

GLSEN grades schools on youth

by Kate Frankfurt
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—The nation's largest organization addressing anti-gay bias in schools released its first "report cards" September 18 identifying schools that fail to protect students and teachers from harassment and discrimination. The average grade was a C. Winston-Salem, NC schools were included in the study and received an F.

The annual report cards were prompted by the 1996 landmark court decision in which Wisconsin High School student Jamie Nabozny won \$900,000 in punitive damages against his school district due to the school's failure to protect him from harassment and physical harm. This decision established a precedent on anti-gay harassment that affects schools across the country.

"The Nabozny decision, for the first time, holds school systems accountable for offering equal protection to gay and lesbian students," said Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the study's sponsor. "The report card initiative is our effort to make fair, objective judgments of schools on this issue and to understand what steps are needed to improve conditions. The results show a need for immediate and dramatic action to protect our students."

Among the report's findings:

- Half the school districts received a failing

grade.

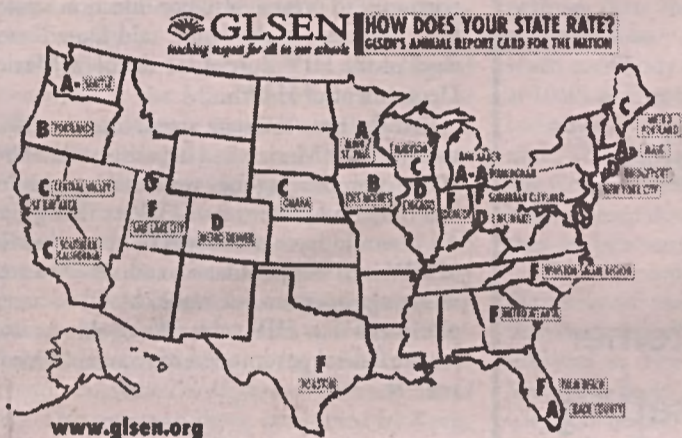
- Massachusetts, the first state in the nation to enact legislation prohibiting discrimination in public schools on the basis of sexual orientation, received the highest grade — an A-minus.

- The national average drops from a C to a D when Massachusetts is removed from the scoring.

The reports were based on data collected from 128 districts in 20 states nationwide and compiled by 62 GLSEN chapters. Criteria used included whether schools have policies in place that: protect students and teachers from harassment and discrimination; provide staff with workshops and training; provide accurate and age-appropriate information in school libraries; support extracurricular activities and clubs; and offer an accurate and inclusive curriculum.

According to the findings of another study, a typical high school student hears anti-gay slurs as often as 25.5 times a day. When this occurs, only 3 percent of faculty will intervene in such incidents. As a result of this lack of intervention, 19 percent of gay and lesbian students suffer physical attacks associated with sexual orientation with 13 percent skipping school at least once per month and 26 percent dropping out all together.

The startling numbers, along with recent legal actions taken by students against their school systems for failure to protect them from harassment, have brought to light the need for a nationwide advocacy effort to protect gay and lesbian students, estimated to be 5 million or 9 percent of the total school population, from such discrimination. With lesbian, gay and bisexual youth increasingly visible, many school districts will find it necessary to address anti-gay discrimination and harassment for the first time. ▼



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