

Submitted by: Janet Stetzer, Helena

I am speaking to you as the sister, mother, aunt, and friend of career teachers, and as such, I hold these professionals in the highest esteem. Their contribution to our children and our society is immeasurable.

I am also speaking as the mother of six; including 1 hard-of-hearing, 1 Gypsy, and 3 black children. I want to tell you that, although we may not want to admit it - bullying does exist in Montana schools - both verbal bullying and physical bullying. My son's medical and emergency room bills bear testimony to the severity and frequency of his abuse in our public schools.

Montana's population is becoming more diverse. This change in demographic, demands a new level of understanding - an understanding of cultures, certainly - but also an understanding of the subtleties and effects of bullying. Children are bullied because of their color, weight, disabilities, or the clothes they wear.

It may be tempting to characterize incidents of taunting and harassment as harmless 'joking around', but for the students who are targeted and tormented, the damage and pain are real and sometimes irreversible. Bullying that is tolerated by authority figures and role models is devastating and demoralizing. Learning in such an environment of fear and anxiety becomes secondary to survival. Above all else, our children deserve to feel safe in school.

The fear, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem that are the products of bullying often persist throughout adulthood. Ignoring bullying is not a favor to the bully either. Statistics show that children who were bullies in school are much more likely to maintain a pattern of fighting, vandalism, stealing, and drug abuse. There are no winners in this scenario.

We must all stand together to declare, unequivocally, that we will not tolerate the bullying and harassment of anyone in our schools - student or teacher. It is also imperative that we provide our teachers and administrators with the tools to recognize and respond to bullying when it does occur. That response must be swift, clear, and consistent.

Respect, inclusion, and freedom from fear are fundamental to our American way of life. If we fail to impress upon our children the importance of tolerance and diversity, we will contribute to a new generation of intolerant and hateful adults.

Please give your support to Senate Bill 141. Please give your support to our children.