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Obama: 'You've got to work for it'

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President Barack Obama told the nation's school children that the country is counting on them to work hard and succeed in a nationally televised speech that initially [drew complaints](#) from critics, but won loud applause and cheers from students in the audience.

In a packed gymnasium at an Arlington's Wakefield High School filled with students fresh from their summer break, Obama took on a fatherly tone, recounting his own childhood and telling students that they were the architects of their own futures.

"You can't drop out of school and just drop into a good job. You've got to work for it and train for it and learn for it," the president said. "And this isn't just important for your own life and your own future. What you make of your education will decide nothing less than the future of this country. What you're learning in school today will determine whether we as a nation can meet our greatest challenges in the future."

The 17-minute speech initially [sparked protests](#) from conservatives who feared that Obama would use it as a political platform to push liberal ideas. They were particularly angry over a suggested homework assignment that encouraged teachers to have their students write a letter with ideas for how to help the president.

The remarks were televised nationally, and many schools set up televisions for students to view the address. Some schools organized alternative activities in case students and their parents elected not to watch the speech.

There were no signs Tuesday of a significant boycott, and many who complained ahead of time reversed course after the text of the president's remarks was [released Monday](#), which diffused much – but not all — of the controversy.

Former first lady [Laura Bush](#) endorsed the speech and Jim Greer, who heads the GOP in Florida and initially said that Obama's speech was an attempt to indoctrinate kids and push them towards socialism, said he would let his children watch the address.

A [handful of protesters](#) stood outside as students trickled in for their first day at Wakefield, which has about 1,400 students. One sign read, "Mr. President, stay away from our kids." Some 150 journalists signed up to cover the speech.

Obama peppered his address, aimed for students from kindergarten to twelfth grade, with references to iPhones, Michael Jordan and author JK Rowling, and he encouraged students to discover their gifts.

"We need every single one of you to develop your talents, skills and intellect so you can help solve our most difficult problems," he said. "If you don't do that – if you quit on school – you're not just quitting on yourself, you're quitting on your country."

Obama also talked about his own struggles, growing up with a single mom, feeling lonely and not always fitting in.

Borrowing from a speech he gave to the NAACP conference in New York in July, Obama said students, no matter their background have "no excuses."

"But the end of the day, the circumstances of your life – what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you've got going on at home – that's no excuse for neglecting your homework or having a bad attitude," he said. "That's no excuse for talking back to your teacher, or cutting class, or dropping out of school. That's no excuse for not trying. Where you are right now doesn't have to determine where you'll end up. No one's written your destiny for you."

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who helped warm up the crowd before Obama took the stage, said he visited the school during his first days on the job last February and that it "represents the country."

"This school has a very, very diverse population, a number of students below the poverty line, they are working really hard to challenge students," he said. "I was really struck by the sense of urgency, there was no complacency. There has been huge progress but they know how far they still have to go."

For the last for years, the school has exceeded No Child Left Behind standards, and 60 percent of the students who took Advanced Placement tests passed.

Duncan called the uproar over whether the speech should be shown "silly" and said it was up to local school authorizes to decide whether to let students watch it.

Principal Doris B. Jackson told students to soak in the energy and feeling of the day.

"You will be telling this story to your children and to their children," she said. "Take the time to be still and experience today totally."

Speaking against a backdrop that read "My education, my future," Obama ended the speech with a personalized message to students.

"I expect you to put your best effort into everything you do," he said. "I expect great things from each of you."

Not all critics came around to the White House view that the president's speech was always meant as an innocent pep-talk.

"Despite its generally innocuous tone, the speech contains some controversial political and ideological assertions, including that 'setting high standards, supporting teachers and principals, and turning around schools' is the job of the federal government," the libertarian CATO Institute said in a statement on its Website. "No matter how innocuous the content overall, this could certainly be an address with very political goals, intended to cast the President in the warm glow of a man who just 'cares about kids.'"