

Back-to-School Speech to Students
Secretary Arne Duncan
U.S. Department of Education, LBJ Plaza
September 21, 2012

Ask yourself this question: In my education, am I a passenger or a driver?

The theme of this bus tour — and it's written in huge letters on the bus — has been "Education Drives America."

Think about it this way: Your education is going to drive you. It's going to take you places. For those of you who really take an active role and real responsibility for your education, the sky is the limit as to where it can take you. I fully believe that as I'm looking into this crowd that on the plaza here tonight are the future innovators and leaders of the United States. Pretty soon you won't be in high school anymore — you can be the next generation of game-designers and entrepreneurs and community organizers and anything else you decide to do.

But first, for any of that to be possible, you need to capitalize on this precious time you have as a student. Every successful adult that you might look up to once sat in a classroom and did homework and studied and learned just like you.

My friend Barack Obama was also once a student just like you — and if you read his book you know that he was going down the wrong path — angry at the world and feeling sorry for himself. But he got serious — he took responsibility — and he controlled his destiny — and you can too. He didn't have his life all mapped out when he was a teenager. In fact, he transferred colleges and then changed careers a few times — but his education and a strong sense of responsibility drove him to each new achievement in his life, all the way to the Oval Office in the White House, just up the street.

And sometimes your first dream doesn't work out, but a good education buys you options. When I was in school, I wanted more than anything to play in the NBA. I tried out for the Boston Celtics, but I didn't make it. I didn't give up on basketball though, and I ended up getting to play pro ball for a few years in Australia and then when that was over I changed careers, following my mom into the field of educational leadership.

So, yes, your journey as a student is long. Sometimes, it's challenging. But with grit, taking responsibility, and keeping your sights set on smart long-term goals, you can accomplish extraordinary things.

I want to shout out the band Kids These Days, who are here tonight. As teenagers in Chicago, they didn't wish their way onto the lineup at Lollapalooza. They didn't fantasize their way into a record deal. No, they worked hard. They worked smart. And they worked for a very long time to realize their dreams.

Tonight they get the microphone and the spotlight. But behind the scenes to get to the stage, they put in countless hours and developed incredible teamwork when no one was watching. They took responsibility for their journey.

Education and responsibility: that means being a scholar and being a go-getter and being someone who contributes to the community. Each of you can do this and drive yourselves to wherever you want to go.

Of course, the risks of not taking responsibility and not capitalizing on your educational opportunities are extremely serious. Right now, twenty-five percent of our young people are leaving school without a high school degree and with this economy, that's not going to drive them to a good long-term place.

The good news is that your education is yours to shape — yours to do what you want with it. My job, all the adults' jobs ultimately amount to trying to support you as you take control. We want each of you to build up your brains, your skills, and your networks of people who you can help and who want to help you. You can never have too many people on your side rooting for you, and that means working at building good relationships with the adults in your lives.

One last thought. In the news around the country, a lot of people are talking about education. It's everywhere. When you listen to or participate in those conversations about education, I want you to substitute the word "education" for your name — because those conversations are really about you and your future.

Tonight is a time for celebration and hope. There are always nervous butterflies around the start of school and that's a great thing. At this moment, you've got a new year rolled out in front of you like a red carpet. I want you to commit to getting in the driver's seat of your education and making this your best school year ever. Your families and your communities are rooting for you. We've got your back.

Thank you very much.