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Dear Teachers, Administrators, Students and Parents of College Community Schools:

It seems all of us involved in education have had a controversy thrust upon us!

As you may or may not know, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sent out an e-mail encouraging all schools to view President Obama's "Welcome back to School" speech on September 8. In the speech, the president will speak directly to American school children. (Duncan's invitation is included in its entirety below). Since then, the 24-hour news channels and talk radio have had a heyday debating the significance, motivation, and appropriateness of the invitation.

We do not have advance access to the President's words. But rather than rely on the media interpreters, I suggest that you read the invitation itself. It seems that most of the controversy in the news centers on the content of the "menu of classrooms activities" that is available to teachers on-line to assist students to think more deeply about the message contained in the speech. The menu of activities (one for PreK-6 and one for 7-12) is also reprinted below for your review.

Several thoughts went through my head as I read the documents:

- The suggested activities are educationally sound strategies to encourage deeper thinking.
- It can be inferred from the activities that the emphasis of the speech is "personal responsibility, persistence, and goals" related to school effort - ideas that are important in education and are not "owned" by a particular party or political group.
- There are probably many more activities on the "menu" than any teacher would possibly use. That is why it is a menu – no one is expected to order **everything** on a menu or required to order **anything** from a menu. No one is expected to do each activity or to do any activities.
- Our individual teachers are also capable of designing appropriate activities to extend learning and teach personal responsibility, persistence and goals in the classroom.

I have received several queries in the last day about whether the students at College Community will listen to the president's speech. Some are strongly in favor of it and some are strongly opposed. Those questions raise interesting questions. Both seem to assume that we live in a hierarchical system in which the "chief" (superintendent) can simply decide who our students **can** listen to or who they **must** listen to. Not so - our system instead functions by policies. We have a policy that addresses teaching about controversial issues (also copied in full below). That policy says, in essence, we can teach about issues that contribute to the major purposes of the school curriculum.

The topic "personal responsibility, persistence, and goals" related to school effort certainly qualifies as contributing to a major purpose of the school curriculum.

Therefore, on Tuesday, September 8, teachers may decide that listening to a speech by the President of the United States encouraging students to try hard in school, set goals for their education, and persist when learning is hard is an appropriate teaching opportunity that may be used in the classroom. They may also select appropriate classroom activities to extend student thinking about the importance of school and their own educational goals. Those activities may be selected from the menu provided by the U.S. Department of Education or developed at the local teacher, building or grade level. I am confident that some teachers will weave this opportunity into the lessons of the day in an appropriate manner that will benefit the students. I will defend their right to make that decision.

I also realize that some teachers will continue on with the lessons originally planned and still cover the topics of effort, persistence and goal setting at another time and in an appropriate manner. I will defend their right to make that decision as well.

Likewise, if the speech is taped, it may be used at a later date if it is useful in teaching those same lessons in an appropriate manner.

I trust that if the speech is used, it will be used to teach about “personal responsibility, persistence, and goals” related to school effort, and it will **not** be used as a political lesson or an endorsement of any person or party.

**Nonetheless, parents, if you wish - for whatever reason – for your child to be excused from the viewing of the speech or the activities connected to it, please send a written message to the Building Principal stating your desires on this issue.**

**I have only one condition I would ask of all parents who are considering making such a request: Please read the U.S. Secretary of Education’s invitation to watch the speech and the menu of activities before you accept the media’s interpretation of its contents.**

Regardless of your decision on this issue, I encourage all parents take this issue as another opportunity to talk to their children about the importance of education, their child’s educational goals, and ways the family can work together with the school to help the child succeed!

I understand that it is a sign of our times that this topic is even perceived as controversial. I hope that our community will use it as an opportunity to model for our children how people with differing opinions can discuss concerns in a civil manner and work together where there is common interest. The education of our children is certainly such an area and provides the opportunity to be united.

Best Wishes!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard T. Whitehead".

