

**NOMINATION OF MIGUEL CARDONA
TO SERVE AS
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION**

HEARING
OF THE
**COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS**
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION
ON
EXAMINING THE NOMINATION OF MIGUEL A. CARDONA, OF
CONNECTICUT, TO BE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

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FEBRUARY 3, 2021
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**NOMINATION OF MIGUEL CARDONA
TO SERVE AS
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION**

Wednesday, February 3, 2021

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m., in room SD-430, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Patty Murray, Madam Chair (Pro Tempore) of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Murray [presiding], Casey, Baldwin, Murphy, Kaine, Hassan, Smith, Rosen, Lujan, Warren, Burr, Paul, Collins, Cassidy, Murkowski, Braun, Marshall, Scott, and Romney.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MURRAY

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions will please come to order.

Today, we are holding a hearing on the nomination of Dr. Miguel Cardona to be the Secretary of the Department of Education. Senator Burr and I will each have an opening statement, and then I will recognize Senator Blumenthal, who has joined our Committee today to introduce Dr. Cardona, followed by an introduction from Senator Murphy. After Dr. Cardona gives his testimony, Senators will have 5 minutes each for a round of questions, and I am happy to continue for a second round if Senators have any remaining questions.

Before we begin, I also want to walk through the COVID-19 safety protocols in place. We will follow the advice of the Attending Physician and the Sergeant at Arms in conducting this hearing. Committee Members and our witnesses are seated at least 6 feet apart. That means we are unable to have the public or the media attend in person, but the hearing is available on our Committee website at www.help.senate.gov. Some Senators, including myself, are participating by videoconference. And I am very grateful to the Sergeant at Arms, the Capitol Police, the Architect of the Capitol, the Press Gallery, the Rules Committee, and our Committee staff for all of their hard work to help us all stay safe and healthy.

This is the first meeting of the HELP Committee in this new Congress. I am immensely honored today to take the helm of the Committee I believe represents the heart and soul of this Country, from healthcare, to education, to supporting workers and retirees, to childcare, to ensuring everyone can live with dignity and respect.

The issues that we tackle are the issues families across this Country face in their everyday lives.

I want to welcome Senators Hickenlooper, Lujan, and Marshall, who will be joining us on this Committee, and I look forward to welcoming all of our new Members soon.

Also, given that Senator Warren will be leaving the Committee, before she does, I just want to say she has been a powerful voice in this room for families in Massachusetts and nationwide. We will miss her at these hearings, but I know that even though she is leaving our Committee, she will continue to be a champion for patients and parents, children, students, borrowers, workers, retirees, and families across the Country. And I look forward myself to continuing to work with her to make progress and expand access to quality, affordable childcare; ensure healthcare is a right, not a privilege; give every student the opportunity to grow and thrive; reduce student debt; empower workers; and so much more.

Finally, before we begin, I do want to recognize my partner across the dais, Ranking Member Burr, and welcome him to this new role. Senator Burr and I have had positive conversations about how this Committee can continue its long history of working together to address issues critical to the American people.

I look forward to working with all of you, from both sides of the aisle, as we address the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis facing many, and so many other critical issues. I hope today is the beginning of a productive, next chapter for this Committee, building on our bipartisan history, where we work together to bring nominees and legislation through this Committee and onto the Senate floor. I look forward to our partnership, Senator Burr, and I welcome our new Members to the Committee and hope to hear about your priorities in the days ahead.

I also would like to specifically thank Senator Burr for his willingness to work with me so that we could schedule today's hearing with Dr. Cardona and tomorrow's hearing with Mayor Walsh.

Dr. Cardona, thank you for joining us, and I would like to welcome your wife, Marissa, as well. I am glad she could be here with you today, and I know your children are watching, as well. They must be very proud.

President Biden announced his intent to nominate Dr. Cardona on December 22, 2020. The Committee received Dr. Cardona's HELP Committee paperwork on January 15, and his Office of Government Ethics paperwork, including his public financial disclosure and ethics agreement, on January 20. His formal nomination also arrived January 20, 2021.

Dr. Cardona, we have not met yet in person, but I am very much looking forward to meeting with you in the future, and I know we will be working a lot together, both virtually and in person when we can. I am excited to start working with you and the Biden-Harris administration to serve public schools, colleges, students, borrowers, educators, and families across our Country. And I hope to work with my colleagues here in Congress to confirm you as quickly as possible, given the urgency of this pandemic and its impact on our students, all the ways former President Trump's utter failure to handle have put us behind, and the longstanding inequities this crisis has exacerbated.

Under the Trump administration, tests and PPE were hard to get. Federal guidance was politically motivated and unclear, and the path to safely reopening schools in person was chaotic and uncertain. Families are now counting on us to get things on track, fast. The stories I have heard from Washington State made clear how desperately we need a secretary who will work with students, parents and caregivers, educators and school administrators, state, local, and tribal officials, and public health officials, to help our schools safely reopen for in-person learning.

I heard from a mother in Yakima, whose children are sharing one iPhone to learn. I heard from a father of a high school freshman in Spokane, who is worried about the social and psychological toll the pandemic is taking on his son. And I heard about students from the Lummi Nation, who are trying to focus on remote classes while in multi-generational households on shared, spotty broadband. And I know there are so many similar stories from people in my state and across the entire Country.

Our students and our schools are in crisis, and every day without an experienced leader at the Department of Education is a day we are losing precious ground. We know the pandemic is setting back learning for all students and compounding long-standing inequities in our education system. Reports estimate that, compared to a typical year, this pandemic has set back learning by 1 to 3 months for White students, and 3 to 5 months for students of color.

We know remote classes can make learning more difficult, impossible even, for the one in four students who have no access to the internet at home. And families of color are significantly more likely to experience limited internet and device inaccessibility. We know many students have lost access to critical resources, like mental health services and school meals, and school counselors and extra-curricular activities, and much more.

The pain of this pandemic is not felt equally. Instead, it is deepening systemic inequities that were already incredibly damaging for students of color, students from families with low incomes, students with disabilities, women, English learners, students who are experiencing homelessness, and many others.

For those pursuing higher education, it has not only disrupted classrooms and dorms. It has upended our economy, making it harder for students already stretching their budgets to pay tuition or rent, or pay for food and other basic needs.

For parents across the Country, it is also exacerbating our long-standing childcare crisis, making things that much harder for them and their children.

We desperately need more funding and resources for schools, like education relief that President Biden called for in his American Rescue Plan.

We need clear and actionable guidance for schools working to safely reopen for in-person learning.

We need more direct financial assistance for students, including student debt relief, and a Secretary of Education who is ready to tackle all of this and more on day one.

Given Dr. Cardona's background, there is no question he is ready for these challenges. And after 4 years of a Secretary of Education who had no experience in public education, I am thrilled to have

a nominee before us who is a former elementary school teacher, a former adjunct professor, a former principal, and a former assistant superintendent. As a former preschool teacher myself, I know firsthand how valuable that classroom perspective is when working on these issues.

Dr. Cardona will not just bring much-needed teaching experience to the Department, but also invaluable personal experience. As an English-language learner himself, Dr. Cardona knows that all students can succeed when given access to a high quality, public education. And he has spent his whole career working to ensure every student can reach their full potential, no matter the language they speak, or their zip code, or income, or race, or ethnicity, their gender, their sexual orientation, or their disability.

As assistant superintendent, Dr. Cardona showed new teachers around the community's economically disparate neighborhoods to help them understand the students that they served.

During this pandemic, he has continued to center the needs of students facing inequities in his work as Connecticut's Education Commissioner. Under his leadership, Connecticut became the first state in the Nation to ensure every one of its public school students has access to a laptop and a high-speed internet connection to engage in remote learning.

Dr. Cardona is a proven collaborative leader. He is a champion for public schools, and he is an excellent choice to lead the Department of Education through the challenges ahead.

Challenges, like meeting President Biden's goal of safely reopening the majority of our K through 8 schools for in-person learning within his first 100 days of office.

Challenges, like addressing learning loss due to COVID, which means fulfilling our moral imperative to measure students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and provide with substantial resources and guidance that states and school districts require to address them, and the many challenges that existed long before COVID-19 struck, but have become so much more severe through this pandemic.

We need to address the inequities permeating our education system, from early education through higher education, that make it much harder for students of color, students from families with low incomes, and many others to succeed. And that starts with long-overdue efforts to address inequitable school funding and inaccess to high-quality and rigorous curriculum, racial and socioeconomic school segregation, the use of seclusion and restraint, the school-to-prison pipeline, and more.

We also need to make sure every child can benefit from pre-K and early learning experiences that set them up for success.

We need to address the student debt crisis and provide student loan borrowers with relief by continuing the freeze on payments and interest President Biden extended, and helping borrowers to reduce their debt.

We need to overhaul our financial aid system, implementing reforms we recently passed in Congress, making it simpler for students and families to get help, and ensuring student loan companies meet high standards of service and transparency.

We need to make sure higher education is affordable so cost never prevents a student from going to college, and so every student can make ends meet while attending school, and make a living without being crushed by student debt after they leave.

We need to make higher education accessible so every person, especially students of color, students with low incomes, students with disabilities, and others traditionally left out of higher education can find the opportunity that is right for them, be it a community college or a 4-year college or university, including minority-serving institutions, or a workforce training program or apprenticeship.

We need to make sure higher education is accountable so every student is protected from bad actors, like predatory, for-profit colleges, empowered with better information about college outcomes, and provided the support they need to receive their degree.

We need to make sure every campus is safe from infectious disease outbreaks, from gun violence, and from bullying, harassment, and sexual assaults.

In short, we have a lot of work to do. We have an excellent candidate to help us get it done, and we have no time to waste. Any Senator who has heard from a parent who wants to get their child back to the classroom safely, and I am sure everyone here has, should vote to advance and confirm Dr. Cardona without hesitation. And I am hopeful when the time comes, they will do just that.

Finally, I would like to ask unanimous consent to enter into the record 37 letters of support for Dr. Cardona's nomination for Education Secretary, signed by over 400 individuals and groups representing educators, school administrators, civil rights organizations, non-profits, and a bipartisan group of Governors. So ordered.

[The information referred to can be found on page 50]

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. I now recognize Senator Burr to give his opening remarks.

Senator Burr, welcome.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator BURR. Well, Madam Chair, I thank you. I look forward to working with you specifically this session of Congress. I am grateful to my colleagues, maybe a little premature than what the timing had, that we will organize at some point today, and hopefully I will be the Ranking Member of this Committee.

This Committee has a great history of bipartisanship, and I expect that will continue. Patty Murray and I have a history of working together to run the Veterans Affairs Committee, so this is not new for the two of us, and I look forward to continuing to build on the relationship we already have.

My main priority for this Committee is healthcare. We should all, Senators, staff, and the Administration, anticipate spending more time than we can imagine today on the response to COVID-19, and to make sure that we are better prepared for the next one. This includes looking at supply chains and making sure that we make in the United States what we need, not through burdensome requirements, but through incentives.

We also need to work to make sure the United States Research Enterprise is aware of and better prepared for the threats of our enemies.

We need to continue to prioritize and enable and incentivizing private sector innovation. We have seen what the private sector can do. A vaccine developed and authorized less than a year after a novel virus was discovered should become the norm and not the exception. FDA has shown incredible speed and flexibility, and the FDA user fee reauthorization discussion later this Congress is a good chance to examine how the speed and flexibility can help in the fight against serious conditions with no treatments that exist today. If we can speed bureaucracy up and not abandon the gold standard of safety and efficacy, with as much money as the FDA already has, I want to know why we cannot have that be the new baseline expectations.

We will need to conduct vigorous oversight. While I am sure that many of my Democratic friends will just want to blame the last administration for every problem that exists, and we know they made their share of mistakes, but we also need to dig deeper into the laws and agencies that we created to see what works and what needs to be fixed. For example, if it was not for cultural arrogance of the bureaucracy at the CDC, we might have had diagnostic tests a lot sooner than we did in this Country. We need to fix the problem that has been exposed, not just blame the last group that were here.

I hope to be able to be a partner in getting President Biden's cabinet quickly operational, with fair, qualified candidates who have submitted the necessary paperwork and forms for the Office of Government Ethics in the timeframe that Senator Murray and her colleagues requested of President Trump's nominees. We will not always agree on which nominees meet these goals, and I think you will see the differences in who we have asked this week and who is testifying before us next week.

Now, turning to Dr. Cardona. Welcome. Welcome to you, to your wife, Marissa, to your children, who are in the annex behind us. And I am told that they are going to come out when you start your testimony. I do not want them to miss it live and in person, and we can adhere to the separation guidelines and have them over there. I also want to welcome your parents, who I understand are—did not make the trip because of COVID, but they will be watching this on TV. Your entire family, I know, is proud of this nomination.

The fact that you have been asked to lead the Department of Education at a very challenging time is daunting for anybody. You have had a meteoric rise from a classroom teacher to a principal, to a superintendent, from a small State of Connecticut. You should be proud of that, and I am glad the President has nominated you for this position.

Millions of children are stuck at home trying to learn. Parents are at their wits' end, and the adults running public schools across the Country are failing to actually follow the science and open schools safely. CDC experts just released a paper in the Journal of American Medical Association on January 26 that said this, and I quote. The preponderance of available evidence from the fall school semester has been reassuring in as far as the type of rapid spread

that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites has not been reported in an education setting in schools, unquote.

That says to me that we should be seriously talking about reopening schools as quickly as possible. That is what the science tells us and, quite frankly, that is what students and parents need.

