

Q&A with Miguel Cardona

Transcript

MEYER/VALANT: Some people say that ED gave districts too much flexibility in how to spend recovery funds—and should have required more direct spending on academic recovery. What is your perspective?

CARDONA: Funny, because a lot of those same people say that the federal government shouldn't have a role in deciding what local people do. Look, and this is where being an educator really—name something that's not connected to recovery where the money was used. And I remember telling the Chiefs, half joking, I'd better not see football fields being built with ARPA dollars. But when you talk about infrastructure, I went to Philadelphia and those air handling systems hadn't been touched in 20 years. So, you had poor circulation, respiratory issues, so when the infrastructure of needs were being taken care of there, part of that was to build confidence from your employees to say, okay, I'm going to go back now. Because over there, there are a lot of issues that were surrounding airflow, deferred maintenance, so those dollars were being used there. So, to me, as a former teacher, principal, district leader and commissioner, I know that there has to be a balance between coherence and autonomy. And who knows better than the people in that community what they need?

Now, I was very adamant that, this is about...one of the first things that I did was bring together the leaders of what I call the education alphabet soup. So, think about all the letters and groups, you know, whether it's CCSSO, AFT, NEA, AASA, NASBE, and I said, we are going to be judged based on how we deliver the dollars and use the dollars. So, make sure that you're communicating what those dollars are going for. So, I was very cognizant of that, and I was also very clear that, districts, when they get those dollars, I had limited role. And I want to remind you, it was Congress that determined my role, not me. So, I was very clear that, one of the expectations was, if I can't hold you accountable—five thousand districts—I will have your people hold you accountable. So, we required—and we kicked back state plans if they didn't have this—we required, on your website, clarity around how the dollars are being used and where they're going. I felt that a bottom-up accountability system, that I required them to have, even though I wasn't told by Congress that I could do that, was the way to make sure that accountability was authentic and specific to the needs of the community.