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Education secretary urged his employees to attend Sharpton's rally

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President Obama's top education official urged government employees to attend a rally that the Rev. Al Sharpton organized to counter a larger conservative event on the Mall.

"ED staff are invited to join Secretary Arne Duncan, the Reverend Al Sharpton, and other leaders on Saturday, Aug. 28, for the 'Reclaim the Dream' rally and march," began an internal e-mail sent to more than 4,000 employees of the Department of Education on Wednesday.

Sharpton created the event after Glenn Beck announced a massive Tea Party "Restoring Honor" rally at the Lincoln Memorial, where King spoke in 1963.

The Washington Examiner learned of the e-mail from a Department of Education employee who felt uncomfortable with Duncan's request.

Although the e-mail does not violate the Hatch Act, which forbids federal employees from participating in political campaigns, Education Department workers should feel uneasy, said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute.

"It sends a signal that activity on behalf of one side of a political debate is expected within a department. It's highly inappropriate ... even in the absence of a direct threat," Boaz said. "If we think of a Bush cabinet official sending an e-mail to civil servants asking them to attend a Glenn Beck rally, there would be a lot of outrage over that."

Russ Whitehurst, director of the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution's Brown Center of Education Policy, said nothing like this happened when he was a Department of Education program director from 2001 to 2008: "Only political appointees would have been made aware of such an event and encouraged to attend."

Officially, Sharpton's event commemorated the 47th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a



A Department of Education e-mail sent Wednesday encouraged workers to join Education Secretary Arne Duncan, above, at a rally led by the Rev. Al Sharpton. (AP file photo)

Dream" speech.

"[Conservatives] think we showed up [to vote for Barack Obama] in 2008 and that we won't show up again. But we know how to sucker-punch, and we're coming out again in 2010," Sharpton said.

Obama avoided comment on Saturday's dueling rallies, but Duncan took the podium alongside Sharpton and 30 other speakers on the football field of Dunbar High School. Thousands of mostly blacks listened -- and a lone man booed -- as Duncan called education "the civil rights issue of our generation."

"Educators, we have to stop thinking of [poor-performing children] as other people's children," he said.

Speakers at the Sharpton rally praised Obama and took jabs at the Tea Party.

"Dr. King gave us a miracle in 2008. He gave us the first African-American president, and we must let them know today that we support [Obama]," said John Boyd, Jr., president of the National Black Farmers Association.

D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton said Beck's rally "would change nothing. ... We will move right over you."

Education Department spokeswoman Sandra Abrevaya defended Duncan's decision. "This was a back-to-school event," she said.

Duncan was chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools for seven years before Obama nominated him in December 2008.

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