

How to Parent: A Department of Education Guide

A few years ago, the Obama administration caught backlash after the Department of Education released suggested lesson plans to schools in conjunction with a national back-to-school address that the president was delivering on Sept. 8, 2009. But federally directed lesson plans are so 2009. On Friday the Department of Education released a “checklist” designed to “help parents ensure their children receive ‘an education that will prepare them for college and careers,’” *Politico* reported. “It can be hard for families to know how to support their child’s education,” Secretary Arne Duncan said. So, the federal government has created a guide. But first, let’s remember what happened in 2009. Then the administration published the lesson plans as the Common Core national standards and tests push was getting off the ground, flaming the fire. The Department of Education is prohibited in three federal laws from being involved in curriculum, and this felt too close to skirting that prohibition. And there was just something about the content of the plans that just didn’t set well with people. The Department’s lesson plans suggested teachers ask:

- 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?
- What is the president trying to tell me?
- What is the president asking me to do?
- Are we able to do what President Obama is asking of us?

The lesson plans also suggested teachers could extend the lesson by having students “write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president. These would be collected and redistributed at an appropriate later date by

the teacher to *make students accountable to their goals.*" (Emphasis added) After public outcry, the Department later edited the lesson plans to instead have students "Write letters to themselves about how they can achieve their short-term and long-term education goals." Although the president's speech focused on the value of education and personal responsibility, federally directed lesson plans set a concerning precedent. As American Enterprise Institute's Rick Hess wrote at the time, the lesson plans "were developed with federal funds, devised on taxpayer time, and made available on the Department of Education's website" and "might be construed as an invitation to engage in advocacy rather than instruction." Now for the 2015 edition of the Department of Education interfering into Americans' business. The guide states, "As a parent or caregiver, it can be hard to know how to support your child's learning, but asking your child's educators the right questions is a good place to start." The guide suggests parents ask specific questions of their child's school, including, among others:

- What are the discipline and bullying policies at the school?
- Are the meals and snacks provided healthy?
- Is my child on grade level, and on track to be ready for college and a career?
- How do I know my child's teachers are effective?
- How much time do teachers get to collaborate with one another? What kind of professional development is available to teachers?

Although none of the questions are particularly eyebrow-raising, it's the pomposity with which the federal Department of Education suggests that "it can be hard for families to know how to support their child's education," but that they know how. Parents are the most informed and active consumers of education information, especially when they have school choice options available to them. As researchers Thomas

Stewart, Patrick Wolf, Stephen Cornman, Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, and Jonathan Butcher have found, school choice moves parents from being passive recipients of education to active consumers, moving from the margins to the center of their child's educational experience. Parents don't need a government manual to know how to support their children. They need the freedom to choose options that work for them. The Obama administration has been hostile to school choice, annually trying to eliminate funding for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, and placing injunctions on Louisiana's school choice program, among other meddling. Instead of producing government manuals, the administration should support choice in Washington, D.C., and not threaten life-changing school choice programs in the states. *Reprinted from The Daily Signal.*