

President Obama touts Miami-Dade schools, urges Congress to pass education appropriations

HIGHLIGHTS

The president visited Coral Reef High to tout federal college aid before heading to a Keys resort.

By David Smiley

President Barack Obama campaigned for better access to higher education Friday during a visit to a Miami-Dade high school he says should be a model for the rest of the country.

The president and first lady helicoptered into Coral Reef Senior High in the early afternoon, where they talked college, careers and investment with a classroom of seniors before electrifying a gymnasium with hundreds of screaming upperclassmen seated to the ceiling in bleachers.

“We heard great things about your school,” Obama said, barely audible over the roar. “We wanted to come down here and see what was going on.”

The Obamas, making a political pit stop on their way to a weekend vacation at a secluded Key Largo resort, focused on college access and education initiatives during their hour at the southwest Miami-Dade school of 3,200. On their way in, the presidential helicopter flew over a small crowd of protesters waiving Venezuelan flags, but Obama avoided, at least in his public comments, the subject of turmoil in the South American country and in Ukraine.

Instead, the president used his time at the school to tout Coral Reef’s career-themed academies and the Miami-Dade school district’s wireless access as examples of how some of his proposed education appropriations can be successful. He also announced a program to improve communication between the federal government and schools to allow administrators to better track who hasn’t filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.

The FAFSA acts as a gateway between graduating seniors and almost \$150 billion in federal and state student grants and loans, but the U.S. Department of Education says about 1 million students each year fail to complete the form. In Florida, little more than half of all graduating seniors complete the FAFSA, leaving \$100 million in Pell grants alone on the table.

Coral Reef, however, has in recent years boosted completion rates to 71 percent, the second-highest in the state among large high schools. The president also gave Miami-Dade schools credit for sending higher rates of low-income students to college, which Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said can be further improved by increasing access to financial aid.

“If we want to dramatically boost college-going rates for children across America, particularly those who are often disconnected from digital access, we need to simplify the process and increase awareness in schools,” Carvalho said. “We need to make it easier for students to fill them out.”

Obama has been trying to accomplish that since he became president. On Friday, he and first lady Michelle Obama took a peek at how those efforts have fared while visiting the classroom of Amy Shapiro as her students filled out financial aid applications on their laptops.

“We simplified it a lot,” the president told student Marko Prats as the senior filled out the form, which has been stripped down by Obama’s administration. “This was a big project to make it simpler. A lot of people were deterred.”

He also got some small talk in, joking that he’d like to buy stock from a student who said he was considering running a cellphone business.

When Obama moved to the gymnasium to give his speech, he was introduced by student government president Anyssa Chebbi, an International Baccalaureate academy student who said her family’s financial constraints mean that her only hope to attend the colleges of her choice is through financial aid and the FAFSA. She said that she’s applied to Harvard and Yale, and hopes that her college of choice won’t be decided by the cost.

“Some of you may sit around the kitchen table with your parents wondering if you’ll be able to afford it,” Obama said. “The FAFSA is the best way to answer that question.”

During his visit, which was well attended by local school officials, politicians, members of Congress and gubernatorial candidate Charlie Crist, Obama also called on Congress to pass close to \$1 billion in education initiatives in his recently unveiled budget. Hundreds of millions would go to redesigning high schools into career- and college-themed institutions like Coral Reef’s magnet academies. He also wants to bolster wireless technology and the competitive Race to the Top program, which Miami-Dade has embraced.

But while Obama talked about supporting the middle class and poor families Friday, his opponents took jabs at him for leaving Miami-Dade and flying straight to Key Largo, where the first couple was staying at the Ocean Reef Club.

“Only President Obama would deliver a brief speech about education and then have the nerve to jet over to the posh Ocean Reef Club — an exclusive members-only resort for the wealthy — for a quick vacation,” said RNC spokesman Jahan Wilcox.

Others who wanted to hear Obama speak about Venezuela, where tensions between the administration of president Nicolás Maduro and protesters has turned violent, also were disappointed. But Congressman Joe Garcia said Obama spoke to him one-on-one about the issue, and discussed getting support from other nations and targeted sanctions.

“I think the Venezuelans should feel comfortable the president is on it,” Garcia said.



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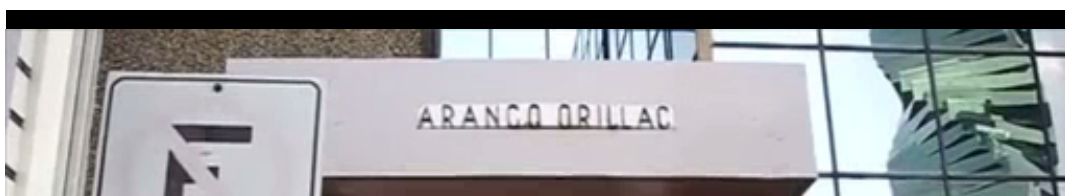
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