The CDC experts went on to say, and I quote, all recommended mitigation measures in schools must continue: requiring universal face mask use, increasing physical distancing by de-densifying classrooms and common areas, using hybrid attendance models when needed to limit the number of contacts and prevent crowding, increasing room ventilation, and expanding screening testing to rapidly identify and isolate asymptomatic infected individuals.

In the five COVID bills we passed last year, Congress has provided over \$67 billion for K through 12, and \$36 billion for higher education. That is in addition to the regular appropriated dollars for these activities, and that is also on top of the hundreds of billions of dollars from state and local sources.

We need schools to open safely and to stay open safely. While that was considered partisan and dangerous when some suggested it last year, since President Biden won and over a million vaccines from Operation Warp Speed being delivered daily, more folks have changed their tune. And I welcome that change. COVID-19-related school closures have led to significant learning loss, and we need to get caught up and help all our students.

But, one-size-fits-all requirements from Washington will only further hurt the situation. So, I hope that you will refrain from the mistake so many have made of your predecessors, which is that just because you have a good idea, that does not mean everybody should follow it based upon the makeup of their school systems.

Even school districts—each school district, college, university, community college, state and community, faces a different pandemic in a different circumstance. Trying to treat them as a monolith instead of providing flexible advice for states and localities to use, if applicable and useful, would be a mistake.

I hope you will follow the examples of Richard Riley and Lamar Alexander, both Governors, and one the former Chairman of this Committee, and recognize that you cannot run a Nation's schools or colleges from Washington, DC, but we can inspire them and we can help them.

Finally, we are going to have to have an adult conversation about academic testing for this school year. While we do need to know how much educational harm has happened, I am not sure that the Federal accountability system and existing state tests are the right thing at this moment.

I understand the Department of Education sent a letter last week to chief state school officers, saying the previous February 1 deadline for seeking waivers was being extended. However, it did not set a new deadline. I hope that you and my colleagues in Senate are willing to engage in a conversation about whether we need to pause for one year the accountability and testing requirements as we grapple with the pandemic.

I also want to caution you, and especially some of the staff that will show up at the Department, that the law does not give you the

authority to impose a bunch of conditions on states seeking waivers. Some of your predecessors thought that they could use the need for waivers to bully states into submission on some of their preferred policy objectives that were not in the law. The law does not allow you to do that, or any secretary of education, and I hope, Commissioner, you will respect those limitations.

Let me turn to student loans for one minute. Last year, Congress acted to pause loan repayments for all borrowers as we grappled with coronavirus. Then, the Trump administration, now the Biden administration, have extended the pause so borrowers have a certain certainty for a long time.

But, I am not eager to see the Biden administration pursue dangerous and foolhardy proposals to simply forgive student loans. The claims that some—by some that the Higher Education Act allows this would stretch the law beyond recognition. I hope that you and the White House do not pursue that.

Instead, I invite you to work with Republicans and Democrats in Senate to pass legislation that dramatically simplifies student loan repayment options, allows borrowers to pay whatever they can reasonably afford, capped at 10 percent of their discretionary income, and have their loan forgiven after 20 years. This is bipartisan legislation that I have previously introduced with Senator Angus King, and I am sure we would be happy to work with the Administration and you to pass this into law in the next 100 days. But, I will oppose any effort to simply move debt from borrowers onto taxpayers.

In conclusion, I plan to conduct rigorous oversight, especially on the response of COVID-19, and will ask fair but difficult and probing questions on the decisions that you make and the way the agency operates. You would expect that from an oversight committee. I will expect honest, complete, and timely answers. I hope you can commit to working with me on that.

Commissioner Cardona, I expect by the end of this hearing, I will be able to support your nomination, and I will encourage all of my colleagues on my side to support you, as well, and to move as expeditiously to have you sworn in as the next Secretary of Education. I look forward to working with you.

I thank the Madam Chair.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

We will now move to Dr. Cardona and our colleague, Senator Blumenthal, has joined us today to help introduce Dr. Cardona. I will recognize him first, followed by Senator Murphy.

Senator Blumenthal, welcome.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Madam Chair, and Ranking Member Burr. I am so deeply honored and excited and proud to be here today to introduce Dr. Miguel Cardona, President Biden's nominee for Secretary of Education. Indeed, it is one of the proudest and most exciting of my days in the U.S. Senate.

I have known Dr. Cardona and his family for many years, watched him rise. His rise has been indeed meteoric. It is the stuff of legend, almost mythical, except it is based on real hard work and solid values gained from his parents. As he told me just moments ago, when one member of his family does well, all do well. And I think that kind of ethic is one he will bring to his job as Secretary of Education.

He is a proud son of Meriden, Connecticut, a proud son of our public education in Meriden, of higher education, public education in Connecticut, two institutions of higher learning—Central Connecticut State University and the University of Connecticut—and he is a passionate advocate of English as an English language learner.

His entire career is living proof that there are no limits to what anyone can achieve, regardless of what their language is as a first language. And I am absolutely certain that he will be as distinguished a Secretary of Education as he was an assistant superintendent, as well as a fourth grade teacher, commissioner of education. We are going to miss him in Connecticut for all the reasons that he will add such value and be so extraordinarily distinguished and committed to learning and teaching.

The main point I think about Dr. Cardona is in fact that he is dedicated with every fiber of his being to learning and teaching, and he will be a staunch and steadfast advocate and leader.

He will be an advocate for disadvantaged students, who are in danger of being left behind in this pandemic.

He will be an advocate for teachers, who are stressed and strained during this time as never before, who are such great public servants, along with school administrators, in gaining new opportunity for the next generation.

He will be an advocate for parents who are concerned and overwhelmed managing their children's schooling, as well as their own work, and their families.

Most important, he will be an advocate for students—students at every level, including students who are drowning in student debt that has left their financial futures crippled and deter their gaining access to better jobs and futures.

He is a proven leader. He knows how to listen. And he also knows the importance of students returning to school, but doing it safely, and the critical importance of making sure that vaccines are widely available, putting vaccines into the arms of more people, and putting students and teachers back in the classroom are priorities that we can all share, and doing it safely.

Finally, let me just say that he is a leader of courage and conviction. He will restore integrity and professionalism at the top levels of the Department of Education, and he will do it with a caring and compassion, as well as a toughness of mind and a clear-eyed courage that have characterized his career beginning from his days as a student and going through to his serving as Commissioner of Education. Connecticut is solidly behind him, and I think that we will miss him, but I am sure that Connecticut's pride will be mirrored by his accomplishment as Secretary of Education.

I want to thank the Chairman and you, Ranking Member, for this honor and opportunity to introduce him today, and to share the pride that his wife, Marissa, his two children, who are here watching, and I am sure his parents, as well, feel for his tremendous accomplishments in this role.

Thank you very, very much.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.
Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Madam Chair, thank you, Ranking Member Burr, for giving us the opportunity to introduce our friend, Miguel Cardona.

If you are from Meriden, you know the Cardona family. The Cardona family are in some ways a typical and in some ways an extraordinary American family—a family that eats, sleeps, and breathes to make its community better. And while today the whole Country is learning about Miguel Cardona, it frankly is his gregarious police officer father with his trademark handlebar mustache, Hector, who often draws the most attention in Meriden.

I cannot remember exactly where I first met Miguel, but I am going to guess it was at the city's Puerto Rican festival. Connecticut has one of the largest, proudest Puerto Rican communities in America, and Meriden is home to thousands of families. But, its cultural festival had hit hard times. There were years where there were only a couple hundred people showing up, until the Cardona family took the festival over.

Each summer, now, you can find Miguel and his family speeding around the festival in their golf carts, organizing children's activities, checking on vendors, organizing bus transportation. Now, 8,000 people a year come to Meriden to this festival because Miguel and his family not only care about their community, but because they are willing to do something about it.

It will not surprise you to learn why Miguel's professional career has been this rocket ship ride that has been referred to, advancing so quickly from classroom teacher, to principal, to assistant superintendent, to state commissioner, to this nomination.

At Israel Putnam Elementary, Miguel, on a starting teacher's salary, fished \$450 out of his pocket to make sure that his kids had the supplies they needed. He was relentless in teaching his students to refuse to let socioeconomic obstacles block their dreams and their progress. And, so, it was no surprise that he was named the state's youngest school principal a few short years after he started teaching.

As principal, it also will not surprise you to know that he was one of those principals that knew every kid's name, knew every kid's story. He dressed up as a conductor for Polar Express Day. He performed with his students at holiday concerts, and he relentlessly built a community of teachers, students, and parents. He led by example.

The promotions kept coming. He tackled teacher diversity as assistant superintendent in Meriden. He championed the cause of replacing draconian exclusionary school discipline policies with restorative justice practices. And, as has been mentioned, as our state's commissioner, he led the effort to reopen Connecticut's schools earlier than most people thought was possible, and he did it in a way that did not divide teachers from students and parents.

Miguel Cardona keeps getting asked to do bigger things for a reason. He has a servant's heart, an immovable moral compass, a refusal to take no for an answer, and a unique talent for consensus building, something that will be essential in this job. He is going to make a great Secretary of Education, and I am so glad to join Senator Blumenthal in expressing Connecticut's pride and support for him today.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Murphy.
 Dr. Cardona, welcome. Thank you so much for being here today.
 We are looking forward now to hearing from you, so you can begin
 your testimony. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF HON. MIGUEL CARDONA, MERIDEN, CT

Dr. CARDONA. Madam Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as Secretary of Education.

Thank you, Senator Blumenthal and Senator Murphy, for your kind words and support.

Soy Miguel Cardona, husband of Marissa, and proud father of Miguel, Junior and Celine. Son of Hector and Sarah Cardona, and brother to Hector, Junior and Marisol. Their role in my life has shaped my preparation for today, today's hearing, as much as any degree or professional experience I have had. While the pandemic has prevented them from—all of them from joining me in the room today, I carry their presence in every word I speak.

We are here today in the midst of one of the most challenging school years in American history. For far too many of our students, this year has piled on crisis after crisis. As a parent and as an educator, I have lived those challenges alongside millions of families. The burden on educators and families has been tremendous, taking a toll on the mental health and well-being of our children, our parents, our educators, and staff. Fewer students started college this fall, and those declines were most striking at community colleges, institutions that have long served as entry points to higher education and economic mobility for so many.

Our Nation's educational challenges did not begin with the pandemic, but it has exacerbated inequities in our educational system. These inequities will endure, and they will prevent the potential of this Country, unless tackled head on. And it is so—and, so, it is our responsibility, and it would be my greatest privilege, if confirmed, to forge opportunity out of this crisis.

As Americans, we have always risen to the challenge to solve problems and create a brighter future for our students. This was true for my family when my parents—my grandparents, Aveline and Maria Cardona, and Germana Muniz, traveled from the beautiful city of Aguada, Puerto Rico to find new opportunities in the Silver city of Meriden, Connecticut.

It was true when my parents, Hector and Sarah, taught me to dream big and to aim high. Their own hard work empowered me to expand my horizons and become the first in my family to graduate college. While we did not always have a lot of material possessions, I was born rich. This perseverance turned into gratitude when I became a teacher, a principal, a district leader in the very same community that gave me so much as a child.

For me, education opened doors. That is the power and the promise of America, but it is not a promise kept for every student. If I am fortunate enough to be confirmed, I will work tirelessly to make sure our education system is a door to opportunity, a great equalizer for every student.

We will work to reopen schools safely so that students can return to classrooms.

We will remove silos in education, sharing our breakthroughs and successes throughout our Country, and cultivating schools and colleges as places of innovation.

We will make sure that when students graduate from high school, they have college and career pathways to good futures.

We will make sure—we will make college accessible to every student who seeks opportunity through education, including strengthening this Nation’s best-kept secret—community colleges.

We will ensure that dedicated teachers, paraeducators, principals, superintendents, and committed higher education faculty are recognized for their great contribution to this Country.

We will boldly address educational inequities head on and hold ourselves accountable for providing equitable outcomes from pre-kindergarten through college and into adult learning.

Investing in public education changes lives and it saves lives. I have seen it and I have lived it. And I know our challenges ahead are problems that we can overcome together.

As a saying in Spanish goes, En la unión está la fuerza. In unity, there is strength. We gain strength from joining together. And, like our schools, we gain strength when we create a culture of community.

That is why, if confirmed, I look forward to sitting at the table with the vast, diverse community of people who have a stake in education—students, parents, teachers, caregivers, advocates, and state, local, and tribal leaders, and the dedicated career staff at the Department. Their voices matter.

I can think of no higher calling than working to build a better, more equal future for the next generation. I have the same dreams for all of the students in our Country as I do for my own Angelito and Celine.

I am grateful for the chance to take on this responsibility, and I am grateful for your time today. I am grateful to President Biden and Vice President Harris for placing their trust in me.

In closing, as your nominee, I am first a husband of a family school liaison, a father of two public high schoolers, an educator, and most importantly, a student advocate.

If confirmed, I look forward to getting to work on behalf of all students and working with you to build a future of promise and opportunity for the next generation.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Cardona follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MIGUEL CARDONA

Madam Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee:

It’s an honor to appear before you today as the President’s nominee to serve as Secretary of Education.

Soy Miguel Cardona, husband of Marissa and proud father of Miguel Jr. and Celine. Son of Hector and Sarah Cardona, and brother to Hector Jr and Marisol. Their role in my life has shaped my preparation for today’s hearing as much as any degree or professional experience I’ve had. While the pandemic prevented all of them joining me in the room today, I carry their presence in every word I speak.

We're here today in the midst of one of the most challenging school years in American history. For far too many of our students, this year has piled on crisis after crisis. As a parent, and as an educator, I have lived those challenges alongside millions of families.

The burden on educators and families has been tremendous: taking a toll on the mental health and well-being of our children, parents, educators, and staff. Fewer students started college this fall, and those declines were most striking at community colleges—institutions that have long served as entry points to higher education and economic mobility for so many.

