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Obama's speech to students sparks controversy

President plans to address students nationwide via the internet Sept. 8; schools caught in crossfire as some parents object

By Maya T. Prabhu, Assistant Editor

Primary Topic Channel: [Federal Policy](#) , [Multimedia](#)

A plan by President Barack Obama to address students nationwide via the internet Sept. 8 has energized opposition, with some districts refusing to allow students to view the speech. Others, however, say they welcome the opportunity to let students hear from the president directly, and they don't see what all the fuss is about.

"It's hard to understand how a speech by the president of the United States that is expected to encourage students to work hard and stay in school could be so controversial. The anger this has generated among some individuals feels misplaced," said Nora Carr, chief of staff at Guilford County Schools in North Carolina.

Carr, who writes a monthly column for **eSchool News** on the use of technology to connect with school stakeholders, added that as a public school district, Guilford County welcomes and encourages diverse viewpoints. "We believe in the First Amendment, [so] it's important that students and families with many different viewpoints feel valued and accepted in our schools," she noted--including those who object to the president's speech as well as those who support it.

According to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Obama will discuss the importance of education on what is the first day of school for many students in the United States.

"The president will challenge students to work hard, set educational goals, and take responsibility for their learning. He will also call for a shared responsibility and commitment on the part of students, parents, and educators to ensure that every child in every school receives the best education possible, so they can compete in the global economy for good jobs and live rewarding and productive lives as American citizens," Duncan said in an Aug. 26 letter to school principals.

However, some school districts are choosing not to show the speech.

The superintendent of the Wichita Falls Independent School District said his district's schools will not participate. The *Times Record News* reported Sept. 2 that Superintendent George Kazanas said too many aspects of the speech are unusual and atypical and conflict with education protocol.

He added that educators are not getting adequate lead time to work the address into their plans.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is providing resources developed by and for teachers to help engage students and stimulate discussion about persevering and succeeding in school.

Corinne A. Gregory, president and founder of SocialSmarts, a schools-based program that integrates social skills, character, and values into core curricula, said that according to the parents and teachers she's spoken with, the lack of planning time is a problem.

"There was strong encouragement by the White House that everybody, essentially, in schools across America drop their normal educational lesson plans so that all kids could watch this," she said. "But at the same time, it was never said what was going to be in the address, what was going to be discussed, and more importantly, parents, by and large, have not been informed."

Gregory said the fact that many parents were unaware the speech was even happening made them uncomfortable.

"Regardless of whether or not there's an agenda involved, it makes people uncomfortable because there are a lot of people right now [who] are very, very nervous about hidden agendas, about messages that are being sent out-- particularly to our young children," she said.

Distrust of the president seems to be a theme among many of those who oppose his speech.

For example, the head of Florida's state Republican Party has attacked Obama's address, saying the president wants to push a "socialist" agenda on children.

Florida GOP Chairman Jim Greer issued a press release Sept. 1 headlined, "Greer Condemns Obama's Attempt to Indoctrinate Students." Greer told the Associated Press that if the speech is simply a feel-good message about the importance of education, he doesn't object to that. But he said he doesn't trust Obama to stick to those points and said the president should not address children unless parents can review the speech ahead of time.

In Greer's press release, he says, "As the father of four children, I am absolutely appalled that taxpayer dollars are being used to spread President Obama's socialist ideology" and "I do not support using our children as tools to spread liberal propaganda."

Responding to these concerns, White House officials said on Sept. 3 that the text of Obama's speech will be posted on the whitehouse.gov web site Sept. 7, allowing teachers and parents to review it before his address the next day.

Students themselves, meanwhile, are coming out to say that people should not allow fear and unease to rule their actions.

"It seems as though opponents of the president often attempt to vilify the genuine attempts to spread hope across the nation, simply because they are afraid of what change may occur if the president is allowed to inspire and affect young people," said Dan Hoffmann, a senior at New Rochelle High School in New York. He is also a member of the Junior State of America, a national organization for students who are interested in politics and government, foreign affairs, the law, and education. "Students across the country deserve attention, and I'm glad to see that President Obama is willing to address them, their future, and the importance of education."

Recognizing the good that could come from Obama's speech, many districts have jumped at the opportunity for students to hear directly from their president.

