

Michelle Obama settling in as a role model

Hasn't named signature issue for her tenure

By [Christina Bellantoni](#) | Friday, April 10, 2009

First lady Michelle Obama is staking out her turf - dabbling in healthy eating, offering inspiring words to schoolchildren and reaching out to military families - but unlike her predecessors, she's yet to settle on a signature issue to champion.

By this point in a first lady's tenure over the past 29 years, the nation knew Hillary Rodham Clinton would be tackling health care and Nancy Reagan would urge children to "Say 'No' to Drugs." Both Barbara and Laura Bush promoted literacy.

Mrs. Obama, however, has served as a sort of role-model-in-chief, the most recent example coming Thursday when she planted a garden with D.C. students.

"She sees part of her leadership role as being a good example and role model to others across the country," said Jocelyn Frye, a longtime friend from law school and policy aide to the first lady's office. "This is something that she found important to her family," Ms. Frye said. "She wanted to take that message to a broader community."

Though aides said Mrs. Obama hasn't set a firm agenda - besides raising daughters Malia and Sasha - she seems to have developed a passion for teaching children healthy eating habits.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack suggested that the first lady's attention to gardening has led to an increase in seed sales, telling *The Washington Times*: "A large part of it is the awareness that she has raised about the importance of nutritious eating."

On Thursday, as Mrs. Obama marveled at the new White House garden they helped to plant last month, she told the students it was the "No. 1 question" she received from foreign leaders while accompanying President Obama on his international visit.

"Every single person, from Prince Charles on down, they were excited about the fact that we were planting a garden, because in many countries they really believe in the importance of planting and growing your own food," Mrs. Obama told the students, who snacked on apples and helped plant herbs and flowers in the garden.

Carl Anthony, a historian with the National First Ladies Library, said Mrs. Obama's packed schedule - at least 20 solo events so far - suggests that she's actually outpaced her predecessors.

While the public was aware that Mrs. Reagan would focus on drug issues during President Reagan's term, it took more than a year for her to host the first event tied to the issue.

Barbara Bush had already been working on adult literacy issues as the wife of the vice president, so she got up to speed on her signature issue early in President George H.W. Bush's term.

Laura Bush spent much of her time the first year traveling to Texas, where she and President George W. Bush had just purchased their Crawford ranch.

It was months before her first event about reading, the Book Fair on the Mall.

What's more, the modern era's first ladies had experience living in the public spotlight - having been wives of a governor or vice president.

Mrs. Obama - who got her black slacks muddy while kneeling in the grass to put in cilantro plants alongside two beaming elementary school students - said it was up to the children to help her promote healthy eating habits.

"We're looking to you guys to help educate the country, not just in your own homes, but other people as they think about how to plan their meals for their kids, to think about the importance of making sure that we have enough fruits and vegetables. And doing this garden is a really inexpensive way of making that happen," the first lady said, surprising the children by announcing the garden cost less than \$200 to plant.

She's been to half a dozen agencies - donning a traditional shawl and honored with drum beats at the Department of Interior and presenting the International Women of Courage award alongside Mrs. Clinton.

Mrs. Obama participated in a YouthBuild AmeriCorps event to promote energy-efficient home building, and hosted events for Black History Month and Women's History Month.

She brought London teenagers to tears when talking about her humble upbringing on the South Side of Chicago.

Mrs. Obama attended many events with military families during the presidential campaign, and gave early signals that would be one of her primary areas of focus.

Last month, she went to Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, N.C., to meet with soldiers and their families.

Mr. Anthony said first ladies must tread carefully when endorsing pending legislation, and noted that Rosalynn Carter was the first presidential spouse to actually announce her agenda during the campaign and before her husband won the election.

"They must avoid anything that is going to be a political distraction from his agenda," he said.

"It's important for first ladies and their staffs to really have a well-thought-out plan of action," he added.

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