Standing up against school bullying

Student suicides spur supporters to press Legislature for passage

By PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI
Free Press Education Writer

Matt Epling was a 14-year-old with plans for his future: He was looking forward to driver's ed, had found a job and was about to start high school in East Lansing.

But in a hazing incident on the last day of eighth grade, a group of high school students lured Matt and a friend to a park where they were held down and covered with broken eggs and syrup.

"The message was 'Welcome to high school, high school's going to be hell for you,'" said Matt's father, Kevin Epling.

He said his son was so traumatized by the threat of four years of hell in high school, he killed himself.

Matt is one of at least eight Michigan students to kill themselves since 2001 over alleged bullying, ranging from taunts about their religious views to their appearance. In the last two months, there has been a spate of suicides across the country by students bullied because they were gay.

Supporters of a proposed statewide anti-bullying bill that would mandate every school district have a policy — though no criminal consequences — say they are more determined than ever to get it passed. It previously failed to be called to a vote, some legislators argue, because it included protections for gay and lesbian students.

School bullying is alive and well

Michigan is among just five states in the nation that have not passed an anti-bullying law, while the 45 other states have been adopting these laws since 1999.

A first attempt to pass Matt's Law didn't make it to the floor of the Senate for discussion before being dismissed in 2008. A vote on a new version of the anti-bullying bill introduced in 2009 must come before the current legislative session ends on Dec. 31 or that bill, too, will fail to become law.
The law requires all Michigan school districts to have an anti-bullying policy and within those policies, districts are urged to spell out what is appropriate student behavior and how bullying will be handled.

Supporters say it is more crucial than ever to pass the law, saying too many students are taking their own lives because of bullying. The policy is important to protect kids from bullying, and also to help teach students about bullying, they say.

Students report bullying is alive and well in schools. About 30% of Michigan students -- more than 265,000 kids -- in grades six through 10 say they have been bullied, and 19%, or 168,000 students, say they have participated in bullying, according to state statistics.

Boys and girls are bullied equally, though boys are more likely to suffer physical abuse. Girls are more often bullied through e-mail, text messages and phone calls, said Kevin Epling, co-director of BullyPolice USA, an anti-bullying advocacy group.

Backers say the bill isn't getting traction because some opponents, including the conservative American Family Association-Michigan and its leader, Gary Glenn, say it promotes a homosexual agenda by creating a special protection for gays and lesbians.

Glenn said his group is not to blame for Michigan's lack of a law requiring schools to have an anti-bullying policy.

"Those who would attempt to use bullying legislation as a Trojan horse for the homosexual agenda are the ones responsible for the fact that there is no anti-bullying law in Michigan right now," Glenn said.

A question of definitions

State Sen. Glenn Anderson, D-Westland, who introduced the first failed bill, said those opposed to the law, including the Senate floor leader, who can decide whether or not a bill gets brought to the floor for debate, objected to a specific reference to sexual orientation in the definition of bullying.

The bill defined bullying as any act "based on a pupil's actual or perceived religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, height, weight, gender identity, socioeconomic status, or any other distinguishing characteristic, or is based on association with another person who has or is perceived to have any of these characteristics."

Anderson said the floor leader, Sen. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, agrees with Glenn and his movement, which opposes specifically defining bullying, often referred to as enumeration.

"I generally agree with them, but you need to understand that what they're looking at, and what I'm looking at, is no bullying," Cropsey said. "Anybody who's enumerated would be treated differently."

Cropsey said he didn't call Anderson's bill to a vote because he feared the definition of bullying in the bill would leave out some form of bullying, leaving some child unprotected.

The second bill, now before the Legislature, does not list types of bullying. Instead, it defines bullying in part as any act that "is reasonably perceived to be motivated by animus or by an actual or perceived characteristic."

That too, still promotes a homosexual agenda, according to Glenn.

"It insists on defining bullying based on a characteristic," Glenn said. "It's segregation language. Basically the concept they would like to see enacted is to segregate students into separate class categories and then dole out protection based on separate categories."

Cropsey and Glenn both said they would support a bill that simply prohibited bullying -- period, with no elaboration.

But some definition of bullying is necessary if schools are going to teach students to recognize bullying,
said Glen Stutsky, a professor at Michigan State University and an expert on youth violence and bullying. A policy that does not define bullying for students is meaningless, he said.

**A model policy**

The Michigan Department of Education has an anti-bullying policy that is highly praised by anti-bullying advocates, and MDE strongly recommends school districts adopt it. But MDE cannot legally require districts to adopt it. Only a law can require school districts to act.

Cropsey said a law is unnecessary because all districts voluntarily have anti-bullying policies. In reality, only 70% to 80% of districts have a policy, and many are too weak to be useful, Kevin Epling said.

No one can know with any certainty which side is right, however, because districts aren't required to file their anti-bullying policies with the Department of Education or other agency.

One of the advantages of the law, backers say, is that the policies would have to be filed with the education department and for the first time, parents could see all districts’ policies and determine which are strongest.

"For me and for other parents, the difference between a policy and a law is a policy is really seen as a suggestion. A law is seen as a requirement," Epling said.

The key to stopping bullying is to adopt a strong policy that begins with anti-bullying education in elementary school, Stutsky said.

"If kids in elementary school had an anti-bullying environment for five or six years, there'd be less of it in middle school," Stutsky said.

**Related content**

**A look at House Bill 4580**

The proposed anti-bullying law requires every school board in the state to have a policy prohibiting harassment or bullying at school. At school includes on buses, at bus stops, during school activities and at off-campus, school-sanctioned events.

The wording of the policy is up to the local board, but must include:

A statement specifically prohibiting bullying or harassment.

Statements on how to report bullying and consequences for bullying or harassment, and on how the school will respond to and investigate allegations.

Plans to hold one public hearing on the policy.