.I.’s methods, the same is true for many men who also do not want to be educated at V.M.I. Ginsburg stated,

The question before us, however, is not whether women or men should be forced to attend V.M.I. Rather the question is whether Virginia can constitutionally deny to women who have the will and capacity the training and attendant opportunities V.M.I. unique affords—training and opportunities the V.W.I.L. program does not supply.

To answer that question we must have a measuring rod—what lawyers call a standard of review. In a nutshell, this is the standard our precedent establishes:

Defenders of sex-based government action must demonstrate an exceedingly persuasive justification for that action. To make that demonstration, the defender of a gender line must show at least that the challenged classification serves important governmental objective and that any discriminatory means employed is substantively related to the achievement of those objectives.

The heightened review standard applicable to sex-based classification does not make sex a proscribed classification, but it does mark as presumptively invalid, incompatible with equal protection, a law or official policy that denies to women—simply because they are women—equal opportunity to aspire, achieve, participate in, and contribute to society, based upon what they can do. Under this exacting standard, reliance on overbroad generalizations, typically male or typically female tendencies, estimates about the way most women or most men are, will not suffice to deny opportunity to women whose talent and capacity place them outside the average description.

As this Court said in *Mississippi University for Women against Hogan* some 14 years ago, state actors may not close entrance gates based on fixed notions concerning the roles and abilities of males and females.... The violation is the categorical exclusion of women from an extraordinary educational leadership development opportunity afforded men. To cure that violation, and to afford genuinely equal protection, women seeking and fit for a V.M.I. quality education cannot be offered anything less.<sup>274</sup>

This decision can be applied to local governments and public schools sponsoring gender-exclusive events. Local governments and public schools are not considering forcing any children to attend a gender-exclusive community event, and need not consider whether some boys or girls would not want to attend a particular event even if given the option. Local governments and public schools are, however, deciding whether or not to prohibit attendance on the basis of gender. If a father-daughter dance or a mother-son sports outing provides a particular benefit that is being denied to others on the basis of gender, it is unconstitutional, unless the school/government can demonstrate that the event has a particular objective that cannot be achieved without gender-based discrimination. Exclusion can also not be based on stereotypes or generalizations. This means a girl should not, on the basis of her gender, be excluded from an opportunity to bond with her family and attend a sports game if she otherwise has interest and qualifications to attend. A boy should not, on the basis of gender, be excluded from a ‘father-daughter’ dance if he otherwise has interest and qualifications to attend. A mother should not, solely on the basis of gender, be excluded from a ‘father-daughter’ dance. To the extent that father-daughter dances were traditionally established to carve out space for working fathers to connect with their daughters, contemporary families include working mothers, single mothers, and nonbinary parents who are also interested and qualified in connecting with their children, yet who are excluded solely on the basis of gender from public events designated as being only for fathers.

#### *Gender-inclusive events are good public policy*

Enforcing gender-segregated exclusive events is difficult and problematic to implement, and in that alone is not good public policy. While having informal rules and procedures for gender-exclusive events is problematic, formally codifying a gender-exclusive event has its own issues. If someone perceives that a parent or child does not definitively ‘fit the description’ of who is supposed to be allowed at a gender-exclusive event, who is going to determine what gender the parent and child actually are? Will they be required to show identification? Is the body hosting

the event going to also police the event and inquire about the gender of people who do meet the definition of who was invited but might have less gender-stereotypical presentation? Will the policy end up being inconsistently enforced, with the event organizers and gatekeepers changing from one year to the next? With some communities allowing parents or children of any gender to attend events that are either titled as gender inclusive or still titled as gender exclusive, are you prepared to turn away parents or children who come to an event who think it will be okay based on their previous experiences? For example, Jennifer Meade, who had attended a *Dance for Daughters* in another community, did not expect to be turned away from a *Father & Daughter Valentines Dance* in her own community.

Some communities with events that are gender exclusive in name are willing to allow children and/or adults that would otherwise be excluded to attend if an adult inquires and shares their unique circumstances. However, this still stigmatizes those children and families. For example, widow Caroline Johnson shared that when she attended a father-daughter dance with her daughter, “Sadly it was one of the most unsettling experiences for both my daughter and I.” Additionally, there are a variety of reasons some families may not inquire about whether they can be included as an exception, resulting in their direct exclusion. For example, children and families with lower social class statuses may be less likely to advocate to institutional authorities for an exception to what they perceive to be the event’s policy.<sup>275</sup> Families with marginalized identities also may feel uncomfortable discussing their family structure with school or government officials. Allowing exceptions when they are asked for rather than starting with an inclusive policy means that those who ask may be part of the event while others will still be left out. If you already plan to let parents or children of any gender attend, inform them upfront that the event is gender inclusive. The most straightforward way to accomplish this is to use a gender-inclusive title that corresponds with this policy.

