

## US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona

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Marianne O'Hare: The brightest minds in health policy and innovation, interviewed by leaders in community health. This week Conversations on Health Care welcomes Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, on the impact of COVID-19 and the need for stability in American schools.

Miguel Cardona: We have worked closely with all states to make sure that that message is there. We supported our superintendents that are making decisions to protect students and staff, and will continue to do that.

Marianne O'Hare: Now, here are your hosts Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter on Conversations on Health Care.

Mark Masselli: This is Conversations on Health Care. Our guest is U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, who holds the nation's top education job as America's schools tackle the COVID health challenge and the learning losses it's created.

Margaret Flinter: Secretary Miguel Cardona first gained national attention while serving as Connecticut Education Commissioner where he navigated the safe return of students to classrooms in his state. Secretary Cardona has been a teacher and a principal, fulfilling President Biden's promise to put an educator in the nation's top education job.

Mark Masselli: Thank you so much for joining us.

Miguel Cardona: Hey, great to be with you both, Mark and Margaret. I'm glad to be on this show, and honored to be able to engage in a conversation about a topic I love so much, our kids and our schools.

Mark Masselli: Absolutely. You know, seven school boards are challenging Virginia Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin's executive order banning mask mandates in schools, and the school boards say masks are needed to ensure the safety and welfare of all students. What's your take on this situation, and is there anything that your department can do?

Miguel Cardona: Yeah. Well, you know, my message from day one has been very clear, and by 'day one' I mean March 2020, before I was Secretary of Education, when I was Commissioner of Education. And it stems from my feelings as a father, you know. There is nothing more valuable to me than my own children, and their safety, and their health. Right? So, one thing we did early on, and part of the reason why Connecticut was successful in safely reopening the schools, is we relied very closely on our health experts. It is a health pandemic. We need to keep it in the hands of our health experts. I had more conversations with epidemiologists than with my own family members for so many of those months, and the reason why we did that is because they have an understanding of how disease spreads and how to keep ourselves safe. Right?

That hasn't changed. I think what has changed is the fatigue across the country. We are two years in. I remember planning for two weeks of disrupted learning. We are in our second year. So the fatigue has increased. I also think politization of many of the strategies to keep our families and our schools safe. It's become political in so many places, and I think intentionally, and that's unfortunate. So, the leaders and educators today have much more to contend with. They have not only the pandemic, but also growing fatigue and politics getting in the way of good public health policies.

So, what we have done, it happened when the Delta spike happened if you recall. You know, that happened maybe two weeks before schools started in the fall. We really were very strong at the Federal Department of Education, communicating that it is the responsibility of our superintendents and our boards to protect our students and our staff. Safe working environment, safe learning environment is critical, and we still believe that, and we have worked closely with all states to make sure that that message is there. We supported our superintendents that are making decisions to protect students and staff, and we'll continue to do that.

I think really everyone wants our kids in schools. We all know the benefits of in-person learning. We have to leave public health to the experts. But I also understand we are all fatigued. We all want a day when masks are not required, but right now we know especially with Omicron we have to do everything in our power to keep our children safe, and that's following those medication strategies that the CDC recommends.

Margaret Flinter: Well Secretary, thank you for those comments. Masking has been polarizing, mandatory masking in schools has been a polarizing issue, but now, the Los Angeles and the Washington DC school districts are putting in place COVID vaccine mandates for students. I think they are set to begin soon. I imagine this will also create quite a bit of controversy. What are your thoughts about keeping students out of school if they are not vaccinated?

Miguel Cardona: You know, I talked to the mayor of New Orleans maybe three-four weeks ago when I was visiting New Orleans schools, and we had a conversation about this. She too was implementing a requirement for vaccinations for students in the schools. And I recognize that vaccines are the most important tool we have. It really is, to prevent disease spread, and to prevent severity, to keep children out of hospitals, to keep communities safe, not just for the student that's vaccinated, but for their vulnerable family members, or those in our community who are unable to get vaccines even if they wanted to.

You know, with regard to the requirements, those are local and state decisions. I think state leaders and local leaders need to understand

the implications of that. I strongly encourage not only vaccines, but also that our schools have a role in promoting vaccination. We have setup clinics throughout our country. I have visited many with Dr. Murphy and others just to promote the importance of schools having a role here, pediatricians having a role partnering with schools. As far as the mandates are concerned, or the laws, I will leave that up to the local officials. But I do know that in places where vaccination percentages are higher, there is less disruption to school, and there's less hospitalization, which is obviously the goal for any parent to protect your child.

