

Schools can air Obama speech to students

DEAF EARS: Plea to stay in school won't be heard by those kept home.

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Anchorage public school teachers can have their classes tune in to President Obama's speech Tuesday despite the protest of some local parents that the speech should be blocked from the classroom.

School Superintendent Carol Comeau said Thursday she instructed teachers that if they want, they can air the speech on education and work it into their curriculum, and that parents can opt to not have their children watch.

Similar flaps to the one in Anchorage are occurring across the country as some parents are calling the Obama speech an attempt at partisan propaganda by the president.

Comeau said she was caught off guard by some of the comments she has received this week from parents on plans to air the back-to-school speech. "I was really very surprised with the push-back and some of the comparisons and comments that are being made," she said.

While some have been supportive, most have shared similar-sounding concerns about Obama bringing politics into the classroom, saying it is similar to the propagandizing of Hitler's Nazi Germany.

The speech is meant to encourage kids to stay in school, challenge kids to work hard and set educational goals, according to a statement from the U.S. Department of Education. It is scheduled to be aired live at 8 a.m. Tuesday in Alaska.

Obama announced the speech weeks ago, but opposition and concerns spread rapidly Wednesday morning through conservative social-networking Web sites and radio talk shows. Fox's Glenn Beck called it Obama's attempt at indoctrinating the nation's children. The chairman of the Florida Republican Party, Jim Greer, condemned it. Arizona state schools superintendent Tom Horne, a Republican, said lesson plans for teachers created by Obama's Education Department "call for a worshipful rather than critical approach."

And districts in states including Texas, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Virginia and Wisconsin have decided not to show the speech to students. Others are still thinking it over or are letting parents have their kids opt out of the 15- to 20-minute address.

Just as with any school activities, Comeau said Anchorage parents can pull their kids from participating. Because a number of parents are threatening to keep their kids home from school, she said schools will set up alternative activities for those children, like going to the library, she said.

The superintendent said she spent hours on e-mail and the phone fielding parental concerns on Wednesday. One e-mail said, "I believe we pay taxes for the schools to teach our kids educational basics. I do NOT want any politician of any party giving speeches in our schools."

Another e-mail said Obama was fulfilling an agenda to indoctrinate children. It said: "As Adolf Hitler began to 'educate' the youth ... he created a generation of youth who were loyal to not only the fascist state but to him personally."

Comeau said she was offended by such comments and disappointed parents felt that way about what she called a non-partisan speech.

"It's an opportunity for our young people to hear from people they hear about, read about in the paper, see on TV, and so forth ... about the value of staying in school," she said.

Anchorage public schools have long battled the problem of a high dropout rate. Comeau thinks hearing from any leaders about the value of education, whether they are political leaders or athletic stars, is good for kids. Last week, Gov. Sean Parnell visited East High School with the similar message to stay in school, she said.

Mat-Su school district spokeswoman Catherine Esary said the Valley district was leaving it up to teachers and schools to decide to watch it or not. Alaska Department of Education spokesman Eric Fry said his non-partisan state agency was also taking a hands-off approach, leaving it up to districts, as it does most decisions.

The White House plans to release the speech online Monday so parents can read it. He will deliver the speech at Virginia High School.

"It's not a policy speech," said White House spokesman Tommy Vietor. "It's a speech designed to encourage kids to stay in school, which I think is a nonpartisan goal."

President George H.W. Bush made a similar address to schools in 1991. Like Obama, Bush drew criticism, with some Democrats accusing the Republican president of making the event into a campaign commercial.

That the speech is airing at 8 a.m. Alaska time is not convenient for Anchorage public schools. High schools, which start at 7:30 a.m., might be able to watch it live. But elementary and middle schools don't start until after 8 a.m. and teachers won't be able to show it in real time to students.

Comeau said any parents who want to talk to her about it are welcome to call her office or e-mail her.

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