

Washington Update January 22, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

Welcome to the new world of Biden/Harris. The reset button has been hit and we are launched!

1. The Biden Harris Era Begins

Just two weeks after a riotous mob vandalized the Capitol, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris took the oath of office on the steps of the very same building. Setting the tone of unity, President Biden urged us to “see each other not as adversaries but as neighbors” and to “join forces, stop the shouting and lower the temperature.” With three living former Presidents (Clinton, Bush, Obama) from both sides of the aisle joining together to send a message of support to incoming President Biden, a hopeful tone is set for moving forward.

With astounding speed, the new Administration got right to work. President Biden signed [17 executive orders](#), memoranda and proclamations on the first afternoon of his Presidency. Among them were orders to rejoin the Paris climate accord, end the former Administration’s travel ban on predominantly Muslim and African countries, impose [a national mandate requiring masks](#) and physical distancing in all federal buildings, on all federal lands and by all federal employees, and to [pause Federal student loan payments through September](#).

On Thursday, the president took further [executive actions](#) that aligned with his pledge to reopen most K-12 schools in his first 100 days in office. These orders will help support the reopening goal by way of developing a national strategy to get the coronavirus under control. One [executive order](#) will direct the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide reopening guidance to schools with a focus on masking, testing and cleaning. A separate presidential memorandum will offer reimbursement to schools for purchases of personal protective equipment through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund.

Beyond executive action, Biden is pushing Congress to approve another \$170 billion for K-12 schools, colleges and universities to help them operate safely in person or facilitate remote learning. Congress approved \$82 billion in aid for schools in December, which Biden has said he views as a "down payment." This package will be an early test of bipartisanship on Capitol Hill.

President Biden [announced](#) San Diego Unified School District Superintendent Cindy Marten as his nominee for Deputy Education Secretary. Marten has been outspoken about addressing concerns about equity and interrupted learning time as schools continue to face the COVID-19 crisis. The Department of Education also announced [numerous appointees](#) in the Department including chief of staff, senior advisors, special assistants,

deputy assistant Secretaries and more. The appointees include former employees of NEA, Ed Trust and the Center for American Progress.

On Thursday – her first full day as First Lady -- Dr. Jill Biden, met with leaders of the AFT and the NEA in the White House for a [virtual event](#) with educators. She revealed that she was teaching her class the day before the inauguration, just hours before she boarded the plane to head to DC for the festivities. “I had to take the hybrid training and actually, on Tuesday morning, before we got on the plane to come to Washington, I was actually teaching my class,” she said. She told the participants that “Together, we are going to transform our nation’s education system....And when we do that, we will change the course of our future forever. And if you ever wonder if it’s possible, just remember that the First Lady of the United States is one of your own.”

2. Democrats Take Control for the 117th Congress

With the House in control of Democrats, the Senate followed suit this week confirming its Democratic majority, though by the slimmest of margins (50/50). After taking her own oath of office, [Vice President Harris](#) swore in Rev. Raphael Warnock (D-GA) and Jon Ossoff (D-GA) from the state of Georgia as well as Alex Padilla (D-CA) who assumed her vacated seat. The swearing-in of the three new Senators was groundbreaking as Warnock and Ossoff are respectively the first Black and Jewish Senators representing Georgia, while Padilla is California's first Latino Senator- all sworn into office by the first female, first Black and first Asian-American Vice President. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) took the majority leader gavel from Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY). Schumer becomes the first Jewish person to hold the role of Senate Majority Leader.

Majority Leader Schumer has been able to secure a number of confirmation hearings for Biden’s Cabinet nominees and two confirmation votes to date -- Avril Haines as Director of National Intelligence and General Lloyd Austin becomes the first Black American to lead the Department of Defense. Votes on Janet Yellen for Secretary of the Treasury and Andrew Blinken for Secretary of State are pending. The Senate HELP Committee may have a confirmation hearing for Secretary of Education nominee, Dr. Miguel Cardona, as soon as next week. Cardona continues to meet with Senators and education organizations to introduce himself and listen to concerns and priorities.

