

Critics Assail Obama's 'Safe Schools' Czar, Say He's Wrong Man for the Job

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since this story was originally published, the former student referred to as "Brewster" has stepped forward to reveal that he was 16 years old, not 15, at the time of the incident described in this report.

President Obama's "safe schools czar" is a former schoolteacher who has advocated promoting homosexuality in schools, written about his past drug abuse, expressed his contempt for religion and detailed an incident in which he did not report an underage student who told him he was having sex with older men.

Conservatives are up in arms about the appointment of Kevin Jennings, Obama's director of the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, saying he is too radical for the job.

Jennings was appointed to the position largely because of his longtime record of working to end bullying and discrimination in schools. In 1990, as a teacher in Massachusetts, he founded the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which now has over 40 chapters at schools nationwide. He has also published six books on gay rights and education, including one that describes his own experiences as a closeted gay student.

The OSDFS was created by the Bush administration in 2002. According to its Web site, one of its primary functions is to "provide financial assistance for drug and violence prevention activities and activities that promote the health and well being of students in elementary and secondary schools, and institutions of higher education."

Jennings' critics say he fits only half the bill, if that.

"Jennings was obviously chosen for this job because of the safe schools aspect... defining 'safe schools' narrowly in terms of 'safe for homosexuality'," Peter Sprigg, a senior fellow at the Family Research Council, told FOXNews.com.

"But at least half of the job involves creating drug-free schools, and we've not been offered any evidence about what qualifications Jennings has for promoting drug-free schools."

Jennings' detractors note that he made four references to his personal drug abuse in his 2007 autobiography, "Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son: A Memoir." On page 103, discussing his high school years in Hawaii in the early 1980s, Jennings wrote:

"I got stoned more often and went out to the beach at Bellows, overlooking Honolulu Harbor and the lights of the city, to drink with my buddies on Friday and Saturday nights, spending hours watching the planes take off and land at the airport, which is actually quite fascinating when you are drunk and stoned."

Sprigg said that quote is particularly unacceptable for someone who has been named to lead America's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools.

"It would be nice to hear from Mr. Jennings ... that he regrets the drug use he engaged in when he was in school," Sprigg said. "But in this autobiography, which Mr. Jennings wrote only recently, he never expresses any regret about his youthful drug use."

But Amanda Terkel, deputy research director at the Center for American Progress, sees Jennings' comments about drugs in a different light.

"We have had elected officials do [drugs] and we still believe it is fine for them to be elected," she said. "This is a point in his life that he was struggling ... I think those experiences now help him reach out to students, relate to what they are going through, and help them through their problems."

Liberal groups remain in Jennings' corner, saying he is fully qualified for his position and is the victim of a right-wing smear campaign. But Jennings' detractors point to other things he has said that alarm social conservatives.

In 1997, according to a transcript put together by Brian J. Burt, managing editor of the student-run Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy, Jennings said he hoped that promoting homosexuality in schools would be considered fine in the future.

"One of our board members" was called to testify before Congress when they had hearings on the promotion of homosexuality in schools," Jennings said. "And we were busy putting out press releases, and saying, 'We're not promoting homosexuality, that's not what our program's about. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah....' "

"Being finished might someday mean that most straight people, when they would hear that someone was promoting homosexuality, would say 'Yeah, who cares?' because they wouldn't necessarily equate homosexuality with something bad that you would not want to promote."

The group Jennings founded has also been accused of promoting homosexuality in schools. At a GLSEN conference in 2000, co-sponsored with the Massachusetts Department of Education, the group landed in hot water when it was revealed that it had included an educational seminar for kids that graphically described some unorthodox sex techniques.

A state official who spoke to teens at the conference said:

"Fisting (forcing one's entire hand into another person's rectum or vagina) often gets a bad rap....[It's] an experience of letting somebody into your body that you want to be that close and intimate with... [and] to put you into an exploratory mode."

At the time, Jennings said he had concerns about events at the conference, but he also criticized attendees who filmed it.

"From what I've heard, I have concerns as well," Jennings told the Boston Globe in May 2000. "GLSEN believes that children do have a right to accurate, safer sex education, but this needs to be delivered in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner.

