

Education Writers Association National Seminar 2021

Plenary: A Conversation with U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona

Caroline Hendrie: [00:00:06] Hello and welcome to Day One of EWA's, 2021 National Seminar. I'm executive director Caroline Hendrie and I'm delighted that you're joining us. Our education journalism community, our country and our world, we've all been through a year for the history books, but the focus of this conference is the future. How can you be better prepared to play your vital role in our democracy? What trends in the education sector and the journalism profession do you need to understand more fully? How can you put into context all the unforeseen news developments that you'll cover in another tumultuous year over the next three days? Those questions are what we and our partners aim to answer. I'm eager to get started, but first I want to say a quick word of thanks to all the folks who helped make this conference possible. First, to our sustaining funders. We are so thankful for your generous support. Likewise. We appreciate the organizations that sponsored this event and are so grateful to our annual fund donors to the members of our governing and advisory boards are dedicated staff and last but not least, our members. Your time and talent were absolutely essential to making the event possible. So, let's begin. And what better way to get started than to welcome to Iowa for the very first time, the new US secretary of education, Miguel Cardona, now to introduce the secretary and moderate our conversation. I'm pleased to pass the mic to Sarah Carr, a member of his board of directors. Sarah has had a long and distinguished career as an education journalist. Sarah, over to you.

Sarah Carr: [00:02:07] Thank you, Caroline. And thank you all for joining us for this Kick-Off session at EWA's 74th national seminar, a conversation with US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. Before we begin, a few housekeeping notes. First, remember that this is being recorded. Everything is on the record, and that includes Chat's. If you hover over the speaker screen, you should see a button for closed captioning and live transcript to start viewing closed captioning click, closed caption and to view the live transcript, click live transcript and then select show subtitle. To submit a question for our speakers, you can use the chat box located in the packable platform, you can submit questions at any point, and then a staffer will be monitoring them and we'll facilitate the Q&A portion at the end of the session. And finally, if you're going to tweet about this, please use the hashtag a EWA21. Now, let me introduce our speaker, Secretary Cardona took office two months ago, one year into the pandemic. Prior to that, he was commissioner of education in Connecticut. And before becoming commissioner, the secretary spent his career in the school district where he grew up, Meriden, Connecticut, where he served as an elementary school teacher, principal and assistant superintendent. He's the first in his family to graduate college, and he said

after his nomination that the past year has stolen time from our children who've lost something sacred and irreplaceable, and that it's our responsibility to take this moment and to do the most American thing imaginable to forge opportunity out of crisis. And I'm hoping that we can dig deep on how to do that in the next forty-five minutes. And with that introduction, I'll turn it over to Secretary Cardona for some brief opening remarks.

Secretary Cardona: [00:04:14] Thank you very much, sir, I appreciate it. Glad to be with everyone. Thank you for having me. Just a very quick introduction. As she mentioned, Miguel Cardona on the title that I'm most proud of and the letters behind my name that I'm most proud of, our S.R. I have a son named Miguel Jr., who is a junior in high school. And my daughter Celine is a freshman in high school. My wife, Marissa, is a family school liaison. She works in two middle schools in my hometown. And as was mentioned, I started as a fourth-grade teacher. I loved the classroom. I still feel when I walk into a classroom, I still want to kind of enjoy my time with the students. As always, the best part of my day, I served as a principal, as was mentioned earlier, a great, great ten years of my life as a principal. I had children as young as three in that building up to age 11, a variety of needs, different needs, whether they're learning English as a second language or children with autism, children with developmental delays. So, I learned a lot. I grew a lot there, but always a teacher at heart, you know, as was mentioned, second month on the job. And really there's a level of urgency that I want to keep as long as I'm secretary of education, because we have a lot of work to do. The first one hundred days, there was a really bold effort by our president to prioritize education and really bring importance to what educators do and the role of education in our country.

Secretary Cardona: [00:05:51] So I'm pleased to be a part of that. As far as reopening data from February show that pre-K through eight schools, 80% are offering in-person learning. That's two months ago before vaccinations were prioritized, before the money was given for surveillance testing.

So, next week we're going to be getting new data, and I look forward to the data being better than that. So, yes, we hit that goal that we set out to hit. But until we're at 100%, there's a lot of work to be done.

And through the Help is Here Tour where I was able to visit – I think it was like nine states or eight states, 10, 11 different facilities – just to kind of hear from folks, from students to educators to district leaders to parents, about what they're experiencing and what's working and what's not working.

So that's going to help shape the work that we do at the agency.

I'm really pleased now with the American Families Plan. What an investment, again, doubling down on the importance of education in our country – at the bookends – I call it the bookends from the early childhood years and then community college years.

I'm at Community College of Baltimore County this morning visiting and talking to students here.