In Columbia, South Carolina, the Brockman Elementary School P.T.O. and principal jointly decided to cancel their 2016 *Father-Daughter Dance* after encountering parent concerns about the event, though the concerned parents “never asked for it to be canceled.” The event had been held for five years, and parents had complained that the event was exclusive and that each year it made children who were left out upset. Karen York, Communications Director for the school district, shared in a media interview after the cancellation that, despite the dance’s name, it “was inclusive... at all times... It was never an event that was exclusive to only fathers and daughters. Mothers and anyone else who wanted to show up at the dance were certainly welcome to attend.” While Karen iterated that “the whole focus is to have a special occasion for all students and all parents,” concerned mother Hope Sybert noted that was her goal as well, but that the event was not inclusive of all students and families. While the school considered hosting a gender-inclusive *Brockman Ball*, they ended up canceling the May dance permanently rather than replacing it with a gender-inclusive one.<sup>276</sup> The P.T.O. did end up putting on a new gender-inclusive annual fall event, the *Brockman Bash*, meant as an opportunity for Brockman families to have fun.<sup>277</sup> This event is an example of how a lack of clear policies and corresponding language for event names can lead to confusion and people being and/or feeling excluded, regardless of intent.



## **Preserving traditions by adapting them to serve your community's children and families**

**Message:** *Making community events gender inclusive is about how we can continue to celebrate family bonds and bring families together, while following best practices to make these events inclusive of all forms of family that are in our community.*

**What you might hear (pushback):** *Why do we need to change this event? It's good the way it is.*

*The Daddy Daughter Dance is a longstanding tradition for [town / school name]. We shouldn't end it just for the sake of political correctness.*

*There's nothing wrong with a dad dancing with his daughter or moms taking their sons to a sports event. We have had these events for years and they are popular. Why is our [school / government] trying to take these events away from us now? It's ridiculous!*

One of the most common frames used in opposition to adapting gender-exclusive events is that tradition is important and that people seeking change are trying to change or end traditions.

Sometimes this frame is about resistance to changing the status quo, a familiarity and comfort with how things are currently done, and/or a sense of connection and/or nostalgia associated with the gender-exclusive event and even its title.

I hate ['P.C. (Political Correctness) Culture']... People are just becoming too scared to talk... They're trying to take away everything that everybody grew up on and has come to know. And I don't think it's fair or right... They should leave it the way it was—father-daughter, mother-son.  
-Matthew West, a father upset when the P.T.A. at his daughters' school postponed their gender-exclusive father-daughter dance a month after realizing it was out of compliance with district guidelines<sup>175</sup>

However, often concerns about tradition are less about the tradition of the actual event and more about challenging 'traditions' in our society of holding up the nuclear family, of boys and girls engaging in gendered activities, and about a perception that father-daughter relationships are being attacked. This may take the form of specific religious perspectives. Traditional as opposed to egalitarian gender ideologies include ideas such as that a family should have a man as breadwinner and a woman who takes care of the home, that men are inherently better in a number of domains, and that society should reflect natural "gendered separate spheres."<sup>278</sup> Oftentimes those bringing up tradition in this context hold a broader sense of discomfort and/or dislike about a feeling that society is rapidly changing beneath them in more ways than just these specific events—that the world as they thought of it is being upended.

**What not to do:** Do not disparage people's connections to the events or to tradition. Do not use the phrases "your traditions" or "anyone's traditions." Using "your tradition" instead of "*our* tradition" sets up a division with you as the potential enemy. These are *our* (the community's) traditions, whether or not everyone likes them and whether or not you helped establish them or you think they are sexist, heterosexist, or otherwise problematic in their current form.

Do not iterate that “we are not taking away your traditions” or “not ending a tradition.” Moreover, your denial repeats opponents’ talking points. You can start with something like, “That is not what is happening” if you are responding directly to someone, but do not repeat their frames. Doing so centers the debate around whether or not this is taking away a tradition and leaves people remembering that phrasing when they think about the possible change. Saying “Gender-inclusive events are not an attack on tradition” leaves people associating those two things (“gender-inclusive events” and “attack on tradition”). You want to communicate that the tradition is still going to be there and that no one is taking it away using language about how this *shift* is allied with tradition and adapts the tradition for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Do not repeat frames that oppose gender-inclusive events.<sup>279</sup>

***How to respond:*** Families asking for us to adapt our event(s) just want to be able to participate in community traditions with their family. Adapting these events to be inclusive helps ensure everyone can participate in our community’s traditions.

*Gender-inclusive events preserve our traditions by adapting our community events for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ensuring they meet all our community members’ needs.*

*I’m advocating for this change because I believe in this tradition. My goal is to make sure we can continue this tradition in a way that does not exclude children and families in our community from participating.*

As we know from history, communities and institutions regularly adapt, and they do so without disintegrating or losing their overall character.<sup>280,281</sup> Focus on a message of adaptation and resiliency. We do our best to make traditions work for the contexts we are in. For example, with the COVID-19 pandemic, many traditions at face value seem to have been upended, from commencements to funerals, and yet we find ways to make them work for our communities. The essence of gender-specific events is bringing together families, having opportunities to celebrate family, and having dads, moms, and caregivers come together with their children and with the broader community to celebrate and lift up that family connection. That is the tradition of gender-specific events—and gender-inclusive events preserve that tradition. Families that want to continue to have father-daughter dances can still have father-daughter dances as part of gender-inclusive family dances.

