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Gene Healy: Hey, Mr. President, leave those kids alone

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Examiner Columnist
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At noon Eastern time today, President Obama will deliver a speech to America's schoolchildren on what, for most, is their first day of classes. Many of them won't be watching, however. Parents across the country are pressuring schools not to show the speech -- or even keeping their kids home.

Is the president's speech part of a sinister plan to create a socialist Obama Youth movement? Hardly. The transcript, released yesterday, reveals a pretty standard homily to educational excellence, and there's no evidence it was ever supposed to be anything else. Even so, there's something grotesquely collectivist about the idea of the president addressing a captive audience of 50 million schoolchildren, hectoring them to turn off the X-Box and hit the books.

After all, the president has no constitutional power over education and no proper role in it. Our Constitution's framers thought schooling was too important to be left to a federal government that would be far removed from local communities, and whose principal responsibility was to deal with large national concerns, like defense, that the states and localities couldn't handle.

The framers were wiser than they knew: The lesson plans Obama Department of Education officials came up with after several meetings with the White House make it clear that federal education bureaucrats should be kept as far away from children as possible.

One of the plans envisioned teachers making kindergartners write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president. After parents rightly recoiled from that recommendation, the DOE tried to throw it down the memory hole, deleting it from their Web site.

Given some of the cultish questions that survived DOE's hasty revision, however, concerned parents can be pardoned a few overheated references to Kim Il-Sung:

How will [President Obama] inspire us?"

What is President Obama inspiring you to do?

Why is it important that we listen to the president and other elected officials?

These are question-begging questions, especially if you're one of those sensible Americans of all ages who aren't particularly inspired by President Obama, and who aren't convinced that listening raptly to elected officials is the best possible use of your time.

Worse still, the goofy pedagogical theory that informs DOE's lesson plans assumes that if we just get kids to express themselves about how a speech makes them feel, then they'll get smarter.

When they're old enough, in history class, kids ought to read and listen to presidential speeches like Ike's farewell address, LBJ's Great Society speech, Carter's malaise speech, and George W. Bush's second inaugural. And then they should be encouraged to dissect those speeches: What's the argument here? Is it convincing? We ought to ask kids to think critically about presidential rhetoric, instead of prodding them to burble appreciatively about his compassionate plans for everybody.

Of course, Barack Obama wasn't the first president to deliver an address to all of America's schoolchildren. George H.W. Bush did it 18 years ago, and though he didn't include an obnoxious lesson plan, he did -- shades of Obama's DOE -- ask kids to "Write me a letter about ways you can help us achieve our goals." Liberals are right to ask why people weren't just as offended when Bush 41 did it. They should have been.


It's just not the president's job to urge students to shun "kids who think it's cool not to be smart" (Bush 41) or "stand up for kids who are being teased" (Obama). If students need inspiration, they shouldn't be encouraged to get it from professional politicians, who generally make even poorer role models than professional athletes.

The president isn't a benevolent father-protector, charged with the welfare of all creatures great and small -- and educators do kids a great disservice if they help promote such a childish notion. Still less was he supposed to be the educator in chief, presiding over a centralized education bureaucracy, handing out Title X grants (with strings attached) and falsely promising that no child will be left behind. The framers thought of the president as a mere constitutional officer, whose main job is taking care that the laws are faithfully executed. Students -- and presidents -- could stand to learn a lot more about how far we've drifted from that ideal.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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