

Patriotism and personal responsibility

Obama addresses public school students

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As most public schools in the US opened for the first day of classes Tuesday, President Obama delivered a speech at a high school in Arlington, Virginia, which was broadcast to public school students around the country.

The event had been the subject of a hysterical campaign by right-wing talk show hosts and Republican politicians who warned that the president would use it to indoctrinate children in his “socialistic” agenda. The news media gave wide coverage to these semi-fascistic elements demanding that schools prohibit the airing of the president’s remarks and exaggerated the impact of their campaign. In the end, only a small number of districts, primarily Republican-voting regions in the South and West, did not show the speech or left the decision up to teachers.

As it has repeatedly done—most recently in the firing of “green jobs czar” Van Jones—the White House responded to its reactionary critics by seeking to appease the Republican right. The administration released the text of the president’s speech on the Labor Day holiday so it could be reviewed beforehand and dropped its request that school officials accompany the speech with a class project, in which students write letters on how they could “help the president.”

Regardless of the efforts to push him further to the right, Obama had no intention of using the occasion to provide any insight into the conditions young people are facing, let alone encourage any questioning of the status quo. On the contrary, as is his wont, the Democratic president went out of his way to conceal the social realities in America and to suggest that the problems facing students are essentially of their own making.

“Maybe someone in your family has lost their job, and there’s not enough money to go around...But at the end of the day, the circumstances of your life—what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you’ve got going on at home—that’s no excuse for neglecting your homework or having a bad attitude. That’s no excuse for talking back to your teacher or

cutting class or dropping out of school. That’s no excuse for not trying,” the president said.

Obama cited his biography and that of his wife as proof that hard work and perseverance was all that was needed to overcome obstacles and attain success. “Here in America, you write your own destiny. You make your own future,” he claimed, rehashing the “rags to riches” nostrums of the 19th century dime novelist Horatio Alger.

In another refrain, Obama said, “[A]t the end of the day, we can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, and the best schools in the world—and none of it will matter unless all of you fulfill your responsibilities. Unless you show up to those schools; pay attention to those teachers; listen to your parents, grandparents and other adults; and put in the hard work it takes to succeed.”

In other words, good schools, well-paid teachers and decent living conditions for young people are not essential to a good educational outcome! Those who fail, according to Obama, simply lack the moral fortitude to achieve the success and wealth of the American Dream.

There is a political purpose behind this nonsense. First and foremost it is aimed at concealing the fact that his administration—which has handed over trillions of dollars to Wall Street—is systematically starving schools of financial resources and directly contributing to the further collapse of public education.

Standing next to Obama at Wakefield High School in Virginia was Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the administration’s point man in the restructuring of the public education system. Over the last year, Duncan has threatened to withhold federal stimulus money to near-bankrupt school districts in order to blackmail them into expanding for-profit charter schools and merit pay for teachers. And far from breaking with Bush’s reactionary No Child Left Behind measures, the Obama administration has accelerated the firing of teachers and administrators at allegedly “failing” schools.

The day of Obama's speech, the *New York Times* published a front-page story detailing the massive budget cuts hitting school districts across the country. The article noted that stimulus money had failed to stop the layoffs of thousands of teachers and other school personnel in Arizona, California, Georgia, Michigan and a dozen other states. As a result, in Arizona "some classrooms were jammed with nearly 50 students when schools reopened last month, and the norm for Los Angeles high schools this fall is 42.5 students per teacher."

In California, hundreds of districts have laid off a total of 20,000 teachers, according to the California Teachers Association. In Detroit, the emergency financial director appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm has closed 29 schools and laid off 1,700 instructors and school personnel.

With states facing a \$165 billion budget shortfall, about half of the 160 school officials from 37 states surveyed by the American Association of School Administrators said they had been forced to cut teachers in core subjects, and eight out of 10 said they had cut librarians, nurses, cooks and bus drivers.

The AASA study found a sharp increase—in some cases three to four times higher than last year—in the percentage of districts increasing class sizes, laying off personnel, cutting academic programs and extracurricular activities and deferring maintenance.

These cutbacks will lead to an increase in the already staggering dropout rates in major US cities, where studies show nearly 50 percent of high school students fail to graduate. In addition, the impact of the economic crisis on working class families has had a devastating effect on students.

Another recent article in the *Times* noted that the wave of mass layoffs and home foreclosures has sharply increased the number of homeless children, which the already strapped public school system must teach and care for. The number of "school children in homeless families appears to have risen by 75 percent to 100 percent in many districts over the last two years, according to Barbara Duffield, policy director of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth," the *Times* noted. "There were 679,000 homeless students reported in 2006-07, a total that surpassed one million by last spring, Ms. Duffield said."

With the start of the new school year, districts are reporting a record number of homeless children. In San Antonio, Texas, for example, the district has enrolled

100,000 homeless students *Times* the first two weeks of school, twice as many as at the same point last year, the paper reported.

"It's hard enough going to school and growing up, but these kids also have to worry where they'll be staying that night and whether they'll eat," Bill Murdock, chief executive of a charity group in Asheville, North Carolina told the *Times*.

According to Obama this is of no consequence. Such conditions only serve to strengthen character! But it is no coincidence that the drop out rate in Detroit (75 percent) is roughly equivalent to the percentage of students who qualify for free lunches (70 percent) because they come from impoverished households.

This is the economic and social reality behind Obama's talk of personal responsibility. The "school reform" measures his administration is championing—charter schools, merit pay, etc.—will only drain further money and students from the public schools and create even greater inequality in education.

One last point needs to be made. Throughout his remarks, Obama also repeatedly insisted that young people had a patriotic duty to do well in school. "[W]hen you give up on yourself, you give up on your country," he said, adding in another passage, "What you make of your education will decide nothing less than the future of this country. What you are learning in school today will determine whether we as a nation can meet our greatest challenges in the future."

There is a logic behind the repeated appeals to nationalism. They are aimed at corraling young people behind the effort to make American capitalism more competitive against its economic rivals in Europe, China and elsewhere. At the same time the administration wants to condition working class youth—many of whom will never have the means to afford higher education unless they join the military—to fight and die in future wars on behalf of America's corporate and financial elite.



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