

Washington Update March 19 2021

Dear Colleagues,

With spring around the corner, massive funding ready to flow into school districts and institutions of higher education around the country, and shots increasingly in arms – it’s a good time to exhale and know that better times are on the way.

1. The Biden Agenda Continues to Unfold

The Biden Administration is on the brink of distributing the nearly [\\$122 billion](#) in new covid relief funding for the nation’s K-12 schools, which the Education Department said would be [made available](#) to states “this month.” Education Secretary Miguel Cardona notified state officials on Wednesday about the share of funding they would receive from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) that President Biden signed last week. States and school districts “should plan to expend these funds to safely reopen schools as expeditiously as possible this spring, sustain their healthy operations, and address the significant academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of their students,” Cardona wrote in the letter to state school chiefs.

Dr. Cardona joined White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki for her daily [press briefing](#) on Wednesday. During the Q and A with the press pool, Dr. Cardona touched on COVID-19 relief, school reopening, and standardized testing. The Secretary [told reporters](#) he didn't plan to change the Education Department’s decision on standardized testing, which was announced in February before he was confirmed by the Senate. “The guidance that we provided at the agency last month is the guidance that we’re going with moving forward on assessments to see where students are after this pandemic,” Cardona said.

The Education Department will convene a [summit on school reopening](#) on March 24, as part of its push to reopen a majority of the nation’s K-8 classrooms for in-person instruction by the end of April. Secretary Cardona, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and CDC Director Rochelle Walensky plan to speak at the event, called the *National Safe School Reopening Summit*. The program will feature three panels with federal health experts, school district leaders, teachers and students. The goal is to share best practices, connect with leaders, educators and students from across this country who are navigating this challenge together, and find solutions to support students and bring them back to in-person learning, Cardona said.

[Melanie Muenzer](#), who was recently named as Chief of Staff in the Education Department’s Office of the Under Secretary, offered some insights into the new Administration’s plans for higher education during a panel discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution on Tuesday. Muenzer noted that the Department is working with the CDC on new Covid-19 guidance for colleges and universities. That information is expected to be released in the next few weeks and would complement a coronavirus “best

practices clearinghouse” ordered by President Biden. Additionally, federal partnerships with minority-serving institutions and community colleges could aid Covid-19 vaccine distribution, she said. Working with these institutions "could go a long way in helping to ensure that people within the community are getting vaccinated both on campuses and within the general community itself," she said. Muenzer also noted the possibility for new flexibility and details on how higher education institutions can spend their share of coronavirus relief funds.

President Biden kicked off a week of high-level [Administration efforts](#) to tout the benefits of his \$1.9-trillion COVID-19 relief package as he seeks maximum political benefit from his first major legislative victory. With “shots in arms and money in pockets,” Biden is hoping not only for partisan advantage but -- more broadly -- to restore Americans’ trust in their government. Vice President Kamala Harris, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and Senior Administration Officials hit the road this week, visiting politically critical states in what amounts to the Administration’s first sustained barnstorming tour since the Inauguration.

The First Lady, an educator herself and a champion of teachers and public education, opened the week long effort on Monday. Dr. Biden stopped by [Samuel Smith Elementary School](#) in Burlington, N.J., as the first stop on the ["Hope is Here" tour](#). “I’m here to tell you, with the American Rescue Plan, help is here to open schools, and we're going to do it safely,” she said. In addition to reopening schools, the relief package also helps childcare providers open safely and creates solutions for childcare to be more affordable for parents, the First Lady said. The visit was a chance to recast the reopening debate "away from questions about priorities and the influence of teachers’ unions and onto the avalanche of resources tucked into the relief bill,"

While the Administration celebrates the passage of ARPA, a group of Democrats are reigniting their calls for President Biden to cancel \$50,000 of student loan debt. Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) on Monday said a [tax provision](#) added to ARPA would allow President Joe Biden to cancel \$50,000 of student loan debt per borrower through executive action. Schumer and other progressive lawmakers have been urging the Biden Administration to make this move; however, they have been reluctant.

2. As Congress Approaches Appropriations Season, Earmarks Are Poised to Return

Once a [time-honored Congressional tradition](#), earmarks were banned in 2011 amidst probes of corruption, self-dealing and questionable investments. In essence, earmarks are congressionally directed funding to specific projects in the district or state of the Member of Congress who requests the earmark. They are included in appropriations bills and have often served to garner support for the passage of the bills from Members who were otherwise hesitant to vote “yes.” Many have argued that earmarks “greased the wheels” of Congress enabling bi-partisan support for funding bills, and that a return to the practice would promote bi-partisanship and a more productive Congress.

House Republicans [agreed](#) on Wednesday to lift their decade-long ban on earmarks — a major reversal that will enable the GOP to take advantage of the practice soon to be revived by Democrats. The resolution offered by Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) allows their Members to request a congressional earmark, as long as certain criteria are met. GOP lawmakers would need to publicly disclose the earmark, include a written justification for the project and verify that they have no financial stake in it, among other requirements. The secret-ballot vote was 102-84, according to sources familiar with the count.

Democrats previously announced similar reforms in their plan to bring back earmarks. With the majority party planning to soon bring back the spending practice, many Republicans felt like they would be at a huge disadvantage if they decided not to participate while Democrats reaped the rewards of the spending practice. The Senate is separately working out an agreement to reinstate earmarks. Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said he would defer on the issue to Sen. Richard Shelby (R-AL), the top Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Shelby has said he's supportive. Senate Republicans have been generally more receptive to earmarks than their House counterparts.

House Appropriations Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) is already plowing ahead with an [overhaul](#) of the earmark system, which includes capping the overall amount of money spent on earmarks to 1 percent of discretionary spending and allowing lawmakers to submit no more than 10 project requests. All requests would be posted online, lawmakers and their immediate families could not have a financial stake in the requests and funds could not flow to for-profit recipients, DeLauro said. A federal watchdog would periodically audit a sampling of earmarks, and Members would be required to justify their requests with evidence from their communities. Stay tuned as Appropriations Subcommittees begin marking up bills as early as next month.

3. New Resources for Educators

- [The Washington Post](#) released an article this week highlighting the changing landscape of education due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- [The Department of Education](#) has released a brief outlining the state by state breakdown of the American Rescue Plan Act funding to be issued to states for PK-12 and higher education funding.
- [The National Institute for Early Education Research](#) is out with new research that finds pandemic-related declines in state budgets and preschool enrollment may threaten future funding for preschool programs.
- [The National Center for Education Statistics](#) reports that 18% of public school teachers supplement their salary with an outside job.

I can't say enough about the great work of Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan as she contributes to Washington Update. She is such an asset to our field!

See you on twitter @janewestdc @brennan_kait

Best,
Jane