



Safe at School

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN JENNINGS

Bullied in school, Kevin Jennings now devotes his life to making schools safe for all children.

By Joan Richardson

KAPPAN: I've had the chance to read your memoir (*Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son*, 2007) but I'm assuming most of my readers haven't done so. I think it's important for them to know a bit about your family and where you came from in order to understand some of your ideas about school safety.

JENNINGS: I grew up in a very poor family in the rural South. I'm the youngest of five children. I was much younger than my siblings. My dad died when I was eight, leaving my mom with me to raise. My mother was a brilliant woman, one of the smartest people I ever knew. Unfortunately, she grew up a woman in Appalachia in the 1920s, which means that she really never had a chance. She had to drop out of school in 6th grade to pick cotton and tobacco to keep her brothers and sisters alive during the Depression.

She was completely self-educated. She read voraciously. She had a dream that one of her kids would go to college. That was her only big dream in life. As her youngest, kind of her last chance, I became the focus

JOAN RICHARDSON is editor-in-chief of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine.

of that dream. So I really can't remember a time when education wasn't held up to me as the most important thing. My doing well in school was *the* most important thing. I don't know quite how she did it. She made it seem completely logical. She made it seem inevitable that, of course, I would go to college

From

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son

One boy in the trailer park, John, took special delight in humiliating me at the bus stop every day. His favorite thing to do was to wait until we got off the bus in the afternoon and, with all the kids on the bus still watching and all the other kids from the trailer park gathered around, order me to sit down on the pavement and not move until he was out of sight. Faced with the seemingly impossible odds against successfully fighting off John and his posse, I would sit down. This brought howls of laughter from the other kids, laughter that echoed as the bus pulled away. Once the bus pulled away, John and his buddies would saunter off, but this didn't mean my ordeal was over. Sometimes, they would hide so that, when I turned the corner, John would scream at me for having gotten up without his permission and would order me to sit a second time. . . . On some days, they would do this repeatedly, so that the half-mile walk to our trailer could take me an hour or more.

and I would go to the best college I could get into. Even though no one in our family had ever done it and we had no money to pay for it. After my father died, my mother cleaned houses, she worked at McDonald's. She got whatever kind of job she could get with a 6th-grade education.

Like a lot of poor people, our lives were very unstable, and we moved pretty frequently. When things were doing a little better, we'd get a more expensive trailer. Then we couldn't afford it and we'd have to give it up and move again. So I ended up attending 11 different schools in four states in the course of my childhood. Yet, somehow, my mother maintained this kind of stability.

When I look back now, knowing what I know about the risk factors for a kid dropping out of school and not getting into college, I had every single one. But from that experience, I

learned that a really strong parent can compensate for a lot of deficiencies. I could very easily have been a dropout instead of a Harvard graduate. I am very aware that there is a very thin line for a lot of kids.

EARLY YEARS IN SCHOOL

KAPPAN: So, what was school like for you when you were young?

JENNINGS: School was a place that I both loved and hated. I loved it because I loved learning. I hated it because I was targeted at a pretty young age for bullying and harassment. That really started because, in the kind of communities where I grew up, boys didn't do homework and didn't pay attention in class. Boys watched NASCAR and football. So I really started getting picked on in elementary school, and it was awful.

On Sunday nights, I would get what my mother called that "Sunday funny feeling." We used to always watch the "Wonderful World of Disney" on Sunday

nights. When the theme music played at the end of the show, I would start to get very nauseous because I knew the weekend was over and that I had to get up and go to school the next morning.

The worst years for me were 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. In 9th grade, I finally got up the nerve to go and tell the counselor. I said, this is what's happening to me. It's happening every single day. Could you please do something about it?

I'll never forget him saying, well, "which kids is it?" I named some of the kids. They were some of the most popular kids in the school. He replied, "I know those kids. I don't believe they'd do that." It was just clear that nobody was going to be there for me.

Ironically, the only math class I ever did well in was my 9th-grade geometry class. Mr. Cobb was the only teacher who consistently intervened when I was bullied in the class and in the hallways. A lot of my philosophy of education came from Mr. Cobb. I wasn't then and never have been good at math. But because Mr. Cobb made me feel like he cared about me, I would do anything to do well in geometry. It was the first and last A I ever got in a math class.

I think that so much of student achievement comes back to whether young people feel like we care about them, that we value them, that we notice them. We know that when young people are in schools where they have that sense of belonging, they come to school, they do better in school, they graduate from school.

GENDER HARASSMENT

KAPPAN: Was there a point where the harassment turned the corner and became more because of your sexual orientation?