*Traditions I believe are important.... But when it comes to tradition... in this day in age, it’s time to start doing a little continued groundbreaking in making things that *are traditional*, but don’t have these associated titles that are excluding people. -Caroline Johnson, mother and widow who successfully advocated for her daughter’s school to make their father-daughter dance gender inclusive*

Besides framing gender-inclusive events as a way to preserve tradition, consider how you can use tradition as a positive frame for supporting the change. Communities have many traditions. Does your community have a tradition of being inclusive? A tradition of supporting families? A tradition of being flexible to meet community needs? Perhaps there are other traditions that can help people interpret the change as consistent with their commitment to tradition.

In some communities, father-daughter dances are extremely popular and well attended. However, in other communities these types of events are struggling financially. The tradition may already be endangered and need to adapt in order to be preserved for the future. Making it inclusive is one way to potentially increase turnout because it opens up the pool of who can attend.

While people opposed to adapting gender-exclusive events commonly raise ‘tradition’ as a reason they want to keep the events gender-exclusive, this framing is usually well-intentioned but not interrogated. Tradition can be a consideration for event planning, but is not in itself a justification for continuing gender-exclusive events; there are many appalling practices that have changed or ended that were also ‘traditions.’ Generally people who raise tradition as their concern with adapting gender-exclusive events are people who are able to take part in the gender-exclusive tradition; they have normative family makeups, children with traditional gender expressions, and lack firsthand experience of what it is like to be excluded and stigmatized around these types of events. Attending and enjoying gender-exclusive events may be a tradition for some members of your community, but not for the whole community. You can interrogate this notion of tradition and consider how to expand the tradition to be more inclusive. Whose tradition is the father-daughter dance or *Mom & Me Tea*? Who does not have that tradition in your community because they have not been allowed to participate? Adapting these events enables community members who have been excluded to also have community-sponsored family events as traditions.

Furthermore, in some communities, it is gender-inclusive events that are the long-standing tradition. For example, in Cranston, Rhode Island, schools had been hosting gender-inclusive events for over a decade prior to 2012, when the Stadium School P.T.O. decided to instead host gender-exclusive events, including a *Me and My Guy* father-daughter dance and a mother-son baseball game outing.<sup>117</sup>

### **The Tradition is Gender Inclusive**

In a number of communities, community events did not need adapting—the tradition was already gender inclusive. The following is a sampling of community events that began as gender inclusive.

#### **East Bridgewater, Massachusetts**

East Bridgewater Central Elementary School has held an annual February *Sweetheart Dance* since 2014 that invites students to bring “along the special adults in their lives for a night of fun and dancing at the annual Sweetheart Dance.”<sup>282</sup> The event is “overwhelmingly popular,” so children can bring any “one adult.”<sup>283</sup>

#### **East Sacramento, California**

The Phoebe Hearst Elementary School P.T.O. has put on a *Family Dance* since at least 2013.<sup>284</sup> The school principal said he is not aware of it ever having been a gender-exclusive event.<sup>86</sup>

### **El Cerrito, California**

The City of El Cerrito has held a *Sweetheart Family Dance* since 2014.<sup>285</sup> Designed to welcome families of all types who have young children to celebrate Valentine's Day, the event includes a D.J. dance party, cookie decorating, crafts, and a photo booth.

### **Exeter, New Hampshire**

Exeter Parks and Recreation began hosting their annual *Sweetheart Dance* in 2016 to provide a gender-inclusive event for families to celebrate Valentine's Day together. The Recreation Department makes it clear that the event is not a gender-exclusive father-daughter dance, advertising to "Get the whole family dressed up and bring them down to the Town Hall for an evening of dancing, snacks and entertainment. No one in the family gets left out for Valentines this year!"<sup>286</sup>

### **Naperville, Illinois**

The DuPage Children's Museum held its first *Love Bug Dance* in 2020 where all families are invited to celebrate Valentine's Day through dancing, photo opportunities, snacks, and special activities.<sup>287</sup> It is a standard practice for the museum to review their policies and practices (e.g., safety forms) to ensure they are gender neutral.

### **Palatine, Illinois**

The Palatine Park District has hosted a gender-inclusive *Date Night* event since at least 2013, where "children ages 3 to 12, with a parent,... mothers and sons and dads and daughters" are invited to a night of "dancing and dining."<sup>288,289</sup>

### **Pleasant Hill, California**

The Pleasant Hill Recreation and Park District began their *My Little Sweetheart Dinner Dance* in 2007 as a way for entire families to celebrate Valentine's Day.<sup>290</sup>

### **Southlake, Texas**

For over a decade, the Southlake Parks and Recreation Department has held an annual *Valentine's Day Sweetheart Dance* that "brings the whole family a night to remember."<sup>291</sup> Southlake intentionally set the dance up as gender inclusive to welcome all families, inviting adults in the community to bring their "daughter, son, niece, nephew, or grandchildren for a night full of fun."<sup>292</sup>

### **Wellesley, Massachusetts**

Since 2005, the Wellesley Recreation Department has held an annual *Sweetheart Dance* that invites "kids" to bring a "special adult" to enjoy "dancing, refreshments, and photos."<sup>293</sup> The Recreation Department began the event as gender inclusive to help ensure children from the full diversity of family structures in their community could attend.

