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Many listen; some districts tune out

The Boston Globe

By Peter Schworm and Lisa Kocian
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CAMBRIDGE - It was their first day back, and the middle-schoolers were fidgeting, eager to leave a darkened classroom for recess in the late summer sun. Then President Obama flashed onto the projector screen around noon and began his back-to-school speech, and the room fell still, or at least as still as two dozen eighth-graders can be.

Obama's motivational message, an often personal plea urging students to work hard and never give up on themselves, seemed to ring true, even prompting one young boy to shout out his support mid-speech.

"Amen," said Jeff Tabb.

But after a weeklong uproar that turned a seemingly harmless pep talk into the political equivalent of a schoolyard brawl, many students missed the chance to watch Obama's nationally televised address in class yesterday.

Although the speech scrupulously avoided political issues, a number of districts, including Shrewsbury, Sudbury, and Waltham, had already decided not to air the speech, which conservatives had denounced as an attempt at political indoctrination.

Many school officials insisted that logistics of showing the speech on short notice, rather than the swirling controversy, prompted their decision. But others said that they were hesitant to show the speech before seeing it, and acknowledged that the bitter partisanship over the talk had influenced their thinking.

"Frankly, the political turbulence has turned this into an issue that puts our school district in a very awkward position," Joe Sawyer, superintendent of the Shrewsbury school system, wrote in an e-mail message telling parents the speech would be viewed later. Sawyer said he believed it was good for students to hear Obama's message about the importance of education.

In the speech, Obama challenged students to study hard and fight to overcome obstacles, using basketball star Michael Jordan and J.K. Rowling, author of the "Harry Potter" series, as examples of standouts whose success did not come easily.

"These people succeeded because they understand that you can't let your failures define you - you have to let them teach you. You have to let them show you what to do differently next time," he said.

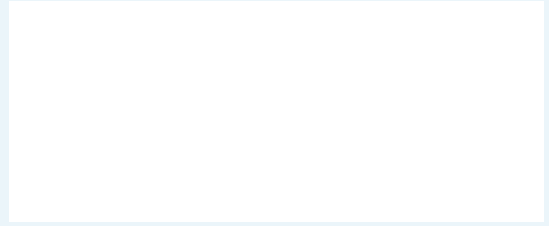
"If you get in trouble, that doesn't mean you're a troublemaker, it means you need to try harder to behave. If you get a bad grade, that doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means you need to spend more time studying," he said.

News of Obama's speech had sparked a flap among some conservatives, who accused the president of politicizing the education system. The hue and cry, which gained momentum on talk radio and right-leaning blogs, threw a speech

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meant to inspire children squarely into the political realm.

The controversy was fueled by an Education Department suggestion that students write about “how they could help the president.” After an outcry, the department proposed instead that students write about their education goals.

When the address was finally aired yesterday, the response in Massachusetts - with some schools showing the speech, some not, and still others taping it for possible later viewing - mirrored what happened across the country. Even in schools where the speech was shown, not all students watched; in one large high school outside Chicago, for example, more than 200 students opted out of the viewing, many at their parents’ urging.

Waltham Superintendent Peter Azar held a press conference to explain his reasoning for not showing Obama’s speech, saying administrators were given little notice about its timing and content.

“We had little information and made plans to follow up in a way that was appropriate,” he said, adding that the district plans to eventually show the speech.

“It has nothing to do with politics,” Azar said. “It was more a question of the lateness of the information.”

Other school administrators said they had received few complaints from parents in the days leading up to the speech, and showed it to students without hesitation yesterday, sensing it might strike a chord.

“The message, in my mind, wasn’t political,” said Matthew Malone, superintendent in Brockton schools who let individual teachers decide whether to play the speech. “It’s the same message we are sending every day, but from the leader of the free world. If the president’s words can help just one child, we’re better off than we were yesterday.”

Teachers and parents praised Obama’s focus on personal accountability and insistence on possibility, and seized on the speech as a “teachable moment.”

“We need every single one of you to develop your talents, skills, and intellect so you can help us old folks solve our most difficult problems,” the president 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.”

At Morse School in Cambridge, where posters of Langston Hughes and Malcolm X hang from the wall, English teacher Latrice Bates asked the middle-schoolers what Obama had said.

“He said that it doesn’t matter where you come from, you can still go to college,” said Grace McCabe.

“That’s right,” Bates said. “You can do anything if you put your mind to it.”

Later, Bates tried to turn the bully pulpit to her personal advantage.

“He’s talking about handing in your assignments, y’all,” Bates said. “So hear that part.”

In Needham, some students gave the address high marks. Freshman Eloise Terry said she came away inspired by his personal appeal. “I like that he didn’t talk about [school] from an adult’s point of view,” she said. “He talked about it as someone who has had the same experiences.”

In Sudbury, officials said they would tape Obama’s address for teachers to use as a curriculum resource. But they did not believe the speech was “historical or of significance that we set aside time during the school day for all students to watch.”

That rankled some parents, who said Obama’s call to action, bolstered by his personal experience, was the ideal theme for the start of school.

“The president’s live address could have been a highlight of the start of school - a genuinely inspirational event,” said Robert Rosenthal of Sudbury, who was frustrated that his daughter did not see the speech at her middle school. “Imagine that a message about the importance of staying in school and studying hard is somehow a bad thing for the kids to hear.”

Leslie Anderson of the Globe staff and correspondents Jessica Rudis and Matthew Rocheleau contributed to this report. Globe wire services were also used. Kocian can be reached at lkocian@globe.com; Schworm at schworm@globe.com. ■

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