
BIDEN’S SINGULAR PRIORITY FOR EDUCATION: OPENING SCHOOLS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The progress made by any new administration, including during its first 100 days must be assessed in the context of the prior administration. Is the new government continuing previous policies? Making an abrupt 360-degree shift? Does the new administration have different priorities and goals? Or perhaps different methods of achieving similar objectives? The Biden-Harris administration and the Trump-Pence administration are worlds apart on most issues, and yet each has what appears to be a singular overarching priority when it comes to education: to re-open schools as soon as possible even as we continue to battle an unprecedented global pandemic.

In other words, Biden’s education policy in the first hundred days of his administration *is* his Coronavirus policy. This is understandable given the enormity of the pandemic and its influence on every aspect of daily life. To put the severity of this pandemic in perspective, the number of deaths in the United States caused by SARS-CoV-2 ([approximately 551,728 and counting](#)) is quickly approaching the number of battle deaths in all the American wars ([approximately 651,031](#) according to the Department of Veterans Affairs) between the American Revolution in 1775 to the Iraqi Gulf War in 1991. Given these figures, it is unsurprising that containing Covid-19 would dominate domestic policy, and in turn education policy.

Accordingly, the primary focus in elementary and secondary education for the last year has been keeping schools open. This is both a continuation of and a departure from Trump’s policy. Trump insisted that schools must re-open at all costs, arguing that [closures were causing more deaths and economic harm](#) than the virus and that the dangers of [Covid were greatly exaggerated](#). Many argued that this “head in the sand” approach was shortsighted and dangerous to the most vulnerable student populations. In contrast, the Biden administration immediately doubled down on what they perceived to be the dangers of the pandemic and explained in the “[The Biden Plan to Combat Coronavirus](#)” that “we must spend whatever it takes, without delay” to address the public health needs and

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economic impact of the pandemic. Biden's decision to up-play rather than down-play the urgency of Covid-19, nonetheless did not dampen his insistence on re-opening schools immediately. It did mean however, that he was forced to pair his educational policy with his Coronavirus policy. When it comes to opening schools, President Trump and President Biden are both right—even if for different reasons.

Soon after his swearing in, during the first few hours of his presidency, Joe Biden signed an [Executive Order](#) declaring that “it is the policy of my Administration to provide support to help create the conditions for safe, in-person learning as quickly as possible.” While not all 13,000 school districts in the country are not back in-person, the numbers are very promising. According to [estimates reported by the National Review](#), only 6% of districts are offering “remote only” instruction. Shortly before Biden took office, that figure was as high as 25%. Another data tracking firm, [Burbio](#), reported similar numbers-- noting that the remote-only figure fell below 10% for the first time since the pandemic. Aided by the availability of vaccines, President Biden has been able to deliver on his promise to re-open schools in 100 days.

The re-opening of schools is great news for American's students. But more equally important is what President Biden's approach to school opening can tell us about his educational policies in general. This article examines how the Biden education plan signals, not only a different approach to Covid-19 from his predecessor, but a preview of his administration's broader stance on key education policy issues.

SELECTION OF SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

Just as Trump's selection of billionaire [Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education](#) reflected their shared conservative views on education vouchers to support private and parochial school students (until she [resigned from his cabinet](#) for his role in spurring the attack on the nation's capital), President's Biden's selection of [Dr. Miguel Cardona as Secretary of Education](#) speaks volumes. As Education Commissioner of Connecticut, Cardona was known for forcefully arguing for the reopening of schools throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, often in opposition to teachers. Himself a product of public schools in an industrial town—who went on to become an elementary school teacher and a principal—he was best known during his short stint as Commissioner for his advocacy on behalf of the state's most vulnerable students and argued that school closures would widen the existing achievement gap. His demonstrated commitment to public education and issues of equity made him the perfect candidate to address not the question of *whether* to open schools but *how*.

Secretary Cardona also reflects the Biden-Harris effort to position itself as the champions of repair and relief who will inject hope as well as resources in schools that may have felt [abandoned](#) under the previous administration. Cardona, often accompanied by First Lady Jill Biden, has been leading the education branch of President Biden's [“Help is Here”](#) tour by visiting opened schools and

explaining how the Covid-19 relief package will support their efforts and rebuild our schools.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND THE LEARNING GAP

Biden has made no secret of the fact that his administration wants to address [disparities and inequities in education](#). The pandemic has impacted minority and under-resourced communities more acutely than it has impacted other communities. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) cites increasing evidence that some [racial and ethnic minority groups suffer disproportionately](#) from the negative health impact of COVID-19. Some of the factors that contribute to the higher risk of illness and death include discrimination, occupation, healthcare access, income and education.