### **Western Springs, Illinois**

The Western Springs Recreation Department has held a *Little Sweetheart Dance* for over 20 years to bring families together to celebrate Valentine's Day. The event is open to the entire community. "Parents, Grandparents, or any special friend can come. Everyone can attend – no age restrictions."<sup>294</sup>

*Gender-inclusive events are about supporting families.*

You can generate support by bringing the framing of gender-inclusive events back to the positive outcomes they generate, such as the benefits they bring to families. (Who wants to oppose families?) Jennifer Meade, an unmarried mom who was forced to leave a father-daughter dance because of her gender, ended up going on a local conservative radio talk show to discuss her experience and why she thinks father-daughter dances should be gender inclusive. She was surprised to find that the socially conservative host was supportive. The host explained that he supported her because her reason for attending the event was to spend time with her children, and events in one's community are good opportunities to do something with your children. The host valued family and understood people trying to adapt gender-exclusive events as people simply trying to be good parents and invest in their family.

At first, I opposed it, but that's just because there were a lot of changes coming down to our department that weren't explained really. It was just, *Hey, this is what you're going to do. Do it.* But, as the summer went on and as I started asking more questions, I started to come around... And I stopped looking from a narrow, traditional viewpoint and started stepping back and saying, Okay, like yes, there are a lot of students on this campus,... and I need to be more accepting and accommodating of them. Even if that means we have to break some of the tradition, we can keep the main aspects that made that tradition great, but also make it so that more people feel welcome to come.... To be more welcoming of people who maybe their parents have passed on, or they were adopted. There are so many different stories, and ways to view family. -Curtis Orona, Program Council Director, Oregon State University. Orona helped implement a change from the longstanding tradition at their university of Dads Weekends and Moms Weekends to having Family Weekends.

One of the above instances of potential pushback references political correctness. Often opposition stems from community members concerned that having gender-inclusive events validates groups of people they do not want to validate, whether that be single parents, nonbinary children, same-gender parents, etc. The subsection below entitled "Providing a tangible improvement for children's wellbeing" directly addresses the cultural politics surrounding this issue.

If opposition is based on traditional gender ideologies and you are advocating for the change for a public body, a useful response is to transition back to the messages that *public bodies have a responsibility to serve all their constituents* and of *separating personal opinion from professional responsibility* (see the earlier subsection entitled "Public Events: An obligation to serve the whole community"). Just like public school teachers are expected to teach all their students across social identities, and local governments are supposed to serve all their constituents across social identities, public bodies should be meeting the needs of all their community members, not excluding some community members. You can differentiate public from private bodies, noting to people who oppose gender-inclusive events on personal moral grounds that private organizations, such as houses of worship, can continue to offer gender-exclusive events if they feel it is appropriate to do so.

Social conservatives often feel that they are committed to family values. For community events, note that valuing family means celebrating and upholding family. Public bodies and even private membership organizations exist to serve their constituencies. Transitioning to gender-inclusive

events is not about whether or not someone thinks there is too much divorce and too many single parents, or about people's views on incarceration or same-gender marriage. The makeup of a community exists as it does, so in order to support families one has to support families as they are in one's community. If your community or some of your decisionmakers or policy influencers are particularly socially conservative, you may want to lean in on framing the change as being about supporting families.

Adapting community events to make them gender inclusive is about benefiting children. Focusing on children may help you make your case. While there may be negative biases and corresponding judgment in a community about parents being incarcerated, never married, divorced, or in a same-gender marriage, children are not blamed or perceived as responsible for their family structure. Should children be excluded from events because of their family structure, something outside of their control? While children do not have much political power, people have positive associations with children (e.g., viewing them as deserving and relatively blameless), and "[public] officials want to appear to be aligned with their interests" and protect them. Adapting community events can be a political win for public officials because they can "show great concern" for groups like children without being required to expend substantive resources.<sup>295</sup>

Additionally, you can try to bring forward stories from a diversity of affected community members who have multiple, different reasons gender-exclusive events affect them, as well as support from a variety of allies. If you have a public hearing on this issue, try to bring together different types of families to share their stories. That will prevent the change from turning into a discussion solely focused on one group (e.g., single parents, or L.G.B.T.Q.+ parents, or nonbinary parents or children). Some affected stakeholders may be particularly effective messengers (e.g., a mother with a husband who is enlisted overseas; a widower), and this could vary by community (a single parent might be a particularly effective messenger in a community with a higher rate of single parents; a veteran might be particularly effective in a community with a military base). In our society groups are differentially viewed as deserving public policy support.<sup>295</sup> While changing these narratives is important, it is also important for advocates to be aware that some people have relative privileges that will enable their message to be more effectively heard by particular targets.