Mark Masselli: And to protect your child is so important. Mr. Secretary, you know that our organization here in Connecticut operates school-based health centers across the state, providing care to 17,000 students, including their mental health needs, but in the entire country only a fraction of students receive that type of service. But there is good news I hope, or hope is on the way. The bipartisan Hallways to Health Care Act has been introduced in the Senate. It would lead to greater investment in school-based health centers. I'm wondering is there anything else the administration can do to push this idea.

Miguel Cardona: Sure, yeah. I know a little bit about what you do, in my previous roles and you know, having people that I know very well working within community health center. The reality is the days of us thinking that our schools are places where it's only about reading, writing and arithmetic, those are long gone. We need to think holistically about our children. I was fortunate to serve in the Meriden public schools for over 23 years, and I saw as the needs progressed with our students we needed to evolve in our thinking. And you know, the partnership with the community health center to provide support services, mental and behavioral support services to students, dental services, just the health needs of our students, they are present in our schools. So the more we can remove barriers by providing good partnerships with community organizations like a community health center that provides some of these services, the better the students are able to learn, and we can focus on teaching and learning.

So, I'm encouraged by the growing sentiment, bipartisan sentiment, that we must care for the holistic needs of our students. And at the Department of Education we haven't been sitting idle waiting for this to happen. Day one, we made it very clear that as we are thinking about how to utilize the \$130 billion that the President and Congress passed for the American Rescue Plan, safe school reopening obviously is the priority. So, ensuring you have PPEs, ensuring you have all the tools you need to safely reopen. But the second thing on our list and on purpose was the social-emotional wellbeing of our students and our staff. Often times we leave that out.

Our students, their families, and our educators, our dedicated educators, we have all experienced trauma. So, ensuring that as we reopen our schools we reimagine the role of social and emotional wellbeing, access to mental health supports. So, we have really prioritized it. We released a first of its kind support manual for districts in their language, not in government speak, not in bureaucratic language, in their language, on how to implement mental health supports, how to learn from colleagues across the country, and in each of our reopening guidance documents we emphasize the importance of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

So, for me, it's critically important that as we reopen and reimagine schools, we don't go back to what it looked like before where it was insufficient. We must design and embed within our reopening strategies social and emotional supports for students, and access to mental health support. So, we have encouraged use of ARP funds for that, we have provided guidance, we live the best practices, and we are going to continue to push so that the ARP money is being used for those reasons, for those purposes.

Mark Masselli: Great.

Margaret Flinter: Well Secretary, thank you for those comments. And we certainly have seen an evolution in many ways over these last 15 or 20 years as you say. One of the changes that we saw this year, over the last two years really, was the level of engagement of parents, and often very unhappy parents, around some of these issues in the schools, around masking, and around the response to COVID, and it kind of raised the question of who do the public schools really belong to. And there's been some debate popping up that we need to do better at listening to parents, though I know you have always tried, and that parents are really the clients of public schools. Is that the right world view to have that the parents are the clients and that's who the school systems really have to organize around? What have been your thoughts since you have watched this unfold over the last two years?

Miguel Cardona: You know, I have seen President Biden articulate it very clearly. Not only did he start as President during a pandemic, but during a time when our country was divided, and he aimed to restore the soul of our country and bring folks together. I mean the work to get to the bipartisan infrastructure plan, demonstrates the commitment of working with different perspectives. And we still have ways to go. There are lot of folks that are divided on certain topics, whether it's masks mandates, or whatever. It's really important that we recognize that schools unite.

Schools are hubs of the community that bring people together, and it's really important as we reopen schools and really think about the

next chapter of what education looks like across the country, that we are not limited by listening only to those who share our thoughts, that we entertain the various perspectives that exist, and understand that there is a lot of emotion behind it, there is a lot of passion behind it. But, it's the American thing to do to listen to different perspectives and come together especially around our students, around our children, to improve education. So, I think it is important that all families have access to be heard, and that different perspectives are taken into account.

At the end of the day it's critically important also that we have boards of education that represent families. In many cases, especially in the experiences that I have had, board members are elected and they represent the different parts of the community. So, we must recognize that democracy prevails, and that we have a system setup where we should be listening to parents. But I also would argue we need to be listening to our students, and make sure that their voice is being taken into account as we think about how to reimagine education. Our students have experienced this firsthand and they also have say in what education should look like moving forward.