Richard T. Whitehead

Message received from U. S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan

Dear Principal:

In a recent [interview with student reporter](#), Damon Weaver, President Obama announced that on September 8 – the first day of school for many children across America – he will deliver a national address directly to students on the importance of education. The President will challenge students to work hard, set educational goals, and take responsibility for their learning. He will also call for a shared responsibility and commitment on the part of students, parents and educators to ensure that every child in every school receives the best education possible so they can compete in the global economy for good jobs and live rewarding and productive lives as American citizens.

Since taking office, the President has repeatedly focused on education, even as the country faces two wars, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and major challenges on issues like energy and health care. The President believes that education is a critical part of building a new foundation for the American economy. Educated people are more active civically and better informed on issues affecting their lives, their families and their futures.

This is the first time an American president has spoken directly to the nation's school children about persisting and succeeding in school. We encourage you to use this historic moment to help your students get focused and begin the school year strong. I encourage you, your teachers, and students to join me in watching the President deliver this address on Tuesday, September 8, 2009. It will be broadcast live on the White House website [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) at 1:00 p.m. eastern standard time.

In advance of this address, we would like to share the following resources: a menu of classroom activities for students in grades preK-6 and for students in grades 7-12. These are ideas developed by and for teachers to help engage students and stimulate discussion on the importance of education in their lives. We are also staging a student video contest on education. Details of the video contest will be available on our website [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) in the coming weeks.

On behalf of all Americans, I want to thank our educators who do society's most important work by preparing our children for work and for life. No other task is more critical to our economic future and our social progress. I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead to continue improving the quality of public education we provide all of our children.

Sincerely,

Arne Duncan



## **Menu of Classroom Activities President Obama's Address to Students Across America (PreK-6)**

**Produced by Teaching Ambassador Fellows, U.S. Department of Education**

**September 8, 2009**

### ***Before the Speech***

- Teachers can build background knowledge about the President of the United States and his speech by reading books about presidents and Barack Obama. Teachers could motivate students by asking the following questions:
  - Who is the President of the United States?
  - What do you think it takes to be president?
  - To whom do you think the president is going to be speaking?
  - Why do you think he wants to speak to you?
  - What do you think he will say to you?
- Teachers can ask students to imagine that they are delivering a speech to all of the students in the United States.
  - If you were the president, what would you tell students?
  - What can students do to help in our schools?Teachers can chart ideas about what students would say.
- Why is it important that we listen to the president and other elected officials, like the mayor, senators, members of congress, or the governor? Why is what they say important?

### ***During the Speech***

- As the president speaks, teachers can ask students to write down key ideas or phrases that are important or personally meaningful. Students could use a note-taking graphic organizer such as a "cluster web," or, students could record their thoughts on sticky notes. Younger children could draw pictures and write as appropriate. As students listen to the speech, they could think about the following:
  - What is the president trying to tell me?
  - What is the president asking me to do?
  - What new ideas and actions is the president challenging me to think about?
- Students could record important parts of the speech where the president is asking them to do something. Students might think about the following:
  - What specific job is he asking me to do?
  - Is he asking anything of anyone else?
  - Teachers? Principals? Parents? The American people?
- Students could record questions they have while he is speaking and then discuss them after the speech. Younger children may need to dictate their questions.

### ***After the Speech***

- Teachers could ask students to share the ideas they recorded, exchange sticky notes, or place notes on a butcher-paper poster in the classroom to discuss main ideas from the speech, such as citizenship, personal responsibility, and civic duty.

***Menu of Classroom Activities (PreK-6)***  
***President Obama's Address to Students Across America***

- Students could discuss their responses to the following questions:
  - What do you think the president wants us to do?
  - Does the speech make you want to do anything?
  - Are we able to do what President Obama is asking of us?
  - What would you like to tell the president?