Michael Traficante, Cranston Public Schools School Committee Member, was quoted previously in this report as saying,

I'm a devout Catholic. I truly believe in the Catholic doctrine about a man and a woman create, you know, constitute a marriage. I want to start with that principle. But I do understand that over the past decade or so... lifestyles have changed. Mores [social norms subject to social sanction] have changed.

But Michael went on to not only differentiate about how as a public servant he has to serve his whole community, but that

I personally did not see a problem with doing away with a concept of a father-daughter / mother-son dance and creating a family dance. To basically [enable] a lot of people who are in those other categories, so to speak, to enjoy such events with their children.

Notice where Michael's support comes from. He has competing ideologies—socially

conservative views of family, but also ideologies around what it means for the public to hold events, and about upholding families. Given these ideologies, Michael wants to make sure to serve Cranston’s entire community, and support his underlying value of empowering family to have joy as a unit together. Your issue framing can influence how people prioritize, understand, apply, and negotiate competing ideologies.<sup>296</sup>

At the root of some opponents’ claims about tradition is a feeling that something is being taken away from them. This ties into a broader cultural sense of being “left behind” while others are given “special rights” or “special treatment.”<sup>297,298,299</sup> It can be useful to emphasize that nothing is being taken away (again without using that particular language). As noted above, families that want to continue to have father-daughter dances still can—they are included in gender-inclusive family dances and can choose how they participate. Indeed, expanding access to an event may not materially change most of the makeup of who attends the events. (For example, at a New Hampshire school, a former father-daughter dance turned *Sweetheart Social* had about five boys out of the 100+ students in attendance.) Expanding access simply removes ostracization and stigma for families who were previously excluded and harmed by the event being formally gender exclusive.

*Adapting our community events by expanding access empowers families to figure out what works best for their children and family. Traditions like a father taking his daughter to a dance can and will still happen for families who want to participate in that tradition.*

It can be helpful to have allies speak in support and make this point—for example, a father could share that he would still bring his daughter to a gender-inclusive family dance, that that dance would meet his needs and dreams for his daughter and family. The father could also share that he would rather bring his daughter to an inclusive family dance because it would help teach her about diversity and inclusion and it would mean that she would not have to worry that a friend could not attend because of their family makeup.

In East Greenwich, we have had dances, and they have been open to everybody, and my husband has taken my daughter, and my husband and my daughter have had a beautiful time, and they’ve had the photograph taken to prove it. But the fact that other boys were there with their mothers, and other kids were there with their uncles or friends—the fact that anyone else was at that dance had no impact on the time that they had together. -Carolyn Mark, Rhode Island N.O.W., telling a state legislative committee why she supports gender-inclusive events<sup>6</sup>

Jared Fox, Associate Director of L.G.B.T.Q. Equity for N.Y.C.D.O.E., shared that in their conversations with principals, the principals would often “think about the mythical angry parent,” and so Jared would role play with the principal, pretending to be a concerned parent. Jared suggests that a good way to connect with concerned community members is to make sure they feel heard while getting to their underlying values surrounding the events. These values can then connect with inclusion, because parents who want the event to be a special bonding opportunity for/with their children can relate to other families who may want the same thing, but may be kept from having that experience with gender-exclusive events. Asking questions, getting to the concerned party’s underlying interest related to why they care about the event, and using tangible stories that connect with them can help generate empathy and understanding regarding

the change. Here is Jared’s advice about how to best respond to someone who is upset about a father-daughter dance being adapted (or in the concerned party’s mind, ‘canceled’):

I think a lot of times it is asking questions. And open-ended questions. So if you were a parent who was upset because your daughter couldn't go to the father-daughter dance, I might ask you, like, “What were you looking forward to about the father-daughter dance? What does the father-daughter dance mean to you?” To let you tell me, so that I'm hearing you.

Once I've heard you, I'm going to say, “It sounds like you really want to build this special connection with your daughter, and I can see that a lot of people might want to build a special connection with their kid, but may not have a dad to be able to do that. Or may not have a mom, or may live in foster care. So, I can see this could actually be an opportunity for us to give those other families the same thing that you want. So let’s figure out how we can do that together.”

And loop them into actually thinking that I'm hearing them and seeing them, but at the same time maybe even get them on board with planning this new event. Cause they’re like, “Oh, wow. I feel seen and heard.” People often feel dismissed.