Our nation's education challenges didn't begin with the pandemic, but it has exacerbated inequities in our educational system.

These inequities will endure, and prevent the potential of this great country, unless tackled head-on. And so it is our responsibility, and it would be my greatest privilege, if confirmed, to forge opportunity out of this crisis.

As Americans, we have always risen to the challenge to solve problems and create a brighter future for our children. This was true for my family, when my grandparents Avelino, Maria, and Germana travelled from Aguada, Puerto Rico to find new opportunities in the Silver city of Meriden, Connecticut.

It was true when my parents, Hector and Sara Cardona, taught me to dream big and aim high. Their own hard work empowered me to expand my horizons and become the first in my family to graduate college. While we didn't always have a lot of material possessions, I was born rich. This perseverance turned into gratitude when I became a teacher, principal, and district leader in the very same community that gave me so much as a child.

For me, education opened doors. That is the power and promise of America—but it is not a promise kept for every student.

If I am fortunate enough to be confirmed, I will work tirelessly to make sure our education system is a door to opportunity, a great equalizer, for every American:

- We will work to reopen schools safely, so that students can return to classrooms.
- We will remove silos in education, sharing our breakthroughs and successes throughout our country, and cultivating schools and colleges as places of innovation.
- We will make sure that when students graduate from high school, they have college and career pathways to good futures.
- We will make college accessible to every student who seeks opportunity through education, including strengthening this Nation's best-kept secret: community colleges.
- We will ensure the dedicated teachers, paraeducators, principals, superintendents, and committed higher education faculty are recognized for their contribution to this country.
- We will boldly address educational inequities head-on and hold ourselves accountable for providing equitable outcomes from pre-kindergarten through college and into adult learning.

Investing in public education changes lives and saves lives. I've seen it. I've lived it. And I know that our challenges ahead are problems we can overcome together.

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I can think of no higher calling than working to build a better, more equal future for the next generation. I have the same dreams for all students in our country as I do for my own Angelito and Celine.

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In closing: As your nominee, I am first a husband of a family school liaison, a father of two public high schoolers, an educator, and most importantly, a student advocate.

If confirmed, I look forward to getting to work on behalf of *all* students—and working with you to build a future of promise and opportunity for the next generation.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Dr. Cardona, thank you very much. We all appreciate that.

We will now begin a round of 5-minute questions, and I would just ask my colleagues to keep track of your clock, if you would. Stay within those 5 minutes so we can respect everyone's time. And I am very happy to stay if anyone has additional questions, if we want a second round for anyone.

Dr. Cardona, the COVID-19 pandemic is really having a profound impact on students. Abrupt school closures, lack of access to high-quality, remote learning or a conducive learning environment, educator layoffs, and general chaos and confusion has really severely disrupted student learning. So, we have a big job ahead of us to help support our students, our educators, and our schools respond to and recover from this pandemic, and that starts with providing schools and colleges with the resources they need to reopen safely for in-person learning.

I was pleased to see President Biden's plan call for significantly more funding. It also demands strong Federal leadership to accomplish that goal. But, we have a long road ahead.

Dr. Cardona, as Connecticut's Commissioner of Education, you have been working every day for the past year to address the needs of students and their families during this pandemic. Talk to us about how your experience in Connecticut informs your work as Secretary of Education in navigating the COVID-19 response.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator Murray. I want to acknowledge the fact that, as a Country, we are experiencing some trauma together. And serving as Commissioner of Education in Connecticut has provided the opportunity for me to be in a position to help lead with amazing partners at the agency and throughout the state in the reopening of our schools.

Through these last 10 months, I have been able to listen to parents, students, educators, and we all want to make sure we can get our students back into schools safely.

Some of the strategies that we took in Connecticut that were very clear were to make sure that we relied very closely on the science.

We partnered with our public health experts in the state and created a system of communication that was regular and intentional.

We were open and transparent with what we knew, and we made sure that we partnered with our health experts to put out very clear guidance early on to make sure that the mitigation strategies were very clear, to make sure that we talked about how to safely reopen schools, and how to provide the students the access to learning if they had to learn remotely. We partnered together.

I look forward to, if I am fortunate enough to serve as Secretary of Education, to bring that same mentality of partnership and clear

communication to help recover our public education and reopen our schools.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much. One of my greatest concerns about the pandemic's impact on students is learning loss, particularly for students who face systemic barriers, including students of color, students from families with low incomes, LGBTQIA students, students with disabilities, and English learners. And the pandemic has really further widened the achievement gaps in this Country.

Dr. Cardona, if you are confirmed as secretary, how would you support states and school districts in identifying and addressing learning loss among all students?

Dr. CARDONA. Okay, and thank you for that question. This learning loss is something that we are all grappling with. But, before I get into that, I want to acknowledge our students have shown us a level of resilience that I don't think we have ever seen in history before. Our students have really risen to the occasion and really adapted in ways that are inspiring to me, as an educator and as a father.

But, we know that—and especially in many communities that do not have great resources, students have not had access to quality learning, or have had interrupted learning. So, we have to make sure that we identify those practices that we know are effective at meeting students where they are.

We know that with proper support and funding, we can offer extended learning opportunities for students, extended summer school options to help students recover some of that loss. And we have to make sure that the materials that we put in front of our students are high-quality materials so that our students are able to benefit the most from any intervention or access to learning that they get moving forward.

We need to do this not only by providing strong remote access and quality materials there, but ensuring that we are doing everything in our power to safely reopen schools. There is no substitute for a classroom experience for our students being in front of their teacher. There is no substitute for that. So, we have to do everything we can to safely reopen schools in a manner that gets the students back into their learning environment.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much. I will turn the questions over to Dr. Burr—or to Senator Burr at this point.

Senator.

Senator BURR. Thank you, Madam Chair. You can call me Doctor if you would like to.

[Laughter.]

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Sorry.

Senator BURR. Dr. Cardona, again, welcome to you and to your family.

On January 12, the Fairfax Education Association in Virginia tweeted at you that schools should not reopen until all staff and students had received a vaccine. Do you agree with the Fairfax Education Association on this?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator. I recognize the frustration and distrust and fear that is out there. And, if confirmed as Secretary of Education, I will do everything in my power to make sure

that our rollout strategy for reopening schools includes communication on how to safely reopen schools, and I think that needs to include increased surveillance testing for our educators and a prioritization of our educators for vaccination.

Senator BURR. But, just to be clear, to safely open a school and to safely keep a school open, it does not require that 100 percent of the participants be vaccinated to accomplish that?

Dr. CARDONA. We have examples—and I know in Connecticut we have many examples, but we have great examples throughout our Country of schools that are able to reopen safely and do so while following mitigation strategies. While I recognize that is the case, I do believe that making sure surveillance testing is something that we focus on as well.

Senator BURR. Thank you. Should teachers be prioritized for vaccination? And when I use the term teachers, does that include public and private school teachers together?

Dr. CARDONA. I use the term educators. There are so many members of the school community that contribute to making the school successful. So, our educators should be prioritized for vaccination rollout, especially as we work to maintain our schools open. And we have to keep in mind, also, that reopening schools is not just about the next month or two. If we want to keep them reopened, we have to make sure that we are properly testing our teachers and educators and prioritizing them for vaccination, keeping an eye on the variants and the different changes that might take place. I think it is a priority to provide testing and vaccination for our educators.

Senator BURR. When you use the term educators, you are not separating between public and private?

Dr. CARDONA. All educators.

Senator BURR. All educators.

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Thank you. States like Connecticut may want to pursue testing this year just to have some data to understand the learning loss problem they have on their hands. But, due to the validity and reliability issues of conducting testing remotely and in hybrid situations, testing experts say that the scores may not even be comparable to scores from before, or after, COVID-19.

It really does not seem fair to include test scores in schools' performance accountability measures as required under the ESSA in state plans. Do you plan to waive the need to include scores in school accountability for state plans this year?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, sir. And I know that not only COVID testing, but assessments are an issue of concern and great debate. I speak to you now as a nominee. Obviously, I have not had any role in any policy development to this point. I can speak to you from the role of a commissioner.

I know that validity of testing is critically important. And as a school principal, I remember making sure that assessment data was looked at only if it was valid and reliable. With that said, I don't think I am in favor of what you called earlier a one-size-fits-all if the conditions under COVID-19 prevent a student from being in school in person. I don't think we need to be bringing students in just to test them on a standardized test. I don't think that makes any sense.

With that said, I do feel, sir, that if we don't assess where our students are and their level of performance, it is going to be difficult for us to provide some targeted support and our resource allocation in the manner that can best support the closing of the gaps that have been exacerbated due to this pandemic.

Senator BURR. Do you feel that states should be able to decide whether they incorporate standardized testing this year given the circumstances of the pandemic?

Dr. CARDONA. I feel that states should not only have an opportunity to weigh in on how they plan on implementing it and what is best for their students, but also the accountability measures and whether or not those assessments should really be tied into any accountability measures, as well.

Senator BURR. Doctor, I thank you.

Madam Chair, I return the time.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Alright. Senator Casey.

Senator CASEY. Madam Chair, thanks very much. I appreciate this opportunity to ask Dr. Cardona a question, but I wanted to start by commending our new Madam Chair, Senator Murray, and the Ranking Member, Senator Burr, for the way they opened this hearing today. We are grateful for their words today.

Dr. Cardona, I want to start by commending you for the achievements in your life to date. I am not sure there are many, if any, secretaries of education who have served as not only a fourth grade teacher, but also a principal, as well as an assistant superintendent, and then finally as education commissioner. So, you are not only well-qualified, but I think your story is a great American story of hard work and sacrifice, and we are grateful that you are willing to put yourself forward for additional public service.

I want to try to get to two issues. The first will take a little longer because it is a particular issue that affects students with disabilities, and the second is a question about early learning.

But, let me start with the question regarding students with disabilities and this unique issue. Students with disabilities face significant barriers to entering and completing post-secondary education. Federally funded research found that students with learning disabilities attend college at half the rate of their peers without—who don't have disabilities, and are less likely to complete their programs.

Two, students, we are told it is about one in four with learning disabilities inform their colleges that they have a disability, and many high school students with disabilities and their parents find the process to secure both accommodations and services in colleges both difficult and unclear.

I have legislation with Senator Cassidy that would ease the transition by, among other things, ensuring institutions of higher education make information about requesting an accommodation both—transparent for both the prospective student, as well as current students. And, also, this legislation would ensure that proof of a disability in K through 12 education is sufficient to receive accommodations in higher education settings.

President Biden's education agenda indicated he would increase funding for post-secondary programs that support students with

disabilities and will direct the Department of Education to provide guidance to those post-secondary programs.

I guess the two-part question here is, how will you ensure that students with disabilities have increased access to post-secondary education? And second, how will you make sure that those higher education institutions are prepared to support and provide services to students with disabilities?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator. I do acknowledge that, the dream of higher education or the goal of higher education is one that we have to expand in our Country, and it is one that I am committed to serving and working with you and others to learn more about and see how we can, at the agency, if confirmed, support that work.

Helping students gain access to higher education is a process that does require coordination and collaboration with our pre-K–12 systems and our higher education systems. Clarity and communication and expectations, and really just a culture of not only looking at these students as students with disabilities, but looking at them as students with assets, students with great abilities who have to learn a certain way or require accommodations. So, I think that cultural shift is a prerequisite to any technical strategies.

With that said, our agency would be poised to not only look for best practices across our Country of where they are doing it right and where they are finding success and sharing those best practices, but also ensuring that we are looking at how these universities are—what outcomes they are getting when serving students with disabilities. Making sure that we are partnering with them, but also keeping an eye on how our students with disabilities are faring in these colleges.

Something that I am pretty passionate about, as well, and I look forward to working with you and others to learn more about it and see how we can support it. Thank you.

Senator CASEY. Thank you very much. And I know I am short on time, but I will just—maybe I will submit a longer question for the record. But, the question pertains to early education. I like to say that if kids learn more now, they are going to earn more later. I think all the evidence shows that.

I will submit a question regarding expanding access to early learning, early care and learning, and also about the coordination between and among Federal Government agencies and programs. But, now that I am down to 6 seconds, I will leave that for a written question, or possibly in a second round. But, I know you have a broad experience in early learning and we will speak to that a little later.

Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you. I look forward to it.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Casey.

We will turn to Senator Collins.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you, Madam Chair. I look forward to working with you and Ranking Member Burr this year.

Dr. Cardona, I want to thank you for sharing your inspiring story with us today. I think it is a perfect role model for so many children in this Country.

I also appreciate the time that you took to meet with me, and I want to bring up two issues that we touched on in those meetings.

There is a lot of focus, and understandably so, in this Country on low-income children in large, urban schools. But, we also have a lot of low-income children in rural schools.

Along with former Senator Kent Conrad, I authored the Rural Education Achievement Program, known as REAP. And in 2015, that program was reauthorized. It is the only direct Federal support for small, rural, low-income schools. For example, island schools off the coast of Maine have used it to buy technology to connect their students and enrich their learning experience.

This program is really vital, yet last year the Department announced changes in the formula that was used to determine eligibility for the REAP Program. The result was that it would have abruptly eliminated funding for more than 100 rural, low-income school districts in the State of Maine.

When we talked one on one, I went into more detail about the devastating impact of this. I am seeking today, as you testify, your commitment to work with me to resolve the formula issue so that the rural, low-income students across our Country—it was not just in Maine that this eligibility changed, had this effect—will receive the funding that the REAP Program envisioned.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I recognize, and through the great conversation I had with you, the challenges that rural communities face, and I commit to looking at this very closely, if confirmed, and working with you and others to learn more about how these issues in rural communities really need more attention.

