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Obama's plan to speak to schoolchildren ignites furor in Dallas-Fort Worth

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A groundswell of parent opposition to President Barack Obama's speech next week to students on the importance of education has forced many North Texas school districts to question whether to air it live in classrooms.

Obama announced the speech weeks ago, but opposition and concerns spread rapidly Wednesday morning through conservative social networking Web sites and radio talk shows.

By midday, local school districts say, they were inundated with hundreds of phone calls from parents urging them to not show Obama's speech at school.

Some parents threatened to keep their children home from school if the video was aired.

"We had no idea that there would be a public outcry," said Laura Jobe, a Mesquite ISD spokeswoman. "It caught us by surprise."

Cody Cunningham of the McKinney ISD said: "We rarely hear of parents pulling children out of history or government classes where they're studying the politics or historical significance of a previous president."

The White House said earlier that the speech – to be shown on C-SPAN and educational stations – would focus on "the importance of education, the importance of staying in school, how we want to improve our education system and why it's so important for the country."

Other presidents, including George H.W. Bush, have given similar speeches directly to students.

But some Dallas-area parents said Obama's speech amounts to partisan propaganda. His critics have been even harsher.

Jim Greer, chairman of the Florida Republican Party, said Tuesday that the speech used taxpayer dollars "to spread President Obama's socialist ideology."

The White House said Tuesday that Obama hopes his speech will inspire students and encourage them to set academic goals.

"It's not a policy speech," said White House spokesman Tommy Vietor. "It's a speech designed to encourage kids to stay in school, which I think is a nonpartisan goal."

School districts across the country have the option to choose whether they show the president's address, which he's giving at 11 a.m. Dallas time Tuesday at a Virginia high school.

But vitriolic e-mails and angry calls from parents flooding school district phone lines Wednesday morning forced many area districts to make quick decisions about airing the speech:

- Plano ISD said it won't show the speech but will put links to the video on its Web sites.
- Rockwall ISD said it might make watching the video optional in campus libraries.
- The Dallas and Richardson districts are expected to decide today how to proceed.

Susan Dacus, a Wylie ISD spokeswoman, said, "All parents I have talked to have been very negative."

School officials there have decided not to make his speech a districtwide activity but will let teachers incorporate it into the day's lesson. Other districts, including Carrollton-Farmers Branch and Mesquite, said they will probably do the same.

Suggested lessons

Arne Duncan, Department of Education secretary, informed principals of the speech in a letter sent last week. He encouraged students to complete suggested lessons that go along with the speech.

One lesson plan for students in kindergarten through sixth grade suggests children write down what they would say to students if they were president. Another asks students to discuss, "Is President Obama inspiring you to do anything? Is he challenging you to do anything?"

McKinney ISD will make viewing the video optional. "It's a unique opportunity," said Cunningham, the district spokesman.

Allen school administrators have encouraged teachers to show the video, but officials spent some time Wednesday urging parents not to withhold their children from school that day. Allen, McKinney and other districts say those absences won't be excused.

Yet, parent Bill Hogsett said he figured half of the Frisco parents he knew would keep their children home from school Tuesday.

"It doesn't matter if it's a Republican or Democrat. We have a problem with the government intruding on our lives," said Hogsett, who has a 5-year-old son in kindergarten.

Garyld Miles, a father of twin first-graders at Eddins Elementary School in McKinney, shared similar concerns.

"It's dangerous grounds for a president to ask students to advocate his policies for reform for education," he said. "That's exactly what he's doing."

Duncan said the intent of the speech and the lesson plans has been misunderstood. The president, he said, won't be lobbying for policy changes but will be calling for a "shared responsibility" among students, parents and educators "to ensure that every child in every school receives the best education possible."

'Tool of indoctrination'

Obama's speech has ignited partisan passions among conservative groups, which accused him of injecting politics in the classroom.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the conservative Cato Institute, said the lesson plans accompanying the speech are "troubling."

"Reasonable people can disagree" about Obama's policies, he said. "But they don't want their kids to be indoctrinated. This is potentially a tool of indoctrination."

Fred Moses, chairman of the Collin County Republican Party, said he had not heard anyone who was concerned about the speech.

"As long as the president is not talking about his agenda or policies, we all need to encourage our kids to do better," Moses said.

Barb Walters, president of the Texas Democratic Women of Collin County, contended the outrage is mostly manufactured.

"Emotions are running so high in politics," she said. "People are just shoving signs and fists into people's faces these days. Whatever happened to civil discourse?"

Larry J. Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, said he doubted that Obama would risk criticism by giving a political speech.

"If this is simply a pep talk by the president of the United States to schoolkids," Sabato said, "to me that is in the category of mother and apple pie and the flag."

Staff writers Todd J. Gillman, Sam Hodges, Jessica Meyers, Matt Peterson and Valerie Wigglesworth contributed to this report.

OBAMA'S EDUCATION EFFORTS

President Barack Obama's nationally televised address to students Tuesday is part of what the White House calls a continuation of his efforts to use the bully pulpit to promote the value of education. Among other efforts:

- The Department of Education has sent classroom materials to the nation's schools to facilitate discussion of the president's message.
- The administration has enlisted top NASCAR drivers to tape public service announcements touting the importance of school.
- Since taking office, Obama has pushed hard on his goal to reduce the high school dropout rate and increase the number of students who attend and graduate from college.
- The \$787 billion economic stimulus plan included more than \$100 billion for education, and Obama has frequently called on teachers and parents to help students maximize their educational opportunities.

SOURCE: Wire reports