JENNINGS: I don't think kids actually make that distinction. I think what happens is that they know that terms like the "f" word are just acceptable language in a lot of places. It's the word you can say. Kids say that about anyone they don't like. It's just that, for me, it struck a special terror in my heart because I was struggling with my sexual identity during those years. Like a lot of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, I felt "different" from an early age, and the fact that my classmates seemed to be able to sniff it out terrified me.

But I don't think only gay kids get called [uses an anti-gay slur]. Most kids who get called that are actually not gay. Kids are smart. They figure out pretty quickly what behaviors will be tolerated and what behaviors will not be tolerated.

When I was at GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), our 2005 study found that the three main causes for harassment were ap-

pearance, real or perceived gender orientation, and gender identity.

When I started getting called the “f” word in middle school, it wasn’t because kids thought I was gay. It’s because it’s the most damaging word you could use and no one would stop you. For me, it hit home in a particularly frightening manner.

KAPPAN: Your descriptions of the harassment you experienced are really chilling. It’s very disturbing to read them. I find it so interesting that, in spite of a lot of discomfort at school, to put it mildly, you decided to become a teacher and more or less put yourself back into the same situation.

JENNINGS: I look back at that with a sense of amazement myself. It’s ironic that I chose to go back and spend my time in the source of my greatest nightmares. I think there was an unconscious desire to go back and fix it, to make sure that kids didn’t go through what I went through.

And there were other reasons. I was raised in a very religious family, and I was taught that to whom much is given, much is expected. The year I was graduating from Harvard in 1985, it felt immoral to me to just take my degree and go out and try to earn a lot of money. I was the first person in my family to ever have this opportunity. To have that opportunity because of incredible sacrifices from people like my mother, I felt like I had a responsibility to give back. The second reason is that a disproportionate number of first-generation college graduates go into education. Partly, that’s because it’s the only field they know. I didn’t know any lawyers, any businessmen, any doctors growing up. I had no conception of what people in those jobs did. I knew what a teacher did, and I could see myself doing it.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

KAPPAN: You hear a lot these days about kids, at least teenagers, being more comfortable with diversity in schools, with students of different races, different ethnicities, different sexual orientations. Do you think that’s true, or is there just as much harassment, bullying of students these days as there was during your teenage years?

JENNINGS: We can’t really answer the question of whether there’s more or less because there were no scientific studies 30 years ago. It’s all based on conjecture.

But when I was at GLSEN, we did find that, if you’re an LGBT student, being harassed will be the rule, not the exception for you. There are obviously some advantages and supports for LGBT students today that I didn’t have. Teenagers may be more comfortable coming out these days, but being more



Associated Press/Kathy Willens

KEVIN JENNINGS

POSITION: Assistant deputy secretary, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education.

AGE: 46

EDUCATION: Bachelor’s degree in history, Harvard University, 1985. Joseph Klingenstein Fellow, Teachers College Columbia University, 1993. Master’s degree in interdisciplinary studies, Columbia University, 1994. Master’s degree in business administration, New York University, 1999.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: High school history teacher, Moses Brown School, Providence, Rhode Island, 1985-87 and Concord Academy, Concord, Massachusetts, 1987-95. Became faculty advisor to the nation’s first Gay-Straight Alliance. Founded the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) as a local volunteer group in the Boston area, 1990. Appointed by Gov. William Weld to co-chair the education committee of the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth and was principal author of its report, *Making Schools Safer for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families*. The commission led the fight that made Massachusetts the first state to outlaw discrimination against public school students on the basis of sexual orientation. Executive director, GLSEN, 1990-2008.

CIVIC SERVICE: Member, board of directors, Harvard Alumni Association. Member, board of trustees, Union Theological Seminary, New York City. President, board, Tectonic Theatre Project. National fundraising chair, Appalachian Community Fund.

BOOKS: Author, *Mama’s Boy*, *Preacher’s Son* (Beacon, 2007) and *Always My Child* (Simon & Schuster, 2003); editor, *One Teacher in 10* (Alyson Publications, 2004), *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students* (Alyson Publications, 1994), and *Telling Tales Out of School: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Revisit Their School Days* (Alyson Publications, 1998).

WEB SITE: kevinjennings.com

visible also makes you a bigger target. I felt very alone. I don't think that LGBT kids today feel alone in the same way that I did 30 years ago. But that varies a lot on where they're living and where they're going to school.

REPUBLICAN OPPOSITION

KAPPAN: Let's switch focus and talk about the 53 House Republicans who would like to have you fired from your job. (A letter organized by Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) signed by 52 other House Republicans was sent to President Obama on Oct. 15 demanding that he fire Jennings for "pushing a pro-homosexual agenda" and because he "lacks the appropriate qualifications and ethical standards to serve in this capacity.")

JENNINGS: I'm not going to talk about that. I came here to do a job. People can say what they want. I am here to do my job the best that I can.

