

How far we haven't come

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

by Laura Kenyon

Editor

It is no secret that New Canaan is a predominantly Republican town, with GOP members outnumbering Democrats nearly two to one.

It might therefore have struck few with surprise that a federal announcement urging all schools to air President Obama's back-to-school speech live raised red flags among some residents this past week.

What is surprising, however, is the impulsive and uninformed reaction by the Republican Town Committee, and the all-or-nothing frenzy that ensued on both sides, sparking outrage that reverberated through New Canaan and across the nation.

On one side, it can be likened to a five-year-old covering his ears and humming because he doesn't like what is being said. Urging parents to shelter their families from the President's address only teaches children to ignore, run away from or silence messages with which they disagree — or, in this case, believe they will find disagreeable.

On the other side, an overly hostile reaction without all the information turned New Canaan school administrators into unwitting scapegoats. While their message was neither unique to the area nor entirely in error, the abstract way in which it was communicated helped spawn misinformation and inflame tempers everywhere.

The question of when and how to show the President's speech, especially with many schools still on vacation and pre-planned school activities to account for, was legitimate.

Any question of whether to show it at all was not.

In a world where troubled actors, egotistical reality TV stars and ethically gray athletes are viewed as role models, parents should have jumped at the opportunity to have their children listen to (and in many cases actually pay attention to) a Harvard- and Columbia-educated public servant urging them to work hard, stay in school, push past failure and overcome obstacles.

Some said it was not the 14-minute speech by the President that had them concerned, but how the teachers planned to use it after the fact.

If the ability of New Canaan instructors to teach objectively was truly the issue, however, going after one speech would be as ineffectual as plucking a leaf off an Elm tree to stunt its growth.

Notwithstanding that New Canaan teachers are considered some of the best in the country, has the role of parents in their children's lives eroded so far that they cannot contribute their own opinions or engage in meaningful dialogue at home?

Also at issue is a striking lack of respect for the office of the President, which the media is in many ways to blame for "celebratizing." From talk show segments about the First Lady's workout

and her decision to wear shorts during a family vacation, to paparazzi photos of the President's abs, the Obamas have become the West Wing version of "Brangelina." That type of interest is fleeting, insulting and unhealthy.

Furthermore, while many residents rightly voiced their outrage with the RTC's behavior and school district's decision to pass up a school-wide broadcast, some went too far, threatening town officials and preemptively assigning the "racist" label without any facts. They share the blame for further inflaming the issue, tarnishing the reputation of diligent administrators and perpetuating ignorance.

Parents on both sides should always respect the rights of their neighbors to have differing opinions, not to launch an all-or-nothing attack before hearing what others have to say.

School administrators' decision to delay broadcast for elementary students was understandable as some references could be seen as unfamiliar to the younger grades. The President's message in those cases will be most effective shown in segments that retain children's attention, accompanied by well-assembled lesson plans addressing bipartisan advice.

Students at the middle and high school levels are mature enough to understand the difference between blind adherence and political rhetoric. It is acceptable, considering the plethora of state and federal mandates, that halting classes to shuttle everyone into the auditorium for a school-wide assembly was distracting. Still, teachers should be instructed to play and discuss the President's speech as soon as feasible.

At the end of the day, knowledge is power and understanding is strength. The past week's dilemma has shown adults acting like children, jumping to extremes without rationally trying to understand the facts, and impulsively reaching to shut out voices with which they disagree — with little attention to the words.

The history books say the same situation clouded the land when George H.W. Bush gave his welcome speech to schoolchildren in 1991.

Let's hope the next time the elected leader of America wants to welcome children to school, the future generation reacts with greater tact, confidence and tolerance.