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Northampton students to hear Obama's school message today

By CATHERINE BAUM
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NORTHAMPTON - City schoolchildren will tune in to President Barack Obama's speech to America's students today at noon.

Obama is to speak directly to the nation's youth about persistence and success in school. He'll challenge students to give their best effort, come up with academic goals and be accountable for their own education, according to letter from Arne Duncan, U.S. secretary of education.

"He is our president - we are really excited about this historic opportunity," said School Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez, who was to inform parents of the viewing in a ConnectEd phone call over the weekend.

The president is scheduled to speak for 15 to 20 minutes. The address is meant to help students get focused and inspired to begin the new school year, according to Duncan.

A second ConnectEd phone call from Rodriguez over the weekend urged parents to make sure their children take precautions against swine flu, or H1N1 infections, via hand-washing and other healthy practices.

###

Help from #Henry the Hand'

Elementary school students are known to sneeze into their hands, play in the dirt and pick their noses. While that may be normal kid stuff, problems arise when germ-infested children touch their eyes, ears and nose or their friend's eyes, ears and nose. To address such problems, Seroe Michaud, who chairs the district's music department, introduces students to "Henry the Hand," a cartoon character who dances and sings about proper hand-washing.

"We use music to teach," Michaud said. "Kids have so many rules to follow in school: walk on the right side of the hallway, raise your hand, this is where you line up for lunch. This way here the song is catchy, and it has all of the rules about washing hands."

At the Leeds and Bridge Street schools, posters hanging over the sinks remind children to wash their hands for 20 seconds. They sing the song with one another and talk about Henry the Hand while they wash their hands before lunch, Michaud said.

"Rather than having the teachers police the hand-washing all the time, the kids start to watch each other," Michaud said.

The Henry the Hand video can be viewed at henrythehand.com. Students are set to perform the song

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President Barack Obama gestures as he addresses union workers and their families at the AFL-CIO Labor Day picnic at Coney Island in Cincinnati, Monday, Sept. 7, 2009. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)



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at the first community meeting of the school year, Sept. 17 at 2:15 p.m. at Leeds Elementary School.

###

A #great opening'

Rodriguez said the school community had a great opening of the school year, which started last week on Tuesday for teachers and Wednesday, Sept. 2, for students. Despite giving up one furlough day before school, most teachers came to school early to prepare their classrooms, Rodriguez said.

"The energy was up and positive," Rodriguez said. "I was very happy with what I saw."

Another cost-saving measure for the school district: Bus fees were raised from \$252 to \$302 for one child; from \$450 to \$540 for two children; and from \$588 to \$706 for three children. Kindergarten through fifth-grade students used to ride the bus for free, but are now charged as well. The increased fees are expected to raise approximately \$42,000, according to business manager Susan Wright. A couple of people unhappy with the change expressed their opinions to the School Committee last month.

"I strongly believe that elementary school children should not be used a source of revenue," said city resident Theresa Labato. "Parents had less than three weeks to come up with a fee."

Also changed this summer was the start of the school year date from Sept. 8 to Sept. 2. On the first day of school last week, Rodriguez reported there were approximately fewer than six absences at each of the elementary schools and fewer than 10 absences at both the middle and high school. The majority of absences were due to illnesses or situations unrelated to the schedule change, she said.

"I really want to thank parents" for getting their children to school, Rodriguez said. "I know this might have been a difficult situation for some families."

Rodriguez will give the official attendance report at the School Committee meeting Thursday at 7:15 p.m. at JFK Middle School.

Catherine Baum covers schools in Northampton. She can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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