I will tell you, during the pandemic, in a small State like Connecticut, we found that our rural communities were facing challenges that were different than urban centers, and they were equally as important. Connectivity was an issue.

Senator COLLINS. Exactly.

Dr. CARDONA. Accessing high-quality content is only dependent on how well your signal is. So, I recall those conversations with parents and students and educators in the rural communities, and I recognize with—after the conversation with you and others the importance that this has in our Country, not only with the pandemic, but past the pandemic, making sure the needs of our students in rural communities are being met.

I look forward to learning more about it from you and your colleagues, but also serving to do the best we can at the agency to make sure we are meeting the needs of those learners, as well.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you. The second issue I want to bring up has to do with the TRIO programs, which I am a big supporter of, which help first-generation, disadvantaged students pursue higher education. And there are many incredibly dedicated people at the Department of Education. Let me make that clear.

But, let me tell you what happened a few years ago. The Department made a very abrupt, bureaucratic decision, really embodies the worst of bureaucracy, that denied funding to an Upward Bound program in my state on the basis of a formatting problem in the application. And this was a spacing problem. Instead of being dou-

ble spaced in a particular graph, it was one and a half spaces—that is how minor—and the University of Maine at Presque Isle was not given an opportunity to correct this.

Well, the result of this would have been that more than 900 students would have been denied access to the Upward Bound program over a 5-year program of the grant.

I worked with other Senators. We—Senator Murray was one who also signed the letter. Senator Tester. There were many Senators on both sides of the aisle. We sent three letters to the Department saying, this is ridiculous. This is not—the format is not dictated by law. This is arbitrary. In the case of Maine’s application, it was in a graph that was included in a 65-page application, and yet it was not even reviewed for the merits.

Well, the Department only changed course after I added language to the appropriations bill. It should not have taken legislative language in an appropriations bill to get the Department to prioritize the needs of disadvantaged students participating in the Upward Bound program over bureaucratic formatting errors.

I would just ask, again, for your commitment to make sure that we take a more commonsense approach and always remember that the students come first.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator. I commit not only to a strong partnership and ability to work with you, and I also want to commit, if confirmed, that our agency will be a service agency, making sure that our students’ needs are at the forefront.

Senator COLLINS. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Collins.

Senator Warren.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Madam Chair. And, Dr. Cardona, congratulations on your nomination.

You were a first-generation college student, and for you and for me, an affordable college education opened a million doors. But, today, students face a very different situation, so I want to talk with you today about student debt.

I know you know these facts, but I think it helps everyone if we could just talk about them for a few minutes. So, about 43 million people—that is one in five adults in America—have Federal student loan debt. Is that right?

Dr. CARDONA. That is right.

Senator WARREN. Good. And this debt adds up to more than about a trillion and a half dollars. Now, about 40 percent of the people with student loan debt do not have a college degree. Can you just say a word about what that means for them?

Dr. CARDONA. Well, what it means is that because they don’t have the college degree, maybe they don’t have the income potential that they would have had if they had the degree, and paying these bills will be a larger task and probably a longer process.

Senator WARREN. [Inaudible]—debt.

[Pause]

Senator WARREN. Dr. Cardona?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes. Can you hear me?

[Pause]

Dr. CARDONA. I said that students that are not able to graduate and probably would have their income affected because they were

not able to graduate and get the income potential, earning potential, that they would have had if they did. And they are probably in greater debt, and it may be more of a challenge to pay off their debt.

[Pause]

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. We may have lost Senator Warren. Is she—did we lose her video?

[Pause]

Senator BURR. Patty, I think we did lose Senator Warren.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Okay. I believe we have lost Senator Warren. We will try and get back to you when you—is she there? Senator Warren.

Senator WARREN. I am here.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Okay.

Senator WARREN. I am here.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. We lost you for a minute. Go ahead.

[Pause]

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Okay. We seem—we seem to be having connection problems with Senator Warren. Let's see if we can fix that, and we will move to Senator Paul and then go back to her. Okay.

Senator PAUL. The Office of Civil Rights sent a letter to Connecticut saying that boys cannot compete with girls in sports, or they should not be forced to allow boys to compete in girls' sports. If you are confirmed, will you enforce that Office of Civil Rights opinion?

Dr. CARDONA. Hello, Senator. Thank you for the question. I understand that there are a lot of concerns about that. It is—if confirmed, it is my responsibility and my privilege to make sure that we are following civil rights of all students, and that includes activities that they may engage in high school or in athletics.

Senator PAUL. What do you think in general about boys running in girls' track meets like they have been doing in Connecticut?

Dr. CARDONA. I think that it is critically important that educated—education systems and educators respect the rights of all students, including students who are transgender, and that they are afforded the opportunities that every other student has to participate in extracurricular activities.

Senator PAUL. Does it bother you that like the top 20 percent of boys running in track meets beat all of the girls in the state, and that it, would be— completely destroy girls' athletics, the girls are being pushed out, they don't make the finals in the state meet, they don't get college scholarships, that it is really detrimental to girls' sports? Do you worry about having boys run in girls' track meets?

Dr. CARDONA. I recognize and appreciate the concerns and the frustrations that are expressed. I, as Commissioner of Education, have had conversations with families who have felt the way you just described it, and families of students who are transgender. So, I understand that this is a challenge. I look forward to working with you and others to—

Senator PAUL. Do you think—

Dr. CARDONA [continuing]. Communicate—

Senator PAUL [continuing]. It is fair to have boys running in the girls' track meet?

Dr. CARDONA. I think it is appropriate for—I think it is the legal responsibility of schools to provide opportunities for students to participate in activities, and this includes students who are transgender.

Senator PAUL. You don't have a problem then with boys running in the girls' track meets, swimming meets, you name it? You are okay then with boys competing with girls?

Dr. CARDONA. Respectfully, Senator, I think I answered the question. I believe schools should offer the opportunity for students to engage in extracurricular activities, even if they are transgender. I think that is their right.

Senator PAUL. Alright. Well, a lot of us think that is bizarre, not very fair. I come from a family that has a lot of girls who have been—have competed in college athletics, have been state champions. And frankly, some boy that is six foot two competing against my five foot four niece does not sound very fair. I think most people in the Country think it is bizarre. It is just completely bizarre and unfair that people—

You are going to run the Department of Education and you have got no problem with it. That concerns me. And I think it is this kind of thing that is going to lead to really just the vast majority of America just wondering who are these people that think it is okay? From what planet are you from? I mean, to think it is okay that boys would compete with girls in a track meet, that somehow would be fair. I wonder where feminists are on this. I wonder where the people who supported women's sports are on this. I mean, are we all going to be okay with hulking, six-foot-four guys, wrestling against girls to—it just makes no sense whatsoever.

I think the fact that you seem to be afraid to answer the question, or you basically do answer the question by saying it is okay without saying it is okay, really is a statement to a real problem we have and a disconnect between what middle America and what most Americans actually believe. I even think most Democrats don't believe girls should run in a boys' track meet, boys should run in a girls' track meet.

I am disappointed in the answer and I just cannot imagine that we are going to have a policy like that nationally.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you.

Senator Murphy, you are next.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Again, congratulations, Dr. Cardona. Thank you for your willingness to serve.

Just a word on the topic that Senator Burr raised about assessments. I am a believer in assessments. I think it is really hard to figure out how to target resources if you don't know how your kids are performing. Admittedly, much tougher to do assessments right now, and there is probably a worthwhile conversation about how you tie assessments to accountability measures.

But, on a bipartisan basis, we have approved hundreds of billions of dollars to send to states and municipalities. We want to make sure that money is spent well, and having a sense of what kids are

succeeding and what kids are not is just, I think, a proper exercise of responsible taxpayer dollar management. And, so, I just add that to the conversation.

Dr. Cardona, I want to talk about sort of two issues unique to Meriden, Connecticut that I think are great to highlight for the Country. One is the work that you have done there to reduce suspensions and expulsions, and the next is the work that Meriden has done to promote a truly diverse community, racially diverse and economically diverse, and to talk about the benefit that is provided to students by going to school in a diverse environment.

First, I am a believer that the Federal Government should move more quickly to try to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline; that we should be encouraging states to use less exclusionary discipline, meaning kicking kids out of school as a means to try to make schools safer.

What have you done in—you led this effort in Meriden. What did you do to reduce the use of suspensions and expulsions in a way that frankly ended up making your schools safer places?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator. Yes. It is hard to learn if you are being excluded from the learning environment, so efforts to reduce exclusionary practices were critical to our work in Meriden and at the state level. And, to do this, you have to really engage students as partners in the process. Engaging student voice and giving students an opportunity to communicate their experience, and how their learning is best and what struggles they are having in their learning environment is critically important.

You mentioned restorative practices. Making sure that when issues arise in our schools that we are looking at it as a learning opportunity for our students and trying to bring a stronger sense of community as a result. So, restorative practices was something that we did in Meriden.

But, also monitoring. I know you talked about accountability and monitoring. If—we are not going to improve it if we are not monitoring it, if we are not looking at our data disaggregated by race, by socioeconomic status, by free and reduced lunch, by students with disabilities. We have to be open and honest about what we are doing and what the results are, and are they different for different students, and then we have to be honest about building capacity for our educators, for our schools, and for our systems to make sure that we are addressing it intentionally.

Senator MURPHY. One of the things that you will be immediately presented with is an executive order around school discipline policies that included a lot of incentives for data collection. And I hope you will take a hard look at re-implementing all or part of that Obama year executive order, in part because it does get to this question of making sure that we are watching what happens. What we know is that it tends to be students of color and students of disability that end up getting excluded from school more so than their White or non-disabled peers.

Lastly, I just wanted to ask you to talk about the benefit of Meriden's diverse student community. I have legislation that would set up a Federal grant to support voluntary school integration programs, racial integration programs and economic integration programs.

I have always been struck in visiting Meriden how the kids themselves are so conscious of the benefit they get from going to middle schools and high schools where they have economic and racial diversity. And, in fact, I have talked to lots of kids who moved from less diverse communities, either all-White communities or communities with almost exclusively students of color, and they themselves just had their eyes opened. So, why is that important to Meriden's success?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator. So, I am a big believer in not only curriculum providing a window into other cultures or a mirror into your own culture where you can see yourself, but I also believe the environment. Having a diverse environment is a better environment. Diverse perspectives, diverse backgrounds.

There is a level of celebration of differences, which, if we can get our students to graduate school with a celebration of differences, they are going to be much more successful in the global economy that we are in.

It is definitely a benefit, and it is something that in my home community, I have benefited from, and my children, too, as well.

Senator MURPHY. Well, I will look forward to, working with you on ways that we can allow the Federal Government to be a facilitator of those conversations. These are ultimately decisions that get made at the local level about how to approach this question of desegregation, integration, but it is a conversation that the Federal Government can play a more helpful role, and I look forward to working with you on that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you.

Senator Cassidy.

Senator CASSIDY. Hey, Dr. Cardona. Nice to see you again. Thank you. Can you hear me? I think you can.

Dr. CARDONA. I can. Hello, Senator.

Senator CASSIDY. Listen, we had a great conversation and, as I expressed to you, I have a real interest in dyslexia. The gurus on this, if you will, are from Yale Medical School, so kind of a home state for you, the Dr. and Dr. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz.

It is clear that you can diagnose dyslexia in kindergarten and first grade; that one in five children are dyslexic—the best data shows that—and yet, we are not diagnosing that many children. And you and I discussed how poverty, and you mentioned English as a second language, can be used as an excuse to explain a child's lack of reading ability when perhaps they are dyslexic and require the specific intervention to address their dyslexia to keep them from falling down.

Right now, I am just reviewing our conversation that you and I had for those who are listening to kind of set the stage for this.

Again, I have been so concerned that poverty can be used as an excuse to deny a child the appropriate intervention. Can you give me your thoughts on that? And could you commit to helping to address that?

Dr. CARDONA. Sure. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I appreciate—I appreciate our conversation we had last month and the passion with which you bring these issues forward.

I could call it the iBentido effect. The iBentido effect is having lower expectations because—that because a kid came from a tough environment, or maybe there was disruption in learning, that does not necessarily mean it is a learning disability.

I agree with you that making sure we are screening adequately and providing the right interventions is critically important in our educational system. And I look forward to working with you and others to make sure that we have the right balance of screening and making sure that we are not assuming that students that come with a specific demographic background are thought of as having a special need, a special need for learning, or an issue that prevents them from learning.

Senator CASSIDY. What would be your position on universal screening for dyslexia in kindergarten or first grade, knowing that the data shows that it can be detected then with the appropriate screening instrument?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you. Yes. I am a big proponent of ensuring that we have adequate tools in our classrooms and that our teachers are equipped with the right tools and training to make sure that they can see where students' needs are and what might be something that requires a little bit further diagnosis or assessment.

I think making sure that we have a really robust pre-K through three system that gives teachers the tools to assess students not only for dyslexia, but for other—other needs that students might have in their ability to learn to read. Because we know those years are pretty critical. So, I am in favor of better screening tools for our educators to have to help support our students.

Senator CASSIDY. Now, let me ask about high-stakes testing. If you are a child with dyslexia with a reading-intensive, high-stakes test, you are going to—it is testing for your weaknesses, not testing for your strengths. And that is just intuitive, and I am stealing this from the Shaywitzes, who are at Yale, so—but they have taught me so much about this topic.

My concern is that if you have—and the best schools in the private sector put dyslexics in a single area, classroom, breakout session or whatever, and they give them the specialized curriculum that is needed for dyslexics, but that would be not so beneficial for non-dyslexics. So, it focuses the attention, the resources, where it is needed, but does not diffuse it over all.

