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Central Jersey schools plan lessons, activities around inauguration

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When Barack Obama declared his candidacy for president in February 2007, Piscataway High School teacher L-Mani Viney asked his African-American Studies class what they thought of the Illinois senator's prospects.

"Only two students said they would vote for him — and all of them said they didn't think he had a shot to win," said Viney, who will be attending Obama's inauguration. "It's not that they didn't like him or didn't believe he was the best candidate. They were looking at the reality, and there was still disbelief that an African-American could win the highest office in the United States."

Nearly two years later, a new group of students will be watching President-elect Obama's inauguration as he takes the oath of office tomorrow.

"It went from students saying he doesn't have a shot, to students not only saying he had a shot, but going out and participating in the campaign," Viney said.

Young people throughout New Jersey volunteered at phone banks, knocked on doors for Obama and attended rallies. When those efforts bear fruit, many Central Jersey schools are allowing students to watch history play out.

Piscataway High School is among a large group of area schools that will have students watching Obama's inauguration speech tomorrow. Some schools will broadcast the speech on big screens for the entire student body, some will stream it over the Internet, and some will watch it on television sets in classrooms.

Many students throughout the area will be asked to wear red, white and blue to commemorate the occasion. Some younger students will re-enact it. Students at many schools will dissect and analyze the contents of the speech.

It's an ongoing unit for many schools, which have integrated the primaries, the campaigns and the general election into their curricula.

ONGOING LESSONS:

In East Brunswick, students created posters, had presidential debates, had mock elections and prepared multimedia presentations on the different candidates.

"Before the students went to the polls for the mock election, they were informed on what the issues actually were," said Michael Vinella, East Brunswick's supervisor of social studies and

media. "We were able to make this come alive for the students so they felt like they were part of the whole journey."

That journey continued after Election Day as pupils engaged in related activities leading up to Inauguration Day. Fourth-graders at Bowne-Munro and Memorial schools wrote letters to the incoming president. Memorial School fourth-graders will read about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and discuss how the 2008 election has helped to fulfill King's dream. After watching the inauguration, Memorial School fourth-graders will write their own "I Have A Dream" speeches intended to look 40 years into the future.

Memorial School kindergartners will send a class letter to the incoming president after lessons on Inauguration Day. First-graders there will take a virtual tour of the White House on the Internet.

"It is infused within our curriculum through current events all year long, so it won't stop with the inauguration," Vinella said. "I think what social studies is, what we want to create, is active and informed citizens. And I think it's our job as educators to instill that within our students."

In the Bridgewater-Raritan Regional School District, all Eisenhower Intermediate School pupils will watch the inauguration together in the gym. Many teachers will lead activities through Scholastic's "Your Government, Your Voice," program, which integrates vocabulary, writing, reading and civics into Inauguration Day activities.

Pupils also will compare and contrast this inauguration to the inauguration of the school's namesake — Dwight D. Eisenhower. They'll take presidential comparisons a step further by researching Abraham Lincoln and comparing the 16th president to President-elect Obama.

WIDER CONTEXT:

In Somerset County, Franklin Middle School's eighth-graders have been learning about the constitutional context of Inauguration Day. Pupils in Justin Buffer's eighth-grade social-studies classes have been discussing past inaugurations; the 20th Amendment, which moved Inauguration Day from March 4 to Jan. 20; and Abraham Lincoln's bible, which is used in the swearing-in ceremony.

"By the time they see (the inauguration), they'll know the history behind it; they'll know the procedures leading up to it," Buffer said. "We're going to watch some videos of past speeches, and by the time they get (to Inauguration Day) they'll have a good idea of the constitutional background and the historical background behind it."

After watching the speech, Buffer's pupils will compare it with past inaugural speeches. Then they'll make a list of the new president's pledges and reflect back in 100 days.

Franklin Middle School pupils will break into two large groups and watch the speech on screens in the cafeteria and the auditorium. Teachers and administrators ultimately planned the school-wide viewing, but it was originally the pupils' idea, Buffer said.

"They were bringing it up first," he said. "I think Barack Obama taps into the idealistic part of all of us. And that's how kids are — they're dreamers."

At Franklin's Sampson G. Smith Intermediate School, principal William Grippo had a dream of his own: to raise enough money to install TVs in every classroom in time for Inauguration Day.

By last week, the school had installed TVs in more than half its classrooms and will combine classes tomorrow so everyone can watch the inauguration speech.

Watching the inauguration of the first black president is especially important in a school district as diverse as Franklin's, said Phyllis Bruno, the director of social studies and work readiness.

"Franklin Township is probably the most diverse community in Somerset County, and we love our diversity — we live it," she said. "Students have spoken about how proud they are of this time and how excited they are that they're living it. They've spoken to parents and grandparents — for them it was a dream, and for students of this generation it's a reality."

A WAKEUP CALL:

At Perth Amboy High School, teachers Siglinda Gallagher and Venecia Alston hope the 2008 election served as a wakeup call for their students.

"We're bringing it home to them that you can no longer make the excuse that you can't do something because you're a minority in this country," said Alston, an in-class support teacher who is black.

"Or because you're poor," said Gallagher, the first Puerto Rican page for the U.S. House of Representatives.

At Shull School, fifth-graders will do Internet research on the history of presidential inaugurations and on the White House. At James J. Flynn Elementary School, a class will re-enact the swearing-in ceremony, with pupils playing the roles of President-elect Obama, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Vice President-elect Joseph Biden, Associate Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens and President George W. Bush.

Pupils at Robert N. Wilentz School will walk down their own presidential tunnel as "Hail to the Chief" plays in the background. They will march to the cafetorium, where a life-size cardboard image of President-elect Obama will be displayed. There, a student representative from each homeroom will talk about what Inauguration Day means to them.

"BEYOND SKIN COLOR":

Viney, the Piscataway High School teacher, wants his students to understand that while electing the nation's first black president is momentous, the historic significance of Inauguration Day transcends race.

"The magnitude of this is not just because he's African-American. As an African-American teacher, I'm not going to gloss that over, but I think it's so much more important to understand what's happening around the world has really made this an inauguration of incredible magnitude in terms of what's next to come," said Viney, who also teaches World History. "It's like a perfect storm of things: First he's African-American, then you look at what people's feelings are from the past eight years, you look at the economic situation, you look at what's happening at home and abroad.

"I want them to understand why this inauguration is so big — it's way beyond skin color."