***Extension of the Speech***

***Teachers could extend learning by having students:***

- Create posters of their goals. Posters could be formatted in quadrants, puzzle pieces, or trails marked with the following labels: personal, academic, community, and country. Each area could be labeled with three steps for achieving goals in that area. It might make sense to focus first on personal and academic goals so that community and country goals can be more readily created.
- Write letters to themselves about how they can achieve their short-term and long-term education goals. Teachers would collect and redistribute these letters at an appropriate later date to enable students to monitor their progress.
- Write goals on colored index cards or precut designs to post around the classroom.
- Interview one another and share goals with the class to create a supportive community.
- Participate in school-wide incentive programs or contests for those students who achieve their goals.
- Write about their goals in a variety of genres, such as poems, songs, and personal essays.
- Create artistic projects based on the themes of their goals.
- Graph individual progress toward goals.



## Menu of Classroom Activities President Obama's Address to Students Across America (Grades 7-12)

Produced by Teaching Ambassador Fellows, U.S. Department of Education  
September 8, 2009

### *Before the Speech*

- Conduct a “quick write” or “think/pair/share” activity with students. *(In the latter activity, students spend a few minutes thinking and writing about the question. Next, each student is paired with another student to discuss. Finally, the students share their ideas with the class as a whole).* Teachers may choose to ask the following questions:
  - What ideas do we associate with the words “responsibility,” “persistence,” and “goals?”
  - How would we define each term?Teachers then may choose to create a web diagram of student ideas for each of the words.
- Have students participate in a “quick write” or brainstorming activity. Teachers may ask students:
  - What are your strengths?
  - What do you think makes you successful as a student and as a person?
- Teachers may engage students in short readings. Teachers may post in large print around the classroom notable quotes excerpted from President Obama's speeches on education. Teachers might ask students to think alone, compare ideas with a partner, or share their thoughts with the class. Teachers could ask students to think about the following:
  - What are our interpretations of these excerpts?
  - Based on these excerpts, what can we infer that the president believes is important in order to be educationally successful?
- Create a “concept web.” Teachers may ask students to think of the following:
  - Why does President Obama want to speak with us today?
  - How will he inspire us?
  - How will he challenge us?
  - What might he say?
  - Do you remember any other historic moments when the president spoke to the nation?
  - What was the impact?After brainstorming answers to these questions, students could create a “cause-and-effect” graphic organizer.

***Menu of Classroom Activities (Grades 7-12)***  
***President Obama's Address to Students Across America***

***During the Speech***

- Teachers might conduct a “listening with purpose” exercise based on the following ideas: personal responsibility, goals, and persistence. Teachers might ask pairs of students to create a word bank at the top of a notes page that has been divided into two columns. On the right-hand side, students could take notes (trying to capture direct quotations or main ideas) while President Obama talks about personal responsibility, goals, or persistence. At the end of the speech, students could write the corresponding terms from the word bank in the left-hand column, to increase retention and deepen their understanding of an important aspect of the speech.
- Teachers might conduct a “listening with purpose” exercise based on the themes of inspiration and challenges. Using a similar double-column notes page as the one described above, teachers could focus students on quotations that either propose a specific challenge to them or that inspire them in some meaningful way. Students could do this activity individually, in pairs, or in groups.

**Transition/Quick Review**

- Teachers could ask students to look over their notes and collaborate in pairs or small groups. Teachers might circulate and ask students questions, such as:
  - What more could we add to our notes?
  - What are the most important words in the speech?
  - What title would you give the speech?
  - What is the thesis of the speech?

***After the Speech***

***Guided Discussion:***

- What resonated with you from President Obama's speech? What lines or phrases do you remember?
- Whom is President Obama addressing? How do you know? Describe his audience.
- We heard President Obama mention the importance of personal responsibility. In your life, who exemplifies this kind of responsibility? How? Give examples.
- How are the individuals in this classroom similar? How is each student different?
- Suppose President Obama were to give another speech about being educationally successful. To whom would he speak? Why? What would the president say?
- What are the three most important words in the speech? Rank them.
- Is President Obama inspiring you to do anything? Is he challenging you to do anything?
- What do you believe are the challenges of your generation?
- How can you be a part of addressing these challenges?

***Video Project:***

- Teachers could encourage students to participate in the U.S. Department of Education's “I Am What I Learn” video contest. On September 8, the Department of Education will invite students age 13 and older to submit a video no longer than two minutes in length, explaining why education is important and how education will help them achieve their dreams. Teachers are welcome to incorporate the same or a similar video project into a classroom assignment. More details will be released via [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).

