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## [Obama's Missed Opportunity](#)

[Platitudes aren't enough.](#)

By Abigail Thernstrom

The president gave an innocuous and useless speech on education yesterday. Some on the right charged politics-in-the-classroom, but, really, get a grip folks. The problem was not its offensiveness; it was screamingly boring. There was a message he could have delivered that would have been of real importance, but no chance.

To talk to the nation's K–12 students, Mr. Obama went to an Arlington, Va., high school that Jay Mathews — the Washington Post's splendid education columnist — has called “an amazing place.” I believe it, but the president made no mention of the source of the school's success — its important formula.

Whites and Asians together make up only a quarter of Wakefield High's student population; the school is 47 percent Hispanic and 27 percent black. About half the students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. But it was a recipient last year of a National College Board Inspiration Award for its commitment to challenging all students to take advanced and Advanced Placement courses. The result: Last year, 39 percent of the graduating seniors had at least one passing score on an AP test. That's more than double the national average.

Wakefield High's secret is clearly defined on its website. The school sets “high expectations academically and behaviorally”; its coursework is “demanding”; and it encourages students to “learn from mistakes, value perseverance and strive for excellence.” It describes its results as creating a “passion for excellence through the collaborative efforts of staff, students, parents and the community.”

Thus, at Wakefield High itself, the students were already familiar with the president's message. “We can have the most dedicated teachers,” Obama said, “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.”

Hard work is the key to success, he continued. The “circumstances of your life . . . [are] no excuse for talking back to your teacher, or cutting class, or dropping out of school. Where you are right now doesn't have to determine where you'll end up. No one's written your destiny for you. Here in America, you write your own destiny.”

That destiny “could be a good writer . . . an innovator or an inventor . . . a mayor or a senator or a Supreme Court Justice.” Well, yes, but . . . He did have the wits to add nurse, police officer, or member

of the military to the list, but in his imaginary occupational universe no one does anything so déclassé as to run a business or work for one.

Had conservatives and libertarians who objected to Obama's speech focused on his blinkered view of the world of work, they would have had a real point. But the rest of the speech was harmless. Oh yes, the Department of Education did initially suggest an accompanying lesson plan that suggested students "write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president," but criticism forced the administration to drop that requirement. Students were encouraged instead to write on their own goals and how they might achieve them.

Nevertheless, the bells of alarm continued to ring. For instance, the estimable Clint Bolick, who has been so important to the school-choice movement, yesterday complained that the president was indoctrinating "highly impressionable young minds." Would that it were so. What a happy thought: Obama able to convince kids in crummy schools — in, say, inner-city Detroit — that they should pay attention in class, do their homework, and read books on their own, because it was highly unlikely they would find fame and fortune playing for the NBA or rapping.

In fact, of course, presidential sermons won't make a whit of difference in educational outcomes. Pres. George H. W. Bush made much the same speech in 1991: "Let me tell you something, many of you may find very hard to believe this. You're in control. . . . Take control — challenge yourself. . . . If you don't work hard, who gets hurt . . . you do." Neither speech was objectionable — and both were futile.

In 1991, Bush 41 envisioned a nation in which, by 2000, at least nine in every ten students would graduate from high school and America would be first in the world in math and science. In 2002, George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind, the main purpose of which was to close the racial gap in academic achievement by 2014. Careless rhetoric and promises have even infected the U.S. Supreme Court. In the 2003 University of Michigan affirmative action decisions Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, with disingenuous optimism, spoke of the Court's expectation that racial preferences in admissions would be necessary only for another quarter century.

The racial gap in academic achievement was closing, she said. It wasn't true then; it isn't true now. The College Board has just released its report on the 2009 SAT scores of college-bound high school seniors. In the six years since O'Connor's opinion, the racial gap has widened slightly, and is substantially wider than it was two decades ago. We're peddling backward on this front.

That gap reflects real deficiencies in skills and knowledge that cripple the life chances of too many black and Hispanic youngsters — deficiencies that were very apparent in the New Haven firefighters promotion test that the Supreme Court upheld 5–4 in this past term — much to the consternation of civil-rights groups. The result: Test designers are reportedly scrambling to come up with assessments that do not measure cognitive skills and thus have no racially disparate impact.

Obama's innocuous speech was actually a missed opportunity. Instead of platitudes about the importance of working hard, he could have taken on the anti-testing crowd. Standards-based tests, he might have said, are an essential tool in assessing the skills of those applying to law schools — but also in deciding who is qualified to be lieutenant in a fire department. Hostility to such assessments in the K–12 years is not a civil-rights position. It betrays a callousness and indifference to the future of disadvantaged kids.

It would have been a Sister Souljah moment, and might have even given his faltering presidency a needed lift.

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