

The Tradition of Segregated Proms

The landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954),¹ put an end to racial segregation in U.S. schools. Even though schools have been integrated since the early 1970's, some Southern communities host two proms each spring: one for Caucasian students, and one for African-American students. Jon Paul Edge, a white student at Montgomery County High School, says, "I have as many black friends as I do white friends. We do everything else together." At the same time, he supports two proms because, "It's just a tradition."²

These segregated, invitation-only proms are not organized and funded by the schools, but by parents and social groups. Supporters argue that because these events are privately funded, there are no civil rights violations.³ They also justify the two-prom system by claiming that it decreases conflict and violence that may arise when different races interact, prevents problems resulting from interracial dating,⁴ and acknowledges that students have different tastes in music and dance. Since students self-segregate anyway, proponents argue, separate proms are in the best interest of the students.

Terra Fountain, a Caucasian student, says "Most of the students do want to have a prom together...But it's the white parents who say no."⁵ Mareshia Rucker, an African-American student, asks, "What's wrong with dancing with me, just because I have more pigment?"⁶ In the spring of 2013, a group of students at Georgia's Wilcox County High School challenged this traditional practice and organized their own integrated prom. They created a Facebook page that has over 25,000 "likes" and received donations to fund the event.

The students of Wilcox County High School received a great deal of media coverage both on TV and in print. The group Better Georgia urged the Georgia Governor Nathan Deal to support the integrated prom and the students of Wilcox County High School, but Governor Deal refused to comment on the issue, calling it a publicity stunt from a leftist group.⁷

Study Questions:

1. Even if schools are not breaking any laws by holding privately-funded racially-segregated proms, is it morally wrong to do so?
2. Should schools be allowed to hold two separate proms based on race if the majority of the students want it?
3. Would segregated proms be more or less morally permissible depending on the extent they're supported and endorsed by school officials?
4. Does the Governor have a moral obligation to support an end to segregated proms?
5. Is tradition or an appeal to personal freedom a good justification to maintain practices that may be perceived as discriminatory?

¹http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952_1/ ²<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/magazine/24prom-t.html?pagewanted=1>

³<http://www.longisland.com/news/04-08-13/georgian-high-school-to-host-first-non-racially-segregated-prom.html> ⁴<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ga-students-plan-whites-only-prom/>

⁵<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/magazine/24prom-t.html?pagewanted=1> ⁶http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/us/in-rural-georgia-students-step-up-to-offer-integrated-prom.html?_r=0

⁷<http://www.policymic.com/articles/34767/segregated-prom-georgia-gov-nathan-deal-refuses-to-comment-because-liberals>

