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## Conversation On Bullying Empowers Students and Parents

BY KATE OPALEWSKI

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**NOVI** - More than 200 teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and community members gathered Oct. 17 at the First Annual "Defeat the Label Community Conversation on Bullying" at the Suburban Collection Showplace in Novi.

The conversation was moderated by Kevin Epling - father of Matt Epling, for which Michigan's [Safe School Law](#) is named. A series of panelists took part in a TED-style talk to share how bullying affects their sectors and what attendees should know.

"Addressing bullying is a huge issue that comprises many disciplines," said Jamie Greene, executive director for Defeat the Label. The key messages delivered at the event show that students and parents want to feel empowered and that they have the ability to make a change in their schools and community.

"For parents, it's about knowing what the schools plans are," Greene said. "When something happens, what are the steps that the school district has in place? Do they go to the counselor first or the teacher? And what should they be able to expect in terms of response, and contact from the school?"

Following a keynote address by Dr. Stephen Smith of the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, breakout sessions gave attendees an opportunity to create a comprehensive, pro-active anti-bullying platform.

Panelists included Glenn Stutzky, MSW, Michigan State University School of Social Work; Tom Holt, PhD, Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice; Saleem Alhabash, PhD, Michigan State University College of Communication Arts and Sciences; Dr. Marlene Seltzer, Beaumont Hospital/NoBLE Clinic; U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District Barbara McQuade; Michigan State Supreme Court Justice Richard Bernstein; and Kenneth Gutman, Walled Lake Superintendent.

"It was an outstanding conference where student ambassadors from different school districts were present, and they play a vital role in carrying this conversation forward," Bernstein said.

As a blind person who was the target of harassment and bullying, he said, "I wish someone had told me or conveyed the message that, 'It gets better,' a key message that comes from a conference like this. It would have been incredibly helpful. You tend to think that this is all there is. That how you are in high school is how you will be when you graduate. But this is a temporary phase of life and sometimes when you're struggling and feeling the pain, you don't realize that an incredible and exciting world awaits beyond the walls of your high school. Experiencing adversity and hardship in a lot of ways makes you a better, kinder, warmer, more empathetic person and can be used to have a tremendous effect and impact on the rest of your life when you use your passion, your energy and your spirit to make incredible change happen."

### Next Efforts to Stop Bullying

Epling said, "You have to have heroes in your hallway" when he spoke with Michigan Radio online Oct. 13 in advance of the event.

"Students are the biggest overlooked tool we have in our schools," he said, adding that people have missed the point. "Bullying prevention is a cornerstone of a good environment in our schools and at times it can be much more important than test scores. If students are afraid to go to school, they're not learning and test scores are going to go down. If we actually activate those students to help, teach them not to torment each other and be a part of the solution, we'll see test scores go up. It's a fundamental thing that really has to be looked at."

And while every school in Michigan is required by law to have an anti-bullying policy in place, some do not implement them, according to Epling. He urges parents to "get familiar with school policy, review the law, correlate the two, then go and ask a lot of questions."

ACLU LGBT Staff Attorney Jay Kaplan points to the [Patterson v. Hudson Area Schools](#) federal lawsuit filed against a Michigan school district where disciplinary procedures to address the bullying of a student suspected of being gay were ineffectual.

"With or without an anti-bullying policy, a school district can be found liable for its failure to address incidents of bullying if it was deliberately indifferent to the complaints of the student," he said. "Deliberate

indifference would include even if the school actually took steps to address the bullying, but such steps were ineffectual and the district continued to address the problem the same way."

Since the State Board of Education approved a set of [guidelines](#) designed to protect LGBTQ students, conservative lawmakers in particular have been critical.

Epling recalls the big battle back in 2005 when he was dragged into discussions about policy and law.

"The main fight was over enumerated language. It wasn't really focused on the safety of the children. I felt at times that I was the only person in the room thinking about safety and well-being rather than language," he said. "That is something that we really kind of need to go back to and amend even Matt's Law in the next administration or the one down the road ... highlighting who is affected, because we are all affected by bullying behavior. But sometimes, if it's not written down, some people don't take it seriously."

Epling clarified his statement on Oct. 25.

"In the future, if we have a sponsor and more importantly the votes, Matt's Law needs to be revised on several areas ... one which includes better language on who is affected, a clear revised definition as things have changed, more information on cyber issues and potentially more punitive measures on the schools that were not following their policies."

Joining Epling during the radio show was Suzanne Spurr, a counselor from Chippewa Valley High School in Clinton Township.

"I know that people are overwhelmed with all the new mandates and all the new laws and things that are being asked of them," she said. "But I think that people are breaking things down and looking at what's decent and what's right and what's appropriate and what everyone should be doing anyway."

For more information, visit the Defeat the Label [website](#), email [info@defeatthelabel.com](mailto:info@defeatthelabel.com) or call 248-962-3851.