

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona: Here is my five-point plan to get students back in school full time

With the right support, students are remarkably resilient. They have risen to the COVID challenge in ways that inspire me as an educator and a father. Miguel Cardona. Opinion contributor

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest and most complex challenge our education system has experienced. It has been extraordinary to see schools, educators and families face this challenge head-on and continue to educate our students.

But despite heroic work by educators and staff, the year-long pandemic has led to fewer learning opportunities, more kids going hungry, greater stress and a growing sense of social isolation. The disruption in school has taken the heaviest toll on students of color, students from families with low-incomes, English learners, students in rural communities, and students with disabilities — impacting their social, emotional and mental health, and academic well-being.

We must continue to reopen America's schools for in-person learning as quickly and safely as possible. As Secretary of Education, this is my top priority. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden announced steps to accelerate school reopening nationwide by treating in-person learning as the essential service that it is and prioritizing educators for vaccinations in every state in the country.

National summit on safe reopening

This is an important step, but there's much more work we must also do to safely reopen schools in every community in the country. As the Education Commissioner in Connecticut, my team and I offered clear, science-based guidance and communicated with all stakeholders involved: teachers and staff, administrators, district leaders, parents and students. We knew there was no one-size-fits-all solution — that different districts know their schools best and would adjust to local COVID-19 data. My approach with our nation's schools will be the same.

Thanks to the work of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, our nation's schools and educators have a clear operational strategy from public health experts on how to safely reopen for in-person instruction.

Under my leadership, the Department of Education (ED) will take a problem-solving, solutions-oriented approach to working with schools, educators, and families to get students back in the classroom full-time. Here's our plan.

First, we'll convene the experts. The Department of Education will host a national summit on safe school reopening this month that will bring students, teachers, families, community organizations, and school leadership together not only to get the critical feedback we need to make reopening as seamless as possible for students and staff, but also to work together to solve problems. We'll also talk about and hear from leaders about addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of students. Because it's not just enough to get our students physically back to school. We have to support them.

Second, we'll share best practices about the incredible work already happening in our schools. In Connecticut, I started an effort called "Learn Together, Grow Together CT" where we elevated schools using innovative solutions to solve common problems — and shared those practices with other schools. As Secretary of Education, I will ensure that ED, as directed by the president, creates a best practices clearinghouse that removes the silos in education, collects innovative, solutions-oriented approaches and shares them with schools everywhere.

Third, we're getting to work right away on the second volume of the ED's COVID-19 Handbook. It will provide schools and educators with practical, research-based strategies to help effectively meet the social, emotional, mental health and academic needs of students; address the loss of instructional time; bridge the digital divide; extend learning time; stabilize the education workforce, and much more.

Fourth, we need to collect better data about how schools are operating during the pandemic. To that end, ED recently announced the largest representative and highest quality national survey yet to collect information about schools' reopening status and how students are learning. This month, we look forward to having a clearer picture of where students are able to safely access in-person learning and where they cannot. We'll continue to collect that data so we can track our progress moving forward, and use that data to inform our decision-making.

Children will succeed with our help

Finally, and most importantly, schools need financial help to reopen classrooms safely, stay open, address students' learning needs, and support students' mental health. President Biden has asked Congress for at least \$130 billion in funding to ensure that schools can make the best decisions for their students, teachers, and staff about how to address these needs.

Some schools will need to reduce class sizes to maintain physical distancing — which could mean hiring more staff to teach more classes or providing broadband access and technology for students to learn from home in a hybrid learning model. Some schools will have to provide more transportation and bus routes or adjust food service plans to keep physically distanced. All schools should make sure their students and staff wear masks.

And it will require tremendous investment from the federal government to meet the academic, social, emotional and mental health needs of students, during and after the pandemic. Over the summer, investments in academic enrichment activities, including in-person accelerated learning, experiential learning, tutoring, and wraparound social, emotional, and mental health services — with additional resources for communities with the greatest needs — could start to level the playing field for the next school year.

High anxiety: As schools reopen, are teachers prepared to meet the emotional needs of all their students?

If I've learned anything in my career as an educator, it's this: With the right support, students are remarkably resilient. America's students have risen to this unprecedented occasion and adapted in ways that inspire me as an educator and a father.

For all of the hardship and heartache this year, I firmly believe that we — and most of all, this rising generation — can emerge from this challenge stronger. We can do the most American thing imaginable: Forge opportunity out of crisis, draw on our resolve, our ingenuity, and our tireless optimism to create something better than we've ever had before. America's students deserve nothing less.

Miguel Cardona is the U.S. Secretary of Education. Previously he was a teacher, a principal and Connecticut's commissioner of education. Follow him on Twitter: @SecCardona