**Transition/Quick Review**

- Teachers could introduce goal-setting activities in the following way to make the most of extension activities:

***Menu of Classroom Activities (Grades 7-12)***  
***President Obama's Address to Students Across America***

“When you set a goal, you envision a target that you are going to reach over time. Goals are best when they are “Challenging,” “Attainable,” and “Needed” (CAN). For example, a good goal might be: ‘I want to boost my average grade by one letter grade this year so I can show colleges that I am prepared.’ But, every good goal also needs steps that guide the way. These steps keep you on track toward achieving your goal. For example, my first step might be improving in all of my subjects by one letter grade. My second step might be completing 100-percent of my homework in all of my classes during the first week of school. My third step might be taking an extra hour to study for all of my tests during each marking period. My fourth step might be attending a tutoring session or getting an adult to help me whenever I do not understand something. My last step might be the most important: asking an adult in my life to check on me often to make sure that I am completing each of my steps. Your steps should add up to your goal. If they don’t, that’s okay; we fix them until they do!

Let’s hear another example of an academic goal for the year and decide what steps would help to achieve that goal...

Now I want you to write your personal academic goal for this year and the steps that you will take to achieve it. We can revise our steps each marking period to make sure we are on track.”

***Extension of the Speech***

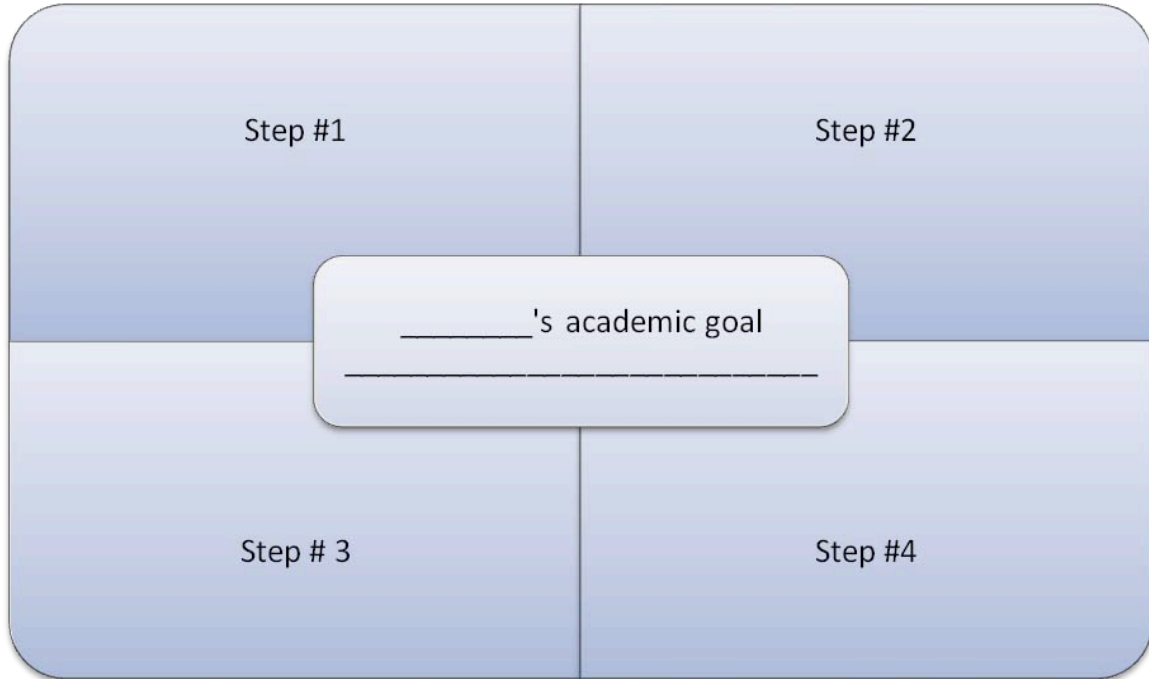
***Teachers could extend learning by having students:***