But, if you have that child in that concentration of such students and you are testing to their weakness where you have high-stakes tests, they are inevitably going to do poorly because, one, they have been selected for being poor readers, and then you are giving them a reader-intensive test. And, now, ideally, you are not going—you are going student by student on their improvement, not a class by class without looking at the individuals' improvement. Any thoughts on that as my time closes out?

Dr. CARDONA. Sure. Again, thank you for the question and the nuanced approach you took to this.

A couple thoughts. No. 1, it is critically important whenever you are assessing a student you have multiple measures. So, I agree with you 100 percent. You cannot base everything on one test. You really have to have multiple measures. And, as you said, some as-

assessments are very reading-intensive, but sometimes that is not the best picture of the whole child.

Second, I agree with you that focusing intervention for children with dyslexia will require a specific set of skills. It is—for me, my opinion, the best way to do that is to ensure that we have the proper training and we are clear on what strategies work well for those students, and make sure that we have our schools able to do those services for our students.

Thank you, Senator, and I look forward to working more with you and hearing more about how we can support students with dyslexia, and all students with disabilities moving forward, if confirmed.

Senator CASSIDY. I appreciate that. And I will close by saying that our Every Child Succeeds Act, which I have, supported, nonetheless gives minimal latitude for a district or a state to do that individual, okay, you have dyslexia, so we are going to judge you differently. In fact, it puts the state in a straightjacket when it comes to assessing their progress. So, I do look forward to working with you on that and with my colleagues on the Committee.

With that, I yield back, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Cassidy.

Senator Baldwin.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Cardona, for joining us today and for your decades of service to the students and families in Connecticut and your willingness to continue that service by serving as Secretary of the Department of Education. I look forward to your swift confirmation and working with you to help address the many challenges that our Nation's students, parents, educators, and administrators face.

Certainly, chief among those challenges right now is our Nation's recovery from this global pandemic and the associated economic downturn. During our last recession, America's community colleges played a real critical role in helping folks acquire new skills and get connected to well-paying, high-quality jobs in in-demand industries. Then and now, career and technical education programs in our Nation's community and technical colleges help unemployed Americans get back to work, and CTE programs in middle school and high school can set students on a path to well-paying jobs.

I am a co-chair of the Senate bipartisan CTE Caucus, and I am always looking for ways to advance career and technical education. One way to do so is by making community and technical college affordable and accessible to more and more students of all ages and backgrounds. My America's College Promise Act would do just that by making two years of education at these institutions tuition-free.

Dr. Cardona, do you agree that strengthening career and technical education can help our Nation's recovery? And if so, if confirmed, how do you plan to support these programs both through community colleges and in middle and high schools?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I absolutely agree that career and technical education and pathways are critical in our recovery, but I also agree that our community colleges are going to be a major part of our recovery as a Country in education, and they play a very important role.

I will explain how best I can move forward with this by sharing with you that, as Commissioner of Education, I had the wonderful experience of working with Superintendent Craig Drezek, who oversaw programming that allowed our high school students to get access to college-level courses in a community college and get credit for that, and create a pathway for them to think about career opportunities when they graduate the two-year college.

Then, what I have learned in my experience—not only in Connecticut but throughout the Country I see this happening—is if we can really start thinking about how we are providing opportunities for our middle and high school students to be exposed to the jobs of today, and pathways that include maybe a two-year college or a career technical education, or advanced manufacturing, computer science training, and get into the workforce, they are more likely to want to go back and get that four-year degree in something that they are passionate about.

I do think it starts early into middle school, drives up through high school. But, we have to design our high schools to be able to provide those pathways for our students to be successful, whether they go to a four-year traditional pathway or to a pathway that involves a career and technical education training.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you. In his first day in office, President Biden issued an executive order directing all Federal agencies to review their regulations, guidance, and other policies in light of this summer's decision by the U.S. Supreme Court finding that discrimination on the basis of sex under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act is properly understood to also forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Dr. Cardona, I urge you to make that review one of your first orders of business if confirmed because it is critically important that all students have a safe environment, free from discrimination and harassment, in which to learn. LGBTQ students in particular remain vulnerable, and I was deeply disappointed by a number of actions that the Department took under the leadership of Former Secretary DeVos that put these students at further risk.

As secretary, how do you plan to change the tone set by your predecessor and communicate the Department's support for LGBTQ students?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, and again, for the passion. I feel it is non-negotiable to make sure that our learning environments are places that are free of discrimination and harassment for all learners, including our LGBTQ students. And, not only will we review these carefully, we will also be in discussion with the folks at the agency and our partners out in the field, who have very strong perspectives on this, to learn more and make sure that we are doing everything to make sure that our learning environments are safe for students not only physically, but also where they can go there free of harassment or discrimination.

Senator BALDWIN. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Baldwin.

We will turn to Senator Murkowski.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. Cardona, thank you for the opportunity to visit with you by phone last week. I appreciated our conversation, and I loved the

story about how you integrated the Iditarod into your curriculum at that point in time. To have someone who has been at all levels working with kids, working with administrators, I think is a very unique perspective that you bring, too, to the position for which you have been nominated.

Now, when I mention Iditarod, I know that through working with your students and in your classroom, that we have got a very, very rural state. And, with rural states, we have some very small schools, and there are challenges that come with that. It comes with teacher recruitment and retention, but it also comes with funding issues and certain disparities that can come about through use of formula or competitive grant-type funds.

The Department's Office of Rural Outreach we think is a pretty good communications tool for the Department, but it really lacks any policy leverage, as I understand it. It is more along the lines of the Department is looking at programs, seeking to move forward with action, but then there is kind of a, oh, how is this going to work for our rural schools? How is this going to work for our smaller schools? So, more of a—it is kind of an afterthought rather than being part of the central discussion.

I would like your input here in terms of what more we can do to ensure that our rural schools, our smaller schools, are not kind of the afterthought. And that when it comes to access for funding for these rural school districts, some are too small to really get many dollars from a formula grant, and then they don't have the capacity to apply and win a competitive grant. So, they are really stuck in this bind here.

Your views, and what more can be done with a focus on our rural schools?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator Murkowski, and I, too, enjoyed the conversations and having the conversation about the Iditarod and someone that really knows it more than I did. It was really awesome.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I have invited you up. I would love to show you around.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you. You brought up the issue of rural schools and rural communities, as did Senator Collins, and it really gives me—it made me think about what I experienced. When thinking about developing curriculum at the district or at the state level, I have often felt that ELLs were an afterthought in the development of curriculum; and that the needs of English learners was not really at the table at times when thinking about how are we going to meet the needs of all learners.

Similarly, I feel the same way about rural communities; that, as you mention, they should not be an afterthought; that there has to be a seat at the table to make sure that when their needs are being—that their needs are being considered when we are talking about grants, when we are talking about competitive grants, or making sure we are meeting the needs of learners who are oftentimes marginalized or not given the attention that they should be given.

What I commit to is ensuring that rural needs have a seat at the table, or representatives of students that are in rural communities have a seat at the table. Because your needs in those communities

are unique, and unless we think about them when we are thinking about how to support students at the beginning, it will probably not get the attention that it needs.

I commit to that in terms of fund distribution, but also learning more. I am very much interested in learning more about how the challenges in our rural communities are preventing students from gaining access to classes that they want or having access to a quality education during the pandemic.

These are issues that are important to me, and I look forward to working with you and others to learn more about it, to make sure that they have a seat at the table, and that, as we plan forward, if confirmed, that the perspective of our rural students is also taken into account.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, I appreciate your focus on that. I think we have learned from this pandemic not only where health disparities exist throughout the Country, but certainly where our educational disparities exist. Because if you are not able to access broadband, if you do not have that—

Dr. CARDONA. Right.

Senator MURKOWSKI [continuing]. Internet, you do not have education.

I was going to ask you a question about statewide assessments. I understand that you have answered that now twice, so I will look to your responses.

But, I am very concerned about some of these students who have been without not only the in-person instruction, but also the benefits that technology has brought to other students across the Country during this time of COVID and the disparity that existed prior to, and unfortunately will probably be exacerbated. So, I look forward to working with you.

Thank you, Mister—Madam Chairman.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator Murkowski.

Senator KAINE.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Madam Chair, and to Ranking Member Burr. I am excited about continuing to work with this Committee under great leadership.

I want to thank and congratulate Dr. Cardona for your—

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you.

Senator KAINE [continuing]. Nomination. I think you are going to make an excellent Secretary of Education.

My dad ran a welding shop in the stockyards of Kansas City, ironworking and welding shop, and he was management. He was the owner. My two brothers and I and my mom worked in that business for years. The core of the business were these anywhere from five to seven ironworkers, union ironworkers, who made that business a success. And my dad always attributed much of the success to them, just as they attributed the success to his business acumen.

Years later, I ran a school in Honduras that taught kids to be welders and carpenters. When I got into public life as a city councilman in 1994, I was completely convinced of the power of high-quality career and technical education, but I started to discover in so many of our policies an inequity about the way we treat career and technical education. It was not emphasized in K-12. Some-

times it was used in the bad old days to track students whose folks didn't think had much potential.

At the Federal level, we have policy after policy that treats career and technical education different than higher ed. So, say there is a family and a couple of parents who are—make an income that would qualify them for Pell Grants, and they have two kids, and one wants to go to college. Well, it is an entitlement for that kid. If he wants to go to college, there is a Pell Grant that is available for that child.

Say the second child wants to be a welder, wants to be an EMT, wants to do something that would be a high-quality, intense career and technical program that does not happen on a college campus and is not the length of a college semester. That child cannot get a Pell Grant.

The child who wants to go to college basically gets an entitlement, but for the child who wants to pursue high-quality career and technical education, well, we give WIOA funds to a Governor, and the Governor can decide how it gets allocated. So, hopefully there is a program somewhere near where this youngster is and hopefully there is room for this youngster, but there is no guarantee of it.

I have made it my passion since I came here in 2013, and certainly since I have been on the Committee, to try to eliminate root and branch, root and branch, the second-class status that we so often assign to career and technical education, and I know you have focused a lot on this in Connecticut.

In Virginia, we have had a program called FastForward, where we fund our community colleges to do high-quality career and tech, not the length of a semester. Because of that, the students cannot get Pell Grants for it, but we have been able to fund it at the state level. What we have found is the students do great. They are a little different than average. They tend to be about 35 years old. They are more likely to be minority students. But, what we have shown is that their earnings increase when they get credentials by about \$8,000 annually, and they are more likely to get jobs with benefits.

I would like you to tell me that, should you be confirmed, you completely get that career pathways for high-quality career and tech are something that we should be valuing and respecting and supporting at—in Federal policy.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I wholeheartedly agree with that. I am a proud graduate of Wilcox Technical High School, where I studied automotive. And I had the opportunity to go into that field if I wanted to, or go into college, and I chose to go to college. I wanted to be a fine arts teacher, and then I was drawn to elementary education.

But, the point is that you are absolutely right. We need to really evolve our thinking to say college and career opportunities should exist in the comprehensive high schools that provide pathways, clear pathways, to options for students in the fields that, right now, there are great, high-paying jobs that are going unfilled because we are not as aligned as we need to be.

I am big supporter of that.

Senator KAINE. Excellent.

Dr. CARDONA. There is a running joke in Connecticut, welders who code have it made. So, if you are a welder and you know how to code, you can program a machine, you are going to be pretty good.

Senator KAINE. Dr. Cardona, I have a very bipartisan bill with Senator Portman called the JOBS Act that would allow Pell to be used for high-quality career and tech. I would love to work with you on it.

Just a suggestion. There have been questions about COVID and testing and how we should grapple with that question. I hope what we might do is continue to use testing to identify challenges and learning gaps, but maybe because of COVID, adjust the accountability sanctions on schools and things like that might not be appropriate, and I hope you will consider that.

Last question. How much would it help states and schools if the Federal Government, instead of funding the IDEA at about 13 percent of costs, would actually do what we said we would do when we passed it and fund 40 percent of the cost? How much would that help our schools in states like Connecticut and everywhere else?

Dr. CARDONA. It would be a game changer for public education and for our students with disabilities, and for all of our school communities.

Senator KAINE. Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Pause]

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Madam Chair Murray, and thank you for holding this hearing.

Dr. Cardona, thank you for being willing to serve as our education secretary. Without any question—I am reading about your life story. It just reminds me of the goodness of America and that all things are truly possible in the greatest Nation on the earth. Your story models that reality, and I am so excited to have a conversation with you about making sure that education is the foundation for the next generation of success stories.

As you and Senator Kaine were just having a very—really important conversation about tech schools and two-year education, I want to just put a plug in there for shop. You may not be old enough to remember when we had shop in high schools, but it is really an important part of the apparatus that makes success possible. And, as you have already alluded to, that you can have a high quality of life, and there is dignity in all work, and shop is a really important part of that.

I come at this issue as a poor kid growing up in a single-parent household and believe that education is the closest thing to magic. And the more we focus on education, K through 12, the more likely we are to have success stories in every community in this Country, and that is exactly what we are striving to do.

I will say that without question, and unfortunately, it has become more and more clear to me that partisan politics and special interest groups sometimes finds its way in front of kids and education. And I will say that, even in the pandemic, we saw relief bills that wanted to empower Governors to make the best decisions that they could for their kids blocked by my friends on the other side of the aisle. That, to me, just does not make a lot of sense,

and it certainly does not make for improvements in educational outcomes for the poorest kids, oftentimes stuck in rural America or inner-city America. They both share the same burden of lacking quality education in too many of those zip codes.

