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Obama runs into resistance over school speech

The president is scheduled to address students next week about responsibility and goals. Florida's Republican Party chairman issues a statement denouncing 'Obama's socialist ideology.'

By Kristina Sherry

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Reporting from Washington

A speech by President Obama has prompted accusations of "indoctrinating" America's youth and led to calls for "transparency" -- nearly a week before the address is scheduled to be delivered to the nation's schoolchildren.

The U.S. Department of Education last week announced plans for the president to speak "directly to the nation's schoolchildren about persisting and succeeding in school," as Secretary Arne Duncan wrote in an e-mail to principals at more than 100,000 schools.

The 15- to 20-minute address is scheduled for Tuesday, the first day of school for many districts, at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va. It will be broadcast over the Internet, on C-SPAN and via satellite.

But the plan has encountered resistance this week, most notably in a statement from Jim Greer, chairman of the Florida Republican Party:

"As the father of four children, I am absolutely appalled that taxpayer dollars are being used to spread President Obama's socialist ideology," the letter begins. "The idea that schoolchildren across our nation will be forced to watch the president justify his plans for government-run healthcare, banks and automobile companies, increasing taxes on those who create jobs, and racking up more debt than any other president, is not only infuriating, but goes against beliefs of the majority of Americans, while bypassing American parents through an invasive abuse of power."

As the statement drew attention from blogs and cable TV news shows, some conservative sites began calling for a "national skip day" to prevent children from being exposed to "Obama propaganda."

Others zeroed in on a set of activities -- posted on the Education Department's website -- designed for teachers and students to use before, during and after the speech.

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The suggested activities center around the concepts of responsibility, persistence and goals. They encourage classrooms to post and discuss "notable quotes" from Obama's prior speeches on education, and to engage in a guided discussion after next week's speech.

"It's one thing for a president to encourage all kids to work hard and stay in school," wrote Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute. "It's another thing entirely, however, to have the U.S. Department of Education send detailed instructions to public schools nationwide on how to glorify the president and the presidency, and push them to drive social change."

In the wake of the uproar, the Department of Education decided to alter its language about one of its activities.

The original version suggested students "write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president." The [updated version](#) asks students to "write letters to themselves about how they can achieve their short-term and long-term education goals."

Individual school districts in at least half a dozen states have indicated they will not show the speech.

Monique Bond, a spokeswoman for Chicago Public Schools, which Duncan headed before joining Obama's Cabinet, said that no school would be required to participate in the activities surrounding the president's address. She added that teachers could offer alternative activities for students whose parents elect for them not to participate.

Wayde Byard, public information officer for Loudon County Public Schools in Virginia, said the speech "just doesn't fit in with the first day of activities."

In October 1991, President George H.W. Bush delivered a speech from an eighth-grade classroom in Washington, D.C., that was broadcast nationwide. The move was criticized by Democrats at the time.

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