

President Obama's Speech to Students Cancelled...An Open Letter...

First of all, please let me begin by stating that I am, like many of you, the BIGGEST fan of our wonderful Community Unit School District 200 (CUSD 200)...it is filled with an uncommon number of caring citizens, parents, staff, teachers, administrative leaders, and board members...and, of course, the best students anywhere! :o)

However, last night I became very concerned about the state of our school district in relation to the goals we have set for our students and ourselves. A "Pace" message was sent outlining the fact that CUSD 200 will not be allowing our teaching staff to play a special "First Day of School" message to our students about the importance of education by our Chief Executive of the United States, President Obama.

I was moved to write this letter last night because of the special opportunity it denies our students and, just as importantly, the lesson in respect, civics, and citizenship it indirectly delivers to our precious students.

The day after Labor Day (this year Tuesday September 8, 2009) is the traditional first day of school for a great number of school districts around the country...including our very own Chicago Public School System. Of course, CUSD 200 will be entering our 3rd week of school because of our own calendar and scheduling. President Obama has chosen this day to speak directly to students throughout our great country about staying in school, not making excuses for failure, and the role education will play in their lives as they move into adulthood and attempt to navigate the new global economy. Such a request is in the fine tradition of similar addresses to students that were made by both President Reagan and President George H. W. Bush. Then, as now, the "leaders" in both major parties fought, I believe, for political points and without a true regard for the best interests of students.

As a Social Studies teacher at Wheaton Warrenville High School for the last seven years I have dedicated my life, as have our wonderful colleagues, to produce good students, good people, and good citizens. In order to accomplish these goals we need to instill in our students the importance of staying in school and getting a "BIG" education. As I understand it, these are exactly the lessons that the President is trying impart to students in his "First Day of School" speech. This President happens to be a Democrat...that does not matter...nor would it matter if he were a Republican or an Independent...he is the leader of us all and has a type of credibility with students that is undeniable and special because of his seat in the Oval Office. Furthermore, he is even more important to our students because he is from our great state of Illinois.

Each and every day our parent/teacher/administrative teams brainstorm and sweat to figure out how to meet the AYP goals of the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) Act. We are especially vexed at how to "connect" with the most at-risk subgroups that happen to be from the lower socio-economic and minority groups. I believe one of the greatest tragedies of not allowing the request of the "Leader of the Free World" to address our student population is that he **directly speaks to these at-risk students...and, thus, we are denying them the chance to be inspired and motivated** by, arguably, one of the greatest speakers of our time and someone who came from a disadvantaged background to sit in the greatest office in the world.

Our particular school, WWSHS, has on its logo "Scholarship" and "Commitment". Each day our students walk through the "Scholarship" and "Commitment" hallways. As their teachers we are

taught to help them realize the importance of “scholarship” and “commitment”. What kind of a message are we sending to our valued students if we cannot take 20 minutes out of a class day to stop and hear a speech made especially for them about those very topics by our President?

When something is important in CUSD 200 we make the time and make the effort. In the past our school district has participated in the well-intentioned “moment of silence”. Everyday, as a class and as a school, we take a minute to say the “Pledge of Allegiance”. These are intended to train our young students in the beauty of respect, thoughtfulness, and citizenship. Each year we also train students to earn “Presidential Physical Fitness Awards”. In the past we also, on a weekly basis, take 20 minutes out of the Thursday schedule to have the students engage in “Independent Reading”.

Additionally, over the last several years we have also made time to invite a wide variety of top leaders/speakers to come into our buildings to speak at both WWSHS and WNHS... such as State’s Attorney Joe Birkett (R), Secretary of State Jesse White (D), Wheaton Mayor Michael Gresk, President Clinton (D), Veterans of the Armed Services (R & D), Business Leaders (R & D), and even sports stars such as Sean Rooney (Former WWSHS student and Olympic Gold Medal Winner in Volleyball) and Brian Urlacher of the Chicago Bears...just to name a few!

The opportunity to be exposed to those who have “succeeded”, no matter what their politics or area of specialty...this has had the wonderful effect of exciting, motivating, and enriching forever the lives of our students in countless ways! This is one of myriad of reasons why CUSD 200 is such a **great district** in which to educate children. Why would we purposely “shield” our students from a President who is from our home state Illinois and made history by becoming the first African-American President...and will be making historic decisions that will be written and talked about for generations?

As a Social Studies teacher and as educators our job is to produce the best students, the best people, and the best citizens...

As everyone knows, our students do not live in a vacuum...they already know, or will soon know, about the President’s “Speech to Students”. We can with 100% certainty expect that students will soon be asking us all...parents, teachers, and administrators...questions...tough questions.

One of the questions from students will likely be why they cannot hear their President give his speech to them when students all over the country are being allowed to hear it?

Another question a student might logically be lead to is why a speech prepared specifically for students by the President of the United States would have to be reviewed for content before it could be shown to the very students it was intended?

Are these really the questions we want to answer or the civic examples we want to set for our students? What will our answers be?

We are all educators...however, even more important, we are first citizens of one of the greatest and most successful experiments in self-government ever undertaken. As citizens of this country we are to uphold the Constitution. In the “Preamble” to the Constitution James Madison wrote those beautiful words about “creating a more perfect union”.

Lord knows that the “union” in this country never has been, nor is it now, “perfect”. However, while not “perfect” the “union” of our great country **has** been greatly improved over the years by

educated, thoughtful, caring, tough, and practical leaders...and everyday citizens who find constructive ways to make even the most difficult situations work out for the best...and look forward to a better future.

We live in an era of seemingly “impossible” political differences that threatens to stagnate or unravel the promise of tomorrow because well-intentioned people on both sides of the political spectrum refuse to really listen to each other, give each other the benefit of the doubt, compromise with each other, and openly (or discretely) refuse to work together with a strong sense of sincere “goodwill” toward each other in hopes of tarring the other with labels and gaining a political upper hand.

Because we know so many people personally in CUSD 200 I know that we are better than that. We have and always will be a model school district, “a shining city upon a hill” as it were, to other school districts about doing what is right for our students insofar as exposing them to the best of everything...and in the process helping them to learn, be good people, and to one day become future servant-leaders of our country.

All of us at CUSD 200 and in the Wheaton Warrenville community are better than the media “shock jocks” and television pundits who highlight our differences, exploit divisions, and sow the bitter seeds of mistrust...all the while showing a lack of respect for the views of politicians on both sides of the aisle. They embrace generalizations, labels, and generate conflict/ hype in return for ratings and economic profit. We, the educators, deal with reality...and the most sobering reality of all...the education of our children and the building of a “more perfect union”.

Whether our President is a man or woman, has a different skin color or nationality, or is a Democrat, Republican, or Independent there should be a fundamental base of respect that we teach our children about the highest office in our land...while still defending our own beliefs and questioning those in power.

Let us please reconsider this position as one corporate body...let teachers show the Presidential address on the importance of education to our students on the scheduled day and time, while allowing respectful accommodations for those students whose parents still do not want their children to watch the address. We need to uphold basic fundamental educational beliefs while acknowledging that not every stakeholder is going to agree every time with every issue for the good of all.

Help us to reinforce our principles of “scholarship”, “commitment”, and good citizenship...continue to make us a beacon of hope, wisdom, and goodwill for all to see and emulate.

Thank you.

Respectfully, Faithfully, and Sincerely,

Jim Lambatos
Wheaton Warrenville South High School
Social Studies Department
(630) 784-7059