

Bullying: Too Dangerous to Ignore

Submitted to the Lansing State Journal
Published on 5/29/2009. Page A7

Every year on the first day of school, thousands of kids pour into Michigan schools full of excitement and nervousness. These nerves usually subside after the first day and return for a big test, presentation or ballgame. Occasional nerves are a normal and healthy part of attending school.

But many Michigan students feel nervous every day. These children are the victims of bullying. They fear for their safety at school, anxiously moving through hallways, classrooms and the cafeteria. Some adults minimize the impact of bullying, calling it teasing or suggesting it builds character. Explain that to the parents of Matt Epling.

Matt Epling was an East Lansing teenager with a great personality and a bright future. That is, until bullying drove him to commit suicide in 2002. More recently, two 11-year old boys, one in Massachusetts and one in Georgia, hung themselves after being consistently tormented at school. The reason? They were perceived to be gay.

Many of our children are being bullied because they are thought to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Studies show that a majority of these youth report being verbally harassed at school or on the Internet. Physical attacks are not uncommon. Last June in Wayland, a town south of Grand Rapids, a 14-year old girl was assaulted by two girls in their school's hallway. The reason? She supported gay rights.

Bullying is a real and dangerous problem in Michigan schools. Researchers note that approximately a third of all children are bullied daily. A 2005 study of teenagers in Michigan schools found that 99 percent of students heard anti-gay slurs and 88 percent heard comments such as a boy not acting "masculine enough" or a girl not acting "feminine enough." Heterosexual students are common targets of anti-gay bullying too.

A child's social development, academic performance and mental health truly suffer when they are victims of bullying. Too many Michigan kids are robbed of their sense of security at school, distracted by fear. School for these youth is like a war zone. Some skip classes to avoid being hurt, and many drop out altogether. These kids are sacrificing their futures to stay safe.

According to research reviewed by the Michigan Project for Informed Public Policy, children who are bullied frequently suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These mental health issues extend into adulthood when a youth's sense of basic safety in the world has been shattered.

Currently, 34 states have laws banning bullying in schools. Michigan has none. Matt Epling's father, Kevin, has been working tirelessly since his son's death to help pass just one such protection.

This year, the Michigan Senate has introduced two forms of anti-bullying legislation: Senate Bill 159 and Senate Bill 275. The latter is referred to as “Matt’s Safe School Law” in memory of Matt Epling.

Please join me in urging our legislators to pass either of these bills. Take a stand against bullying. Do it for Kevin Epling, your own children, and our shared future.

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