

A message students should hear

The essay below is by Paul J. Karafiol of Hyde Park:

As controversy swirls around President Obama's forthcoming address to the nation's schoolchildren, I'm reminded of a 1998 speech he gave in Chicago. Then a relatively-unknown state legislator, Barack Obama visited Providence-St. Mel, a small school in gritty East Garfield Park with a national reputation, to speak at the school's spring honors assembly. And even though a nationally-televised address is a long way from a rundown stage in front of a few hundred kids on Chicago's West Side, I think the President would do well to remember the speech he gave that hot May afternoon: it's still one of the best I've ever heard.

To fully appreciate Obama's remarks that day, you have to imagine a time when he traveled solo, without a small army of handlers, schedulers, and managers. As a constituent and former Chicago Law School acquaintance, I had successfully pestered Obama to visit the school where I taught: a private, formerly-Catholic school justifiably proud of its 100% college acceptance rate and fiercely insistent on self-discipline and academic excellence. Apparently the final arrangements I had discussed with Obama's assistant weren't fully communicated: he parked and walked in slightly ahead of schedule, prepared to discuss local government with a civics class, only to discover that he was expected to address 900 first-through-twelfth graders at an assembly honoring students with outstanding grades and attendance. Fifteen minutes later, the last, smallest children had filed into the auditorium, and after a brief introduction, the future President was on.

Obama started with cordial remarks thanking his hosts and congratulating the students receiving awards at the assembly. "But this speech is not for you," he told the honors students, turning his attention instead to the students who weren't being recognized. Speaking directly to these less-successful students, Obama described his own lackluster academics in grade school and high school: how he didn't care much about his classes, didn't think they were relevant, and didn't do so well. Only in college, he admitted, did he begin to turn up the effort and turn things around.

It's unusual for speakers at an academic awards ceremony to celebrate their own poor scholarship, but Obama went on to explain his later successes: graduating from Columbia University, first president of the Harvard Law Review, and so on to his election to the state senate. His point? Failure today doesn't guarantee failure tomorrow; those students who were watching the awards from the sidelines could be getting awards at the next assembly. Success might not be easy, but nobody should write it off as impossible, Obama said: any student there, he reminded us, could take decisive steps and excel. As shocked as we had been with the start of his speech, this message rang true; the students' faces were a combination of amazement, relief, and inspiration. It was an afternoon to remember.

Obama's claim that any student can succeed may not sound radical, but to this teacher, at least, it speaks to the central challenge of teaching: putting into action, every day, the aspiration that every student learn something challenging and worth knowing. Doing so often requires convincing the student himself (or herself) that success is still possible; that yesterday's confusion need not deepen; that time and effort put in today will pay off, if not tomorrow, then the next day. On the hardest days, I have to convince myself first. But as many high schools and colleges become increasingly selective, and increasingly stratified, Obama's message, delivered in a dusty school auditorium eleven years ago, is even more important now than it was then. Don't worry about what your grades have been in the past, he said: there's still time to change your future. That's a message all of us—students, teachers, and parents—need to believe in.

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