I'm just excited about the potential for our country. I know the president understands the role of education, and I'm fortunate and blessed to be in a position where I can help move this along for our country.

Secretary Cardona: [00:07:12] This is a once in a generation opportunity that we have here. Yes. The pandemic, really, it was challenging. I mean, we're still in it, but we have a tremendous opportunity to hit the reset button on things that we know need fixing way before the pandemic. So, I'm eager to do that.

I want to share that. I respect and applaud all of you for your great work, not only this past year, but before. But, you know, it's critically important that we continue good the use of journalism and communicating what's happening in our schools, good and bad, so that we can continue to grow as a country.

I have to give a shout out to Annie Brown, from The New York Times and the piece on Odessa. You know that I felt like I know Diana Lopez now. I really feel that her story, those that series really touched me in so many ways. I remember listening to the podcast and just having that emotional connection to those students, to those teachers, to that community. And, you know, that's what good journalism is. It really brings out emotion and makes connections. It really dives deeper into some issues from the lens of students, from the lens of children. So, thank you for what all of you do. I look forward to a great conversation. Thanks for having me.

Sarah Carr: [00:08:26] **Thank you so much. We'll dive right in with questions.**

The pandemic has really underscored the fact that many districts need to rethink how they serve kids in fundamental ways and for the long term, and particularly when it comes to low-income children and students of color.

I wanted to ask, since we're challenging school districts to do things differently, what does the Education Department need to change about its policies and practices to ensure greater equity in America is known for its local control of schools? And I wonder, has the pandemic in any way suggested a need to shift toward greater federal control?

Secretary Cardona: [00:09:13] Thank you, Sarah. You're absolutely right.

I think my passion in education is really allowing it to be that great equalizer. You know, it was for me.

I was a first gen. I would say I was born rich. I had a loving family, and I have a lot of material possessions. But I had a warm community, a great family.

But I know that if it weren't for the public schools that I attended and the state universities, I wouldn't be secretary of education.

If it weren't for the teachers in those buildings that really saw something in me, I wouldn't be secretary of education.

I recognize the importance of a good education. Yet, if you look across the country since they've been collecting data, you know, people that follow, that have my demographics, don't typically end up through that path.

If you look at the data, the achievement gaps and the opportunity gaps in our country, that have been exacerbated this past year, have not fared well for many students of color, for students that are in rural communities or students who don't have means at home.

We need to make sure that as we rebuild that we're looking at that and not going back to old practices.

At the agency, we really have to look at higher ed space – for example, public service, loan forgiveness, better borrower defense.

At the pre-K-12 level, we have to make sure that we're lifting and being very transparent about successes and needs across our country and providing support in those areas.

I think it's really important that this agency leads with service as our core mission to help lift those communities that need it.

So, I really want to make sure we're hands on. We're rolling up our sleeves. We're with them, problem-solving with them. I think that's our role as an agency.

And I look forward to doing that with a great sense of urgency, knowing that children and students are waiting in the balance there for us to be direct and forceful in our efforts to make sure we're supporting so that everybody has an opportunity and success.

Sarah Carr: [00:11:22] **Great. So, you talked about problem solving with them, and you've also spoken extensively about the need to earn the trust of families of color across the country, who we know on the one hand, have been less likely to have access to in-person instruction during the pandemic and on the other are less likely to choose it when they do have access. What are three things that most school districts are not doing currently that you wish they would do to better serve and gain the trust of families of color?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:12:01] I'll tell you three things that I know will work.

So, without doing a landscape analysis and looking at those strategies and whether or not they're doing them, I'll tell you three things that I know we need to do more of.

We need to make sure that our school houses are prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of our learners.

We need to make sure that we're that students are seeing themselves in the curriculum.

You know, the work of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, 'the windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors' comes to mind where we need to make sure that what we're presenting to students is sensitive to what their background is and what their needs are.

So, the social-emotional piece and students need to see themselves in their school work so that we can engage them. That's number one.

Number two: We have to make sure we're connecting families to the learning process. You know, my parents will always be my best teachers. I always tell families when I was serving as principal, you know, the parents are the best teachers, and we play a supporting role.

Secretary Cardona: [00:13:11] So what I want to see more of is a natural, authentic engagement of families. And I'm not just talking about pickles and PTAs. PTAs are awesome. We need them.

I'm talking about engaging with all families and making sure that we're bringing them into the mix because parents want the best for their children. And our success with the students is going to be based on how well we engage the family.

And then another thing that we're really going to focus on – it's one of my priorities coming into the agency – is making sure that our pre-K-12 education system is connected not only to higher education, but to the workforce needs. We need to make sure that we're providing better pathways for our learners.

I'm at a community college today, and I got to talk to some students who are having great opportunities here because they're thinking about different pathways.

