

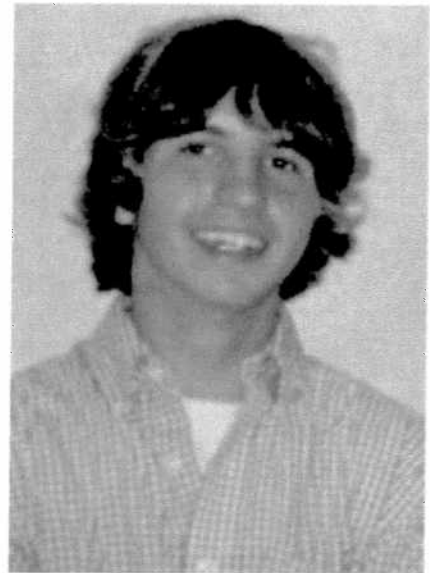


Matt's Safe Schools Law

Who was Matt?

Six years ago, in the summer of 2002, 14-year-old Matt Epling lost the fight against bullying. Matt took his own life 40 days after being assaulted by local high school students in a "Welcome to High School" hazing on the day of his eighth-grade graduation. Today his father, Kevin, and mother, Tammy, fight to ensure that incidents similar to what happened to their son become a thing of the past in Michigan schools.

Matt was an average eighth-grader with tremendous potential. Loved dearly by his parents, Matt was talented and giving; often expressing himself creatively through his writing, poetry, art, acting and quirky sense of humor. He was on both the Citizenship and Honor Roll awards at MacDonald Middle School as well as voted Best Smile, Best Personality, and Most Likely to Be an Actor by his eighth-grade classmates. Matt enjoyed the outdoors and spent several hours practicing stunts and tricks on his bike on a ramp he built in front of his house.



Matt's mother, Tammy Epling, was featured in the book **Bullycide In America: Moms Speak Out About The Bullying/Suicide Connection** by Brenda High. **Bullycide** is a collection of stories from mothers who speak about their children who endured harsh bullying and hazing only to commit suicide. She addressed the incident involving Matt and spoke about the acceptance of hazing in our schools bringing further awareness to the problems students face nationwide.

Kevin Epling has been working tirelessly to pass Matt's Safe Schools Law speaking to hundreds of students, educators and law enforcement officers about the proposed law and its impact on our communities. Matt's Safe Schools Law will make it necessary for every school district in Michigan to have an anti-bullying policy. Anti-bullying has been before the Michigan Legislature since 1999. Michigan is one of only 9 states without legislation addressing bullying and harassment in schools. Since 2001, Michigan has lost eight children to bullying related suicide.

Matt's parents and sister, Kristen, have established a web site (www.mattepling.com) to honor Matt and to remember all that he accomplished within his life. The site stands, not only as a reminder to those that bullying can have tremendous ramifications on anyone's life, but as a call to action for the passing of Matt's Safe Schools Law.

Please Support Matt's Safe School Law
House Bill 4580/Senate Bill 275 (identical bills)*

Bullying of students is a major and persistent problem.

An Oakland Schools survey of 200 high school students found that 84% said they had witnessed someone being bullied and 98% said they had witnessed teasing, insulting, or rumor-spreading about another student.

Every day in the U.S., 160,000 kids miss school because of fear of harassment or bullying.

Bullying leads to a variety of negative consequences -- including violence.

The climate of fear created by bullies may result in increased absenteeism, decreased academic performance, and heightened risk of suicide. Frequently it even leads to vandalism and violence. Nationally, 60% of middle school bullies go on to one or more felony convictions by age 24 – this does not include unknown violence like dating violence, workplace violence. The U.S. Secret Service found that 2/3 of school shootings have had a bullying component behind them.

Bullying is a public health issue.

Few things are as humiliating for a young person as being harassed because of perceived differences or uniqueness. Being humiliated by peers can lead to students acting out in anti-social, destructive, and even dangerous behavior. Any bullying activity can lead to diminished safety for all.

No child is immune from bullying, and bullying affects everyone.

In today's diverse school environments, any child can become the victim of bullying. Today's schools are not like they used to be. For example, cyber-bullying can result in constant, invasive images and texts, and can afford the bully a greater degree of anonymity and a wider audience. None of us can say bullying is "not our problem."

Educators and administrators want help but need direction.

Without clear direction about what behavior is prohibited and how to address and prevent it, many school officials may not act when necessary. School personnel need to feel confident and empowered to protect our children from bullying.

Michigan should be proactive against bullying.

While some schools are already doing a good job preventing bullying before it occurs, these bills will ensure that all schools take the problem seriously.

* Note: other versions of Matt's Safe School Law have also been introduced. However, the two bills described here reflect the current status of negotiations.

What this bill would do:

- Require all schools to adopt and implement a policy prohibiting bullying or harassment at school.
- Encourage schools to include in the policy provisions concerning education, parental involvement, reporting, investigation, and intervention.
- Require a board or board of directors to hold at least one public hearing on the policy before adopting it.
- Require a board or board of directors to submit a copy of its policy to the MDE within 30 days after adopting it.
- It is called "Matt's Safe School Law" in memory of Matt Epling, an East Lansing eighth-grader who took his own life in 2002 after a severe hazing incident. He was 14 years old.

Does this bill protect all children from bullying, or only certain groups?

- **All children.** This bill will **protect every child in Michigan.**
- Under this law, **any child who is bullied for any reason** will be able to seek and get help.
- The bill defines bullying strictly by the **behavior and conduct of bullies**, not their victims.

Will this bill take away local control from my school board?

- **No.** The bill **does not impose a policy on any school system.**
- The bill only mandates that each local school system create an anti-bullying policy that works **for that community**, based on the needs and resources in that community.

A nearly identical version of House Bill 4580/Senate Bill 275 was supported by the following groups last session:

- Michigan Safe Schools Initiative
- The Michigan Department of Education
- The Michigan Department of State Police
- The Michigan Association of School Boards
- The Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education
- The Michigan Counseling Association
- The Michigan Association of School Social Workers
- The Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, Inc.
- The Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers
- The Michigan Association of School Psychologists
- The Michigan Education Association
- The Triangle Foundation
- Fight Crime, Invest in Kids
- Van Buren Legislative Group
- AFT Michigan
- Michigan Small and Rural Schools
- White Lake Middle School and High School
- Michigan Head Start Association
- The American Civil Liberties Association
- The Michigan AFL-CIO
- The Washtenaw Intermediate School District
- The Michigan Association of School Administrators
- The Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals