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Editorials

Why Obama ought to go to school with your kid on Tuesday

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How far has civic education fallen when the president's plans to speak to the nation's schoolchildren about "the importance of education" hits the stiff wind of hyper-partisan rejection?

President Barack Obama announced plans last week to welcome students back to class Tuesday via C-SPAN with an appeal for "shared responsibility and commitment on the part of students, parents and educators" -- a wholly constructive message that strikes us as a welcome step toward renewed emphasis on scholarship and national competitiveness.

But anti-Obama sentiment has reached such shrill proportions that some conservatives are urging parents to keep their children home from school that day. Typical of the bizarre outcry is the Cato Institute, which bases its criticism on the assertion that Obama is merely attempting to "glorify" himself. Others no doubt envision the president pulling out his Little Red Book, "The Sayings of Chairman Mao," for indoctrination/story time.

The idea of a boycott is not just absurd, it's counterproductive. Not only would Obama's opponents deny him the opportunity to jump-start a national conversation about parental involvement (how long has that been an issue?) and renewed dedication on the part of students and teachers, it could have a minor impact on individual school's average daily attendance count, the measure upon which most derive their funding. This is quite a time for a student sick-out; at least things might be roomier for a day in overcrowded classes adversely affected by budget cuts.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who sent a letter about the speech to school principals last week, says this is the first time a president has addressed students in class, but that is not quite correct.

President Ronald Reagan spoke to the nation's high school students from a North Carolina school in May 1986, and President George H.W. Bush, speaking from the White House library, did the same in September 1989. Neither address piqued partisan outrage, despite that fact that both covered somewhat more controversial subjects than Obama will undertake.

Reagan talked about his hopes for the economy and a restored national defense. "The poor are now increasingly able to dig themselves out of poverty, and that's been good economic news," he said. Bush used his time before the nation's young people to introduce a new, \$8 billion anti-drug campaign.

Nobody seems to have boycotted.

Obama's speech strikes us as an excellent opportunity for parents to have a conversation with their children about democracy, government and their rights and obligations as young citizens. Rather than keeping their children home or pressuring principals to keep TVs off, parents ought to quiz their students about what they heard and how they feel about it.

Does Obama have politically driven motivations here? What president wouldn't? Every breath every elected leader takes is driven by the delicate and essential task of convincing the electorate he knows what he's doing. But to assign purely political motives to this speech, or any presidential action, condemns it to the category of things not in our best interest. That is not the case here.