

Q&A with Miguel Cardona  
Transcript

**MEYER/VALANT: How would you describe the situation you stepped into as U.S. Secretary of Education and your administration's work in those early days?**

CARDONA: You know, the thing that many people don't realize about D.C is that you put a bunch of strangers together in a short period of time. Initially I didn't have any say in who they were because as a candidate, I can't make decisions. So, I got sworn in in March. So, there was a team halfway assembled, remote. Good people, well-intentioned, from all over the country, different interests, different backgrounds. So, in addition to the pandemic, I had to really think about, okay, how do I assemble a team that can bring with them the experience of a parent, the experience of a teacher, the experience of a school leader, especially because we have to reopen schools. Only 46% of the schools were open full-time when I assumed the office. Only 46%, and by like October, November, we had over 97%. So, we had to accelerate reopening, because it was it was going on a year already.

So, the goal from day one was, we're going to reopen schools. That's job number one. So, we really convened. And similar to the strategy that I took in Connecticut, I wanted to make sure that—in Connecticut, we had an epidemiologist on the call. I leaned on the epidemiologist in Connecticut to make sure that my plan for reopening schools took into account his expertise around transmissibility, virility, all these words that I didn't know what they were five years ago. So, I brought that to D.C. So, White House Chief of Staff Jeff Zients was the COVID reopening person. Immediately, I spoke to Jeff, and I said, could we have weekly meetings? Could we have regulars with Anthony Fauci, Rochelle Walensky, Xavier Becerra and myself? And, it's the White House, right? If we're going to be successful, the left hand has to know what the right hand is doing. Early on, there was a situation where I put out guidance because I was quick. I knew as a Commissioner of Education, I needed guidance. So, this is the guidance. Here's a template. Make it your own. I'm not telling you what to do, but this is what we believe to be the best way to reopen schools and so on and so forth. A couple days later, the CDC came out with updated guidance, which made what I put out a week before somewhat irrelevant. So, that was an example for me to say, okay, wait a minute, we've got to do better.

And to Rochelle Walensky's credit, she recognized the importance of giving me a heads up around—because as you might imagine, back then, everything was okay, we had to separate, we can't let the president make it seem like he's saying “do this,” because the president needs to show he trusts science, right? So, think about that backdrop also, the political backdrop where, the previous year, it was felt that the President was driving it not based on what science said was right, but based on other things. So, President Biden was very adamant that we trust the CDC, and when they come out with guidance, we're going to use that guidance. But I said, I respect them, but I also can't be putting out guidance a week before and then you send me something else. And it was amazing, I remember doing something with Rochelle in Boston and we developed a very public collaboration strategy because the mentality was, if we could do it at the federal level, you could do it at the state level. And you could do it at the district level. So that was very intentional there.