"What troubles me is the people who have the tape know what our mission is, they know that our work is about preventing harassment and they know that session was not the totality of what was offered at a conference with over 50 sessions," he said.

But Peter LaBarbera, President of "Americans for Truth About Homosexuality, said Jennings' reaction was weak and unacceptable.

"He never really apologized. If a conservative group had done that, they would be out of business," LaBarbera said.

The religious right is also alarmed by Jennings' personal views about religion. In his memoir, he wrote of his views while he was in high school:

"What had [God] done for me, other than make me feel shame and guilt? Squat. Screw you, buddy -- I don't need you around anymore, I decided.

"The Baptist Church had left me only a legacy of self-hatred, shame, and disappointment, and I wanted no more of it or its Father. The long erosion of my faith was now complete, and I, for many years, reacted violently to anyone who professed any kind of religion. Decades passed before I opened a Bible again."

Terkel said Jennings was writing about a "low point" in his life, and he now considers himself a religious person.

"Since then he has been involved in the Union Theological Seminary," she said. "He does consider himself religious. He tithes -- I just don't see any evidence that he is hostile to religion."

Jennings is on the board of the Union Theological Seminary, which describes itself as "progressive and evangelical."

Another controversy from Jennings' past concerns an account in his 1994 book, "One Teacher In 10," about how, as a teacher, he knew a high school sophomore named Brewster who was "involved" with an "older man":

"Out spilled a story about his involvement with an older man he had met in Boston. I listened, sympathized, and offered advice. He left my office with a smile on his face that I would see every time I saw him on the campus for the next two years, until he graduated."

The account led Diane Lenning, head of the National Education Association's Republican Educators Caucus, to criticize Jennings in 2004 for not alerting school and state authorities about the boy's situation, calling Jennings' failure to do so an "unethical practice."

Jennings threatened to sue Lenning for libel, saying she had no evidence that he knew the student in question was sexually active, or that he failed to report the situation.

But a professor at Grove City College in Pennsylvania, Warren Throckmorton, has produced an audio recording of a speech Jennings gave in 2000 at a GLSEN rally in Iowa, in which Jennings made it clear that he believed the student was sexually active:

"I said, 'What were you doing in Boston on a school night, Brewster?' He got very quiet, and he finally looked at me and said, 'Well I met someone in the bus station bathroom and I went home with him.' High school sophomore, 15 years old' I looked at Brewster and said, 'You know, I hope you knew to use a condom.'" [Audio is available on the professor's Web site.]

The Washington Times reported in 2004 that "state authorities said Mr. Jennings filed no report in

1988." A spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Department for Children and Families, the department to which Jennings -- as a Massachusetts teacher -- would have been legally obliged to report the situation, did not return calls from FOXNews.com.

GLSEN spokesman Daryl Presgraves told FOXNews.com that all the attacks on Jennings were hate-motivated smears, but he declined to address individual issues.

"From falsehoods to misrepresentations to things taken out of context to outright smears -- all of which have been fully debunked -- these groups will stop at nothing to ensure that no effective action is taken to address bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in America's schools.

"They have failed to derail and slander GLSEN's well-respected work in the education world, which includes partnerships with numerous national education organizations, and they now seek to tarnish Kevin Jennings' highly regarded career as an educator."

But Sprigg countered that nobody has adequately answered the questions that are being raised about Jennings.

Speaking of Jennings' job, he said: "I think it's unfortunate that [it] is a position that did not require any sort of confirmation process, because there are a lot of serious questions about Jennings and there has not been any forum in which Jennings has been required to answer the questions."

Jennings forwarded questions from FOXNews.com to Department of Education spokesman Justin Hamilton, who declined to comment.

But Terkel said that Jennings' appointment showed that the Obama administration was taking safe schools seriously.

"For a long time I think this position was largely neglected. It was seen as a throwaway position [by the Bush administration.] Now the Obama administration has made an attempt to find someone who, in many ways, seems tailor-made for this position. [Jennings] has devoted his whole career to promoting safe schools."