

Headmaster Obama has a lesson for you

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Marty Trillhaase

So what did we learn in school Tuesday?

Anything the president of the United States wishes to say or do can become whipped up into a five-star national controversy in this white-hot partisan era.

And what was it Barack Obama had to say to America's school children?

I "No matter what you want to do with your life - I guarantee that you'll need an education to do it."

• "I know that sometimes, you get the sense from TV that you can be rich and successful without any hard work - that your ticket to success is through rapping or basketball or being a reality TV star, when chances are, you're not going to be any of those things."

• "No one's born being good at things, you become good at things through hard work. You're not a varsity athlete the first time you play a new sport. You don't hit every note the first time you sing a song. You've got to practice. It's the same with your school work."

Whoa!

Just a minute there. You can't say that. At least not to some of American's children. Not to those whose parents buy into conspiracy theories and flood their local school districts with protests.

Not to students whose parents believe their children have never read a newspaper or watched a newscast and are somehow going to instantly fall under the charm of the president.

Under that kind of pressure, some districts will buckle - including a few in Idaho - and treat a president's words as, well, something naughty - as if it were a discussion of abstinence-based education or medicinal marijuana.

But this isn't the first time a president has reached out to schools. Ronald Reagan did it in 1986. George H.W. Bush spoke to schools 17 years ago, and that time Democrats cried foul.

In fact, telling children to work hard, study in school, graduate and do something worthwhile with their lives is part of the presidential job description.

Teddy Roosevelt left it there when he called the presidency a "bully pulpit." Harry Truman embellished the idea when he described his role as "a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to do anyway."

Obama makes an inspiring figure for this kind of talk. Abandoned by his father at an early age, Obama reached the first tier of American life because he worked hard, studied in school, graduated and did something worthwhile with his time.

But a 16-year-old already knows that and just about everything else. Ask him. He'll tell you.

Getting him to pay attention to an authority figure's message of deferred gratification is going to be a chore.

Until, of course, some adult tells him he can't tune in. That the message is dangerous. That he's too malleable to hear it.

Curiosity and YouTube will take care of the rest. - M.T.