Because of these health disparities, closing schools to further limit the spread of Covid, especially in the most vulnerable populations, appears sensible at first blush. But there are severe costs associated with school closures as well. While Covid has had a disproportionate health impact on minority communities, school closures have had a disproportionate academic and social impact on those same communities. School closures are projected to exacerbate the achievement disparities between rich and poor, between minority and non-minority in ways that could impact students and their families over a lifetime. The impact of learning loss in the higher dropout rates will not be easily bridged, according to a study by McKinsey and Company, as they translate into [permanent income and wealth gaps](#).

Although more students and school districts have returned to some degree of in-person learning, the evidence is clear that some students are still receiving no instruction whatsoever. Some students are not able to return to school even when the in-person option is made available. Others lack the computers or Wi-Fi capability to access virtual schooling. The disruption has caused a [reversal in achievement](#) rather than just a pause in advancement for students. The loss and GDP for the United States based on this gap alone is estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars per year.

In a recent 2021 [survey of 1,000 K-1 educators](#), the vast majority of teachers, approximately 97% reported a loss of learning among their students. School closures impact students in non-academic ways as well. Approximately 57% of teachers estimated a loss of social and emotional progress among the students who were able to attend. Nearly half of teachers cited the widening learning gap among their students and teaching this range of students as a greater barrier in the classroom than simply recovering lost ground upon a return to normalcy.

Closures also exacerbate food and security. Students in destabilizing homes, limited access to internet, precarious housing situations, minimal safe outdoor space look to schools as a respite for many of their waking hours. These conditions make learning difficult in all environments. It may be that Biden's greatest contribution to learning and reducing the achievement gap stem from his

economic policies to [reduce child poverty](#) dramatically, rather than his formal educational policies.

TEACHERS AND UNIONS

President Joe Biden, and First Lady Jill Biden, have traditionally been allies of the workers unions, and teachers' unions in particular. Contrast this with former Secretary DeVos's description of the "[union bosses](#)" who she blamed for denying educational access to millions of children. Biden has stressed his commitment to re-open schools only if it can be done safely for teachers and students. The Biden approach to school re-openings may reveal something about his broader approach to unions. His administration has had to walk a tightrope between supporting teachers and pressuring them to return to the classrooms. Relying more on carrot than stick, Biden's respect for teachers (and their unions) permeates his rhetoric and his actions. [Biden weighed in](#) on the standoff between the City of Chicago and the Chicago Teacher's Union by defending educators as dedicated professionals who "want to work" but who expect to work under safe conditions. Teacher's demands for mask requirements, PPE, partitions, cleaning supplies, ventilated spaces, Covid testing and of course vaccines were well-regarded and figured largely in the Covid-19 relief package. Indeed, ensuring teacher access to vaccines has been a central feature of his Covid policy and his education plan-- even as the [CDC guidelines](#) insisted that vaccines should not be a prerequisite to opening schools. Nonetheless, Biden has been successful in supporting teachers in this regard. All teachers, school employees and childcare workers were eligible for a vaccine and the Centers for Disease Control declared [March the national vaccination month for school workers](#).

TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Biden's response to vaccines and teacher safety does not necessarily mean that he will side with teachers and unions on all issues. Testing and school standards provide a noteworthy counter-example. The pandemic has raised important questions regarding testing, school standards and accountability. In March 2020, when most schools were suddenly closed and school districts struggled to adjust to their new reality, the Department of Education waived the annual statewide testing requirements in all 50 states. This decision was supported by teachers and unions who have opposed testing generally as being an unfair method of assessing students, teachers and districts. Teachers have also complained that standardized tests waste valuable time and educational resources.

Despite pressure to waive requirements again in 2021, the Biden administration and Secretary Cardona have announced the resumption of the testing requirements in 2021. This decision was consistent with the concerns expressed [in an open letter by civil rights and educational equity groups](#) that another waiver of assessment requirement would further increase the gap between privileged students and traditionally "underserved students of color, Native students, English learners, immigrant students, students with disabilities, and students from

low-income families.” Cardona’s decision to prioritize these concerns over the unions’ traditional criticism about testing says as much about the administration’s approach to unions as its approach to equity and accountability in education.

CONCLUSION

In the realm of education, like in much else, concerns about Covid have been front and center. It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that President Biden’s education plan, for the first hundred Days of his administration consists almost entirely of re-opening K through 12 schools. The challenges that Biden has faced in opening schools during the pandemic—and how his Administration has responded to those challenges—are emblematic of how he will manage some of the major controversies in education policy generally. The solutions and approaches used to re-open schools suggest a commitment to re-opening opportunities for American students over the course of the next four years.