Reluctance to change gender-exclusive events may also come from staff or volunteers responsible for implementing the event who are nervous about implementing new ways of doing things. They may sincerely feel that they lack the skills to navigate community concerns around the change or that they simply do not have the developed toolkit for how to pull off such an event. Connecting these staff and/or volunteer planners with resources on best practices could be useful, even for example a list of potential names for the event. Perhaps there are community volunteers who are willing to step forward and help with the transition. Another resource could be to connect them with someone in a different community who has already been through the transition or who hosts a similar gender-inclusive family event—hearing about that person’s experience may help put them at ease and reduce their sense of having to figure out how to proceed in isolation. Finally, it is important to not be dismissive of staff pushback around logistical concerns. Doing so could turn concerns into opposition. While certainly some people use logistics or other specific points to try to derail change, oftentimes those responsible for planning and implementing events prioritize concerns about implementation. Unless they have also communicated other feelings to you against the idea of adapting the event, do not interpret their concerns as their being morally opposed to the change. If you work with them to address their logistical concerns and neutralize those concerns, they are much more likely to support the change.<sup>296</sup> This may involve compromise—perhaps they already have a banner printed for an upcoming event, and so a compromise is to keep the banner for this year’s event while changing the name of the event on the website and in other communications, and then to use the new name in future years on new banners.

### ***Being proactive:***

Take pride in inclusive events and talk about them. Even communities that have gender-exclusive events also have gender-inclusive events. For example, while the City of Edwardsville, Illinois’ Parks and Recreation Department hosts a *Daddy-Daughter Valentine Dance* and a *Mother Son Fun Event* (in 2020 billed the *Mother & Son Superhero Date Night*), the city also hosts a *Family Camp Out*, *Halloween Costume Contest*, *Fishing Derby*, and other gender-inclusive events.<sup>300</sup> Highlight how these events are inclusive when they occur throughout the year, e.g., *I had a great time at Community Day and it was so great to see so many people from all across our community participate. I saw retired people, little children, college students, and all types of families.* Showing the value of inclusion throughout the year, both in your



community's events as well as in its other practices, helps ensure that 'inclusion' is one of your community's values and traditions.

Take time to help people get used to the idea of gender-inclusive events by nudging them in that direction. Attempting to change the status quo is often met with resistance.<sup>301</sup> New ideas and change often require a period of adaptation and adjustment.<sup>302</sup> Sustained discussion and action around the proposed change can acclimate decision-makers to the idea. If the idea of adapting to gender-inclusive events is met with resistance, you can slow down the conversation—first bringing up the underlying concern as something to discuss later, then bringing up the idea and highlighting success stories, then bringing it up and asking for feedback, then asking for staff research, etc. You can even just start referring to the event with a name or framing that is inclusive—e.g., at last year's family bowling event, or at least year's family dance event. When it comes time to make a decision, people are used to the conversation, they are more used to and acclimated to the idea, and they are more likely to support it because it now seems in line with what the decision-making body does.

If there is substantial pushback that labels the idea of adapting gender-exclusive events as radical, put together a broader coalition of organizations and people who will formally support the proposal—this can often be accomplished through dialogue and discussion in smaller settings focused on the tangible issues at hand. When you come back with this broad coalition, its acceptance and support by multiple important community voices and stakeholders will help demonstrate that the change is reasonable, as well as politically feasible.

### ***Other considerations:***

Community dialogue can activate opposition, but it can also help dampen resistance, especially if narratives around the change are inaccurate. Holding a community conversation or forum can be useful leading up to a change or even after the decision has been made going into its implementation. Forums are also opportunities to bring forward stories that show the tangible benefits to such a change. It is easier for opponents to be against adapting these events in the abstract with a justification of protecting tradition than it is for them to tell their neighbor they are against him bringing his son to the school's family dance. Dialogue can create empathy and decrease intensity of feelings towards an issue—for both opponents and proponents.<sup>93</sup>

[We have to be] willing to engage in conversation.... Lots of open conversations about hearts and minds. What would you want if it were you? What would you want if it were your child? What is the most human thing—the most kind thing—that we can do? And operate out of that space of togetherness versus separateness and anger and fear. -Marcia Coné, Women's Fund of Rhode Island, talking about the process of changing gender-exclusive events

Adapting gender-exclusive events forges new inclusive traditions. While people may oppose this change, for many that opposition will not last as they adjust to the adapted event and as it becomes the new normal, the new tradition. Implementation may help change many people's hearts and minds as they observe that their traditions are still intact and that adapting the event added to rather than took away from the tradition.

Ezra Temko (report lead author) first found out about communities adapting these events while a graduate student. Ezra was interviewing a New Hampshire P.T.A. leader as part of qualitative

methods coursework. Ezra remembers the P.T.A. leader noting that when they first transitioned their events to be inclusive of all children and families, the community reaction was split. Opponents did not want the change, for a variety of reasons. For example, they said it was a father-daughter dance, boys should not go or would not go, and that moms could show up wearing who knows what. However, the P.T.A. leader said the pushback seemed to stem primarily from difficulty accepting change, and that within a few years there were “no issues.” When the changes had been discussed at a P.T.A. meeting that year, even people who had opposed the change a few years earlier had come around to supporting the event in its more inclusive form.