So, we need to make sure that as we evolve, we evolve to provide students opportunities to better pathways.

Sarah Carr: [00:14:15] Thank you. I know a big coverage topic and priority right now is the \$130 billion in federal stimulus funding for public schools. And I wonder, as far as districts begin to spend this money, what most encourages you and what most concerns you? And you mentioned the need for authentic family engagement. And I know that states and districts are supposed to provide evidence of that. And I just wonder what accountability will there be to make sure that there's true family and community input about how this how this money is spent.

Secretary Cardona: [00:15:02]

It really is about the design.

You can't just have random acts of family engagement. It has to be intentional. It has to be designed.

So, I feel happy, and I feel confident that states are looking at revisiting what it means to have families engaged.

This pandemic that taught us that we have to be nimble. We have to be flexible, and we have to meet families where they are.

So, I'm feeling optimistic that it's not going to be some of the same strategies that for many families was ineffective, and it really is planning for a reimagined learning, with families at the table – not saying, 'Here's our plan. We want you to embrace it.' It's 'What are your thoughts on what it should look like? How should we engage families?' So, I'm seeing that. I'm excited about that.

And, you know, one of the concerns is obviously that – as we turn on the lights and the spring, flowers come up and things start to look a little bit more like they did prior to the pandemic – my biggest fear is that we go back to practices that were comfortable before the pandemic, but led to the disparities in outcomes that we are experiencing as a country.

So, I don't want us to go back into that comfort zone we grow when we're uncomfortable.

So, we're going to have to rethink education and ensure that the funds are going to those students that were impacted the most. So, that's tough leadership, right?

You're going to have to change what people are used to in schools. I always say that the pandemic, when it ends, it's not going to mean it's easier.

It's going to be different work, but it's going to be equally as challenging to lead through the next chapter of education in our country, where difficult decisions have to be made because we have to address the disparities that existed before the pandemic.

Sarah Carr: [00:16:57] **I mean, do you envision rejecting or really strongly nudging state plans that you think are at risk of bringing some of those practices?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:17:07]

You know, I'm a big believer in equal parts support and accountability. You lead with support, but it's critically important for the students that we make sure that we're supporting our states and helping in every way possible to help them in their efforts to address disparities.

And that could mean that we're having conversations with states that maybe we look at plans and we see that it's not as clear as it needs to be based on some of the data that we see from those states. But at the end of the day, we want to partner with states.

My experience as a commissioner of education in Connecticut. It's hard work, and it's not always pretty, but it's the right way to do it.

It's the right way to roll up your sleeves with folks that are educational stakeholders and say, 'This is the issue that we have. How can we solve it together?' And listen to diverse perspectives so that whatever plan you have, it's the one that has the fingerprints of all those stakeholders on it?

And we recognize why we're going in that direction. And there's generally better buy-in in it. And it's more sustainable than something where you have one person doing it and everyone expected to follow.

I do plan on working closely with states. I do plan on ensuring that our agency is a service agency at the end of the day, when they need to feel supported not only by the resources, but by the best practices that are around the country that we're going to share with them, but also our agency members being partners with them in the thought process.

Sarah Carr: [00:18:40] **Thank you. I want to go back to the issue of reopening schools in person, which you touched on in your introduction, it's been a clearly stated priority for you and for the president. And can you give us somewhat of a kind of your personal scorecard of where we are with that, specifically with an eye towards what you think has gone particularly well and what hasn't? And in hindsight, that target of a majority of elementary schools open by the first hundred days without the right people to do that, should it have been more ambitious?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:19:19]

So, it's a very complex issue to reopen schools in the middle of a pandemic.

Having experienced that, again, as a commissioner of education in Connecticut, I'll give you a quick vignette of what I experienced some mid-March last year.

I called the superintendent of a very well-resourced district, and I said, 'How's it going over there? You good to go?'

'You know what? We just turn on a switch. Every kid has a laptop. They all have good Internet service, and we have all of our curriculum materials online where all you have to do is visit our website.'

And then I called another superintendent of a not so well-resourced district, a lot of needs in that district, and four weeks later, they still haven't communicated with students at all. Nothing, not, 'Hey, we're going to come back, or go on to our website.' So, the disparities there prove a couple of things.

Number one: that we have to reopen with urgency. But number two: that they're in totally different places. Connecticut is small. In different parts of Connecticut, they're in different places.

I had a principal. We were talking about graduation, in-person graduation last year. And I had one superintendent telling me, 'Miguel, I only have about 100 kids in my graduating class. I could pull it off at the local soccer field.'

And then I had another superintendent telling me, 'Miguel, I have 3,000 students in my school. There's no way you can do a one-size fits all.'

So those are some of the challenges that leaders across the country are facing.

I am pleased with 80 percent of the schools providing, this is in February, providing in-person learning.

