

Parents Speak on Bullying, Communication Issues at Edwardsville School Board Meeting

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
October 27 2023 7:35 AM



EDWARDSVILLE - Many parents spoke about bullying at the recent Edwardsville Community Unit School District #11 Board of Education meeting.

On Monday, Oct. 23, 2023, a total of ten parents addressed the Board during the public comments portion of their regular meeting. Several of these parents shared accounts of bullying and discrimination in the school district, while one parent spoke about the district's response to her son's passing, which she said was mishandled.

Jamie Miller was the first speaker of the evening. She shared that her son, Gavin Miller, passed away on Oct. 6, 2023. ECUSD11 sent a letter to district parents in which they did not identify Gavin, citing the family's privacy. The district offered support to grieving students and expressed "great sadness" for Gavin's passing.

"The problem was, nobody from the district leadership or anything decided to contact our family and what we wanted," Miller said. "My son had a name. He went to District 7 schools from kindergarten...He loved acting. He loved theater. He loved orchestra. And this district didn't seem to give a darn about any of that. The fact that I had to find out this email at the same time the rest of the high school body found out is unacceptable."

She urged the Board to consider a written policy for addressing a student's death in the future. She added there are district protocols, "but none were followed." Miller's family also gave every Board member a bracelet with Gavin's name on it.

"I'm asking that no other family feel as unheard as my family did," she said. "To this day, there's still been no acknowledgement of my son by district leadership. Nobody has said anything about him...You need to reach out to families. We should have been involved, and that didn't happen. Shame on you all."

Board President Jill Bertels apologized for Miller's loss and said that the Board acknowledged it with a moment of silence during their work session two weeks ago.

Andrea Painter addressed the Board next. Since the beginning of the school year, Andrea and her husband Bronson Painter have attended every Board meeting to speak about homophobic bullying and sexual harassment experienced by their son. Andrea called Bertels's comment to Miller "disgraceful" when, according to her, the Board has not responded to concerns about bullying in the district.

"You should be ashamed of yourself and appalled by your position on this Board," Andrea said. "I am here because I've been here and I will continue to be here until this problem is done. We emphasize athletics. We emphasize all these other things that literally won't mean anything if we can't even get the bare minimum across to these kids of what matters in life, and that is being good, kind humans...What is a problem in this district, district wide, is that kids are terrible to each other. Kids are suffering."

She shared that earlier that day, her son had been encouraged to commit suicide by another student. She said that students regularly make sexually graphic comments to him, and she pointed out that the board members and other adults are protected against sexual harassment in the workplace. Andrea concluded by saying that the board is

“failing this community” and she “hope to God” none of the board members have to experience a similar situation with their children.

“And then today, of all things, to be told that he should just kill himself? Be proud of that,” Andrea said. “This is what you guys are encouraging. This is what’s thriving in this district: hate...What’s it going to take — this district to lose another child before you guys realize that there’s a problem that exists here?”

When parent Scott Ahart spoke later in the night, he said that he and other parents have repeatedly told the board about bullying and harassment in the district. He encouraged them to set firmer boundaries with students.

“Your inaction is emboldening these kids to do more,” he said to board members. “At what point are you going to get off your hands and start doing what you are asking to do? Every one of you asked to be in these positions. Nobody forced you to be here...If this is the best you can do, I implore you... move on. We’ll find somebody else.”

Scott’s wife, Karen Ahart, spoke after him. She said she has listened for the past five months as her husband and others talked about issues with racial harassment and bullying. She explained that she was dressed in red in honor of Gavin Miller.

“We need to learn that we can’t sit back and wait for the next one,” Karen said. “I almost lost a daughter four years ago at this high school. I don’t want to see another one. , thank goodness, is here today. But Jamie doesn’t have her son anymore. And we have to do something about this, and we have to do it now.”

A few parents addressed other concerns, including unmonitored computer usage and the school’s diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. One parent noted her excitement to learn that the high school football team regularly supports the band, and she encouraged more student groups to connect with each other like this.

Later in the meeting, Superintendent Dr. Patrick Shelton shared information about the Parent Teacher Advisory Committee’s first meeting on Oct. 16, 2023. He said the committee’s goal is to provide information and recommendations about “the development of student behavior policy and procedure.” Board member Terri Dalla Riva asked how many parents had attended this first meeting, and Shelton said one parent was in attendance.

Dalla Riva noted that the committee will require parent participation and “although many people were invited, we had one parent show up.” She was interrupted by Jamie Miller, who informed the board that many parents had attended her son’s vigil instead, which was at the same time as the committee meeting.

When asked for a response about comments made during the Oct. 23, 2023 Board of Education meeting, Edwardsville Community Unit School District #7 sent the following statement:

“District #7 is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all our students. We take all reports of bullying seriously and thoroughly investigate any claim with the utmost care and due diligence in accordance with our district’s policies and procedures.

“Earlier this year, Governor Pritzker signed HB 3425 into law which required that schools inform parents/guardians of students involved in bullying incidents within 24 hours. District #7 has gone a step further, and any reports which involve hate speech, harassment due to sexism, genderism, or racism, require a mandatory conference with parents of both parties (individually) to develop a plan to resolve the conflict and identify a path forward for both students.

“Consequences will continue to be issued for those students who instigate bullying or harassment, which will include interventions that can be taken to address bullying, including school social work services, restorative measures, social-emotional skill building, counseling, psychological services, and community-based services.

“District #7 encourages anyone in our school community who encounters bullying or harassment to report incidents to a trusted adult or report anonymously via the Safe2SpeakUP app which is available on the district website.

District #7 remains committed to ensuring each student has access to an environment that allows them to grow and thrive.”