Jared Fox, Associate Director of L.G.B.T.Q. Equity for N.Y.C.D.O.E., had a number of conversations with schools in New York City about the department’s guidelines that prohibited schools from having these types of gender-exclusive events. Jared shared that, outside of the controversy with the change at P.S. 65 Elementary School in Staten Island (when a parent took the issue to Fox News), generally, “in the places [schools] where it did change, it was quiet. There wasn’t a lot of pushback.... They were just like going to call it a family dance now, that’s what it is.” When there was the occasional pushback, attorneys often got involved to clarify what the law was on the matter. Jared noted that it was generally adults and not children who got upset about the change, though children could become upset if their families made it clear they should be upset about the change.

### **Providing a tangible improvement for children’s wellbeing**

***Message:** I believe so strongly in this change because I support children’s mental and emotional wellbeing. I want to make sure we are not leaving children out just because they don’t have a dad, or have two dads, or because they do not want to bring a foster parent to an event advertised as being for their mother or father. We know that social exclusion has an impact on kids’ health. I want to uplift the kids in our community, not be a cause of distress for them.*

***What you might hear (pushback):** This is just political correctness run amok and part of a war against gender.*

In 2018, when P.S. 65 adapted their father-daughter dance to a gender-inclusive event to comply with the N.Y.C.D.O.E.’s “Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines” (as well as state and federal laws and guidance), Donald Trump Jr. responded on Twitter.



(Note: PC stands for political correctness. SJW stands for social justice warrior)

*This is a slippery slope. Next thing you know we're going to be right back here with the same people trying to get rid of having separate boys and girls sports teams or bathrooms. I'm all for equality, but this just goes too far.*

*No one is asking for this. This is not a problem in our community. We have not been getting complaints. If this affects one person, we can deal with it on an individual basis. There is no need to take such a big step to address a non-issue. This is another example of a solution looking for a problem.*

**What not to do:** Whatever your cultural politics, getting this change accomplished will go better if you focus on the tangible impacts adapting gender-exclusive events has for children and families rather than making theoretical arguments or engaging in whether or not this is a project that will 'end gender' and whether or not that is a good idea. Do not get sidetracked around arguments about slippery slopes or around pushback that seeks to make this policy more controversial than it is. Do not get sidetracked from a discussion about a specific change that will further inclusion in your community and positively affect your community members into a broader political debate. There are plenty of opportunities to engage in that political debate without making it more difficult to see this change happen.

**How to respond:** Focus on the concrete and tangible ways this change will benefit your community, and how making these events inclusive is the right thing to do for families in your community and indeed transcends politics or ideology.

*Right now we're focused on this event, and how we can ensure children's wellbeing and our inclusion of our community's families in an event meant to celebrate and uplift family. I don't want to get distracted by discussing something else that's not on the table. I would appreciate it if we could ground our discussion in the actual event we are discussing and the straightforward and beneficial steps we can take today to adapt the event to make it more inclusive.*

*Let's not make kids and families into political issues. They are people. We are discussing this change because adapting our events to be gender inclusive is a tangible way to ensure our events are not excluding children with different family structures or excluding children based on their interests, preferences, or identities. Adapting these events sends the message to these kids and families that they are part of our community and that we see them and want them to thrive.*

Jared Fox, Associate Director of L.G.B.T.Q. Equity for N.Y.C.D.O.E., shared that they found grounding the discussion in lived experience, in their “story of self,”<sup>304</sup> to be useful. They said, I've found that a lot of times [it is effective] when I've built the argument around my own personal narrative and storytelling of my biological father dying when I was in high school, and my younger sister, having these types of events at her school, like... how that made her feel as a person. It was not about queer families or anything. It's actually not even about that.

This issue does not need to be partisan or break down along traditional ideological divisions. While there may be patterns to this end, nontraditional families exist across parties and ideologies. The following quote from Carolyn Mark, who advocated for gender-inclusive events in Rhode Island on behalf of Rhode Island N.O.W., demonstrates how and why conservative and traditional-leaning community members may support this type of change.

I've heard from a conservative Republican official in my own town of East Greenwich, who said, “You know Carolyn, you and I disagree on a lot of things, but I'm really with you on this. I have a blended family and anytime any kind of a father-daughter dance comes up for my stepdaughter, it's extremely problematic. It raises complex family matters that she has to navigate. It'd be so much easier if everybody just had family dances and my stepdaughter could bring who she would choose—and it would not be her own father.”<sup>6</sup>

Focus on the actual events in your community, or the fact that you are following best practices to make these events inclusive of all family types.

*There are families in our community that these events exclude. We have an opportunity to include them and enable them to participate in the public events our community puts forward. This is about representing and serving all of our constituents. When communities have adapted these events to be more inclusive, the results have been that the events are, naturally, more inclusive. Adapting our events means everyone is included—the event would still be welcoming to traditional father-daughter or mother-son pairings. In communities that have adapted their events, the majority of attendees tends to still be the type of pairings who were attending in the past. The difference is that more inclusive events also welcome attendance from families and children in our community who previously were outright excluded or felt excluded based on how the event was framed.*

Consider if there are particular demographics and stories relevant to exclusion that will give you political capital on this issue. Based on your community and the particular event, your response

may be more focused on certain frames that will be more resonant in your community. You may choose to lean in on the public vs. private frame, inclusion around a particular social location (e.g., incarcerated parents, L.G.B.T.Q.+ parents), or particular cases (e.g., widowed moms).

