

Biden picks Education Secretary committed to opening schools as pandemic rages

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22 December 2020

On Tuesday, President-elect Joe Biden said that he will nominate Miguel Cardona as Secretary of Education for his incoming administration. Cardona has been Connecticut's commissioner of education since 2019 and his chief qualification is heavily promoting the reopening of schools during the pandemic, which Biden has stated will be a top "national priority" upon taking office.

In selecting Cardona, who is of Puerto Rican descent, Biden is furthering the promotion of racial politics to pursue his thoroughly reactionary agenda. In this case, Cardona's background as an English language learner and his supposed sympathy for students struggling with remote learning will be invoked to justify the opening of schools throughout the US in the interests of Wall Street.

The homicidal campaign to reopen schools since July has never been about improving learning conditions for students, as both parties have deliberately starved school districts and states of the funding needed to ensure high quality remote learning and added assistance to low-income and other at-risk students. Rather, the sole aim in reopening schools is to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces, in order to pump out ever-greater profits for the financial oligarchy.

While the Trump administration and his Republican supporters have spearheaded this campaign, Democrat-led cities and states have reopened schools across the country wherever they deem it politically viable. With Biden scheduled to take office in one month, a growing number of Democratic mayors and governors are announcing that they will reopen schools at the same time.

In one of his first policy speeches following the elections, Biden stated that upon taking office, "my team will work to see that a majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days." With this goal in mind, Biden is selecting Cardona due to the central role he has played in reopening schools in Connecticut this fall.

Since the summer, Cardona has joined Connecticut's Democratic Governor Ned Lamont in falsely claiming that schools are not vectors for the spread of COVID-19. In an op-ed in the *News-Times* last week, without citing any evidence, Cardona claimed, "Cases reported by schools, which include students who are in full remote learning, are being traced back to community spread happening outside the building."

Cardona has continually pressured districts to resume in-person learning, so that by December 11 only 28 percent of school

districts in the state were operating under a fully remote model, with the rest either fully in-person or under the equally unsafe "hybrid" model. Throughout the fall, state metrics guiding school reopenings were repeatedly revised to enable schools to stay open even as cases quadrupled the original safety thresholds.

As a result of these and other policies implemented by the state's Democratic politicians, Connecticut now has the fifth highest ratio of deaths per person among all US states. In total, 167,377 of the state's 3.6 million residents have been infected with COVID-19 and 5,676 people have died. Cases have surged in the past two months following the reopening of schools throughout the state, with a record 8,129 cases on December 7.

Amid this surge in the pandemic, Cardona cynically wrote a memo to school superintendents last month, stating that he did not think "arbitrary, date-based closures of school are warranted at this time." He added that the state was "not recommending that districts proactively close for a prolonged period of time in anticipation of changes in disease prevalence."

According to state officials, across Connecticut there were 879 students and 388 staff infected with COVID-19 during the week of December 10-16, the most recent data available. The previous week saw 1,303 students and 424 staff become infected statewide. Earlier this month, paraprofessional Eleanor DeShields, 68, died from COVID-19, and she is believed to have contracted the virus at the school where she worked in Bridgeport.

Nationwide, the reopening of schools has been a complete disaster. According to the COVID Monitor, which is the most comprehensive tracker of outbreaks in K-12 schools, at least 416,462 students and staff have been infected with COVID-19 across the US. Hundreds of educators have died from the virus this year as a result of the opening of schools.

Much is being made of Cardona's background working in public education, with the press and union officials glowing that Biden has fulfilled his campaign promise of appointing an "educator" as his Education Secretary to replace the despised billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos.

In reality, Cardona has spent the past 17 years of his career as a well-paid administrator and he is thoroughly hostile to teachers and education workers. As with Obama's hated Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Cardona is a proponent of charter schools, "school choice," and other schemes that aim to privatize public education. As Connecticut's education commissioner, he has fought to reinstate high-stakes standardized testing later this year,

which he will likely replicate on the national level in order to pressure schools to reopen.

Until it was dissolved in June, Cardona played a major role in attempting to funnel \$100 million in state funds to the “Partnership for Connecticut,” a public-private entity directed by Dalio Philanthropies. Ray Dalio (net worth \$16.9 billion) controls Bridgewater Associates, the world’s largest hedge fund, and is a major proponent of charter schools.

Due to this right-wing record, *Politico* reports that Biden’s “selection of Cardona was met with relief from education advocates who have supported the current education secretary [Betsy DeVos] and her unrelenting advocacy of school choice.”

At the same time, the pro-capitalist teachers unions are also praising Biden’s pick. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten told *Politico* that Cardona’s “commitment to collaboration is crucial to providing the resources and social and emotional supports to safely reopen schools.” Indeed, the chief role of the teachers unions in the coming period will be to fully collaborate with the incoming Biden administration to force schools to reopen and implement savage austerity.

On December 18, a coalition of state unions including the AFT Connecticut, Connecticut Education Association (CEA), and state affiliates of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) signed a joint statement endorsing a possible selection of Cardona as Secretary of Education.

The response from rank-and-file educators in Connecticut has been diametrically opposed to the pre-packaged narrative about Cardona that the media, the Democrats and their union backers are trying to push.

Responding to Weingarten, a Connecticut teacher wrote, “I am a CT public schools educator and have felt bullied, ignored and unsupported throughout this school year in the face of teaching during a pandemic. Cardona has not done anything to support the safety, health and wellbeing of staff.”

Replying to a Facebook post by the CEA, another teacher commented, “How did the CEA decide that it was appropriate to endorse Cardona for Education Secretary? NONE of the teachers I know have high regard for him in his role in CT. He is not supportive of teachers or responsive to our concerns. He has shown disregard of the health and safety of teachers, students and families in this current pandemic situation.”

Dr. Tina Manus, a Connecticut public school teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Cardona “is untrustworthy, and treated teachers, as well as locally elected leaders in urban districts who tried to speak out against his policies, as enemies of the state.” She added, “He put the entire state of Connecticut at risk, opening schools and allowing those schools to become vectors of community COVID-19 transmission. His policies are the reason COVID numbers went up and poor communities are suffering now.”

Biden’s selection of Cardona as Secretary of Education expresses the basic reality that the capitalist state functions in the interests of the ruling class. Both the Democrats and Republicans are impervious to the demands of educators and the working class

as a whole.

While they lavish nearly \$1 trillion on the military to oppress workers all over the world, these politicians could only muster \$82 billion in spending for K-12 and higher education in the latest “relief” bill, as states face a combined education funding deficit upwards of \$300 billion.

There is enormous opposition to the homicidal policies of the ruling class to open schools and nonessential business as the pandemic rages, but this opposition can find no expression through the capitalist political parties and the corporatist trade unions.

The same policies pursued in the US are mirrored internationally, with governments on every continent mandating that schools reopen in order to reopen nonessential businesses, regardless of the catastrophic spread of the pandemic.

To put an end to this madness, the working class must organize itself independently of both corporate-controlled parties, armed with a socialist program. The resources exist to provide high-quality education, full income protection, healthcare, and all the other social needs of the working class, but these resources are being hoarded by the financial oligarchy.

Preparations must be made for a political general strike to close all schools and nonessential businesses with full compensation to workers. This must be paid for by reallocating the trillions squandered on the Wall Street bailout and the Pentagon war machine and the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers, including US billionaires who have increased their net worth by a trillion dollars while more than 320,000 people have succumbed to the virus. Only through such a revolutionary movement will the working class be able to implement a comprehensive program to contain the pandemic, vaccinate the global population, and rebuild society on socialist, i.e., egalitarian, foundations.



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