KAPPAN: I assume that before Arne Duncan hired you that he was aware that you were gay, aware of where you worked.

JENNINGS: I think he had read my résumé.

KAPPAN: So I assume there must have been some anticipation, even expectation that this would happen. I'm curious about the conversations that took place before you joined the Department of Education.

JENNINGS: The week I was offered the job, I heard the story of Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, an

11-year-old boy in Springfield, Mass. He had been repeatedly harassed and bullied by students. I don't know if the school did something that didn't work or if they did nothing at all. But in April, he hung himself with an electrical cord. When I heard that story, I decided that if I was offered the job of making sure that things like that never happened again, it would be pro-

foundly immoral of me to say no. That's why I accepted the offer.

KAPPAN: Since the letter was sent to President Obama, have there been any other activities since then?

JENNINGS: Quite honestly, that is not my focus. I'm focused on the work I'm doing. I have not broken stride for one second because of this. I have a very clear set of goals. Everybody knew when I was hired that I had an "agenda." I've been very clear

about that from the start.

KAPPAN: So, what is that agenda?

JENNINGS: We know that students learn best in a school where they feel truly safe. I am here to make that happen for more kids. What do we mean by safe? Well, to me, a truly safe school goes way beyond just nobody carrying a gun to school. Although that's a given, or at least it should be, although it is not in far too many places. In a truly safe school, you're physically safe, you're emotionally safe. You're not sitting in Mr. Jennings' history class wondering whether you're going to find something written on your locker or if you're going to be called names in the hallway or whether someone is going to try to sell you drugs in the bathroom and therefore you have to "hold it" until you get home. Because if that's what you're thinking about, you're not going to learn history.

Those things are the floor of what we need. Then we also need to make sure that all kids feel like they belong, that all kids feel like they're valued. That is the new, much more comprehensive definition of safe schools under the leadership of Secretary Duncan.

Just as we have standards around academic goals, we need standards around school climate because what gets measured is what gets done. We're only going to put school climate at the priority level it deserves — which to me is at the top — if we have standards around it and start measuring it. And we need a data system so parents know what kind of environment a kid will encounter in a school.

KAPPAN: So, you want to include this in the Common Core standards?

JENNINGS: Yes. If we don't get this one right, the other ones don't matter. Right now, they're really focused on the academic standards. This one is much newer. We have to build understanding of the concept first.

At one of the groups where I talked about this, one gentleman said, "I think we have a good climate in our schools. They're all air conditioned now." So we're even using language that some people don't understand.

We're not first up to bat, and I'm not troubled by that. The Common Core movement is right to start on the things where there's already widespread agreement. We're way down the road. That's fine. This is a new field in many ways. We're still fighting over the definition of school climate. But I can promise you it does not include air conditioning.

Once we have standards and a scientific way of measuring school climate, state and local authorities will be able to pinpoint which schools need im-

From

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son

The hardest part was feeling like there was nowhere to turn. Teachers like Mr. Cultrou joined in the harassment; others stood by and let it happen. No one spoke up. . . . the relentless daily mocking of the "faggot" was the alpha and the omega of my school day.



Associated Press/Kathy Willens

provement and implement policies and programs to drive that process.

KAPPAN: My perception is that there's been a lot of change because of grassroots efforts. Local kids are pushing for change through Gay-Straight Alliances, and parents in groups like PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) are pushing for that change. Your work at GLSEN helped empower them. Now, you're proposing a very top-down approach. That's very different and presents its own set of problems with school districts. Why make that shift? Why not continue with the grassroots strategy that you've already proven can be successful?

JENNINGS: You need both. Part of the goal of standards is to empower people at the grassroots. Every parent ought to be able to go on the web to find a building-level safety rating.

KAPPAN: How's that going to influence change?

JENNINGS: If you went on the web and saw that your child's school was rated unsafe, my prediction is that you're going to be in somebody's face pretty fast. Right now, parents have no reliable way of knowing how safe their school is for their kids. The truth is that kids don't come home and tell their parents how unsafe their schools are or how unsafe they feel in schools. They're not telling parents, particularly as they get older, that drugs are being sold in

the bathroom or that they're being bullied. My mother was the last person to find out that I was being bullied.

KAPPAN: I have to question your belief that that will work. Plenty of districts and local schools publish report cards with test scores and other indicators about how well kids are learning. But there are still many, many places where parents don't push back and demand academic excellence. What makes you think they'll push back if you tell them schools are unsafe?

JENNINGS: Safety is very visceral to parents. I said to the Secretary on my first day here that when parents put their kids on the bus in the morning, they ask themselves two questions. Is my child going to be safe? Is my child going to learn? And they ask them in that order.