- Create decorated goals and steps on material that is the size of an index card. The index cards could be formatted as an inviting graphic organizer with a space for the goal at the top and several steps in the remaining space. Cards could be hung in the classroom to create a culture of goal setting, persistence, and success, and for the purpose of periodic review. (See the “Example Handout” section.)
- Create posters of their goals. Posters could be formatted in quadrants, puzzle pieces, or trails marked as steps. These also could be hung around the room, to be reviewed periodically and to create a classroom culture of goal setting and for the purpose of periodic review.
- Interview and share their goals with one another and the class, establishing community support for their goals.
- Create incentives or contests for achieving their personal goals.
- Write about goals and the steps to achieve them in a variety of genres such as poems, songs, or personal essays.
- Create artistic representations of goals and the steps to achieve them.

*Menu of Classroom Activities (Grades 7-12)*  
*President Obama's Address to Students Across America*

**Example Handout**

(Please see below.)



## TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

### **Criteria for Determining Appropriateness of Controversial Issues for the School Curriculum.**

1. The topics selected for study must contribute to the major purposes of the school curriculum.
2. The topics will be considered appropriate and acceptable areas of study by most students and citizens of the community.
3. No issue involving indoctrination of religious belief will be included in class discussions or in the curriculum. This should not prevent or discourage the teaching of religions as an educational reality, the comparison of history of various religions, nor the influence of religions upon our society, our country's values, or those of other societies.
4. Questions treated will come within the range of the knowledge, maturity, and competence of the particular students involved.
5. Problems and issues selected for discussion and study will be current, significant, and of interest.
6. Materials should be available on all sides of the issues which will yield a reasonable amount of data.
7. The issues studied will be allotted only that amount of time required for a satisfactory study by the class.

### **Rights and Responsibilities of the Student**

1. Students have a right to study and discuss controversial issues and problems in a class atmosphere devoid of partisanship and bias.
2. Students have the responsibility to learn and practice the techniques of participatory democracy in preparation for carrying out the duties of intelligent, involved citizens.
3. Students have a right to an explanation by the teacher if an issue is not to be studied.

4. Students have a responsibility to undertake the study of all sides of an issue, to listen to other viewpoints with an open mind, and to evaluate issues on an intellectual, rather than an emotional, basis.

### **Rights and Responsibilities of the Teacher**

1. The teacher will determine whether the issue raised is to be considered at the moment; whether there will be time to explore the issue sufficiently; what the relation of the problem to be considered is to the course or the curriculum; whether the students are prepared or ready to study the issue; and whether the teacher is prepared to discuss and present it effectively.
2. The students will be instructed in the importance of the reason for considering controversial issues. If an issue is not to be studied, the teacher has an obligation to explain the reason.
3. The teacher as a moderator and a participant will point out the possibility of errors in statements of pupils and writers and the possibility of alternative points of view. The teacher will see that all facts, evidence, and aspects of an issue are honestly presented and that students are helped to evaluate their sources of data as well as their own procedures and conclusions.
4. Teachers have the right to express their opinions providing the pupils understand that it is opinion and not an authoritative answer. Teachers will not attempt to limit or control the judgment of pupils, directly or indirectly.
5. The teacher will uphold, protect, and defend the fundamental freedoms of our American democratic way of life.

### **Rights and Responsibilities of the Administration**

1. A teacher who is in doubt about the appropriateness of discussing certain controversial issues in the classroom or regarding his or her ability to explore such issues will confer with the building Principal. If Principal and teacher are unable to agree, the matter will be referred to the Superintendent of Schools or his designee to make a decision.

2. No group or individual has the right, without authorization, to present arguments for or against any issue under study directly to students or to the class. The teacher; however, may invite representatives of different viewpoints to appear before the class to discuss their opinions after obtaining approval of the Principal.

Adopted: 1980  
Revised: 2/16/82  
Revised: 4/18/94  
Reviewed: 10/19/98  
Reviewed: 4/14/03  
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Reviewed: 12/22/08