Mark Masselli: Well, that's such a good observation, that American solution is really going to require listening to voices across the spectrum including that of teachers. But, you know, you bring an interesting perspective to Washington, and I wonder if you might reflect a little on it. You know, you were a teacher, a principal, and also your experience as an English language learner. How have all those helped shape your thinking as you lead this really very important department at an important time in American history?

Miguel Cardona: You know, it's a time that requires the ability to problem solve with those whose perspectives are different, to engage with people with whom you don't typically engage. As I mentioned, I became good friends with epidemiologists over the last two years, something that I never learned in preparatory school for education. But I will give credit to Meriden, Connecticut, the city where I was born and raised, where I went to school. It's a such diverse community. And as a second language learner, I learned English second, and living in a community that's so diverse, and myself being bicultural, I understood how to code-switch and culture switch and understand different ways of doing things. That helped me during the pandemic understand the different perspectives and keep that mentality that just because someone doesn't think like you doesn't mean that they shouldn't be heard, or that they don't bring value to the table.

I think that's what the President was looking for, someone that can go into the moment and recognize that there is no easy linear solution to this, but is willing to engage different folks, listen, and come up with a

solution that is best for students, number one, and that can lead our country forward. So, the biculturalism I always say is the superpower and an asset for me. Coming from a very diverse community and then being educated and having the opportunity, the privilege to serve as an educator in a community that's as diverse as ours, in my opinion, were really good prerequisites to the problem solving and what I call intentional collaboration that I do today as Secretary of Education.

Margaret Flinter: Well, it's great to have educators like yourself in top places in Washington right now. And we also have another person in pretty high places who comes from education, and that's First Lady Dr. Jill Biden who's still teaching at a community college today even as First Lady. Are you getting any feedback or advice from Dr. Biden on what we should be doing in education and what you should be doing?

Miguel Cardona: Yeah, she's great. Who better than her to really show what education can be and just be such a great advocate for the education system? I always say my job is easier because the best adviser to the President is an educator. And you know I had the privilege of traveling with the First Lady last week. We visited a school, a community college to announce, not only to see the great work they are doing but also to announce \$198 million in grants to help support basic needs of students so that they can go to school, needs like childcare, needs like food insecurities.

So, we were announcing this, and you know, in my conversations with her it's very clear we need to make sure that we are providing opportunities for all students to go to school to study, to reach their potential. And I know she's still teaching, and I know her passion for education across the country stems from the inspiration she gets from her students. So, it's always great to have conversations with her, to talk about education and our path forward in our country.

Mark Masselli: Well, Mr. Secretary, we want to thank you for joining us, and hope we will have you at sometime in the future. And thanks to our audience for joining us for this important talk. You can learn more about Conversations on Health Care and sign up on our email at [www.chcradio.com](http://www.chcradio.com). Mr. Secretary, thank you for your leadership, your inspiration, and the work that you do, on behalf of all American citizens.

Miguel Cardona: Thank you President Masselli and Vice President Flinter for the conversation, but more importantly, for the work you do to promote health across our community, across our state, and across our country. [Inaudible 00:17:06]

Margaret Flinter: Thank you Secretary.

Mark Masselli: Thanks to everybody.

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Mark Masselli: At Conversations on Health Care we want our audience to be truly in the know when it comes to the facts about health care reform and policy. Lori Robertson is an award-winning journalist and Managing Editor of FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aim to reduce the level of deception in U.S. Politics. Lori, what have you got for us this week?

Lori Robertson: President Joe Biden has said his administration will provide one billion free at-home rapid COVID-19 tests to Americans starting in late January, and retail outlets have been selling out of these antigen tests. Let's take a look at some common questions about these tests.

The rapid antigen tests are viral tests that check for the presence of SARS CoV-2 viral proteins in a sample from a person's nose or mouth, to help determine if the person is currently infected with the Coronavirus. Some of these require a prescription, but the ones people are most familiar with are these self-tests that can be purchased over-the-counter and can be performed entirely at home, with the person taking their own sample, running the test, and reading out the result within 15 to 30 minutes.

The tests are similar to pregnancy tests, in that they detect proteins in a specimen using antibodies embedded in a test strip. 13 fully at-home over-the-counter antigen tests now have FDA authorization. These types of tests are generally reliable, but they aren't as sensitive as molecular diagnostic tests, such as the PCR test which can take hours or days for people to get their results. A positive result on a rapid antigen test is very likely to be correct, but a negative test doesn't necessarily mean someone isn't infected. The tests are more accurate in people with symptoms, compared with someone who doesn't have symptoms.

