



## **An Early Honeymoon for Miguel Cardona Could Be Tested by Biden's Push to Reopen Schools**

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If President-elect Joe Biden is nominating Miguel Cardona to be his education secretary in part to minimize controversy, there's some early evidence that he's succeeded. But it may not take long before that political equilibrium is disrupted.

Representatives from disparate groups like the American Federation of Teachers, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the school choice advocacy group Center for Education Reform, and Teach Plus expressed optimism about if not outright praise of Cardona, Connecticut's schools chief. CCSSO's Carissa Moffat Miller, the group's CEO, said Cardona has "dedicated his career to creating a more equitable education system," while AFT President Randi Weingarten said Cardona's record indicated how labor and district leaders could collaborate to help students.

And individuals ranging from the Network for Public Education's Diane Ravitch, a prominent critic of school choice and test-based accountability, to the libertarian Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey, reacted to Tuesday's news about Cardona without vocal objections and—in Ravitch's case—some satisfaction.

It's easy to envision other rumored candidates for the job generating a lot more division and instant controversy in response. To be fair, some teachers indicated Tuesday they would have liked a nominee with more than just a handful of years teaching in the classroom—Cardona became a school principal at 28.

Cardona also has a markedly different background from U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, as well as from higher-profile yet more-divisive individuals that had been rumored to be in contention for the nomination like union leaders and big-city district superintendents.

Indeed, part of what distinguishes Cardona from bigger names in the education field is that he hasn't waded into national fights over things like charter schools, accountability, and labor policies that have (fairly or not) defined some of his peers. Disagreements over these contentious policy issues, over which the federal government doesn't always exercise a great deal of control, have split both the Democratic Party and education political sphere more broadly in recent years.

So it's fair to wonder if a Cardona pick is evidence that, after the tumult of the DeVos/Trump years and controversy during the Obama administration that had the NEA calling on former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to step down, the Biden team's appetite for a prominent, yet controversial nominee, was pretty small.

In addition to being free of political baggage that might have dogged other possible nominees, Cardona can always bring his "practitioner and policy experience" to bear in avoiding fundamental criticism about who he is or isn't, said David DeSchryver, a senior vice president at Whiteboard Advisors, an education research and consulting group.

"It's an encouraging, noncontroversial pick, which suggests that he'll be a good partner and good steward of federal education policies," DeSchryver said.

Denise Forte, a senior vice president at the Education Trust and former staffer in the Obama Education Department, said there's more to picking Cardona than simply not ruffling feathers, especially during a crisis.

"It's less about lowering the temperature and more about having a credible spokesperson who exemplifies the national leadership we need at this time around students and education," Forte said.

### **No Stranger to Controversy**

None of that's to say Cardona is a blank slate on controversial issues. You can read more about Cardona's position on key policy issues [here](#).

He's called charter schools "a viable option" but he doesn't have a lot of hands-on experience grappling with charters from his time in the Meriden, Conn., school district, or as the state chief. Cardona has pushed against using state test scores to evaluate teachers, yet has also said the Smarter Balanced exam as an upgrade over the previous state test.

He also was involved in the 2020 settlement of a long-running legal dispute in Connecticut over racial imbalance in magnet school admissions. Cardona had been in office only a few months before the resolution of that case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, and more generally hasn't been a state chief for very long. Yet his experience with the case and his public work on education equity issues could prove helpful if the Biden administration chooses to prioritize issues like school diversity and integration.

One group Cardona has been affiliated with is New Leaders, a nonprofit that trains K-12 leaders, where he participated in a fellowship program. New Leaders' CEO, Jean Desravines, said

Cardona brings a “balanced perspective” to his work, while his background as an English-learner and school principal sends a helpful message to students of color and educators, among others.

“When you think about school choice as an example, he’s agnostic,” Desravines said. “Miguel cares about kids, kids who attend public schools, and he wants to do everything he can to set those kids up for success. That balanced perspective ... is what he will bring to this role.”

### **Early Challenges on Policy**

DeSchryver did say, however, that Cardona will be tested early in his tenure if he’s confirmed.

Two tests in particular will sound out Cardona and the Biden administration’s political dexterity.

The first is what to tell states they must do when it comes to federally mandated assessments and accountability measures in the spring. Many states have already moved to reduce if not eliminate the role of tests in how they measure schools and students, a general approach that could be relatively easy for Cardona to support.

Yet he’ll face divisions among Democrats as to whether he should allow states to simply cancel these tests, allow states to alter them in some fashion, or tell schools to proceed as usual (or as close to usual as they can get). Earlier this month, Connecticut announced that it would conduct testing as planned this school year.

The second and potentially more challenging issue will be reopening schools.

Cardona made it clear in Connecticut over the past several months that he wants students to get the benefits of going to regular classes wherever and whenever possible. Many schools in the U.S. have held traditional classes this academic year. And Biden has said his goal is for most schools to be back open and offering regular classes within 100 days of his inauguration. (Some people, of course, might not think that timeline is ambitious enough.)

Yet months of polling have shown that families of color are less likely to favor a return to in-person school during the pandemic than their white counterparts. In addition, some educators remain wary about the risks posed to themselves and others if they return to classes while the virus still has a significant foothold in their communities; he will also be likely get consistent reminders about those concerns from teachers and other school staff.

Cardona's push to reopen schools has met with resistance in Connecticut; one teacher, Nicole Rizzo, responded to the state's plan by saying it could cost 200 lives. The controversy and frustration surrounding attempts to reopen New York City schools during the pandemic, for example, could make any education leader queasy.

Desravines acknowledged that this would be a "complicated issue" for Cardona, but added that Cardona will bring "an understanding why parents of color may be hesitant to send their kids" back to school because of how COVID-19 has disproportionately affected them.

But Desravines also said, "My sense is that part of the reason he's taking that approach [in Connecticut] is the understanding and appreciation for the numerous benefits of being able to attend schools in person. I think he's also a skilled administrator and is cognizant of the fact that schools are deeply a local affair. And he will be aware of that as he shares his perspective."

Cardona could also establish a firm foothold by providing clear messages for schools that rely on public health expertise while not forgetting local K-12 needs, Forte said.

"That's what's been missing: the lack of consistent and credible guidance," she added.

One other factor? Cardona could also get the benefit of the doubt that many educators weren't willing to afford to his immediate predecessor.

"He can push, but he'll defer" to school leaders who have final say in states and districts, DeSchryver said. "He'll get a pass DeVos did not."