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Obama's speech to students teaches lesson about power

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The president of the United States wanted to talk to kids on their first day of school, and all hell broke loose.

Many Barack Obama supporters pointed squarely at right-wingers who, they say, hate the president and will stop at nothing to bring him down. Columnist E.J. Dionne called it "one of the most shameful episodes of the young Obama presidency."

Critics of the address point to a different culprit: U.S. Department of Education lesson plans that came out well before the speech. They suggested students "write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president," and made clear that students would be inspired by the president, no matter what. They also indicated the speech might delve into contentious social issues, pushing "students ... to discuss main ideas from the speech, i.e. citizenship, personal responsibility, civic duty." Only one of those fit a "work-hard" message.

The igniting spark, though, isn't nearly as important as knowing how we got to such flammable circumstances.

For decades, more and more power has been concentrated in Washington, so reasonable people with legitimate disagreements have had to fight much more -- and much harder -- over what goes on in D.C.

After more than a century-and-a-half of Washington keeping out of classrooms because the Constitution gives it no authority to go in, federal intrusions have peaked with the now school-dominating No Child Left Behind Act. That means that until the past 30 years, no president would have imagined giving a national, back-to-school address, and no one would have had to fight one.

Concentrating power in one place wouldn't be a problem if all Americans had the same ideals and needs. The diversity of nation, which has been a huge source of strength, dooms any centralization to conflict.

The president's speech demonstrates why political upheaval is inevitable. Reasonable public-school parents who did not want their children exposed to potentially controversial proclamations or campaigning -- or taxpayers who didn't want to fund it -- had no choice but to take action. Meanwhile, reasonable parents who wanted their kids to hear a potentially uplifting address on hard work and perseverance had to fight to get their districts to show it.

So how do we deal with this?

Local control of schools is one of the things that historically saved diverse Americans from crippling education conflict. Admittedly, it wasn't perfect. Where there wasn't homogeneity, conflict often ensued.

As districts have become much bigger and power has moved up the governmental ladder, conflict is constant. Whether the flashpoint is intelligent design, multiculturalism, sex education or just what day the school year will begin, decent people are regularly forced to fight.

To solve the problem, what we need is more school choice so parents can select schools that best meet their kids' needs and share their values. Rather than forcing diverse people to battle over government schools, let them educate their children with the freedom that is supposed to define American life.

If we cease forcing people to fight, we can put this ugly speech brawl behind us and ensure that nothing like it happens again.

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