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The Politics and Government Blog of The Times



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The Early Word: Back to School

By [Bernie Becker](#)

After days of controversy, President Obama heads to suburban Virginia on Tuesday to deliver an [address to schoolchildren on the importance of an education](#).

Some conservatives, as The Times's Sam Dillon reports, have ascribed "dark motives to the White House" in giving the speech, while worried parents have lobbed complaints at school officials across the country. The administration attempted to blunt any controversy over the speech on Monday, [posting the text of Mr. Obama's remarks on the White House Web site](#).

As The Associated Press [points out, the president](#) "makes no reference in his prepared remarks to the uproar surrounding his speech. Nor does he make an appeal for support for tough causes such as his health care overhaul. He uses the talk to tell kids about his at-times clumsy ways as a child and to urge them to set goals and work hard to achieve them."

"We can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents and the best schools in the world," Mr. Obama's prepared text says. "And none of it will matter unless all of you fulfill your responsibilities."

Mr. Dillon reports that some of the most strident critics of the speech — including Jim Greer, the chairman of the Florida Republican Party — have backed off a bit in their criticism. "In its current form, it's fine," said Mr. Greer, who last week accused the administration of trying to force socialism upon students. "But it remains to be seen if it's the speech he's going to give."

From across the ocean, the president received a warm endorsement from former First Lady Laura Bush in a CNN interview, during which she said she approved of his moves to encourage students to do well in school.

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Laura Bush Interview 8:05

Former First Lady Laura Bush talks with CNN's Zain Verjee.

Source: [CNN](#) | Added September 7, 2009

Health Care: Meanwhile, [Tuesday also marks Congress' return](#) and the official end of the boisterous late summer recess. Not surprisingly, health care remains at the top of the agenda on Capitol Hill, especially with the president set on Wednesday to address a joint session of Congress on the issue.

On Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Obama will meet at the White House with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to, [in the words](#) of The Times's Jackie Calmes and Robert Pear, "coordinate strategy."

As Ms. Calmes and Mr. Pear also report, getting legislation through Congress also remains somewhat of a delicate proposition. On Monday, addressing an AFL-CIO picnic in Cincinnati, Mr. Obama continued to plug a public insurance option, as he will likely also do in his speech to Congress. However, his press secretary, Robert Gibbs, de-emphasized the public option's importance, saying that sort of plan would have little to no effect on most Americans.

All eyes are on the Senate Finance Committee, whose members meet in person on Tuesday for the first time since the recess began. The finance plan does not include a public option.

"The White House's straddle reflects the Obama team's recognition that the more liberal House will not pass a health care bill without a public insurance option, while the Senate will not pass one with it," Ms. Calmes and Mr. Pear wrote.

Speaking of which, The Los Angeles Times [has broken out this side-by-side comparison](#) of the health care legislation currently being considered in the House and Senate. And the Washington Post also [attempts to answer some lingering questions](#) about the current health care proposals.

Sotomayor Seated: An investiture ceremony for Justice Sonia Sotomayor will be held at the Supreme Court on Tuesday afternoon. As USA Today notes in [this primer on the ceremony](#), Justice Sotomayor was already sworn in during a private ceremony last month.

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editorial in The Wall Street Journal, Theodore B. Olsen — a giant in conservative legal circles and a lawyer for the plaintiff in Wednesday's case, Citizens United — [lays out the case](#) for allowing corporations and unions to make political contributions: “The idea that corporate and union speech is somehow inherently corrupting is nonsense. Most corporations are small businesses, and they have every right to speak out when a candidate threatens the welfare of their employees or shareholders.”

On the other side of the political spectrum, liberal columnist E.J. Dionne calls on Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., who made a point of stressing his respect for precedent in his confirmation hearings four years ago, to illustrate that in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission: “If he doesn't, he will unleash havoc in our political system and greatly undermine the legitimacy of the court he leads.”

Over at Politico, Kenneth P. Vogel says that Republicans could be the beneficiaries if, as many expect, the justices do give greater leeway to corporate and union spending. “Major Washington advocacy groups and trade associations expect a deluge of new spending in the 2010 and 2012 elections that likely would most benefit Republicans, since for-profit corporations and their non-profit advocacy groups tend to lean right and have more money at their disposals than unions, which typically support Democrats,” Mr. Vogel writes.

Finally, the Cato Institute holds a Tuesday policy forum on the Citizens United case, with Bradley Smith, a former chairman of the F.E.C., as one of the speakers.

Elsewhere on Capitol Hill: Earlier Tuesday morning, our own Carl Hulse wrote that the Senate is expected to take a break from health care wrangling to make a procedural vote on a tourism promotion bill that is near and dear to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

As Mr. Hulse also notes, the Senate will be at 99 members following Thursday's swearing-in of George LeMieux as interim senator from Florida. On Monday, former Representative Joseph P. Kennedy II [announced that he would not be a candidate](#) to fill that 100th seat, vacated last month by the death of his uncle, Edward M. Kennedy.

Getting back to health care, Politico and The Washington Post both discuss the dynamic on the House side of the Capitol. The Post [reports that House Democrats](#) are “almost the exact position they were in when they left the Capitol in late July. Conservatives are still leery of supporting a government-funded, or public, insurance option. Freshman lawmakers from suburban districts remain fearful of increasing taxes for their wealthy constituents to pay for the new measure and await alternatives from moderate Senate Democrats. And progressives, who are demanding the most far-reaching reform since the Great Depression, are still threatening to bring down the legislation if it does not contain a robust version of the public option.”

Politico's David Rogers [examines whether the administration is ignoring the House](#) a little too much in trying to secure health care legislation, writing that the “historic strength of the House . . . better suits an issue as complex and personal as health care.”

High-Speed Stimulus: The Wall Street Journal reports on an [\\$8 billion influx in stimulus funds earmarked for high-speed rail projects](#), igniting “a scramble among states and railroads, train makers, construction firms and other companies angling to profit from the unprecedented stream of federal funding.”

Sarbanes-Oxley: The American Enterprise Institute hosts a discussion with Newt Gingrich about one of the more famous hyphenated bills to emerge out of Congress this decade — Sarbanes-Oxley, also known as the Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act — and its impact on the current fiscal downturn.