

Schools debate on showing Obama speech

Saturday, September 5, 2009

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To show it or not to show it?

That debate is rippling through school districts across the state and nation over President Barack Obama's televised back-to-school address planned for students next Tuesday.

Locally, not all schools will be tuning into the broadcast.

Robert Green Superintendent of Greencastle Schools, said individual building principals were left to decide whether or not students would see the address.

"The students can opt out, their parents just need to call building principals," Green said. "There won't be any repercussions if they do."

Green said he was slightly uneasy about the secrecy surrounding what the president was planning to say.

"We've been in the dark as far as content goes," he said.

South Putnam and Cloverdale students will not be watching. North Putnam will leave it up to individual teachers with an opt out for parents.

GHS principal Randy Corn said he was surprised by the uproar the upcoming address had caused.

"I can't see where it would be inappropriate," he said. "To me, a speech that advocates graduating and staying in school would have to be a good thing."

Still, Corn said because the teachers were not certain about what the president was going to say, he has advised teachers at GHS to watch the address themselves before deciding if they would show it to their students.

"We're all going to look at the speech, and from there the teachers will determine for themselves if they want to build a lesson around it," he said.

Corn said he didn't foresee the address being a political thing.

"Even so, a classroom is supposed to be a place of critical thinking where students are free to express their opinions when it's appropriate," he said. "In a democratic society, you have to be willing to look at opposing views."

Greencastle Middle School principal Shawn Gobert said his school will take a similar tack.

"We're not showing it as it actually happens, but we can access it later by digital archive and decide what we want to do," he said. "We'll review it and then make a decision. Whether that means we show the entire thing in classes or excerpts during lunch, I don't really know yet."

Cloverdale Community schools plan on having a regular day with no noon broadcast available to students.

"Students can watch at home if they want. We're sure it will be on the news," said representatives from

Cloverdale.

South Putnam will also not be taking part in the event as it happens.

"This is a major political controversy and the schools don't need to be in the middle of it," said South Putnam Community School Superintendent Bruce Bernhardt. "I didn't even know about this until parents started calling in asking if we were going to take part. Then I saw it on the news. It's a little irritating not to be notified."

The broadcast is set for noon, and that also is a problem for the school system that typically has half of the students in the lunchroom and the other half in the classroom.

North Putnam Community Schools are leaving the decision to watch the event up to individual teachers. They sent letters home informing parents of the broadcast and allowing them to opt their children out of watching the broadcast.

"We want to accommodate parent wishes," said Kevin Emsweller, North Putnam's assistant to the superintendent. "If they don't want their children to watch they don't have to. We are also letting teachers who decide to broadcast the event in their classrooms know that our IT department has warned us there might be issues with the web cast because of the number of people logging in. We're really leaving it up to the individual teachers and parents.

Last month during an interview with a young student reporter, Obama announced his back-to-school address plan.

"I'm going to be making a big speech to young people all across the country about the importance of education; and the importance of staying in school; how we want to improve our education system and why it's so important for the country," he said.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was reported to have sent letters to the nation's principals, inviting schools to watch the speech and included suggested classroom activities.

Most Putnam County schools had not received the information as of Friday morning. Many heard about the newscast from parents and media.

The controversy that Bernhardt refers to is the objection by the Republican party to the event and to the accompanying suggested lesson plans.

The guide for pre-kindergarten through grade six has questions that suggest students think about what the president is trying to tell them and what he is asking them to do.

Plans for grades 7-12 include a "guided discussion" with suggested topics of what Obama is inspiring them to do.

According to Yahoo! News the Cato Institute, a public-policy research foundation issued a press release titled "Hey Obama, Leave Those Kids Alone."

It criticized the "troubling buzzwords" in the lesson plan.

"It's one thing for a president to encourage all kids to work hard and stay in school -- that's a reasonable use of the bully pulpit," the release said. "It's another thing entirely, however, to have the U.S. Department of Education send detailed instructions to public schools nationwide on how to glorify the president and the presidency, and push them to drive social change."

The Department of Education called the speech a "historic moment" -- an American president speaking directly to the nation's students about persisting and succeeding in school.

It will be telecast locally at noon on the White House Web site and C-SPAN.

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