"After the superintendent received the eMail from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, we immediately began investigating whether our technology infrastructure had the capacity required to handle this. We also were hoping that C-SPAN or another broadcaster would decide to carry the speech live, so we could download it from satellite and broadcast it on our district's cable channel," Carr said.

She said that while she knows there are people who think Obama's speech will be political in nature, it is her district's

practice to welcome elected officials when they offer to speak to students.

"Regardless of the political party in power, [Guilford County Schools] has a history of respecting requests from the Office of the President of the United States, as well as from the U.S. Department of Education. For example, we welcomed President George Bush when he visited Greensboro a couple of years ago to recognize one of our schools," she said.

"In this situation, we have the sitting president of the United States using today's technology to reach today's kids. The fact that the current president is someone who overcame adversity and hardship in his life, and credits the achievement of his dreams to the educational opportunities he received and took advantage of, only makes his message of perseverance more credible."

Jim Koontz, superintendent of East Butler Public Schools in Nebraska, said Obama's speech is a great educational opportunity for his students.

"At our particular school we have no children of color, so I think this is a tremendous educational opportunity," he said. Obama "is a unique individual in that he was ever elected, being a man of color. I think it's important that the students listen to him [and] they'll get to know him and put a name to the face."

Koontz said he hasn't gotten any negative feedback from parents.

"This particular part of Nebraska, and of course the entire state, is a pretty conservative Republican area, but no parents have said a thing," he said.

He said he encouraged the teachers in his district to use the lesson plans that ED has provided, which urge teachers to introduce goal-setting, guide discussion about the speech, and ask what the president inspires them to do.

The address, which will take place at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va., will be broadcast live on WhiteHouse.gov and C-SPAN. Koontz said the speech will be viewed in individual classrooms and most likely on C-SPAN, though teachers have access to computers and the internet and can choose to view it that way as well.

Koontz said his district also is arranging to record the president's address if teachers wish to view it later. "We still have a few days to figure it out," he said.

In a letter to parents and students, Wakefield Principal Doris Jackson said she is honored and thrilled that her school was selected for Obama's address.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for our students, and we are grateful that the president will be with us as we kick off the school year," she said, adding that alternative arrangements would be made for any student who does not want to attend the assembly.

In fact, most school districts that haven't decided to boycott the speech are giving students who don't want to watch Obama's address alternative choices.

Carr noted that many of the parents who are contacting her district to complain seem to be speaking from the same script.

"The comments are so similar, it's scary. It makes one wonder if this is somehow part of an organized campaign against the current administration, with public school officials caught in the crossfire, especially since we started getting calls before the district or local news media had shared any information about the proposed speech. Whatever the source, the anger is very real," she said.

But she added that some parents are upset that viewing the speech is not mandatory.

"We are also beginning to hear now from those who feel that allowing any students to opt-out of an educational activity, especially an address by a sitting U.S. president, is morally and ethically wrong," she said. "Again, school officials are caught in the crossfire as we try to find common ground upon which we can all stand together in support of our students and our government."

Nancy P. Hemenway, a special-education advocate and parent of a freshman at Wakefield, said she is glad that Obama chose Wakefield to host his speech. Her husband teaches government at Wakefield as well.

"Our country desperately needs a better focus on the right kind of education. At least the president is taking the time to address young people. I hope he can listen, too," she said.

Josh Shipp, author of *The Teen's Guide to World Domination* and host of TV's "Jump Shipp," a show dealing with 20-somethings going through their "quarter-life crisis," said the political process often overlooks young people, so it's good to see Obama addressing them directly.

"This is a chance to prove that we believe young people are the future and to involve 'said future' in the process starting now," he said. "As for parents being outraged? Absurd. Whatever the president's specific remarks are--and whether or not you agree with them--what a wonderful opportunity for a conversation and debate about where our country stands, where it's headed, and what young people can do about it."

Shipp added that choosing not to view Obama's address will only hurt those students in the long run.

"Like many things in life, boycotting or ignoring it won't make it better. If you ignore your debt, you'll only go more into debt. If you ignore your health, you'll only become more unhealthy," he said. "Let's listen to the speech, invite young people to participate in a conversation and debate about it, and allow them to come to their own conclusions."

Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Link:

[White House web site](#)

eSchoolNews

7920 Norfolk Ave, Suite 900, Bethesda Maryland, 20814

Tel. (866) 394-0115, Fax. (301) 913-0119

Web: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>, Email: WebAdmin@eschoolnews.com