

Q&A with Miguel Cardona
Transcript

MEYER/VALANT: Many Americans had strong feelings about schools' response to COVID, and it seems the politics of education remain highly charged today. How do you think about the politics of COVID and schools—and its impact?

CARDONA: Well, I think it was politicized, for lack of a better word. I have to remind folks; the schools were closed during the Trump administration. They were reopened during the Biden administration. There was zero guidance from March to March, and then there was an abundance of guidance and schools were opened by November, across the country. So, my message from day one: we've got to get our schools open. The politics rearing its head in it was intentional. It was the "big government is telling us what to do." I remember, I said before, Governor Abbott, Governor DeSantis, in my opinion, just to kind of get themselves on a national footing, any little thing that we did, they would do the opposite. They picked on superintendent of Broward County. They ended up firing her because she trusted her medical people to say, yeah, if the kids want to wear masks, they can. So, it became less about the pandemic, less about health, more about national profile.

And then the whole, vilifying the top doctor, and then look at the pendulum swing. Now we have someone that's leading that that has been against vaccines and is just leading the health and human services. So, to me, this is more politics than anything else. And it was used as the fulcrum for the political swing, the pendulum moving the other way. And I think that's just the nature of where we are as a country, sadly. I think that's the culture in D.C. It made it very difficult to engage in bipartisan efforts to do what's right. It became harder to listen when one side doesn't even want to engage, even on things you agree on, like career pathways or mental health of students. It became us versus them, sadly, in many respects, at least publicly, because behind the scenes there, there were some pretty good conversations with folks that publicly would come after me.

But I think that's just the nature of Washington, DC, and for us, it was less about that. It was really important for me to not engage in culture wars to the degree that I was being baited, because I needed to focus on making sure students had access. I needed to make sure that I was addressing some of the major things that were neglected for decades in in public education and in higher education.