

Obama speech unnerving some parents

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S SPEECH

The president will address students at 9 a.m. Tuesday live at www.whitehouse.gov. The speech will also be broadcast on C-SPAN. Suggested lesson plans for teachers are at www.ed.gov.

■ Schools get phone calls, e-mails saying planned address to kids may be bid to 'indoctrinate' them

By Theresa Harrington

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A presidential address to students planned at 9 a.m. Tuesday is raising the hackles of some conservatives, who are telling parents to keep their kids home to avoid "indoctrination."

"It's kind of blowing up," said

in school. Sheila Jordan, superintendent of the Alameda County Office of Education, is asking schools to participate.

"We want to ensure that every student has an opportunity to hear directly from the President of the United States about the importance of education," Jordan said in a statement, "for students to set goals and priorities, and to actively participate in the learning process."

Kevin Collins, principal of Walnut Creek Intermediate School. "We have had some parent phone calls and e-mails with interest and concern."

The speech, promoted by the U.S. Department of Education, is intended to encourage children to stay

The address will be shown at Barack Obama Academy, a small middle school in East Oakland that opened in 2007 as the Alternative Learning Community. In March, students convinced the Oakland school board to rename it after Obama.

Principal Toni McElroy said the youths have shown more confidence and pride since Obama took office

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and she hopes the president's message will resonate with the new students, as well.

"I hope they will get the lesson that education is key to their success and survival," McElroy said.

But conservatives such as Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly have whipped up a controversy around the address, with some making comparisons to developing a program similar to the Hitler Youth and claiming the political left wants to use youngsters as guinea pigs and junior lobbyists for a socially liberal agenda.

A news crew from Fox asked to visit the Obama Academy during the address, but McElroy said she denied the request.

Obama chose Tuesday for the speech because it is the first day of school for many students. President Ronald Reagan once addressed students about the American government and President George H.W. Bush once spoke to students as part of an anti-drug campaign.

Teacher David Hicks said he is excited about the historic nature of Obama's speech and is frustrated by the opposition.

"I feel like it's kind of a sabotage move," Hicks said. "The president is trying to speak to students about the importance of their education. I find it hard to believe that anyone can argue that education is not important."

The Lafayette and Mt. Diablo school districts have received phone calls from parents who threatened not to send their children to school if the speech is shown. David Shrag, principal of Stanley Middle School in Lafayette, said some teachers plan to watch the speech live with students and others may view it on DVD.

"It's something we feel is a positive message," he said. "We had one caller ask, 'Are you going to let my son or daughter be indoctrinated?' I said, 'That's not really the goal.'"

Shrag and Collins said students could opt not to view the speech. History teacher Kandi Lancaster said she plans to view the speech with students and use the suggested discussion questions.

Lancaster also points out that "indoctrinate" means "to teach or instruct."

"I just have to laugh about the whole idea that we're indoctrinating children," she said, "because, technically, isn't that my job?"

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Staff writer Katy Murphy contributed to this report.

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