Secretary Cardona: [00:21:01]

I know it's going to be a higher number next week.

But I still feel that same sense of urgency until all schools are open. There is no substitute for in-person learning.

Every day that the students are not in school is a lost opportunity for emotional connections, for relationship building, for academic support, and for the school community to really wrap their arms around these children who for the past year are wondering what's going on.

I do believe it was the right goal. I think early childhood, pre-K to eight – It's much more difficult to teach a first grader, a six-year-old from home than it is a high schooler.

But I still want to double down and I still want to make sure that the conversation is about reopening schools in the spring.

Yes, we need to be thinking about the fall, but we also need to be thinking about what we can do to bring students back in now. That's why the Help is Here tour – my message is clear.

Do everything you can to get the students in now. Some places the ventilation, some places the trust, some places the fear of the pandemic are still preventing students from coming in.

But in some cases, it's also the fact that some students didn't feel comfortable in school before the pandemic. So, it really speaks to the issues that we have and the challenge that we have moving forward.

But I'm really optimistic that we're going to get to those because we're going to be bold in our leadership and we're going to keep that sense of urgency.

Sarah Carr: [00:22:18] **I mean, it sort of connects back to that. First question is just do you think there's a need for greater federal and state oversight with some of the districts that are not communicating with families and not developing plans?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:22:34]

There will be ongoing relationships with districts, with states, that will – not only with reopening, but right now, we're assembling a group of folks whose focus is going to be on getting better data points, regular communication with states and districts, problem-solving.

Together, we lifted up the Best Practices Clearinghouse Friday. We made it public. We had over 1,100 submissions of what's working in different places, and we went through those meticulously. We posted 200 right now we're going to keep going. We're going to keep adding to that. But there are best practices. We're going to be providing support.

It's not the federal government's role to micromanage education.

It is our role to make sure that all children across the country are getting a free, appropriate public education – one where they have the opportunity to succeed in life. And I take that very seriously.

And I know that it's going to be my role. It's going to be my agency's role to support states on that, but also call out where issues are happening so that we could work with them and make sure that we're doing what's right for students.

Sarah Carr: [00:23:43] To ask a couple of questions that focus on those bookends of student loans were a big campaign topic and candidate Biden promised ten thousand in debt forgiveness. You've already taken several actions to reduce the student debt burden, including extending the payment pause and forgiving debts of disabled borrowers. What's next? And can you be specific about a timeline for action and whether this can be done administratively or needs congressional approval?

Secretary Cardona: [00:24:22]

As you mentioned, loan debt has really impacted many families, many students, and getting out of it and seeing a pathway out of it is critically important.

And I know that's a priority for the president as it is for me.

We're still working with the White House on the best path forward and negotiating what rights, responsibilities and rights we have as an agency and what isn't.

So as soon as we're able to communicate on that, as soon as we get to a point where we can communicate information, we will.

But I think it's really important to recognize, too, that we have to kind of go down the river, right, to see where this is coming from and really stop the bleeding to make sure that our public service loan forgiveness is working.

I know 98% of the claims were rejected in the past. I know that borrower defense is something that we also have to take seriously.

I'm really passionate about making sure that higher education, that we can quantify a return on investment.

I want to make sure that our graduates are graduating with greater earning potential and going out there buying homes and contributing and not being held down by debt. Unfortunately, that's the narrative for so many families.

Secretary Cardona: [00:25:40]

While I don't have a specific timetable of when we're going to be announcing things, I can tell you that there's a great sense of urgency.

I'm hoping that the confirmation of the undersecretary happens soon.

This is going to be as much a priority for me as secretary of education as the pre-K-12 shifts that we have to make across the country because I see the connections, and I know that a good education system is the best economic driver in our country.

So, we have to get it right on both ends: the early childhood, but also the higher education, and the loan forgiveness and not getting into that position where five years from now we shouldn't be talking about loan forgiveness because college should be more affordable.

The opportunities for students to get grants and you know, they shouldn't be paying, they shouldn't be paying for the rest of their lives for an education that they're going to be receiving in the next three to four years.

So, I'm critically focused on that while also knowing that loan forgiveness is something that is a priority for the president, for myself.

And we look forward to communicating when we're ready.

Sarah Carr: [00:26:40] **And related to college affordability, President Biden last week proposed the landmark move to make community colleges free and expand support for Pell Grants. And to use I mean; do you think that we should go further and should all colleges be free?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:26:59]

I'm pleased that the focus is really on those that work to address some of the inequities that we see in higher education.

We know how important HBCUs, MSIs, tribal colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions to giving those students an opportunity to have a crack at college and be successful.

I recently read that half the dentists across the country, Black dentists, are from HBCUs. That stuck with me.

