

Dear ZPS School Board,

On Aug. 31st, our son Maxwell Ver Beek had just finished his first week as a freshman at Zeeland West. He was so excited to attend the first home football game. We dropped him off at the game and got a call for an early pick up. Max was saying he was sick and wanted to come home. When his Dad, Dustin, arrived to pick him up, he was obviously intoxicated. The assistant principal spoke with Dustin and said students were saying he was “trashed” and confirmed he had vomited in the student section, but said he wasn’t sure because Max was still holding a proper conversation.

On the way home, Maxwell proceeded to vomit all over himself in the car. When he got home, I could tell he was intoxicated with either drugs or alcohol. He admitted to being drunk, but wouldn’t tell us where he got the alcohol. We spent time with him to make sure he was okay and then told him to try and go to sleep and we would deal with it in the morning. We made sure to tell him how much we loved him and he had made a mistake but we could work through it. We took his phone away so he would sleep and not continue to talk to other kids about what had happened. We didn’t realize he had his old phone that didn’t have cellular service on it, but still had wifi so he could access social media.

Dustin got up at 6 am to let the dog out and saw that our Jeep was gone. He quickly rushed downstairs and also saw that Max was gone. We had several families out looking for him. When we realized it was futile, we called the police to get help. Within a half hour there were 3 police officers that came to our door and told us they believed it was Max who had crashed our Jeep into a tree and caused an explosion. They originally didn’t know for sure because there was hardly anything left of the Jeep or Max.

Within a few hours of learning Max had died, we started to get bombarded with even more disturbing news. We were told that kids at the game had taken out their phones and had taken pictures and videos of him vomiting on himself and others and put them on social media to humiliate him. We suspect he was able to see all the social media posts and become mortified. We have a screenshot from Tic Toc, from one of your children, where she states, “He felt guilty and mad at himself looking at us stare at him and take pictures.” Another student commented under her post saying “He threw up on a lot of people and people started taking pictures and videos to mock him and make fun of him, it’s really sad.”

Within a few days, we were told by an Allegan Co Police officer that a student had confessed to supplying Max the alcohol and admitted to getting the alcohol from her parents. And it wasn’t the first time the student had done this. A girl with Max at the game told us the girl had supplied Max with around 6 water bottles full of Tito’s Vodka (this would approximately equal 4 Fifths of Vodka) and that he and other students were drinking it in those water bottles at the game. We appreciated the communication from Travis Spaman and Jessica Knoth in that first week. But a week went by and we hadn’t gotten a single email or phone call from the Superintendent. Another week went by and still nothing. After the 3rd week, we sent an email to her saying we were disappointed and saddened that she never reached out to us. We had several excuses such as “I have struggled with when and how to approach your family” or “members of our high school staff had been in close contact with you.” It took 30 days for her to make a phone call to us.

We feel that one of the roles of a Superintendent is to absolutely reach out to families within the

first week, when this type of occurrence happens. I've spoken to a parent who not long ago lost their son to suicide at ZPS. To their knowledge, their child did not experience bullying at school, nor was he given drugs or alcohol from a student and Cal DeKuiper still reached out to them the first week, without them asking for it. But Max was given alcohol by a student at ZPS at a ZPS school sponsored function, and the cyber bullying occurred by ZPS students at a school sponsored function and the Superintendent was silent.

It has been going on 6 weeks since Max died and other than providing counselors for students who request it, there has been nothing done to address the student body about this tragedy and how a student providing alcohol to a peer and/or the cyberbullying were contributing factors in our son's death. Not a single assembly, not a "homeroom" discussion, not a vigil or moment of silence, NOTHING. A Grand Haven Public Schools parent told us that right after Max's death, the school had "very serious, no bullying talks with the students." Holland Christian Schools had a day where all their students wore white in honor of Max. If other districts can address it, why can't ZPS???

I am sincerely asking you to pause for one second. I'm sure all of you have kids in the district, or have at some point. Please reach to the most empathetic parts of your soul and think about what you would want done if this happened to your child. Wouldn't you want the girl and parents that supplied your child with the alcohol to get a consequence that matched the action? Wouldn't you also think that a five day suspension is just a slap on the wrist and no lessons will be learned? Wouldn't you want the students who ridiculed and mocked your child to have some sort of consequence? Knowing these two things absolutely contributed to your child feeling so degraded and humiliated that they took their own life?

Here is a list of things we think the board should consider:

We would like to see that any student suspected of being intoxicated (especially when other students are saying they are "trashed"), be checked by the Officer on duty. They are trained to know when people are under the influence and can pick up on cues that civilians can't. If they do a field sobriety test or a breathalyzer and are found to be intoxicated, they are issued ramifications. According to the Policy handbook, page 34, they should be subject to expulsion, especially if this was a second offense. If a student is found to consume or distribute alcohol to another student, they should not only get a 10 day suspension, (we heard she only received a 5 day suspension), but not be allowed to attend sporting events, and ZPS Code of Conduct states a first offense is them being suspended from 25% of their sports season and a second offense they are to be suspended from 50% of their sports season. The ZPS handbook, page 34, states the student could be expelled, and it "WILL affect the student's athletic and extracurricular participation." Especially if this is a second offense. And we were told by the Allegan Co. Sheriff, who spoke to the school resource officer that this was not the first time she has supplied alcohol to others and the school has a record of this. Lessons are learned by consequences.

Any student who is found to have recorded another student in a position of "personal degradation" (your words from the handbook), and distributes it on social media should also be disciplined. This is bullying according to ZPS handbook, page 39, and is punishable up to expulsion. It states, "refusing to tolerate harassment or bullying is expected of administrators. This applies to all school-sponsored activities or functions." This bullying occurred at a football game which is a school-sponsored event. On page

40, it states, "if the investigation finds an instance of bullying has occurred, it will result in prompt and appropriate remedial action. This may include up to expulsion for students." Lessons are learned by consequences.

We also ask that ZPS make it a policy that filled water bottles or containers not be allowed into school sponsored events. We ask that water bottles and backpacks be checked at the gate and if the water bottles are full, they have to be poured out before entering, but can be filled up at the concession stands or provide filling stations.

When something as severe as this situation occurs, there should be some type of education to go out to the entire student body that address the contributing factors of the person's suicide, such as them being provided drugs or alcohol by other students, or bullying or cyber bullying. This education needs to happen within a week or two of the event, while it's still fresh on everyone's minds. These contributing factors were committed by the people in that student body. We believe if it wasn't for the alcohol and then the subsequent bullying, our son Max wouldn't have taken his own life.

The school should also have a liaison specifically for communication to parents when events like this occur. This liaison could be the point person to check in with parents. Any updates at all are better than none.

Please consider the proposals in this letter,

Thank you,

Dustin and Amy Ver Beek