



Backgrounder: Education Secretary Nominee Miguel Cardona

January 2021

Biden named nominees to lead several cabinet agencies impacting K-12 education



Education
Miguel Cardona



Interior
Rep. Deb Haaland



Agriculture
Tom Vilsack



Defense
Gen. Lloyd Austin



Attorney General
Merrick Garland



Labor
Marty Walsh

Biden named Miguel Cardona as his pick for Secretary of Education, signaling a focus on reopening and detente on choice

“If you were told to build an education secretary for President-Elect Joe Biden in a laboratory, you’d probably come up with something like Miguel Cardona.”

Cardona doesn’t fit neatly into either the reform or anti-reform camps, which will provide the Biden administration with an opportunity to focus on reopening schools instead of relitigating old battles.

- **Public School Experience:** Miguel Cardona served as a teacher and principal in his hometown of Meriden, CT before becoming a district-level administrator and assistant superintendent.
- **SEA Leadership:** Cardona was appointed by Gov. Lamont to serve as Connecticut’s Commissioner of Education in August 2019. During the pandemic, he worked in parallel to support districts’ remote learning efforts while also providing guidance to safely reopen classrooms.
- **Focus on ELL Issues:** As a child, Cardona started school speaking no English and has worked throughout his career to improve the education of English learners.
- **Neutral on Choice:** Cardona has a neutral stance on school choice issues. In his capacity as Commissioner, he is a charter authorizer and has approved renewal of existing charters. However, no new charters opened under his watch.
- **CTE Pathway Experience:** As a high school student, he enrolled at a vocational-technical magnet school through a lottery. He originally studied to become an automotive mechanic but changed course and enrolled in Central Connecticut State University, giving him a very real understanding of the challenges associated with the range of secondary and postsecondary pathways students navigate.

Cardona's nomination is the best proponents of charter schooling could realistically expect in a Biden administration

- On the campaign trail, Biden's embrace of teachers unions and charter-hostile provisions in his platform were strong indications that he could nominate a charter opponent to run the Department of Education.
- In the wake of the election, former NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia emerged as a front-runner for Secretary of Education. The position was hers to lose: she received a public endorsement from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and was reaching out to Senate Republicans through retiring Senator Lamar Alexander.
- This could have been a disastrous selection for charter advocates, but after public opposition from disability rights groups, support for her nomination withered away.
- After Lily Eskelsen Garcia fell out of favor, Biden announced Connecticut's current Commissioner of Education, Miguel Cardona, as his nominee for Secretary of Education.
- When he was nominated to head Connecticut's Department of Education, Cardona stated during his confirmation hearing, "Charter schools provide choice for parents that are seeking choice, so I think it's a viable option, but [neighborhood schools] that's going to be the core work that not only myself but the people behind me in the agency that I represent will have while I'm commissioner."
- Given the potential nominees Biden considered, the nomination of Miguel Cardona to become Secretary of Education is the best possible outcome for charter school advocates.



"I haven't found him (Cardona) to be pro-charter or anti-charter. It doesn't seem like he's focused on governance and structure. What he is focused on are great schools for kids. And I think just more broadly, I haven't found him to be driven by ideology and politics."

- Dacia Toll, Achievement First CEO

In Cardona's limited professional experience with charter schools, he's maintained a neutral stance

Cardona's Professional Background with charters:

- Cardona's home district (Meriden, CT) has no charter schools.
- As Commissioner of Education, Cardona is a charter authorizer. If confirmed, three of the last four Secretaries of Education will have had charter authorizing experience.
- Cardona approved every charter renewal during his time as Commissioner. Nearly all were given three-year renewals, while The Bridge Academy was placed on probation and given a one-year renewal. No new charters were authorized.
- Two charters approved in 2018 have yet to open. CT's charter funding is controlled by a line item in the state budget. Cardona has not weighed in on funding for these two charter schools as Commissioner – he took the job in late 2019 and the 2021 legislative session would have been his first “budget year” session.

On charter schools, Cardona said it is important for parents to have choices.

“As a parent myself I want to make sure I have options for my children,” he said. His two teenage children attend public school in Meriden. So did he.

Cardona does want traditional public schools, magnet schools and charters to all abide by the same accountability measures. He also wants all schools to prepare students for college and a workforce that is changing.

[Connecticut Post, 8/19/19](#)

Asked about charter schools during his confirmation hearing (to be CT's Commissioner of Education), Cardona said he'd rather focus his energy making sure neighborhood public schools are viable options.

“Charter schools provide choice for parents that are seeking choice, so I think it's a viable option, but [neighborhood schools] that's going to be the core work that not only myself but the people behind me in the agency that I represent will have while I'm commissioner,” he said.