Frankly, one of the things that is most alarming, Dr. Cardona, is that many of our public schools remain closed. And we know that the learning loss that happens over the summertime in normal circumstances and situations slows down the learning progress for so many kids. So, imagine 18 months outside the classroom. That will be devastating for the learning loss for too many kids.

But, at the exact same time, as we celebrate Catholic School Week, we note that there are over five million students today in private schools, and many of those schools are open today. One point seven million low-income families send their kids to open, private and Catholic schools.

That should be the case today. The CDC has said basically the same thing, that it is really important to get our kids back in school, and that is something we should prioritize as a Country. And private school education that is available for the elites in Washington, the elites around the Country, and if you don't send your kid to a private school, you can send your school—your kid to the best public school by simply moving into the right district. That is not the case for too many poor kids in rural America, and is certainly not the case for too many kids in inner-city America.

As a matter of fact, when you think about the promise of high-quality education, and frankly private school education, you have to look right at our current president, President Biden, and his kids, former President Obama and his kids, House Democrat Whip, Jim Clyburn, at Speaker Pelosi, Senator Casey, Senator Kaine, House Ed and Labor Chairman, Bobby Scott. All benefited from private schools and Catholic Schools.

I have got to assume that my colleagues on the other side of the aisle work in good faith, but it does, to me, smack of a little hypocrisy, hypocritical that those folks were allowed to avail themselves and their kids to private school education. And too often, those same policymakers seem to make it hard for the poorest Americans to find the path to take care of their kids and the highest possible education path, and that is just not available for too many kids and too many of their families.

I hope, Dr. Cardona, that you will take some time and perhaps articulate your position on things like the bipartisan D.C. Opportunity Scholarship that helps kids enter into charter schools and get a quality education, where the graduation rate is nearly double that of every other public school in the D.C. market. So, I would love to hear your comments on charter schools and maintaining the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for your passion and your comments and your question.

I recognize there are excellent examples of charter schools. I have seen many in Connecticut. Stanford Charter comes to mind. I know there are also phenomenal examples of neighborhood schools that are doing just as great work and are giving all students—

Senator SCOTT. Absolutely.

Dr. CARDONA [continuing]. An opportunity to succeed. And my passion really is to ensure quality schools, period. Making sure that we are not supporting a system of winners and losers where, if you get into a school, you have an opportunity for success, but if you don't get into a school, your options lead to at least a belief that you cannot make it.

For me, I am a strong proponent of making sure all schools are quality schools, investing in our neighborhood schools to make sure that they are quality schools where parents want to send their children. We know most parents want to send their children to their neighborhood school, so it is really important that we support all schools, including those neighborhood schools that are usually the first choice for families in that community.

Senator SCOTT. I know that I am out of time, so I will just say this, Dr. Cardona. Thank you for your answer. Thank you for being clear. I certainly share the objective of making sure that every child in every zip code has a quality choice. Unfortunately, for poorer kids and minority kids and rural kids, that is not always the case, and I want to make sure that we make that playing field as level for them as conceivably possibly.

Thank you, and thank you for your little extra time, Madam Chair Murray.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you so much, Senator Scott.

Can you hear me in the hearing room now?

Senator BURR. Yes, we can, Patty.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Okay. Great. I will turn to Senator Hassan.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you, Madam Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr. I really look forward to working with both of you in this new Congress.

Thank you, Dr. Cardona, for being here today, and congratulations to you and your entire family—

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you.

Senator HASSAN [continuing]. For your nomination, because this kind of service is truly a family affair.

Dr. CARDONA. Yes, it is. Thank you.

Senator HASSAN. Before I start my questions, I would ask the Madam Chair if I could please have unanimous consent to enter this letter from a coalition of 54 organizations working to protect students and taxpayers with stronger consumer protections in higher education into the record.

[Pause]

Senator HASSAN. Is that without objection, Madam Chair?

Senator BURR. Without objection, .

Senator HASSAN. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. So ordered.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you. Dr. Cardona, as our Nation continues to grapple with unprecedented disruptions to our education systems, I look forward to hearing from you on how we can best meet the needs of our students now and going forward.

Before I get to my questions, I also just want to echo Senator Collins' comments and some of Senator Murkowski's, too, on the importance of supporting rural schools and working collaboratively to fix the formula to ensure that schools are able to continue to ac-

cess needed funding through the Rural and Low-Income School Program. And I look forward to working with you on that.

I wanted to turn to the issue of COVID-19 education funding. As we have discussed today, schools need additional funding to help address COVID-19, especially in order to help more schools reopen for in-person learning. Several of my colleagues have raised concerns about the level of funding in President Biden's COVID-19 relief proposal. What specifically do you anticipate schools using that additional funding for? Do you know how the Administration determined what amount was needed? And what do you see as the consequences if Congress fails to act on education funding for COVID relief?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question. You know, as a nominee, I am not involved in the policy development, but I do recognize that in the development of this, different stakeholders were at the table talking about what impacts it would have as they developed this.

I can tell you that as Commissioner of Education in Connecticut, the funding—and we are appreciative of the funding—has really helped us keep the lights on, make sure we have PPE, make sure we have schools that are safe and clean, better ventilation. We have custodial support making sure that our buildings are clean. I wouldn't want it any other way if my wife and children are going to those schools.

However, the funding that is being considered now, moving forward, is really to make sure we recover. We have—we are experiencing—we are in the middle of a pandemic, and our learners, the social, emotional development of—the needs of the counselors are greater.

Many of our students have lost loved ones, have been through trauma in terms of their families losing their jobs. So much change has happened. We are going to need more counselors in our schools.

We are going to make—need to make sure we have summer programming.

We are going to need to make sure we have extended days.

If we really want to recover, we really need to invest now or we are going to pay later. And I feel that the funds that are being discussed now are really to help us with the long-term recovery process, preventing layoffs when we need more teachers, not less.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you. I now want to turn to the issue of career pathways, which you and I discussed a little bit when we met earlier, and the importance of engaging adult learners. And it also goes to some of what Doctor—Senator Kaine was talking about in terms of the JOBS Act.

Last week, I reintroduced the Gateways to Careers Act for Senator Young, Senators Kaine, and Collins. This is a bipartisan bill that would support career pathways programs where students can make an income while they earn educational credentials. The bill also includes important wraparound supports for learners who face barriers to completion, like to help access affordable housing and cover transportation costs.

Do you agree that it is important to support these kinds of programs? And can you share some of your thoughts on how we can

better serve adult learners who have struggled to engage with traditional education opportunities?

Dr. CARDONA. Right. Thank you for the question. I do think it is important. Pell Grants now pay for maybe a quarter of the expenses in state colleges. I think in 1975, 1976, the same amount paid for about three-quarters of the costs.

Senator HASSAN. Right.

Dr. CARDONA. It is much more difficult to access higher education now for our learners, our students.

Clear pathways that start earlier to give our pre-K–12 system students an opportunity to see what opportunities may exist, whether it is CTE or college-track courses, maybe having more courses at the high school level where students can be dual enrolled and really feel like they are a college student.

My son, who has just recently enrolled in a course through his high school with the community college. That was a pretty proud moment as a father to know that he is taking a college course as a junior, and that he is having a head start.

That should not be the exception. There should be opportunities for all students to do those types of things. And I think with careful coordination, it should be something that we should be doing much more across our Country.

Senator HASSAN. Well, I look forward to working with you on that.

Thank you, Madam Chair. I yield the time.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much.

Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you very much, Madam Chair and Ranking Member Burr. And thank you, Dr. Cardona, for being with us today. I appreciated the chance that we had to chat yesterday and appreciated your answers to that point.

I want to associate myself with a number of the things that were said by Senator Paul. That is not something I say very frequently, but he made a very, very good point. I have got pictures of my eight granddaughters among some grandsons behind me. They should not be competing with people who are physiologically in an entirely different category. And I think boys should be competing with boys and girls should be competing with girls on the athletic field.

I am going to turn instead to the stimulus program that the President has proposed. In December, we added funding for K through 12. Sixty-seven billion dollars was added to what was previously put in the CARES Act. A total of \$67 billion between the two, rather, and now the President is proposing that we add 130 billion on top of that.

In looking at the areas that are proposed, he is proposing that we hire 10 percent more teachers in America. Now, we have about 3.5 million educators in the Country, so this would be some 350,000 additional educators, and he is proposing that we build new classrooms for these teachers.

I don't presume that it is your plan or their plan to fire these teachers after COVID is over. Is that right?

Dr. CARDONA. Correct, Senator.

Senator ROMNEY. Well, so then we are basically permanently adding 350,000 teachers and building a lot more classrooms. So, I presume this is associated with saying that the smaller classroom size is going to get better education for our kids. But, I have not seen any unbiased studies, other than from the teachers' union, that suggest that smaller classroom size correlates in any way to student performance, obviously within some normal parameters.

But, as you look at the NAEP exams, for instance, to compare the various states, the states at the very top have the same size classrooms that the states—as the states at the very bottom. Is that correct? Do you understand that the same way I do?

Dr. CARDONA. I am sorry. I did not understand the—I did not hear the last part of the question.

Senator ROMNEY. I am sorry. I guess our connection today is not doing real well.

I am just pointing out that based upon the National Assessment of Student Performance, it shows that states at the very top of performance compared to those at the very bottom performance have about the same size classroom size. So, just adding more classrooms does not seem to correlate with better student performance. Is that your perception, also?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator. So, the question about classroom size, I think there are numerous studies over time that have shown that, classroom size is not necessarily the most important indicator. However, as a former teacher, a principal, and in my experience as an educator, I can tell you, when I have 15 students in front of me versus 28 students in front of me, I am able to give more specialized attention to those 15 students.

I think, in the NAEP studies that you reference, there are other factors that it would be unfair to compare those to because it could be that in the communities that have greater class size, they also have additional resources that maybe the others do not.

Senator ROMNEY. I would tend to look at studies that were done, for instance, by the McKinsey Institute that looks at performance of students around the world and the impact of classroom size.

I note when I served as Governor of Massachusetts, we compared 152 different school districts based on classroom size and student performance and there was no relationship whatsoever. The key is making sure we hire the best teachers. Starting wages for teachers I think is at—or salaries for teachers, absolutely critical.

I would strongly encourage you to look at the \$170 billion the Administration is proposing to add to K through 12 for COVID relief and suggest that we put in place things that will really make a difference, like giving all of our kids access to electronics, computers, iPads, and so forth, broadband capacity. These things, I think, will have a far greater impact. I would underscore that I am concerned that the funding that we are describing is something which the teachers union is very happy to receive, but which will not result in actual improvement in the scores and the performance of our young people.

I would also like to associate myself with the comments that have been made with regards to technical education that Senator Kaine indicated, and Senator Hassan. I think it is critical that we level the playing field and we encourage young people to get a tech-

nical education if that is where their orientation is, and that we support them in every way we possibly can. Thank you, Doctor. Good to be with you.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator. I look forward to working with you, if confirmed, and learning more with you and your colleagues to make sure we are doing everything we can for all of our students. Thank you.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much. And I understand Senator Warren, who got cutoff earlier, is in the room.

Senator Warren, if you want to finish your time.

Senator WARREN. Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Dr. Cardona.

I am reminded by this how difficult it is right now for our students and for our teachers, who are having to deal with technical glitches that interrupt their education every day, and why this package is so important to get the resources into our schools, so we can get those schools opened for learning for all of our kids in person. So, thank you.

When you and I were interrupted by technical problems, we were talking about the fact that you are a first-generation college student, and that the opportunities that were available to go to college without debt a generation ago are just not there now.

We were talking about the 43 million Americans who are struggling with student loan debt—about \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt. And, at least when I lost you in this process, you were starting to talk about what it means that 40 percent of those who are dealing with student loan debt do not have a college diploma. So, what does that mean in terms of the impact of student loan debt on their lives?

Dr. CARDONA. It is a significant impact. I think 1.2 million default every year. And what we do know is if you did not graduate and did not get your degree, your earning potential is not what it would be if you did. So, I think what it does is exacerbate issues for those who are unable to pay.

Senator WARREN. Yes. And can you say a word about how student loan debt is impacting Black and Latino students?

Dr. CARDONA. It is disproportionately affecting them more. I recently read that for Black students who graduate, 12 years later, they are still paying more than they were starting with when they started—when they took the loan out because of the interest. So, 12 years after starting the loan, they are—they owe more.

Senator WARREN. Yes.

Dr. CARDONA. That is exacerbating gaps. That is perpetuating, the haves and the have-nots.

Senator WARREN. A deep hole that keeps getting deeper.

Here is something that may come as a surprise to many Americans. Student loan debt is one of the biggest contributors to rising debt loads by seniors. There are older Americans who are still paying off student loan debt in their 60's, in their 70's, even in their 80's. In fact, tens of thousands of Americans have had their Social Security checks garnished for student loan debt.

In other words, the impact is felt everywhere. And even before this economic crisis, before this pandemic, the economic effects of student loan debt were holding back our economy.

Dr. Cardona, this is a crisis. You are in a unique position to be able to do something about it. Congress gave the Department of Education tools to help borrowers with student loan debt. Let me ask you, will you commit to doing everything you can to use those tools to provide borrowers with immediate relief?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes, Senator.

Senator WARREN. Good. And one of those tools is overseeing the office of Federal Student Aid. Under your predecessor, Betsy DeVos, that office was on the side of greedy student loan servicers instead of borrowers. Will you commit to developing a plan to reform FSA so that it works for student borrowers instead of for big corporations?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes, Senator.

Senator WARREN. Good. I really appreciate those commitments. They can make an enormous difference in the lives of millions of people across this Country.

One route that I am going to continue to urge you to take is administrative cancellation of student loan debt. The law on this is clear. Congress gave the power to the Secretary of Education, and the past two secretaries—and yes, that includes Betsy DeVos—used it. So, if confirmed, that tool will be waiting on your desk when you are sworn in, and that is tremendous power to help.

