

Pocono school districts won't mandate students to watch Obama's speech

By **Dan Berrett**

Pocono Record Writer

September 07, 2009 12:00 AM

Local school districts will let teachers decide whether to spend class time on Tuesday showing a speech by President Barack Obama on the virtues of working hard and staying in school — a speech some conservative critics decry as indoctrination.

John Toleno, Stroudsburg's superintendent, said he had received several calls from people concerned that the speech would be mandatory, which it is not.

"I am not mandating the viewing of this speech districtwide," he wrote in an e-mail. "I have told the building principals that they can encourage their staff to use the speech as a 'resource' and in no way should they feel obligated to take time from their schedules to view it."

Pocono Mountain is adopting a similar approach.

"We are encouraging our teachers throughout the district to air the speech for our students, if possible," Wendy Frable, Pocono Mountain's director of public information, wrote in an e-mail.

Frable said she was aware of one parent who had called expressing concern, as of late Thursday. "Parents may have their children excluded from viewing this event," she said. "It's not mandatory."

Representatives of Pleasant Valley and East Stroudsburg school districts could not be reached as of press time.

The speech became a flashpoint in recent days in some quarters of the blogosphere, cable news, and talk radio.

The Cato Institute, a think tank dedicated to limited government and the free market, sent out an e-mail blast criticizing the suggested lessons that the U.S. Department of Education drew up to accompany the speech for trying to impose "collectivist" values on students and for teaching them, "how to glorify the president and the presidency, and push them to drive social change."

The text of Obama's speech, which will be released today in anticipation of Tuesday's live broadcast at noon via the White House Web site, is said to focus on the importance of setting goals, working hard, and staying in school.

The suggested classroom activities ask students to read books about presidents, including Obama, and ask questions about why it is important to listen to elected officials. Other activities include making posters of their goals personally, academically, and for their community and country.

One suggested activity for elementary-age students, which has drawn fire and since been altered, recommended that students "write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president."

The president of the Pennsylvania Education Association defended the speech, saying that Obama's opponents were politicizing it.

"PSEA believes all students should be able to see the address and judge its merits for themselves," Jim Testerman said in a statement. "We urge school districts not to censor the event, but use it as a chance to teach children the importance of becoming participants in our democracy."

Bill Vander Brink, a Tunkhannock Township resident who described himself as leaning conservative, said his daughter, a senior at Pocono Mountain West High School, would sit outside class if Obama's speech was broadcast.

"I think it's propaganda," Vander Brink said. "In my opinion, he's a Marxist and he's trying to indoctrinate them."

He added that he thought it was "beneath the President of the United States" to deliver such a speech.

"He has better things to do than this," Vander Brink said.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan addressed students in their classrooms through a television feed. He trumpeted American democracy and what he called this country's "revolutionary economic message of free enterprise, low taxes, and open world trade."

Three years later, President George H.W. Bush also addressed students and promoted similar themes to Obama's in a speech that was aired in classrooms by CNN, PBS, and NBC.

Some Democrats at the time decried it as a waste of "scarce education dollars."