[Connecticut Mirror, 12/22/20](#)

On education issues, Cardona has focused on improving opportunities & outcomes for traditionally underserved students

Achievement Gap

From his service as co-chair of Connecticut's Achievement Gap Task Force in 2011 to his current role as Commissioner of Education, Cardona has kept improving outcomes for underserved students front and center.

English Learners

Cardona holds a masters degree in bilingual education and wrote his dissertation on improving outcomes for English learners. As Commissioner, he sought to expand dual language programs in Connecticut schools.

Assessment

Cardona supports statewide testing of Connecticut students in spring 2021. He wrote in an October 2020 memo, "State assessments are important guideposts to our promise of equity."

Segregation

As Commissioner of Education, Cardona helped negotiate a new settlement in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* desegregation lawsuit. The new agreement will add 1,000 seats in magnet schools and provide more incentives for suburban districts to add seats for Hartford students.

Teacher Evaluation

Cardona led the development of Meriden's teacher evaluation system. While serving on the state's Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, he opposed the use of state assessments in teacher evaluation systems.

Cardona's work on CT's Achievement Gap Task Force may foreshadow how he will approach his new role in DC

- In 2010, the Connecticut legislature passed an education reform bill as part of the state's unsuccessful pursuit of Race to the Top funding. Among other policy reforms, the law established an "Achievement Gap Task Force" (AGTF) to study the state's challenges, recommend solutions, and lay the groundwork for a master plan to address the state's achievement gaps.
- Miguel Cardona, then principal of a Meriden elementary school, was named co-chair of the AGTF. Some of his proposals that didn't make the final AGTF report included:
 - Establishing an Office of Educational Equity that would report to the state's education commissioner to create a focal point for addressing disparities.
 - Creating a state-level Secretary of Education who would report to directly to the governor and focus on influencing educational equity through legislation.
- Under Cardona's leadership, the AGTF initially recommended school finance reform that provided fair and equitable funding for all public schools, including charter, magnet, and other school choice programs.
- The AGTF's 2014 Master Plan took a broader lens than the initial recommendations and sought to address in-school and out-of-school factors that contributed to the state's achievement gaps. Notably, the final plan did not mention charters, choice, or funding reform.



Cardona's initial proposals and the AGTF's initial recommendations were much more focused on systemic reforms to address educational inequities than the AGTF's Master Plan.

Cardona will have more power to set the agenda at ED than he did as a task force co-chair, providing him with an opportunity to orient the department towards equity in ways that *could* be inclusive of choice options.

Cardona called for students to return to classrooms quickly post-COVID, but deferred reopening decisions to districts



“We know we’re in a health pandemic. We’re also in an educational crisis.”

- Miguel Cardona

- As Connecticut’s Commissioner of Education, Cardona’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic focused on two priorities:
 1. Returning students to in-person instruction as quickly and safely as possible.
 2. Ensuring high-quality remote learning as a viable option for students.
- Cardona’s agency provided reopening guidance for districts but deferred reopening decisions to local officials.
- Cardona used data to highlight the educational disparities that stem from school closures, including lower virtual attendance rates for the state’s highest needs learners.
- Only a third of Connecticut students were able to access in-person instruction in late 2020. Parents in New Haven were frustrated with the lack of an in-person instructional option.
- Connecticut officials partnered with the Dalio Foundation to provide students with devices and broadband access, closing most of the state’s “digital divide.”
- Teachers unions led protests and petition drives to shut down all in-person instruction across the state, but Cardona maintained his position that schools should stay open if they are able to do so safely.

Cardona demonstrated capable leadership during the pandemic, but will face new challenges as he works to reopen schools nationwide

- As he pushed for schools to reopen, Cardona also emphasized the need to provide quality remote learning. A combination of federal and philanthropic funding allowed CT to close most of their digital divide but tackling that effort nationally will be much more complex.
- While the beginning of vaccine distribution is an encouraging development, it may complicate reopening efforts. Teachers unions are lobbying to get their members early access to the vaccine, but they may also delay reopening efforts until they secure guarantees around vaccination requirements and ventilation system upgrades.
- Trust between schools and families – or lack thereof – will be a major factor in how quickly schools are able to reopen. Leading with transparency and building trust among stakeholders in reopening efforts will be a key challenge for Cardona.



Risk: The learning curve for Cardona will be steep and will make him more reliant on his team at ED

- 16 months ago, Miguel Cardona was an assistant superintendent in Meriden, CT – a district of 8,000 students. If confirmed, Cardona will be leading an agency with 4,400 employees and a \$68 billion budget.
- Cardona is well-respected in Connecticut, but there are reasonable questions about his readiness to lead a federal agency.
- Most of Cardona’s attention will be focused on school reopening efforts, given Biden’s goal of getting kids back in classrooms within the first 100 days of his administration.
- The combination of these factors will increase the significance of other appointments to ED. This may present a risk for charter schools if charter opponents fill other key positions at ED and because of external pressure.