You know, it's critically important that we make sure we're focusing on those institutions that are really serving students that have been underserved for a long time.

And I think that's a great place to start and make sure that we're providing the support where it's needed most.

Sarah Carr: [00:27:45] **So that's sort of a no for now on expanding it past those institutions?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:27:52]

Not to say that that's not something that we won't be considering.

I just think right now it's really important that – you know, kind of like with the funds, with the American Rescue Plan – there are some folks that were hit much harder than others, you know, front line workers, people who live in multi-generational homes. So, we have to make sure that we're addressing those needs.

Similarly with colleges, there are some institutions that really are providing support for those students that are underserved. And we have to make sure that we're taking care of those that need it the most, as well as looking at options for providing free post-secondary education.

That's why the American Family Plan focuses on community college for everyone for two years.

The students that I talked to a little while ago – one going into occupational therapy, a few that were going into the automotive technology field; there was one going into the sciences.

Their message is this is great for everyone. I hope everyone takes advantage of it. So, there are efforts from the president to provide postsecondary education opportunities.

I just hope it moves forward because it's going to be – no pun intended – a shot in the arm for our country

Sarah Carr: [00:28:57] **And moving on to the other book. And there was the proposal last week to collaborate with states to fund universal pre-kindergarten. This would hinge to a significant degree on state Buy-In and support and even before covid at the state level, average pre-K spending and enrollment have largely stalled. What steps is your administration prepared to take to prod or even force pre-K expansion back on the agenda in many states?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:29:29]

All you gotta do is look at the data. We know a good foundation pays dividends. You pay more in interventions for students if they're not prepared early on. So, I think just being very clear about the benefits.

I was in Illinois last month. I talked to J.B. Pritzker, the governor there, and he talked to me about the investment that they're making for early childhood education and pre-K in Illinois. And, you know, there is this sense that people understand the benefits of it.

We're going to be working with those states and what this looks like and again, learning from examples where it's working really well.

But let's face it: This is a win for their state. This is a win for the education system.

Again, my experience in education – I know. I can tell you – Pay now or pay later.

And remember, I was the principal of the school with an early childhood program for three- and four-year-olds that needed a little bit of extra support. And I knew that intensive support at that age prevented them from needing additional reading, tutoring after school programming, summer school programming, which all cost money.

Let's get it right in the beginning. Let's provide support.

All the data shows that students with early childhood programming do better. They get more access to honors level courses, which ultimately leads to life, happiness.

You know, when you graduate, you do well. You have options. It's either that or you pay for intervention throughout, which is more costly.

We're going to be on the offense to make sure that people understand this is critically important.

What an investment in our country to focus on early childhood education in addition to community college for all.

Sarah Carr: [00:31:12] **So there's been a lot of concern about inconsistency across the requirement to do standardized testing this this spring, and I wondered if you could talk about the principles that are guiding the waiver decisions that you make. And I also related to that I hoped you could speak to. Are you confident that the data that will get will justify the effort given that there's a lot of students that are still studying remotely, who aren't engaged in school right now, and that that we can really get a true cross-section of students, including those who've been most underserved and disengaged throughout the pandemic?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:32:00]

The assessment question reminds me a lot of the reopening question from last July.

We were at a point where we were developing plans. Every state was, and we were developing plans based on the best science and the best information that we had on the pandemic.

If you recall, we were looking at models of the flu to determine transmissibility of COVID-19. We didn't have any data on it.

So, we were developing plans. But then at some point in July last year, as commissioner of education, I had to make the decision, are we going to reopen or are we not reopening?

You just have to make the decision – not easy and not popular with everyone – but you have to make a decision based on everything that you know.

I make it analogous to that because it's unprecedented, right? The conditions are not perfect anywhere. I don't think there's a teacher across the country that needs a standardized test to tell them how the children in front of them are doing.

Yeah, we have to make a decision about how to move forward based on the data that we're receiving from states and the conditions of where they are, where their students are in terms of reopening.

And we know that every little bit of data put together – because standardized tests aren't the end all – but putting those pieces of data together will help paint a picture that can help you distribute resources.

So, for a teacher, they may not need that [data], but for a policymaker, for someone at the state level to say, 'This community needs to get more than this community based on what we're seeing – not only from the standardized test, but the Opportunity-to-Learn data as well and other measures – we're making very serious decisions about how to remove billions of dollars.

Secretary Cardona: [00:33:56]

So, every little bit of data helps. And in terms of the reliability [of standardized tests]. I recognize that.

Listen, if my child was going to school for the first day and they had to sit in front of them [standardized tests], that's not good for the students.

But I don't know how reliable those data are going to be.

But what we're doing is working with states to provide as much flexibility as possible, including assessing students in the fall so that they can get some reliable data to help guide their decisions.