It is not yet known how well rapid antigen tests fare against the Omicron variant, although most tests are able to detect it. While some early lab tests suggested a possible reduction in sensitivity, so far clinical testing of patients show the antigen tests perform similarly against Omicron as previous variants, the Director of the National Institute Of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering told us. However, Omicron infections appear to have a shorter incubation period or length of time from exposure to first symptom, which could mean people are testing sooner after infection than they were previously. That could make it appear that the tests are less sensitive even if they aren't.

In addition to the Federal government's new COVIDtests.gov website, these rapid tests are sold through retail stores and online and some local governments are also offering them to their residents. The CDC

suggests taking one of these tests before gathering indoors with people from other households.

That's my fact check for this week. I'm Lori Robertson, Managing Editor of FactCheck.org.

Margaret Flinter: FactCheck.org is committed to factual accuracy from the country's major political players, and is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have a fact that you would like checked, email us at [www.chcradio.com](http://www.chcradio.com). We'll have FactCheck.org's Lori Robertson check it out for you here on Conversations on Health Care.

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Mark Masselli: Each week Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities and everyday lives. Students of public health are often tasked with devising interventions for addressing some of health's biggest challenges, and for Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health students Dan Wexler and Priya Patel, their idea netted an award, and launched a business idea at the same time. The students were tasked with addressing food insecurity in underserved parts of the world, including neighborhoods in their own backyard, families living in high poverty, low resource area, and finding fresh, affordable, healthy food in neighborhoods with no grocery stores or food markets. They thought of the current trend of healthy meal or meals services like Blue Apron and wondered what if we modified that business model to serve the needs of those living in food deserts.

Wexler and his partner sourced food delivery companies that could provide prepackaged meal kits with all ingredients included, even spices, dressings and recipes. And instead of home delivery approach, they designed refrigerated kiosks that could easily be placed in local neighborhoods. Wexler says they wanted to make the idea of healthy eating and meal preparation as simple as possible.

Dan Wexler: I think the biggest change is that there is no delivery system door to door per se, and that by going and setting up these kiosks in the community you can have a very lean design. You can have -- you don't need a storefront, you don't need to pay for shipping, you don't need to have inbox refrigeration, and you are very much addressing the need of access by physically saying, "Hey, here is healthy food. It's convenient because everything you need is in the box." The directions are simple, are very picture-based. There is a lot of literacy issues. And so just really thinking about how can we take all those lean design principles to facilitate access that really I think make it a solution that has a potential for impact.

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Mark Masselli: And they also conducted research with local ethnic groups to create recipes that would resonate with their families.

Dan Wexler: Then we just went down to the community and did taste testing at the farmers market and talked to people and said, "Do you like this? What do you want to be able to eat for dinner? How do you want to cook?" So basically, we have some dishes that have similar texture, similar spices. One thing that we found is there is a little bit of contention between parents who want to eat more traditional foods and kids who want to eat more American food, and we tried to alleviate that and bridge those gaps. So, one of our recipes for instance is a chicken pot pie pasta. So, it's kind of American, it's fun-sounding, but also, we use a lot of traditional seasonings and spices.

Mark Masselli: Customers can simply walk to the kiosk and purchase their meal kits with the SNAP cards or cash. And they added benefits. The kiosk will be run by the residents of the neighborhood, giving them an opportunity to purchase the kiosk and run them like a franchise, offering an economic benefit to the community as well.

Their idea earned them the Rabobank-MIT Food and Agribusiness Innovation Prize and \$15,000 in startup money to launch their enterprise. A low cost, portable healthy meal service, placed in portable kiosk in food desert neighborhoods, offering families a simple solution to address the problem of poor nutrition, providing an economic opportunity at the same time. Now that's a bright idea.

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Mark Masselli: You've been listening to Conversations on Health Care. I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and health.

Marianne O'Hare: Conversations on Health Care is recorded at WESU at Wesleyan University, streaming live at [www.chcradio.com](http://www.chcradio.com), iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. If you have comments, please e-mail us at [chcradio@chc1.com](mailto:chcradio@chc1.com), or find us on Facebook or Twitter. We love hearing from you. This show is brought to you by the Community Health Center.