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Obama's speech to kids: A different angle on the uproar

by Joan Garry

Tuesday September 08, 2009, 10:22 AM

President Obama just gave a [speech to the nation's school children](#) with a message of personal responsibility. It was a [good speech](#).

[Why, even Newt Gingrich thought so.](#)

Seems to me that the folks who most need a lecture on personal responsibility are the parents who gave their [kids permission to cut school today and miss Obama's speech](#).



Obama's speech to kids was hardly radical. But maybe the underlying message behind the controversy is.

What's the more mature move for a parent who doesn't drink the Obama Kool Aid?

Send them to school and let them express their very own points of view after the speech - exerting their right to free speech and ensuring that their voices are heard? Or let them cut school?

This entire controversy, covered here at NJ.com by fellow blogger Joel Schwartzberg the other day - "[Obama's Speech To Students - What Should He Be Teaching](#)," occurred because some assumed that [Obama's speech would include partisan, even "socialist" statements](#).

A quick read of the speech illustrates that he has put himself in the shoes of America's school children, complete with references to Xbox. He put a mundane science assignment into the context of the window it might open. He reminded kids to look for mentors, to ask questions and reminded kids that without failures and setbacks, success is simply not possible.

He even focused on school kids who have it a bit tougher and tells his own story to add authenticity. Yet again, a message in a genuine and inspirational speech that no one could take issue with. How inspiring. How spot on. How could people be opposed to that?

I found one answer in an email from a dear friend who is a middle school principal in Pennsylvania. Here's what she said:

...The message behind his speech is all-purpose for children, but it does focus a little more on kids that may not have it easy, kids that will have to push through a lot, to even attend school, let alone learn. The crazy people who are protesting, at least some of them, won't like that the speech focuses on the underprivileged, lest they be too inspired, and become too "uppity"...I do believe racism is behind it all... I rarely feel things this way, but in my gut, I think the thoughts behind all of this controversy are really very primitive.

Maybe the controversy will die quickly. Maybe Newt Gingrich and Laura Bush will lead the way in celebrating Obama's efforts. More likely, cable news will find talking heads who will find something to take issue with.

And to be fair, even I have a few pieces of constructive commentary. I had really hoped that the President might quote [Jamie Lee Curtis in Freaky Friday](#). Much to the chagrin of her daughter (Lindsay Lohan), she dropped her to school every morning, yelling "Make Good Choices!" (clearly Lindsay Lohan wasn't listening). I was hoping for some reference to not losing papers or finding them a week later crumpled up in a backpack.

Going a bit further, a mention about sports (read: exercise) might have been a good addition. And the idea of getting involved in an extracurricular activity is terrific but spelling out that it is in the service of working on a common goal with a team (read: community) might have been another good message.

OK, so I am nitpicking. But at least I am honest.

I'm with my old friend. The whole uproar feels more than just stupid. There's a disturbing undertone in all this. Neal

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