When we talk about raising the bar, making sure students are coming back to quality curriculum, we have to know what they missed so that we can modify the curriculum next year to make sure that we're meeting the needs of our learners.

That's what this is about. So, it's not perfect. Clearly, the conditions aren't ideal nor consistent throughout the country.

You've got to make a decision based on what's best for students and what you feel is best for students and make sure that we're keeping students at the center of the conversations.

Never a perfect answer for any of this. But we have to, we have to lead, and we have to make decisions.

Sarah Carr: [00:34:57] **Thank you, so I'm going to ask one final question and then open it up to two members' questions for the last 15 minutes or so. I know there's been concern across multiple presidential administrations, Democrat and Republican, about media accessibility and transparency of the Education Department. And specifically, we're talking about timeliness of response, but also about government officials declining to attach their names to the release of basic information. And I wanted to put it to you up front. Will you allow and maybe even encourage Education Department staff to go on the record with journalists?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:35:39]

One of the things that I value most is the opportunity to control the narrative about the great work that's happening across our country, but also to be transparent when we talk about gaining trust with our families.

There's a group of students that, when given the opportunity, would prefer to stay working remotely because of some of the trust issues there.

It's harder to move forward if you don't trust you don't have a sense of trust, whether it's at the schoolhouse or the Education Department.

What I will commit is that we're going to be as transparent as possible. We're going to communicate openly, and we're going to make sure that we're sharing what's working, what's not working. But the focus is always going to be on making sure that we're doing what's right for students.

And I think having a good relationship with our journalistic partners is critical to doing that work, of being open and honest and transparent and making sure that we're controlling the narrative about what's happening, what we're focusing on, what's working and what's not working.

I've always experienced that to be a positive at every level of service as an educator, and that's not going to change as secretary of education.

Sarah Carr: [00:36:51] Thank you so much, Secretary Carter. And I'm going to turn it over to Emily Richmond of the staff for some audience questions.

Emily Richmond: [00:37:00] **Thank you, Sarah. Let's jump right in. So, our first question comes from Kalyn Belsha. She says: You highlighted the equity issue that students of color are less likely to be learning in person compared with white students right now. But some of that has to do with family choice, not what a school district is offering. Will you set a goal for the share of students you want to see actually learning in person in the fall? And would you advise school districts to offer a virtual option to parents or students who may want to take advantage of that?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:37:30]

So that's a great question. Thank you.

I want all students to have the opportunity to learn in person in the spring, but I expect it in the fall.

And with regard to the remote learning students select, I do believe students learn best in the classroom.

I'm not saying here that I think all students across the country should have an online learning opportunity. But I will say that we need to be innovative in how we connect with students.

And we know that blended learning, it didn't start with the pandemic. There are districts and states that really have taken advantage of the opportunity to provide blended learning for students to learn remotely or to learn from home or to have experiences where they're learning in a community of people from across the country. So blended learning should be a part of how we reimagine education.

And learning doesn't always happen in the schoolhouse. I just left an automotive technology learning space where students spend eight weeks in the field learning from folks in the field around automotive technology, and then they come back into the classroom, and they'll tell you that that learning experience is so rich. As a matter of fact, it's leading to jobs for them.

So, we need to think outside of the box. We need to be creative around blended learning.

But I need all students to have an opportunity to learn in the schoolhouse.

What I don't want to see, to be very candid, is a system where students who were underserved in the past select remote learning because they don't feel that that school is welcoming or safe for them.

We need to do better. We need to make sure all students prefer to learn in the schoolhouse because it's a warm place for them. It's a welcoming place. They see people that look like them, that honor them, that respect them. They see curriculum where they see their stories in the curriculum.

All schools should be inviting places for not only students but families. That's the goal. Yes, blended learning should be a part of the plan moving forward.

Emily Richmond: [00:39:23] **Kim Kozlowski, higher education reporter at the Detroit News. What can communities do to support students who get funds for free college to ensure that they actually graduate with something like a credential?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:39:34]

Thanks, Kim, for that question.

So, I think the question was, how do we make sure that in the community that they graduate with a credential? Right.

So, there are so many options.

There's so much work to be done to engage our workforce partners with our community colleges, with our high schools, to create pathways for students like the ones that I saw today, where we have high school students exploring different pathways – maybe getting an externship or an internship and then joining a two-year program.

And maybe that two-year program starts while they're still in high school and then getting workforce experience so that they can get a job after.

I also think the workforce partners have to be involved earlier. It can't wait for the students to graduate to be connected.

So, sitting down with educators to help develop curriculum so that the curriculum that our students are getting – as early as middle school – connect to the workforce needs that there are out there.

We have to be intentional – intentional about a collaboration to get that work done.

Thank you for the question.

