

## Washington Update February 12, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

I imagine you have been glued to your tv watching the impeachment trial in the Senate this week, as I have. My Representative – Jamie Raskin (D-MD) – led the House in presenting the case for conviction. Whatever your politics, I think you have to agree that he did an amazing job, garnering praise even from opposing counsel in the case. It appears that a final vote will take place this weekend, and the Senate will be back to business, though hard to say if it will be “business as usual.”

### 1. Biden’s COVID Relief Proposal Moves Forward in the House

As per the requirements of the Budget Resolution which passed earlier this month, the shift was made this week to Committees of jurisdiction. Eleven committees are involved in the House and each must draft an individual bill in compliance with the instructions in the Budget Resolution. Then the Committees submit those bills back to the Budget Committee which creates the overall \$1.9 trillion package to be considered by the full House. The same process is supposed to occur in the Senate – all with the deadline of March 14 when current COVID unemployment supplements expire.

Three Committees include important provisions related to education. The first – the Committee on Education and Labor -- finalized their [\\$170 billion proposal for education](#) – over twice the annual budget for the Department of Education. The Committee approved [the measure](#), 27-21, along party lines after considering more than 30 amendments, several of which were intended to require schools to reopen for in-person instruction. The \$170 billion is comprised of \$130 billion for K-12 schools and \$40 billion for higher education. Led by Chair [Bobby Scott](#) (D-Va.), the Committee [package](#) also includes an increase of the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, which Republicans oppose.

A second Committee, the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is producing a [bill](#) which includes \$7.6 billion for a new Emergency Connectivity Fund within the e-rate program. This program will provide funding for elementary and secondary schools and for libraries to buy devices and connectivity services for students and individuals to use for remote learning.

The House Committee on Oversight and Reform, the third Committee, includes \$350 billion for state and local governments- funds which may be used for public education – at the discretion of state and local government recipients. The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) submitted a [letter](#) to the committee in support of this resolution.

The House also moved to name Members of Committees for the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, including the [Education and Labor Committee and its subcommittees](#). Freshman Congressman Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) was formally and unanimously [elected](#) by colleagues to be Vice Chair of the Committee. Bowman is a former teacher and principal with a track record of challenging the use of high stakes standardized testing -- arguing that it perpetuates inequalities. “In the richest country in the world, every child and every worker should be able to live in dignity and reach their full potential,” Bowman said. “As Vice Chair, I’m proud to stand with our students and families every day and to ensure their voices are heard.”

## **2. Senate HELP Committee Confirms Dr. Miguel Cardona for Secretary of Education and Moves Toward a COVID Package**

The Senate HELP Committee cast a bi-partisan vote of 17-5 to confirm Dr. Miguel Cardona as the next Secretary of Education. In supporting the nomination, Ranking Member Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC) cited his “clear qualifications.” He further noted “He’s stressed the need for students to be back in school, and that’s now, finally, a bipartisan mission.” Next up for Cardona is a vote by the full Senate, though the timing is unknown.

As the House wraps up its work on the reconciliation package, all eyes will shift to the Senate. With the tight deadline of March 14, it appears likely that the Senate may simply take up and pass the House version of the bill, leaving any possible changes to take place during conference.

Several Members of the Senate are weighing in with their priorities hoping they will be reflected in the COVID relief bill. Sen Chris Murphy (D-CT) led 12 Senate Democrats in urging Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) to include funding for summer enrichment opportunities for low-income children. [In a letter](#), the Senators stressed COVID-19’s disproportionate effects on low-income families and urged the necessity of setting aside funding for summer programs to help prevent learning loss and promote social and emotional development.

Senators Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Chris Murphy (D-CT), along with Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) reintroduced [legislation](#) to better support students with disabilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Supporting Children with Disabilities During COVID-19 Act* would provide \$11 billion for state grants under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), \$900 million for early childhood education programs, \$300 million for personnel development, and \$55 million under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998.

Like the House, the Senate is naming Members to Committees for the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. The [HELP Committee](#) includes new Senators, including Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-CO), Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) and Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-AL).

### 3. The Biden Harris Administration Outlines Priorities and Issues Guidance

Since December, President Biden has vowed to reopen a majority of K-8 schools in his first 100 days in office. The exact definition of “open” is being debated. Today’s [guidance released from the Department of Education](#) and from the [Centers for Disease Control](#) should provide more clarity on the question. An estimate published last month [by Burbio](#), which tracks various learning models schools are using, reported 58 percent of the nation’s K-12 students were getting some kind of in-person instruction. And a December survey by the Center on Reinventing Public Education reported 68 percent of districts were offering some level of face-to-face instruction. Depending on the definition of “open” the administration could be closer to meeting their goal than expected – or further away!

On Tuesday, Michelle Asha Cooper, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education, outlined the Biden administration’s list of higher education priorities. The plan includes making [community college tuition free](#), supporting minority-serving institutions, and bridging postsecondary education with the workforce. Speaking at the Community College National Legislative Summit, Cooper touted the plan as instrumental to revving the economy during pandemic recovery.

The Administration also wants to establish a new grant program to assist community colleges in increasing student retention and completion of college degrees and credentials.

Biden has also proposed a \$50 billion investment in "high-quality" job-skills training programs which would be used to support relationships between “community colleges, businesses, unions, governments and high schools to help identify high-demand knowledge and skills.”

Cooper also re-upped Biden’s call to double the maximum value of Pell Grants to support low-income students. The Administration wants the Department to “index the grant with inflation to ensure automatic increases so that its value does not continue to diminish over time,” Cooper said. Additionally, Biden wants to make sure student loan repayments do not exceed 5 percent of an individual’s discretionary income and that loans are forgiven after 20 years of payments. Under the plan, Dreamers would also be eligible for financial aid.

The Education Department is launching a national survey [national survey](#) to better understand the status of in-person learning at the nation’s schools, following an [executive order](#) from President Biden. Led by the agency’s Institute of Education Sciences, the NAEP 2021 School Survey will examine approximately 3,500 schools that enroll fourth-graders, and an equal number of schools that enroll eighth-graders, on a monthly basis from February to June.

### 4. New Resources for Educators

- **The Learning Policy Institute** is out with a blog [\*Eroding Opportunity: COVID-19's Toll on Student Access to Well-Prepared and Diverse Teachers\*](#) documenting the critical shortages of teachers, the inequitable impact of shortages, the lack of diversity in the profession and how the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges.
- **The National Education Policy Center** released a [\*review\*](#) on School Accountability which in part highlights why policymakers, educators, and state education administrators should not rely on the Hoover Institution's report for guidance as they consider strategies for assisting low-performing schools and districts. The Hoover Institution argues that state and federal officials should retain results-oriented accountability systems that use standardized assessments of students followed by consequences for not meeting performance goals.
- The [\*\*George W. Bush Institute\*\*](#) released a series of policy recommendations outlining the importance of standardized testing, what education leaders need to be focused on, and reasons for reevaluating what the school day and year looks like. The Institute also released a tool allowing state leaders to look across state data from the workforce, higher education, K-12, and early childhood to inform policy decisions.
- **Educators for Excellence** released [\*Voices from the Classroom 2021\*](#), a nationally representative survey that captures the views and opinions of educators across the country. The report offers a view from the ground as policymakers and elected leaders determine how to return to the classroom -- and not just recover from this education disruption -- but improve education supports for all students. Educators offer information on what is working, what needs to improve, what is needed to return to the classroom, and how to reimagine education to ensure it is equitable for all students.

Big shout out to Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan for her contribution to Washington Update. Like the Congress, we will be on recess next week – returning February 26. Be well.

Best,  
Jane