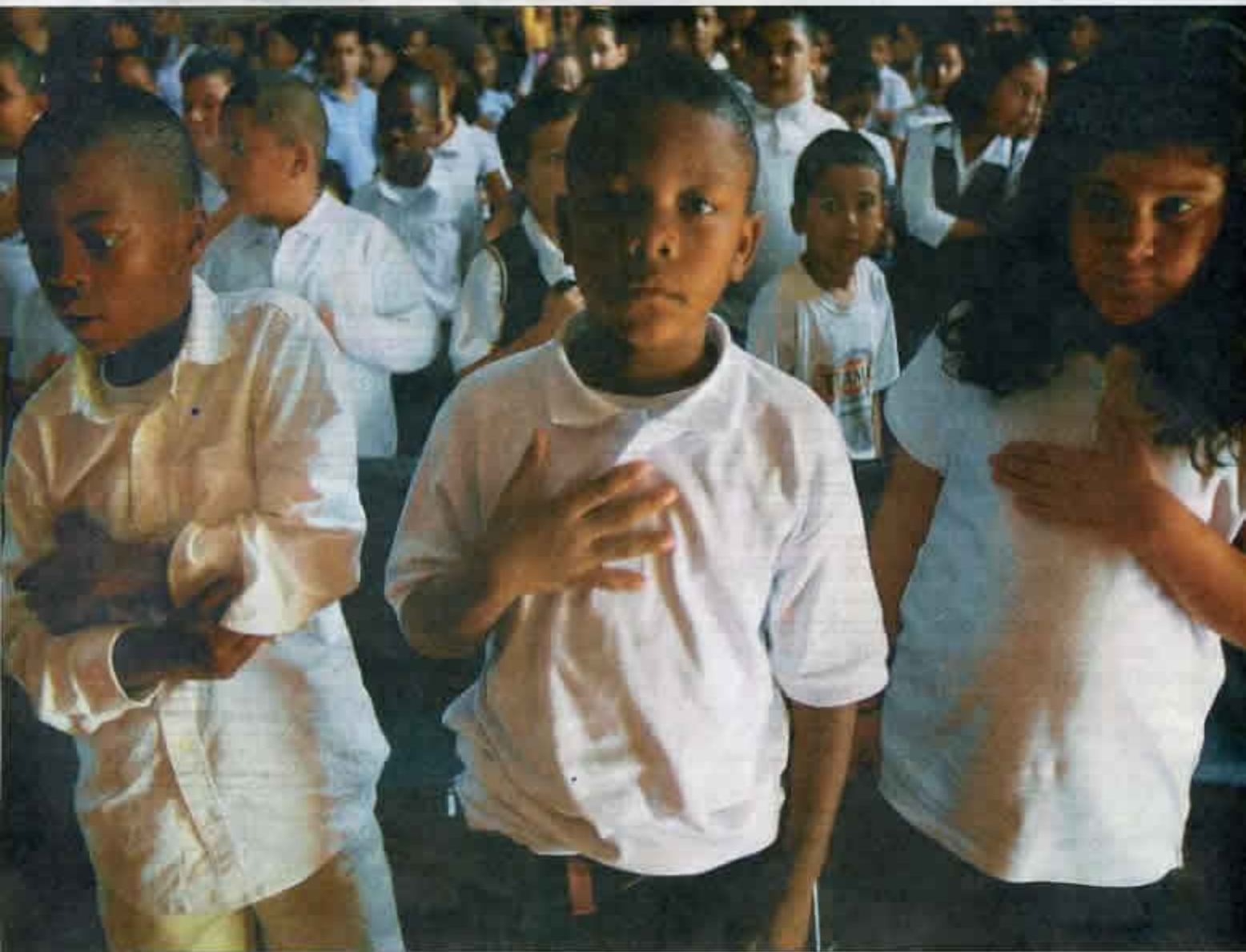


THE PRESIDENT'S LESSON PLAN



JENNIFER BROWN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Second graders from Barlow Elementary School in Plainfield put their hands over their hearts during the national anthem after listening to President Obama's televised speech yesterday. From left are Nashawn Matthews, 7, Erim Beckles, 7, and Daniela Flores, 7.

