

Parenting Expert: The REAL Point of Obama's Speech to Students

Written by Malcolm Gauld, Guest Commentary
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As a parent and educator who has taught leadership through character education for more than three decades, I found myself perplexed by the negative and even rabid response to the televised speech Barack Obama made to the nation's students.

What was Obama doing in his speech?

He was encouraging young people to do their best, set some goals, work hard, and keep trying-even if they didn't get something right the first time.

These are simple concepts. In fact, these are deeply American concepts, and they are at the core of a person's character and approach to life. Obama was talking about basic traits of character that help keep kids on track, traits that will continue to develop and support our youth well into their adulthood.

Instead, Obama was called "creepy" for attempting to inspire kids and keep them focused on education. His advice was called "indoctrination," and he was compared to former dictators in foreign lands known for abuse.

Why was it so controversial for the President to speak up as an American, a father, and a world leader, about the power of education and what we put into it?

When I glimpse back and replay the speech, I still ask what could possibly reside at the root of opposition to the President's address. In no way was his message self-indulgent or divergent from the very principles upon which this country was founded. As noted by many involved in this debate, what better time for such an address given our nation's 30 percent dropout rate? Our kids are in need of some inspiration.

Are parents so unsure of their own skills in raising children, are they so untrusting of the foundation they lay for their kids, that they can't step back and allow them to listen to the President -- the leader of their country -- speak to kids about staying in school, getting a good education, and working hard?

Was Obama "indoctrinating?" I believe he was taking an interest in youth - much the same way JFK did when he introduced physical education programs in the public schools. Is Phys. Ed. indoctrination, or is it just good for our kids – mentally, physically, and socially.

I believe Obama did what Nancy Reagan did when she participated in an anti-drug campaign to kids that initiated the famous slogan: "Just Say No."

If parents are teaching their kids the same ideals, then why would it be so upsetting to hear a similar and, in fact, supportive message from the President?

Regardless of where your politics lie, or whether you voted for the man or not, part of the job of President is to inspire kids and to help pass on the values that helped make this country great.

If parents had such a knee-jerk and horrified reaction to some supportive words directed to their

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kids, they need to ask themselves what is motivating them in their efforts to control their children's lives at that level – especially in light of all the negative messages on television many allow their kids to watch every day.

Years back I heard a former head of a prestigious Episcopal day school tell a story about his trials and tribulations regarding mandatory attendance at daily chapel. Some at the school felt that the Episcopalian mission and culture were draining out of the school.

So, reversing the more liberal policies on attendance that had evolved, this head dug his heels in and required all students to attend, no exceptions. In considering the religious affiliations of his increasingly diverse student body, he was particularly concerned about how the Jewish families might respond, especially the large contingent of Orthodox Jews who had enrolled their children. After a few months, he was surprised to discover that not a single parent from this group complained. While relieved, he was also puzzled.

Eventually, one father's explanation went along these lines: "We know what we have taught our children. We told them to attend chapel and be respectful. While they might hear some things that contradict what we've taught them, they don't have to believe all of it to learn something of value."

If this sentiment is waning among adults who are raising the nation's future leaders, are we prepared to face the end result?

Instead of answering that, go back to the 30 percent dropout rate and try to imagine what it's going to take to turn that around. The first thing that comes to my mind, metaphorically, is...a village. And if push comes to shove I'd bet on a village comprised of leaders invested in kids and education.

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