Emily Richmond: [00:40:32] **Linda Wertheimer, a freelance education journalist, asks: What role do you see the federal government, if any, playing in the ethnic studies movement in the nation's schools? Will it, for example, promote the 1619 Project, in contrast to the prior administration's promotion of the defunct 1776 Commission report?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:40:50]

Yeah, so listen.

I'm an educator at heart. I'm a teacher at heart, and while I know my role doesn't influence curriculum and nor do I believe the secretary of education or the Department of Education should be telling local districts what to teach in their courses.

I do know that when students are seen in the curriculum, they are felt like their stories are listened to or heard. They're more likely to engage and want to be there.

'Windows, mirrors and sliding doors': And I'll just quickly just share what I mean by that:

Curriculum should be a window into other cultures. It should be a mirror where you see yourself in it, and it should provide sliding glass doors where you can walk in for a little bit to see what other people experience.

But I have complete confidence that our educators get it. Let our educators be a part of that process. They always keep the students at the center when making a decision. I think that's what decisions need to be made in the classroom by educators, our leaders in the schoolhouses who know what they're doing, and I have complete confidence that they're going to get it right.

I don't think it's our role as a federal government to be dictating what's going to be taught in the curriculum. But it is our goal to make sure that all students have access to [a] high-quality curriculum and making sure that all students have access to opportunities and success after graduation.

Emily Richmond: [00:42:13] We have a question from the international journalists, from Bidisha Sengupta, assistant editor of The Indian Panorama, that's a New York based news weekly. And she's and the question is: As you said, your parents are your best teachers in India. Our parents are our primary teachers. And the education system is totally different in two countries. Do you think Indian families that have immigrated to the US in recent times need some special training for that, quote, natural, authentic engagement?

Secretary Cardona: [00:42:39] So you're saying – it should families be receiving you're asking should I

Emily Richmond: [00:42:44] I think the question is about outreach to families of color, maybe new immigrant families in the US.

Secretary Cardona: [00:42:51]

Bidisha, thank you for that question, because it really highlights how are reopening efforts are not just about turning on the lights. It's not just about making sure we have enough PPE.

It's really about reengaging in a new way, making sure that we as an institution, an education institution, are aware of the customers and serve.

If that means that we have to be trained or learn the cultural norms of different places, then we have to do that in order to serve the students.

It means that in communities that have high concentrations of cultural norms, that it's our responsibility and our privilege as educators to learn those norms, to help engage those families in ways that they're comfortable so that their students can be successful.

Emily Richmond: [00:43:37] Matt Barnum at Chalkbeat: the administration has said it will not waive standardized testing requirements this year, but local reporting has indicated that large swaths of students won't take the test anyway because downloading remotely. And some educators say the test will take up a lot of time but won't provide actionable information. Why require the test if it's not clear that it would yield useful data?

Secretary Cardona: [00:43:58]

The reality is one size doesn't fit all. If you go to some states, they have computer-adaptive tests that can be done remotely, and they're able to do it in other places. In other places, the technology around the assessments isn't as advanced, so they don't have a remote option. So again, one size doesn't fit all.

What we're trying to do as an Education Department is work with individual states to try to find out what position they're in and what needs they have and be as flexible as possible.

The goal right now is to provide social-emotional support for students, help them come back.

The assessments are a very small part of what we should be focusing on.

We want to make sure our students are feeling welcome, that our families are feeling welcome, that they feel safe, and that we're setting a path toward a reimagined education system that lifts the standards and provides opportunities for all students.

Emily Richmond: [00:44:50] Michael Stratford, who covers higher education for Politico, asks: Are you considering extending the pause on federal student loan payments and interest beyond September 30th? What does the Biden administration plan to restart payments in October?

Secretary Cardona: [00:45:02]

We're looking at it.

Obviously, we're going to always take leave from what the data is telling us and where we are as a country with regard to the recovery, the pandemic.

It's not out of the question, but at this point, it's September 30.

Emily Richmond: [00:45:14] Ok, fair enough.

Freelance education journalist Menachem Wecker asks: Is there an achievement program or value of your predecessors that stands out in your mind what you think the Department of Nation can be proud of, that you're going to build upon? Or should the public expect a fundamentally different approach across the board in coming months and years?

Secretary Cardona: [00:45:33]

You know, I think my focus has been very clear. We're going to unapologetically address achievement disparities.

We're going to create clear pathways to college and credentialing programs and workforce opportunities that exist out there.

We're going to be intentional about collaborating with other sister agencies and creating that culture of intentional collaboration across the country. We're going to lift up best practices.

We're going to control the narrative, and we're going to do so with the support and hard work of our career staffers who have been working nonstop throughout the administration to make sure they serve students. So that's our focus.

