

‘Exceptions may be made’

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times One week ago, USD No. 480 administrators were neck-deep in controversy, as outrage about an outdated prom policy threatened to give the district a black eye — and national media outlets picked up on the story.

By the end of the week, however, Liberal High School Principal Keith Adams, Superintendent of Schools Lance Stout and the offended family of LHS student Courtney Widener had made peace.

Monday, the USD 480 school board made it official: an updated prom attendance policy should prevent future situations like the one that blurred the shine of what is traditionally a high point in the high school calendar.

Widener, a junior at LHS, had requested that her older brother, Casey Widener, a United States Air Force serviceman recently back from a tour of duty in Afghanistan, be allowed to escort her up the red carpet to the entrance of the prom.

Because Casey Widener is 22, he exceeded the age limit imposed by school policy for actual prom participation. Adams interpreted the policy to extend to the red-carpet promenade, as well. His decision disappointed the Wideners, who took their feelings public. A letter-to-the-editor exchange ensued locally, and the issue took off on Facebook and YouTube, thanks to an amateur video of Casey Widener standing at the curb while his sister walked up the red carpet to the school doors. National news media picked up the story.

In a public meeting, however, the Wideners, Adams and Stout found common ground and agreed to put the incident behind them. A key part of the discussion involved the agreement that the district would re-examine the prom policy to allow for exceptions to be made in the future.

That’s exactly what the board did Monday night in a motion made by Tammy Sutherland-Abbott and seconded by Steve Helm.

In a unanimous vote of 6-0 (with Cheryl Louderback absent), the board agreed with no discussion to approve the updated school handbooks for the elementary, intermediate, middle and high schools.

As before, the new prom policy notes, “Guests must be at least in the ninth grade, under 21 years old, and a high school graduate of the last two years, or a student in good standing at

another school.”

However, in a new section added by the board, “Exceptions may be made when the building principal believes that extenuating circumstances exist; Provided further, if the building principal believes extenuating circumstances exist, then the building principal, after consultation with the Superintendent, may give written permission for attendance of the person for whom the exception is being made.

If the USD 480 student affected by the building principal’s decision does not agree with such decision, the student or the student’s parents or guardians may request the building principal’s decision be reviewed by the Board of Education at a regularly scheduled meeting of the Board of Education.

Dress code for formal attire will be enforced for all attendees and for any person who may be escorting an attendee.”

And, as the policy always noted, “Additional prom rules and procedures will be distributed prior to prom.”