

## Washington Update, March 5, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

When the daffodils are sprouting and the crocuses begin to smile, we know that spring is on the way! In less than a month the cherry blossoms will erupt around the Tidal Basin and there will be no turning back. And aren't we ready?

### 1. Congress Moves to Finalize COVID Relief Package

On Thursday evening, Vice President Harris took a critical step in getting schools the resources they need to rebound from the pandemic casting the tie breaking [vote](#) to open debate on President Biden's \$1.9 trillion-dollar relief bill in the Senate. GOP unity against the procedural motion suggested that no Republican will vote in favor of the legislation on final passage, which will come after 20 hours of debate and an amendment free-for-all that is expected to drag into the weekend. Before debate could begin, Republicans [demanded](#) a full, 600-page bill reading ahead of the multi-hour "vote-a-rama". The reading lasted 11 hours with the Senate adjourning just after 2AM on Friday morning. As the Senate clerks read through the bill, Senator John Hickenlooper (D-CO) took to [Twitter](#) to read through letters his office has received from Americans desperate for assistance.

The procedural war is aimed at forcing Democrats to defend several parts of the bill the GOP considers unnecessary and partisan. While the process won't substantially impact the final version of the bill, it will provide plenty of ammunition for future campaign messaging. The bill provides just about \$170 billion for the Department of Education to be available through September 2023. Senate Majority Leader Schumer (D-NY) [expressed](#) his confidence in getting the bill passed with full support from his caucus. Because the Senate bill includes a number of revisions to the House-passed bill, the House will need to reconvene to pass the Senate-passed version before it goes to the President's desk. With a deadline for enactment of March 14, when current pandemic unemployment supplements will expire, the Congress is on a fast timeline which it will likely meet, just in the nick of time.

### 2. Biden Administration Forges Ahead on School Reopening/ Vaccines for Teachers as Secretary Cardona Takes Office

On Tuesday evening Dr. Miguel Cardona was sworn in as the nation's new Secretary of Education. The Senate voted 64-33 to confirm [Dr. Cardona](#), a former public school teacher, principal and state superintendent. Dr. Cardona assumes the Education Department's top job as the debate around how to safely reopen schools has grown increasingly bitter. President Biden in response is now walking a political tightrope, reassuring teachers they should be prioritized for the vaccine while recent [guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) notes that vaccinations should not be a prerequisite for reopening schools. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said last month that vaccinating all teachers against

Covid-19 before reopening schools is "non-workable," Dr. Cardona wasted no time, diving into the debate over school reopening-- with a USA Today op-ed posting as his swearing-in ceremony concluded. In the article, Dr. Cardona reaffirmed his commitment to safely reopening schools, announcing that he will convene a "[national summit on safe school reopening](#)" later this month.

Cardona assumes the job not long after the department [issued guidance late last month requiring states to resume the annual testing](#) of students. Testing, like teacher vaccination, has become a painful political wedge for Democrats. Teachers unions have opposed testing requirements, arguing they consume valuable learning time and that many vulnerable students are still home and unable to take the tests easily. The Biden administration, with the backing of [some civil rights groups](#), argues that testing is key to measuring students' progress or lack thereof.

In his first official visit as Secretary of Education, Dr. Cardona and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden pushed for in-person learning when they visited schools in Meriden, CT—Cardona's hometown, and Waterford, PA. on Wednesday. The pair visited the schools to see first-hand what safety and mitigation measures they have implemented in order to reopen. "We must continue to reopen America's schools for in person learning as quickly and as safely as possible," Cardona said. "The president recognizes this which is why he took bold action yesterday to get teachers and school staff vaccinated quickly." He added that making sure teachers and staff are vaccinated is his "top priority."

This week President Biden directed state leaders to prioritize educators for Covid-19 vaccines, in a sweeping declaration that acknowledged teacher anxiety but added a major wrinkle to local inoculation plans and existing CDC school reopening guidance. "Over 30 states have already taken a step to prioritize educators for vaccination," [Biden said Tuesday](#), as he announced a vaccine manufacturing agreement that will accelerate the timeline for offering shots to most Americans. "I'm directing every state to do the same," the president said. "My challenge to all states, territories and the District of Columbia is this: We want every educator, school staff member [and] child care worker to receive at least one shot by the end of the month of March."

Teachers' unions praised Biden's declaration. "With promises of a vaccine, we have a new opportunity to create safe and just schools for every student," [National Education Association](#) President Becky Pringle said in a statement. [The American Federation of Teachers](#) echoed the NEA with President Randi Weingarten, in a separate statement, adding that the White House commitment and CDC guidance left the union confident its members would be able return to classrooms "within the next weeks and months."

### **3. Opportunities for Public Comment**

[The National Association of Secondary School Principals](#) Board of Directors are requesting feedback after the organization recently stated its intent to adopt two new position statements.

- The first statement focuses on [LGBTQ+ Students and Educators](#) and seeks to affirm support for the rights, safety, and identity of all LGBTQ+ students, educators, and school leaders. It also outlines NASSP's opposition to legislation that discriminates against these individuals, as well as provides recommendations for policymakers on how to better support LGBTQ+ students and educators.
- The second addresses [Supporting Principals as Leaders of Special Education](#) after a survey of more than 3,500 principals administered through the RAND American Educator Panels found that only 12 percent felt "completely prepared" to support the needs of students with disabilities. This statement highlights the important role of principals in implementing inclusive and effective special education services, and offers policy recommendations to support additional training and ongoing professional development for school leaders.

*These position statements are open for a 30-day public comment period. Contact [Amanda Karhuse](#), NASSP's director of advocacy, to **provide your feedback by March 31**.*

#### 4. New Resources

- [The Center for Black Educator Development](#) is entering a new phase in its quest to dramatically change the face of the country's teaching profession. In what it is calling a "national educational justice campaign," the organization will use \$3.1 million in new funding from several foundations and venture capitalists to launch two major initiatives to nurture future teachers of color across the country. The Black Teacher Pipeline will identify and cultivate high school and college students for careers in education, offering them apprenticeships starting in high school, mentorship into college, and overall support through their first four years in the profession.
- [The Hechinger Report](#) released an analysis on the substitute teacher crisis across the United States. The authors highlight how some districts are adjusting to meet the increasing need- often by way of lowering the professional standard.
- [The Metropolitan Policy Program](#) released a report outlining the need for student debt cancellation programs to consider wealth rather than income as a more equitable measure of need.
- [The Education Commission of the States](#) is out with a new policy brief summarizing how states use funding to support K-12 school-based mental health programming.

With much appreciation to Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan who is rapidly becoming a Washington Update aficionado!

See you on twitter @janewestdc @brennan\_kait

Best, Jane