It is a different world in which we live in from when those things started probably in the '50s and '60s. We have family relationships that are different now.... We decided to change it because we saw.... we had a lot of families that had gay couple relationships,.... we had a lot of foster kids, too.... Some kids, for example, their parents are estranged from each other or their mom or their dad has passed away.... We felt we're excluding people because we are doing it this way..... The working world that I'm in is a lot different than the working world that most people are in.... The schools are totally inclusive even when it comes to gender.... And when we call it mother and father dance, when we say, "No, it's all right, you can bring an aunt or older brother or older sister....," there is still an issue of where they don't feel included.... Listen. I'm not the most liberal person in the world, I just, I care about others and other people's feelings. And I'm sure that in this day and age we have to be considerate of the differences that we have in family dynamics from what they were ten years ago or twenty years ago. -Peter Nero, former school superintendent, Cranston Public Schools

If leaders claim they have not been getting complaints about this issue, or argue this issue does not matter, you can generate traction by having local constituents contact the decision-making body with their concerns. However, in terms of talking points, respond by sharing that this does affect multiple community members. Affected community members are already stigmatized or marginalized and may be less proactive in openly pushing this issue. You can be proactive and ensure they are included in your community events.

*This issue affects many children and families in our community. That includes people we won't hear from.*

People walk the world thinking, *Well, I don't know any gay people. I don't know any trans people. None of those people live here.* And it's like, No, we certainly do, we're just not comfortable or feel safe being out about that, because we see what happens to the people who are. -Nat Duran, Youth Engagement Manager, The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance

You can share this anecdote from Caroline Johnson, mother and widow, who helped get her daughter's school's *Father Daughter Dance* changed to a gender-inclusive *Spring Fling*:

I will tell you that I actually got a call. They took the news story on Friday and it aired Friday night in the 10 o'clock hour. I got a call from one of the teachers at the school, thanking me. Because her child was in the same situation but because she worked at the school she didn't feel comfortable that she could say anything.

This issue does affect multiple community members. When single mother Amy Peterson spoke to her daughter's principal at an elementary school in Georgia, the principal shared that other single mothers had also asked about attending.<sup>62</sup> When foster father Ezra Temko reached out to his town's recreation department in New Hampshire about his experience, town staff shared that other community members had also written in the past to share similar issues they had had, such as single mothers who wanted to attend the father-daughter dance with their daughters. The diversity of family structures in our communities mean that gender-exclusive events do exclude children and families in our communities.

You can also use census and demographic data to demonstrate the need for adapting these events. You can share national data like what is in this report, but for many demographic categories (e.g., household type) you can find information more specific to your local community. For example, if you have a lot of working-class constituents and single parents in your community, then you can make that point and note that a substantive portion of your community are impacted by gender-exclusive events and that you have a responsibility to support them.

*Based on the demographics of our community, I know people are excluded and feeling stigmatized from these events. In my district we have a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ / I've met a number of \_\_\_\_\_ families in my district who are affected by how we structure these events.*

Adapting these events may not seem like a top priority, but exclusive events add an additional unnecessary stressor to children and families already facing hardship. Adapting exclusive events is a low-cost change that can have a tangible positive impact on children's emotional wellbeing. If someone asks, "who cares?" or "why are we discussing this?," bring it back to children and families.

*I believe this is important because it provides a tangible improvement for children's wellbeing. That's something that's important to me.*

I would say to focus on the students. I mean, as adults, of course, we've already had those life experiences.... It is all about the students. -Daniel McCord, school principal, sharing his advice to other communities that are considering whether or not to adapt their gender-exclusive events

### ***Being proactive:***

Focus on who this policy affects—children and families. Focus on the fact that it is your job to serve your entire constituency. Focus on the tangible benefits of adapting the event.

While discrimination against any group is an affront to one's entire community, some people will read this type of change as narrow identity politics. Through a public hearing or other mechanisms such as letters to the editor or e-mails to decision-makers, try to bring together affected community members, including ones who have multiple different reasons why they would benefit from the event being more inclusive. It is more difficult for opponents to persuade others that this is just about one group of people or about identity politics when the concern coming forward makes the issue feel like it affects multiple community members.

Use the term gender exclusive rather than gender-specific. Exclusive has a normative component. Exclusion is generally thought of as bad, especially if you are excluding children and families who are just trying to celebrate their family in their community.

## Conclusion

Gender-exclusive events are a harmful tradition. They exclude community members, isolate and stigmatize children, and further gender stereotypes. However, these events are intended to be joyful opportunities for a community to come together and celebrate family. By adapting these events to meet the makeup of your community, your community can realize the benefits of these types of events while avoiding the negative outcomes that exclusive ones produce. Welcoming communities can join the growing trend of adapting gender-exclusive events for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to ensure they serve the whole community.



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The P.S. 65 P.T.A.'s 2018 *Sweetheart Dance* in Staten Island, N.Y, 2018

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