Emily Richmond: [00:46:08] Moving forward to remind everyone that the secretary does have a hard stop at 1:00 p.m. We're going to try to get to just a couple more questions, but we appreciate your understanding about his schedule. And in case he does have to leave abruptly, I just want to thank him on behalf of CWA for making the time for us today. And also, a special thank you to Sarah Carr for moderating the Q&A so beautifully. Thank you, Sarah.

Next question from Sharon Lurye, a freelance journalist, and she mentions the latest data from your home state. Connecticut shows there are several special education schools that report over three thousand incidents of restraint and seclusion in a single year for a relatively small population. These schools receive public funding. As secretary, would you support?

Secretary Cardona: [00:46:56]

So, Emily froze on my screen, but I want to take advantage of the time that I have, and I'm hopeful that you can still hear me and see me.

I want to take this moment to thank Emily for the questions. I want to thank Sarah for the conversation. And I want to thank all of you for allowing me a little bit of time with you to question about special education and disproportionality.

We have a lot of work to do in our country to make sure that we're not that we're meeting the needs of our learners, that we're looking at data to make sure that we're doing so in a way that's equitable.

And our students with disabilities are critical, they're priorities for all of us.

But I know that there are exclusionary practices across the country, too. You can almost predict who's going to be excluded based on race or place where they live.

So, we have a lot of work to do to be open and honest about some of those data and be supportive, but also make sure we keep our foot on the gas pedal to improving those practices so that all students have access. That includes students with disabilities.

Restraint and seclusion is something that's critically an important issue.

As a principal and as a district leader, I made sure I looked at those data, and I talked to leaders, and I anticipate doing that as secretary of education.

Stacia Cedillo: [00:48:12] And I can fill in for Emily. I'm a program manager here at EWA. I know we just have a few more minutes. So, I'm going to try to squeeze in just a couple more questions here.

Hugh Ferguson asks about the student loan moratorium, with the student loan moratorium potentially coming to an end on September 30th. What is the department doing to keep borrowers aware of the repayment landscape amid discussions of some form of federal debt cancellation?

Secretary Cardona: [00:48:37]

And so, as I said, and I'll answer quick, because I think we have time for one more after this one.

We're going to continue to communicate with borrowers if it goes any further.

And we're also going to create a ramp up because we know that we can't just turn on the switch and say, 'OK.'

We have to work with them to make sure that we ramp up the communication and the clarity so that it's as smooth as possible.

We know that that's something that we're going to be focusing on as it gets closer.

Last question really quickly.

Emily Richmond: [00:49:03] So I am back. Can everyone hear and see me?

Stacia Cedillo: [00:49:06] Yes. Yes. I think, Emily, if you want to read the last question from Mark Keierleber. Do you have that pulled up?

Emily Richmond: [00:49:15] **Yes, I do. Thanks so much, from Mark Keierleber at the 74 million: George Floyd's murder prompted districts to cut ties with the police. What are your thoughts on the presence of school resource officers and the police free schools' movement?**

Secretary Cardona: [00:49:29]

I was in a district where we had resource officers in the middle and high school, and when trained well and when working in partnership with the school to be proactive and a support for students, it's a positive thing.

So, I've seen models of where it works exceptionally well, where it even provides a pathway for students to look at themselves as potential law enforcement officers or in the field of law enforcement. It has to be done well.

There has to be efforts to make sure that [policing is] done well, or else it could turn really negative.

We don't need officers to be there looking at offenses and with the mentality of trying to catch students. That's not what it should be.

It should be a positive resource, kind of like a community school almost, where you have different members of this community in the building supporting students to be successful in life.

And I know that when done well, it can really serve students in a positive way.

I want to thank you again for your time. Thank you, Emily, for the questions. Stacia and Sarah, and I enjoyed my time, and I know this is not the last.

Thank you again for all you do, especially during the pandemic, putting faces to some of the stories that we're experiencing together. So, thank you and have a great afternoon.

Emily Richmond: [00:50:46] Thank you. And we look forward to welcoming you in person very, very soon. Another opportunity.

Secretary Cardona: [00:50:51] I look forward to that as well.

Emily Richmond: [00:50:53] And thank you to all of our attendees. Thank you again to Sarah Carr for a magnificent job steering that important conversation. And thank you to all of you who have joined us for this kickoff plenary. You'll get an email next week with an evaluation form. Please complete it. We take our member feedback very seriously and we use it to improve our offerings. We're going to have a short break. We'll resume sessions at one thirty PM Eastern. I just thought, you know what's coming up next, we have K-12 data palooza key datasets for covering the covid recovery in schools. You can also choose to go to the case of the four hundred thousand missing college students. And then third, and certainly not finally, is the covid slide and what to do about it. So, lots of great choices for you waiting at the one 30 session, mark. Thank you, everybody. On behalf of the way, we appreciate your time. We'll see you soon.