As you know, Majority Leader Schumer and I have outlined how you and President Biden can immediately cancel \$50,000 in student loan debt, and I look forward to working with you to provide the relief that our students need.

Thank you so much for agreeing to serve.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator.

Senator WARREN. Thank you.

[Pause]

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you, Senator.

We will turn to Senator Braun.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just a little over a week ago, we had a robust conversation—I think it went 35, 40 minutes—and some of the stuff that we talked about then has already been covered. I am going to jump right to the question nobody ever seems to ask around here. And I know that in building a business and being on a school board for 10 years that I was in my hometown from '04 to '14, being a state legislator on the education committee, it was the idea of cost, how do you pay for things.

Higher education, after you get through high school, when you are out there trying to pursue that pathway of CTE or a four-year degree, has sadly eclipsed in terms of costs going up. Healthcare, the other thing that I have probably been loudest about of any Senator, that we need to reform a broken system.

You and I spoke about Mitch Daniels, what he did at Purdue. I don't know if you had a chance to look into that any. But, he has frozen tuition now I think for 8, 9 years. In a place like this that runs trillion-dollar structural deficits, when so many people look to the Federal Government to get help, what are your thoughts on

how we do better at getting better value out of post-secondary education and how are you going to weigh in on it? What did you learn maybe from Mitch Daniels?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question. And, I did have an opportunity to see how cost-saving measures were done at Purdue and, I think my response to that is we need to do that as a Nation. We need to really look at exemplars and lift them up to say this is another way to protect students, then debt; and making sure that we are keeping college costs down; making sure that universities and colleges are using everything at their disposal to make the experience of the learner one that they can afford and that they are not going to be paying for the rest of their lives, so they can move on to buy a home, start a family, and do the things that they need to do after.

To answer your question, I would want to make sure that programs like that are elevated, communicated, and that the agency can provide a platform through which we—the left hand learns from the right hand, right? Unfortunately, there are a lot of pockets of excellence across our Country that people don't know about. So, you mentioning it gave me the opportunity to look into it.

But, I think we need to have a more structured system where we are learning from one another and we are keeping students at the center of the conversation, making sure that college efficiency is one of those topics. And making sure that the return on investment is there for our higher education learners.

Senator BRAUN. I am glad to see that you have that point of view because currently, on anything we do here, we borrow about 23 percent of what we spend. And I think for most parents, stakeholders across the Country, good health and good education, and sadly those are the two most costly parts of our economy and society.

It was talked about earlier—Senator Scott, choice. Indiana has led the way on school choice. I come from a school district, public school district, one of the best in the state. Back when I was a school board member, a Catholic high school tried to get started in our hometown. No demand for it, even though the faith-based part had interest in it, but the public school systems were so good. At a neighboring county, who lost one of its three grade schools, the smallest of the three, the best performing, due to bad management within that district.

I would like you to be a little more distinct in what you are going to do in terms of promoting competition and choice, because I think you generally said, I want all schools to do well.

Dr. CARDONA. Sure. So, I went to a technical high school, so I had choice when I went to high school. I could have gone to a traditional, comprehensive high school. I chose a technical high school. And I think that is healthy, and I think families should have that, students should have that.

What I referred to earlier, and I feel pretty strongly about, is that our public schools cannot be a poor alternative, that—our neighborhood schools—not public schools, because there are charters that are public also. But, our neighborhood schools need to be schools where we want to send our children, and we have to make sure that it is not that they are alternative, or the least-desired al-

ternative, but that it is a high-quality alternative for students to attend their neighborhood schools.

I feel pretty strongly about that. I think it—I am pretty clear that public education, public schools in our neighborhoods, need to be developed. That is the bedrock of our Country. That is the—that is where the majority of our students attend, and we have to make sure that it is a high-quality school for all kids.

Senator BRAUN. Very briefly, the third topic we covered, which has been covered by three or four other Senators, CTE pathway. I know in building my own business, we do not need more applicants with four-year degrees. We fill those spots with more applicants that we can really even talk to.

Dr. CARDONA. Right.

Senator BRAUN. It is that easy to do. Indiana exports I think twice as many four-year degrees as we keep in state.

When it comes to that, a tip that might be pursued is—I don't think it will cost anything. But, when I looked into it, even in my own county, we were stigmatizing that pathway. Guidance counselors are that first point where parents and students get to talk to someone. Probably needs to be a little more emphasis on high-wage, high-demand jobs in that pathway by just changing the paradigm and the point of view, and I don't think that would cost hardly anything. That would just be a pulpit from which you can say a lot about.

Dr. CARDONA. Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree, Senator. And, if confirmed, I look forward to—this is exciting work. I am fortunate to have been a part of a Governor's Workforce Council in Connecticut where we brought in our business partners, higher education institutions and our K-12—pre-K-12 institutions together to say, let's get this right. Let's work together to get this right, to make sure that these pathways are communicated early in our schools and they are viable options for career and great livelihood for our students. So, I am really eager to get into that work, if confirmed, and I look forward to working with you in Indiana and hearing more about the great programs there and making sure that we are sharing those best practices across the Country. Thank you.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much.

Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you very much, Madam Chair Murray. And congratulations to—it is wonderful to say Madam Chair Murray and also Ranking Member Burr. I am really excited to work with all of you on this Committee this year.

Congratulations, Dr. Cardona. I am so—I have to say, at a time when there is a lot of things going on that are not going great, it is so exciting for me to hear your commitment and your energy and enthusiasm for this really, hard work ahead. And I think that your experience as a classroom educator, as well as a principal and an administrator, is exactly the kind of experience that we need in this role right now, so I am just super excited to hear about this.

I think that in this moment, parents and students and educators are all just overwhelmed. The sense of responsibility and accountability and challenge in this moment is really palpable. I see this all the time in Minnesota, and I can see from the conversations

with my colleagues in this Committee today that we are all experiencing that. And I think it is one of the reasons why you are getting asked great questions about where we go from here.

You can see a lot of us on both sides of the aisle have great interest in career and technical education—shop, as Senator Scott is calling it—where we can really broaden our ideas about how students can build core to great careers and great jobs and great lives beyond a four-year education, and I certainly agree with that.

But I want to ask you about something in particular that is—you and I had a chance to talk with—talk about a little bit when we were together. I so enjoyed our conversation. As we think about how in this Country we can continue the work of fulfilling the promise that our Country holds for everyone in this Country, I am thinking a lot about Minnesotans and Americans who are new Americans, who are immigrants. And I know that in my state, diversity in culture and language is not just something that we see in Minneapolis and St. Paul and the big cities. It is something that we see in regional centers, like Wilmar and Worthington and Fairmont. We have about 74,000 students in Minnesota that do not speak English as their first language. I think it is five million in America.

Certainly, learning English as a second or third language is complicated work and is challenging, but I think so much about what an opportunity this is and how much this adds to our classrooms and our schools and the experiences of all children.

Could you just speak for a little bit—I know you have given this a lot of thought. Could you talk some about how we should support English language learners and immigrant students and what you have seen that works and how we could build on that as we go forward?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator. I wholeheartedly agree that not only should we be, encouraging having more than one language, bilingualism, but also, we should be acknowledging not only bilingualism, but biculturalism. I think, they go together and that we honor our students' bilingualism by also honoring their culture. And I truly enjoyed the conversation I had with you about this.

As a classroom teacher and as a principal, moving along the lines, when you are able to do that, you build community in your schools, No. 1, because they feel more engaged.

But, in terms of the language development piece, research is pretty clear on how you learn a language, a second language. And unfortunately, in many cases, what we have done is we have subtracted L-1 to replace it with L-2, and then later we offer a prestigious elective of the same language that the student came with as a high school elective. So, we really have to rethink how we are doing this and understand the value and benefit of not only being bilingual in this Country, but being bicultural and your ability to work globally if you can do that.

Senator SMITH. Yes. Well, as I think you were saying when we spoke, language is culture, and too often we think of students that need to learn English as—their first language, if it is not English, is a barrier that they have to overcome rather than an asset that they have for themselves, but also, as you are indicating, an asset

for the entire classroom as all the kids can learn from one another about their different languages and their different cultures. So, I just could not agree with you more, and I think that is going to be something that is going to be exciting to work on as we move forward.

I don't have much time left, but I want to just also acknowledge, Dr. Cardona, that we—we had also a really great conversation about the importance of addressing mental health issues in classrooms—this is mental health issues among students—even if they are not in classrooms right now. I think this is also overwhelming, and I look forward to the work that we can do together on this.

This is also a bipartisan issue, I think. Senator Murkowski and I have worked together on this issue, along with others. So, lots of work ahead there, as well, and good work.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much.

We will turn to Senator Marshall. Welcome to our Committee.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, Madam Chair, thank you so much and it is an honor to be here with you today. And Ranking Member Burr, thank you for the invitation to come. Dr. Cardona, welcome.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you.

Senator MARSHALL. You and I have so much in common. We are both first-generation college kids that went on to pursue and obtain doctorate's degrees. Community colleges seem to be something of interest to you. My wife and myself, both community college graduates. And, then, I think last, how important family is to you, that we are part of a loving family that has supported us, whose education was a priority. And, as I think about success of students, what makes up—what makes a student successful, and loving parents and good educators are always a good—a great key and a great indicator, and I appreciate your commitment to those.

I want to go back to community colleges for a second. I am so proud of my community colleges across the State of Kansas. The Perkins Grants, TRIO Grants, are several opportunities, as well. And my dream is that not only would seniors in high school, but juniors and sophomores would start getting a little bit of college credit. And, by the way, how do you drive the cost of college down, and one of it is getting some of those credits back in high school and maybe finishing in 4 years. And if you cannot—if you have to borrow money to go to a university, maybe you should think about a community college.

Just give you a second to expand on your vision for community colleges.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, and I appreciate the question and the statements you made earlier.

Community colleges are critically important to not only rebuilding after the pandemic, but really just our plan forward in education. And I think they serve the community. I mean, it is in the name. And what we need to do more is make those programs more available or more accessible, earlier, for our learners so that they can look—for first-generation college students in particular, who might think about college and think early on, oh, that is not for me, I cannot afford it. We need to really remove those barriers,

those mental barriers, that may exist generationally and really give them access to that.

But, community colleges can also provide opportunities for students to explore pathways that they might not have considered in the past.

Good coordination with pre-K–12 systems and community college systems are going to be really important to make college accessible to more students.

Senator MARSHALL. Great. Thank you. And, moving onto the next subject, one of the top concerns for Americans right now—maybe No. 1 for many, many families—is getting our children back in school. I want to talk about that for a second.

As an obstetrician, I took care of many women with viruses. And if I learned one thing about viruses, they constantly change, and how people react to them is different, and especially pregnant women. Whether it is chicken pox or West Nile Virus, we—each pregnant woman will react differently.

People talk about following the science, and the science is constantly changing with this virus because the virus is changing. And the location you are in is so important, whether you are on a Gulf Coast State or in the State of Connecticut or the plains of Kansas, this virus is acting differently.

As you tried to get your schools opened, and it sounded like you had some success with that, what was the secret potion? Was it one-size-fits-all or was it empowering people in their own communities to be successful? As I have seen the rollout of the COVID challenges, whether it is giving vaccinations now, or before, getting PPE or the testing out, some communities succeeded and some did not. What were your—how was your—how were you successful?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. My experience as Commissioner of Education in Connecticut around school reopening was having very clear communication around which mitigation strategies worked. It was also very clear partnership with our health and safety experts, who understood pathology. I know we started looking at the flu and how the flu spread. Then we learned more about how COVID spread. Making sure that our decisions and policy decisions and recommendations are based off of that.

But, as you said earlier, we have some communities with high schools of 150 students. We have other communities with high schools of 3,000 students. So, we recognized that our job was to provide clear guidance on how to open schools safely and support those districts in order for them to implement those mitigation strategies and safely reopen.

Senator MARSHALL. Great. So, you—I think the point here is you gave them goals, objectives, and guardrails; you did not micro-manage each one of those. And I think as we go forward, I hope you continue that same philosophy for our Nation, empowering local school boards and superintendents to make decisions.

Lastly, I would like to talk about rural America school, but instead I have to talk about transgender issues. So, that—that is sad to me. It is sad to me. Some of the highlights of so many people's growing up are those state track meets, and it—I just don't think

it is American that a genotypical male, a person with a Y chromosome, is competing against girls that—

What I learned from sports, and so important in my upbringing, what sports taught me, was that there was a level playing field; that we all had equal opportunity, and that is not equal. There is nothing American about letting people with a Y chromosome compete against women.

What are the—what other alternatives are there out there? I agree with you, you want every person, regardless of some of those issues, transgender issue, has equal opportunity. Are there—besides letting genotypical males compete against women, are there any other alternatives out there?

Dr. CARDONA. Without getting into the policy that I have not been a part of that conversation, I can tell you that the Supreme Court ruled discrimination based on gender is not—it is illegal. So, we have to make sure that we are honoring our students, and we—I recognize this is not easy, and I respect the perspectives of people that feel differently, and I respect the fact that you are representing your stakeholders who have made it very clear to you how they feel.

I commit to working with you and others to making sure that we can provide opportunities for all students in a non-discriminatory fashion, but also making sure that we respect the rights and beliefs of all of our students.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you, Madam Chair, and I yield back.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much, and we will turn to Senator Rosen.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you, Madam Chair Murray. It is so wonderful to see you have that gavel today. And our Ranking Member Burr, I look forward to working with you in your new capacity, as well.

