Imagine the nerve ... a high-school valedictorian, on his way to Princeton next year, daring to speak about a topic he obviously has given much thought to - the American education system.

It beats the more typical "We are all astronauts on the spaceship to tomorrow" speech, if you ask us. In fact, the unapproved speech that Mainland Regional High School valedictorian Kareem Elnahal tried to deliver before he was hustled off the stage by Principal Robert Blake was rather thoughtful and quite interesting.

Yes, schools have a right and a responsibility to screen graduation speeches. But Elnahal's speech wasn't a puerile rant filled with expletives - it was an on-the-money critique of the public education system. In fact, both Mark Twain ("I have never let my schooling interfere with my education") and, slightly more crudely, Paul Simon ("When I look back on all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder I can think at all") have offered similar critiques.

Mainland officials simply proved Elnahal's point by not letting him give this speech. Listen to what he said:

- "Education can be defined a number of different ways. For me, it is the product of human curiosity. Intellectual thought, as far as I can tell, is nothing but the asking and answering of questions. In my reflection, however ... I found that many of life's most important questions are ignored here."

- "We approach history as though it were a story, endlessly cataloging every major character or event. But the details of the story are insignificant - what is significant is the progression of ideas."

- "We read for the sake of reading, to talk about our interpretations in class as though we were in a book club. ... And this pattern, grade for the sake of grade, work for the sake of work, can be found everywhere. Ladies and gentlemen, the spirit of intellectual thought is lost. I speak today not to rant, complain or cause trouble. ... Rather, I was moved by the countless hours wasted in those halls."

And the principal's reaction? He said Elnahal's speech was "hypocritical" and "an insult." Speaking of the other students in the audience, Blake said, "My hope was they did not hear or understand what he was saying. ... He was belittling the diplomas of every one of those kids."

Nonsense. Elnahal was making those kids, and everyone else, think.

School officials should be asking themselves why they wouldn't have approved this speech in the first place. Elnahal's fellow graduates and Mainland's teachers and administrators shouldn't be embarrassed by him. They should be proud of him.

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