But the transfer of power in the Senate is anything but smooth. The impending impeachment trial of former President Trump hangs in the balance. While Minority Leader McConnell has been recommending a timeline which would postpone the trial until mid-February, Speaker Pelosi today announced that she would be sending the Article of Impeachment to the Senate on Monday. This would require the Senate to immediately begin the trial. The extent to which this results in a delay and/or defeat of Biden’s nominees and legislative priorities remains to be seen. Also in play is the unprecedented legal question of whether a former President can be impeached – considering he has already left office.

While the House pursues a formal investigation to uncover more details regarding possible House Member collusion in the planning of the riot in the Capitol, several Senate Democrats have filed an [ethics complaint](#) against GOP Sens. Josh Hawley (R-MO) and Ted Cruz (R-TX) requesting an investigation into whether these Members encouraged the violent January 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

President Biden's top priority is getting control of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only through executive action, but through enactment of his COVID relief package. While the House may move on it immediately, the Senate is likely to face roadblocks, as many Republicans believe it is too much money. What stands in the crosshairs is the current Senate rule requiring 60 votes for passage of such legislation. Some Democrats have urged that the rule be changed to only require 51 votes—but Sen. McConnell is seeking to extract a promise from Majority Leader Schumer that he will not change the rules in such a manner. The legislative vehicle of reconciliation (which requires only 51 votes) is likely to be in play here; however, that also may face [obstacles](#). The last COVID relief package took over 6 months to negotiate; let's hope this one goes faster.

3. Goodbye to the 1776 Commission

One of the controversial moves of President Trump in his last weeks in office was the creation of a [1776 Commission](#), intended to rewrite American history to deny the legacy of racism. The Commission issued its report just before the end of Trump's term, which historians described as a distortion of the history of slavery. The Biden administration lost no time in revamping the official White House website, removing [the report](#). President Biden has said he will [cancel the commission](#).

4. Invitation to Congressional Briefing “Student Access to Well-Prepared and Diverse Educators During and Beyond COVID-19”

On Thursday February 4, the [Coalition for Teaching Quality](#) will host a Congressional briefing examining the shortages of educators which have been exacerbated by the pandemic -- and possible federal responses to the crisis. Speakers at the briefing will be:

- **Chris LeGrande**, Principal of Guthrie High School and 2020 Oklahoma Principal of the Year
- **Jennifer Robinson**, Executive Director, Montclair State University Center for Pedagogy
- **Tara Kini**, Chief of Staff and Director of State Policy, the Learning Policy Institute
- **Valerie C. Williams**, Director of Government Relations, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education
- **Jennifer Smith**, NBCT, Monticello Middle School, Monticello CUSD #25 (IL)

All are invited. [RSVP here](#)

5. New Resources for Educators

- [The New York Times](#) reports on the dire shortage of not only teachers -- but substitute teachers – where in some districts only a high school diploma is required.
- [The University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) released a roadmap for education research in a crisis. The road map outlines five basic principles for a responsible research agenda.
- The GAO is recommending that the Education Department [take a closer look at federal TRIO grant programs](#), a \$1 billion-per-year effort intended to help first-generation college students, students with disabilities, veterans and others apply to and complete college
- Researchers from the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, [a new report on multiple measures assessments](#), concluded that “state systems have a pivotal role to play in bolstering college course taking by using policy to reduce barriers to college-level course enrollment and providing resources and guidance on placement practices.”
- The Evidence Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education found that [the rates of failing grades have increased significantly](#) across the country, especially for students who are learning online. Researchers concluded that districts shouldn’t rely too heavily on credit recovery programs, and should instead “rethink student progress” and “flood students with support
- [American Council on Education applauded the new administration’s action on DACA](#), , part of Wednesday's orders, and urged Congress to provide permanent legal protections and a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers.
- PBS Lesson Plan: [Discuss 22-year-old Amanda Gorman’s historical inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb.”](#) “

Join me in thanking the hard-working Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan, who keeps an eye on developments throughout the week and provides an early draft of Washington Update. We can both tell you that it is astounding how much news breaks on Thursdays. So, after you think you have the week’s activities covered by noon Thursday, new developments cause you to regroup and rewrite. It’s an interesting thing to monitor in the news cycle.

Wishing you all a weekend of peace and relaxation!

See you on twitter @janewestdc @ Brennan_kait

Best,
Jane