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Speech or no speech?

Easthampton's choices on Obama talk questioned

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EASTHAMPTON - Easthampton school officials said in deciding whether to air President Barack Obama's back-to-school speech to city students, they had to weigh competing demands from those who didn't want their children watching it and those who did.

In the end, at least two School Committee members were unhappy with what transpired.

School Committee member Peter Gunn said there is nothing wrong with exposing students to a little controversy now and then. He was referring to the national uproar over Obama's address, and whether schools should have let students watch it. An educator, Gunn believes the answer should have been a resounding yes.

"It doesn't mean that we're trying to indoctrinate people, but if you want to produce a curriculum no one has an objection to, it's going to be very small," he said.

Easthampton principals talked with teachers to decide whether their students would watch the address Tuesday, a speech aimed at helping get students focused and inspired to begin the new school year, according to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Superintendent Deborah Carter said she alerted principals about the speech, as she does with all education invitations like the one she received alerting her to this speech, but left the decision to individual schools. In the end, the elementary schools did not show the speech, and middle and high school students viewed the presentation in classes where there was an appropriate connection to what was being studied, Carter said.

Classroom discussions were to center around the issues, not the politics, Carter noted in a letter to parents on the district Web site.

At the School Committee meeting this week, two board members said students lost out on a valuable learning opportunity.

"I think it's a shame," said member Eric Yates. "It was a teachable moment that kids could have come together, and it was a rare opportunity to have that kind of dialogue around a national event."

"I think it's a shame that it got turned into something that denied the primary audience the opportunity to learn something really good," said Gunn. "I always favor more speech than less speech."

Carter, though, said her office received a handful of phone calls from parents who said they'd pull their children from school if the address was to be shown. She said she thought about how other superintendents handled the speech via email correspondence and listened to parental input in Easthampton.

The Department of Education maintained that student viewing of the address was optional but if it was viewed in classrooms, students must have an opportunity to opt out.

The elementary schools chose not to show the president's noon address in part because of schedule

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conflicts with lunch and a lack of technology to show the speech, Carter said. She added that she believes it would have been "over the heads" of elementary students.

At White Brook Middle School, some classes in each grade watched it live while others saw it taped. Centered around success in school, the speech was shown not only in social studies classes, but also in classes that focus on goal setting, a popular middle school topic in the first weeks of the school year.

"It's important to set goals; it's important to work hard in school - these are all messages that we're sending to them already," said White Brook Principal Allison Rebello. "I think the more people that they hear it from, the more they realize it's not just mom or dad telling me this or it's not just my teacher telling me this. He is the president of the United States, so I think it's great that he's involved in education."

School Committee member Gunn, who teaches social studies at the Williston Northampton School, said he was amazed by the uproar the speech stirred in school communities throughout the nation.

"You would have thought the earth was going to stop turning on its axis," said Gunn. He said he makes it his practice to encourage students to watch political speeches like the State of Union address.

"I think the opt-out option has become a convenient way of trying to avoid controversy," he said. "We should do everything possible to allow children to opt in."

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Sun, 09/13/2009 - 17:40 — [Stewart](#)

I agree that the President has a right to speak to American

students. I fail to see the need for the controversy. I don't know if elementary children would have gotten the whole gist of the speech but it certainly wouldn't hurt them to hear how a man who has risen to the top political office of our country emphasizes hard work and education.

It's unfortunate that our country is so politically split that neither party is now able to demonstrate the respect our President (whichever party s/he is from) has earned unless he is "their" candidate. We've become a nation of selfish children in the sandbox...we only want to play when we have our way.

When Pres. Eisenhower was in office most children (my generation) would have only thought of him as OUR president. And I believe that was a reflection of how our parents and culture behaved, with more respect for one another and the office of the President.

Compare that time to how socially acceptable it was and still is in this valley to ridicule (and to allow our children to do so as well) the Presidents Bush -- to me it seems the same problem.

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Sun, 09/13/2009 - 10:10 — [ltg](#)

Hijacked by crazy people

Our country is being hijacked by a bunch of irrational, right wing whack jobs wielding influence way out of proportion to their numbers. Because a few morons don't want the President telling their kids to stay in school ('cuz that would be 'indoctrination'?!?), the super caved and kept the video out of the elementary schools. There's no way this was 'over their heads' - next time show a little rationality and have a backbone to stand up to a small bit of controversy please! Obama is our President and deserves respect - those that would prefer to live in a theocracy run by lunatics are the only ones who don't seem to get that. Shame on you Easthampton for not standing up and showing our kids Obama's speech!

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Sat, 09/12/2009 - 20:08 — [13909](#)

He is the President of the United States

Imagine when we were growing up, that President Eisenhower asked to speak to the schoolchildren of America.

What has happened to our country?

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