You're more likely to get an upset parent in your office if the parent perceives that their child is not safe than if they believe their child isn't learning geometry.

Our school climate system will be based on four pil-

From

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son

In 7th grade, studying was even more uncool and sports moved from semi-friendly games of kickball at recess to cutthroat games like "smear the queer" in gym class. For the uninitiated, smear the queer is a game where one boy gets the football and all the others try to hit him hard enough to make him fumble, after which another boy picks up the ball and the cycle begins all over. What "physical education" this imparted was unclear to me, unless it was intended as an object lesson in Darwinian survival. . . . On the rare occasions when the ball inexplicably ended up in my hands, my classmates seemed to turn on me with a special relish, screaming "queer" especially loudly as they belted me.

lars. First, of course, we need incident-based data. We need to know about disciplinary suspensions and expulsions. Second, we'll do surveys of students, surveys of families, and surveys of staff. For example, do the families feel like they can go to school and get the information they need about their children? We know that parental engagement is critical to school success.

If parents don't feel engaged with the school, then children won't feel engaged with the school. Finally, there are surveys of the staff. If the staff doesn't feel safe at school, if the staff doesn't feel respected, if the staff doesn't feel supported, how can they support the kids?

This helps empower people at the grassroots because it gives them information that they need and don't have. It actually asks them what they need and what they think and gives them a voice.

If they have a problem, we're going to help them get better. No one in this department believes in unfunded mandates. If we're going to go out the door with new expectations about school climate, it's got to be matched with new resources. The beginning of that is a new grant program coming out of this department where we'll be providing possibly as much as \$70 million for investments in school climate projects.

BULLYING VS. GUNS & DRUGS

KAPPAN: By targeting climate issues and bullying issues, some will suggest that you're really targeting issues that apply most to suburban and rural and small-city districts and not the hard issues of physical violence and drugs in urban districts.

JENNINGS: School climate to us has several issues. It is not just bullying and harassment. That's one small component of school climate. We want to look at engagement with school. Do kids feel academically challenged? Do they feel like they're wanted at school? Do they have positive relationships with the adults in the schools? Do they have positive relationships with their peers? Second, we want to know from parents whether they have positive relationships with teachers and the principal. Do they feel welcome in the school? Number three is physical safety, which is bullying, harassment, weapons, and substance use. Fourth is the environmental health of the school, by which we mean what's the actual shape of the school. Do they have the books they need, do they have tech support, is there toilet paper in the bathrooms?

All of those components are critical to a healthy school climate. We also propose to develop follow-up surveys. Then we want to drill down into the areas where they have challenges so that we can more closely identify the problem.

What we're trying to develop is a standard that every school should have, whether it's urban, rural, or suburban. There can be one standard, but the solution cannot be one size fits all. Not only do we have to provide funding if we're going to have this new system, we also have to provide solutions. Fortunately, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools has been funding cutting-edge work on solutions at local districts around the country. The solutions are not here in Washington, but we do know where some of the solutions are. We need to do a better job of connecting people to those who have already found the solutions.

This is a commitment to every district in the country and a commitment to helping them address the most salient issue in their community.

KAPPAN: Why do you think this is the right time for this issue?

JENNINGS: We have the perfect storm. We have an unprecedented flow of money and an unprecedented feeling of alarm about education. I am not naïve. I don't believe if we have safety standards that schools are going to change overnight. But I do know that what gets measured is what gets done. Over time, it will force this issue onto the agenda. There will always be a role for grassroots activism. What the government can do is to push those ideas along a little faster.

I'm hearing loud and clear from people at the grassroots that they need help with this issue. We can't just crank out standardized tests and expect that will make our schools better. We have to look at everything that a child needs to succeed.

If they're sitting in the classroom and they're hungry, they're not going to learn. If they're sitting in that classroom and they're terrified about what will happen when they try to walk home that afternoon, they're not going to learn.

KAPPAN: How will you measure your success?

JENNINGS: If, when I leave office, parents have access to a system that tells them if their children are attending a safe school, I will have succeeded.

The process of change is like a relay race. I have the baton for a few years. My job is to ensure that we're little further ahead in the race and, like a good relay team member, be ready to pass that baton to the next person with a lead toward the end goal of a safe school for every child.

My job is to ensure that the next generation has something to build on. That's how you say "thank you" to those who made sacrifices that allowed you to be where you are. Andy Warhol said, "They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself." I'm here to help change things. **■**

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k1002ri1.pdf

**Joan Richardson, Safe at School: An Interview with Kevin Jennings,
Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 5, February 2010, pp. 43-48.**

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. **Copies of this article, in print and electronic formats, may not be made, distributed, or posted online without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.**

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at
<http://www.pdkintl.org/utilities/archives.htm>.