Talk brings cheers instead of jeers

BY JEANETTE HUNOQUIST
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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

After all the hype over President Obama's televised speech to schoolchildren, yesterday it came down to scenes like the one at Barlow School in Plainfield: rows of students sitting in a darkened gymnasium and watching the president urge them to work hard, set goals and do their homework.

In some New Jersey school districts, the noon address stirred controversy. In the North Hunterdon-Voorhees Regional High School District, where students could watch the speech or opt out, officials had been flooded with calls and e-mails, beginning last week, from parents pro and con, spokeswoman Maren Smagala said. She said a "minimal" number of students sat out the speech.

But in other schools, reaction was similar to that at Barlow. There, students broke into applause and cheers, and a few jumped out of their seats, when Obama appeared on both a TV monitor and a projector screen set up in the gymnasium.

While a few Barlow students squirmed or fidgeted during the speech, others, like Jose Zometa, 10, kept their eyes on Obama.



GERALD HERBERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Obama gestures upon his arrival to deliver a speech on education at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va.

Dressed in his school's new uniform of a white shirt and navy pants, arms folded across his chest, the fourth-grader leaned forward to hear Obama say things such as "no matter what you want to do with your life, I guarantee that you'll need an education to do it" and "I'm calling on each of you to set your own goals for your education — and to do everything you can to meet them."

Afterward, Jose said he liked the message.

"He said if I stay in school, I can be whatever I want when I grow up," the boy said.

Obama kicked off a national flap last week when he announced plans for a back-to-school address to the nation's schoolchildren. Some Republicans accused him of trying to foist a political agenda on children with the speech and a set of suggested "classroom activities" the U.S. Department of Education issued to accompany it. Yesterday, some school districts and states decided not to show the talk, which Obama gave from a high school in Arlington, Va.

In New Jersey, the state Department of Education urged schools to find ways for students to participate, although it acknowledged the timing might be difficult. New Jersey kids return to school later than those in many states — some

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schools had their first day yesterday and in others, classes had not begun yet.

Across the Garden State, reaction to the speech was mixed. In strongly GOP Hunterdon County, North Hunterdon-Voorhees officials received about 50 e-mails "from the extremes of both sides," Smagala said. One parent on Friday urged the district not to let the "Marxist charlatan" address students, while others exhorted school officials to show the speech.

Students in the district's two high schools were allowed to watch the talk in school theaters and media centers or, if their teacher showed it in class, they could opt out. E-mails received yesterday were "98 percent positive and supportive," Smagala said, although a few students did skip the talk.

In other districts, Obama's address got a more universal welcome.

Plainfield School District spokesman Eric Jones said all schools showed the speech, and there were no requests from parents for their children to sit it out. Rather, he said, people were excited their youngsters would be exposed to it.

At Barlow School, Principal Caryn Cooper said she could not understand the controversy.

"Any time a president wants to give encouragement to kids, you've got to listen," Cooper said.

At her school, where the student body is half African-American and half Hispanic, she said Obama is a popular figure, and kids "took it really personally" when he was elected.

Yesterday, that enthusiasm continued. Students cheered when Obama appeared on-screen, as if he had walked into the room. Several students even jumped to their feet.



ALEXANDRA PANSFOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Third-graders Rizni Idris, Yaasmiyn Brown and Katia Giovannetti, far left, listen to President Barack Obama's speech at the Bartle Elementary School in Highland Park.

"I think Obama has good words," said sixth-grader Alela Lawson, 11, who was part of the spontaneous standing ovation.

In Piscataway, not all classes could see the speech live — lunch hours interfered for some — but among those who did, "it was very well-received," spokeswoman Teresa Rafferty said. Other grades recorded it for later viewing.

In Democratically strong Highland Park, school officials said they didn't receive any calls from parents objecting to the address. Superintendent Frances Wood, who said Obama "hits all the key points," said she directed the borough's four public schools to play it after consulting with principals.

At the Bartle Elementary School there, a

classroom of third-grade students sat patiently through the address, listening to Obama speak as a video feed kept freezing. Some looked at the president's image with facial expressions usually reserved for sports stars and music artists.

Afterward, Rizni Idris, 8, said he looks up to the president. He connected with a reference Obama made to basketball legend Michael Jordan, who the president said was cut from his high school basketball team, lost hundreds of games and missed thousands of shots, only to go on to greatness.

Idris said that was what he took most from the address: "We will learn from our failures."