Dr. Cardona, I agree with my colleagues. Today, I want to just thank you for being here with us, for your commitment to serving our Nation, our families, our students, and their entire selves in that perspective, particularly now with COVID. I really did appreciate the productive meeting that we had. I look forward to hear more about your plans to expand access to high-quality education, break down barriers for girls, for students of color, support our Nation's amazing teachers, educators reopen our classrooms in a safe way, that we have to do that based on available science, and the incredible strain that COVID has placed on all of us.

We really have to deal with that, so I urge this Committee to facilitate a swift confirmation so Mr. Cardona can get right to work.

But, I would like to talk a little bit about STEM and CTE. As we discussed in our meeting, one of my top priorities in Congress is supporting STEM education and the STEM workforce. My Building Blocks of STEM Act, which was signed into law last year, expands the National Science Foundation programs to increase the participation of girls in computer science. I am glad this new law was funded in the last omnibus, but there is so much work, more work, to be done, particularly in breaking down barriers that stand in the way of students of all ages from pursuing STEM careers from all backgrounds. And, so, in Nevada, those barriers are really

difficult, and we need to establish those career and technical apprenticeships and grow our teachers who are certified to teach this.

Dr. Cardona, what changes can the Department of Education implement under your leadership to help remove these barriers, increase the access to STEM so we can just get all these students ready to participate in the workforce? There is, hundreds of thousands of jobs available right now in the cyber tech field. And, so, how do we go about doing that?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I agree that the fields of STEM are just growing. There is greater need, and the better we can provide guidance and exemplars of where STEM courses and content is integrated into good quality, core curriculum, the more likely that we are going to get all students to have access to it.

I was fortunate to participate in different programs, such as, Connecticut Girls Who Code Program, and be a part of efforts to try to increase participation from girls in programs of STEM. And it is something that we need to do not only as an agency, but as a Country, to really show that computer science is a part of so many of the jobs of today and tomorrow; that it is really important that we make sure that our—all of our students, including our girls, are getting into that field and having more exposure to it earlier.

I think that is a big part of everyone's work, and I look forward to working with you and others, if confirmed, to make that a reality.

Senator ROSEN. I appreciate that. I look forward to that, too. And I want to build a little bit on what Senator Smith talked about and mental health of our students. We have been battling the coronavirus for, well, over a year now, almost a year. Recent studies have found a dramatic increase in the anxiety and depression among children, among young adults, and recent—one recent study found that nearly one-third of surveyed high school students reported feeling unhappy, depressed. In most recent months, more than a quarter of those feel disconnected from their teachers, their classmates, their school community.

Unfortunately, in Clark County—we talked about this. We have the fifth largest school district in the Nation. Eighteen students, 18 students, have taken their lives since March of last year, and tragically, this is one of the highest numbers of student suicides in the Nation. It is a list nobody wants to be on top of. It is absolutely devastating for the families, for the classmates, for the community. Our school district, we are partnering with non-profits. We are doing everything we can for suicide prevention and to get to these kids with pilot programs.

How can we prioritize mental health for our students as we try to reopen schools? Our students, our teachers, all those wrap-around services that we may need, particularly now as we hopefully come out of the pandemic, but during these challenging times.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator. I first share my condolences for those 18 students and their families.

You are absolutely right. If we are not thinking about reopening our schools with mental health support for our students at the core of how we are planning, then we are missing an opportunity. We—

even prior to the pandemic, the mental health needs of our learners, of our students, was increasing, and a lot of the time that we spent in our schools was really to support students from an emotional perspective, a mental health perspective, so that they could be successful academically.

Let's not lose this opportunity post-pandemic to really redesign, to make sure that the mental health needs of our students are first and foremost; that our educators have the training that they need to meet their needs; and that our schools serve as the hubs of their community to make sure that not only do the students feel that they are a part of a community within the building, but that the school is a bigger part of their community at large; making sure that they have the wraparound services and the supports that the families also need to help their children be successful.

I am pretty passionate about that, and I look forward to working with you and others, if confirmed, to move this along in our Country.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you very much. I know I have exceeded my time. I appreciate it. I yield back.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you.

Senator Lujan, welcome to our Committee. Go ahead.

Senator LUJAN Truly an honor to be with you today, and I thank you, Madam Chair Murray, and also Ranking Member Burr for the opportunity to ask some important questions today. And I do look forward to working with you and the rest of my colleagues to not only defeat this pandemic, but expand access to early childhood education, strengthen public education and apprenticeship programs, and make post-secondary education and technical training programs more affordable for millions of Americans. So, thank you again so much.

Dr. Cardona, I want to thank you, as well, today and appreciate you being available to testify. I know that your experience as a public school teacher, principal, and superintendent has prepared you for this moment. And, I want to pick up where some of my colleagues have also asked some questions, specific in the area of children's mental health.

Dr. Cardona, I am very concerned that due to COVID-19 and disruptions in learning, students are experiencing increased stress, anxiety, trauma, mental health challenges, as well as their families. Data shows that over 75 percent of students receiving mental health care received that care in schools.

I know this is something that you are committed to and you have talked a lot about. But, can you expand on what can be done to ensure that students, as well as all of the employees, the teachers, the folks that keep the schools looking good, that get the kids to school on time and that prepare that nutritional food, how they will have access to these important mental health programs?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you, Senator, for the question. It is true. It really takes the whole village. And, I am pleased to see that part of the recovery plan includes funding for counselors, to make sure that we have the adequate—we have adequate support for our students and their mental health needs in order for them to be successful.

Their bandwidth diminishes if they are worried about what might be happening at home, or what they experienced, so it is really important that we look at it holistically and make sure that we are attending to their mental health needs.

You brought up a very good point. The educators that service and support our learners are also—have also gone through trauma, and we have to make sure that our institutions and our agencies are also supporting our educators and making sure that their mental health is fine so that they can meet the needs of our learners.

Oftentimes, our educators take on a lot of the stressors that our students are experiencing, and they—they are trying to support the students the best they can. It is critically important as we recover from this pandemic that we look at our educators' needs, as well, and make sure that we are taking care of our educators so that they can take care of our students.

Senator LUJAN. Dr. Cardona, one of the reports that I keep my eye on is the Annie E. Casey Foundation report on child well-being, looking at what needs to be done to provide support to kids. I am hoping that there will be a commitment from the Department of Education—and with your support—that we look at that report and that we understand it, and that we strive to make sure that whoever is at the bottom of that list, that we work to get them higher up, so that the gaps between who is No. 1 and who is number 50 are small. Would you care to comment on that?

Dr. CARDONA. I look forward to reading more about that, learning more about that, and ensuring, as part of—if I am fortunate enough to serve as Secretary of Education, that it is going to be part of every day of my job to make sure that we are minimizing gaps between highest—the top on the list and the lowest on the list, and making sure that we are learning from one another so that we are learning from best practices.

I do look forward to hearing more about that, working with you and others to learn more about that and make sure that our agency is aligned to supporting the work that needs to get done.

Senator LUJAN. Thank you, Dr. Cardona. And one thing I certainly appreciate is you understand how this crisis has exacerbated longstanding inequities in our education system, and you have made it a mission to close those equity gaps and ensure all students have access to high-quality education, including in high-poverty areas, rural communities, and in Indian country.

Dr. Cardona, this is an area where I hope that we will continue to see your leadership shine and make a positive difference. I do not have a question in that particular area because I am short on time, but I just wanted to commend you on the work you have done and look forward to what must be done to be able to eliminate those gaps in rural and tribal communities.

Broadband, Dr. Cardona, as you know, is something that is important to me. I raised this issue with you when we chatted before. In addition to closing that digital divide and that homework gap, I am curious if you can share with us how you plan to work with the FCC in this case. And, in the areas with tribal schools across America, in New Mexico, we have 22 Bureau of Indian Education-operated schools, 22 tribally controlled schools that are under the jurisdiction for the most part of the Department of Interior.

The question that I have for you is, what can we expect on how you will collaborate with other Federal agencies to make a positive difference in these communities?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for the question, Senator, and I am glad you brought up the issue of Native American and Indian education. That is an issue that I want to learn more about and make sure that our students are receiving a top-quality education and feel heard. First and foremost, they need to feel heard. And I look forward to working with other secretaries to make sure that our interagency support for our students is first and foremost, and that we are doing everything we can to work together to make sure that the experiences of our learners is second to none.

Senator LUJAN. Madam Chair, thank you for the time today.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much. And that completes our first round of questions.

Senator Burr, do you have any additional questions?

Senator BURR. Madam Chairman, I have just got some follow-up things to cover, five questions with Dr. Cardona. They are yes or no questions. I will be very brief, and I thank you.

Let me say from the beginning, thank you again for being here today, Dr. Cardona. I think you are imminently qualified and I look forward to working with the Madam Chair, to expeditiously—

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you.

Senator BURR [continuing]. Get your nomination through. I would encourage you—I know that Members, as well as myself, will have questions for the record. If you will answer those and get them back as fast as you possibly can, that would help us to process your nomination.

Oversight is an important function of Congress, and hopefully that can be done in a bipartisan way. But, if not, I intend to exercise my oversight authority as Ranking Member of this Committee, just as Senator Murray did as Ranking Member.

Five questions. Do you commit to providing me and my staff with the information that I and other minority Members of the Committee request from the Department of Education within the requested timeframe?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Do you commit to providing me and my staff with the documents that I or other minority Members request from the Department of Education within the requested timeline?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Do you commit to providing me and my staff or other minority Members of the Committee with briefings requested from you or your staff within the requested timeframe?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Do you commit to providing the Department of Education Inspector General and the General Accounting Office with any information, briefings, and documents they may request?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Last, do you commit to testify when called before a Congressional committee?

Dr. CARDONA. Yes.

Senator BURR. Doctor, I thank you. I look forward to processing your nomination.

Madam Chair, I yield back.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

Dr. Cardona, I do have an additional question, comment, and then I will close.

Let me start with my question. We do need to move quickly to address the critical needs of students in higher education who are really struggling to meet their basic needs—accessing food and housing. The pandemic and this resulting economic crisis has only worsened this situation for a lot of our students and families. I hear from college students in my state who are homeless. They are sleeping in their cars. They do not have money to eat. They cannot buy textbooks. They are uninsured and cannot afford childcare. And the data proves this is sadly a very widespread problem, and I just think we need to bring a whole-of-government approach to helping students meet basic needs and preventing homelessness and hunger, and those efforts really are critical to keeping students enrolled in college and getting their degree.

If confirmed, how would you work to make sure we are addressing those very basic needs and creating pathways for students to be successful?

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you for that question. And, you really highlight the reality for so many of our students who are trying to access the American Dream through college.

The first thing I will do, Senator, is make sure that their voices are heard and that we understand what they are experiencing so that we can shape our policies and make sure that we are advocating and using our positions to provide the maximum level of support possible for these students.

Also, working with our colleges to help them and support their efforts to make sure that pathways for these students to have flexibility in payment and debt relief where possible. Make sure we maximize those, as well.

It is critically important that, if confirmed, that I do everything in my power to help these students, these first—in many cases, first-generation college students access the same goals that I was able to achieve through higher education. So, it would be something that I would be honored to do.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Okay. Very good. Thank you.

Dr. Cardona, before we wrap up, I just have one more thing I want to say. I was deeply disappointed by the way the Trump administration failed to defend the right of all of our students to feel safe and to attend school without being discriminated against. We have to work together to hold all our schools, our school districts, and our institutions of higher education accountable for providing safe environments for all of our students, and that includes holding them accountable for preventing and addressing sexual assault.

I have heard from survivors, institutions of higher education, families, and school districts across the Country that we have got to do better, and it has to be a key priority for the Department to change the DeVos Title IX Rule. So, I want you to know I am going to be looking for quick action on that.

I also just want to make it very, very clear. I agree with what Dr. Cardona and Senator Baldwin have said on the importance of ensuring the rights of every student, including transgender stu-

dents, are protected, and I look forward to working with you to advocate for all students.

With that, that will end our hearing today. I want to thank the Members—all the Members of this Committee for a very substantive hearing.

Dr. Cardona, thank you for your thoughtful testimony and answers. I very much appreciate your willingness to serve our Nation and to take on this very important assignment.

Dr. CARDONA. Thank you. It is my honor.

The CHAIR *pro tempore*. Thank you. For any Senators who wish to ask additional questions of the nominee, questions for the record will be due by Thursday, February 4, at 5 p.m. The hearing record will remain open for 10 days for Members who wish to submit additional materials for the record. It is my intention to schedule a vote in Committee on Dr. Cardona's nomination as quickly as possible so we can move his nomination forward and he can begin the very important work of leading the Department of Education.

Tomorrow, we will convene in this room at 10 a.m. for a hearing on the nomination of Mayor Marty Walsh to be Secretary of Labor.

With that, the Committee stands adjourned.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

LETTERS OF SUPPORT FOR THE NOMINATION OF DR. MIGUEL CARDONA TO SERVE AS
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

AMERICA'S PUBLIC TELEVISION STATIONS
1225 S. CLARK STREET, SUITE 1425, ARLINGTON, VA
February 3, 2021

Hon. PATTY MURRAY, *Madam Chair*,
Hon. RICHARD BURR, *Ranking Member*,
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions,
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building,
Washington, DC.

DEAR MADAM CHAIR MURRAY AND RANKING MEMBER BURR:

America's Public Television Stations strongly support President Biden's nomination of Dr. Miguel Cardona as Secretary of Education.

Connecticut Public, the public television and radio network for the state, has had a highly successful and productive partnership with Dr. Cardona during his service as Connecticut's Commissioner of Education and in his earlier tenure as Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Teaching and Learning in Meriden, CT.

Since early in the pandemic, Connecticut Public has partnered with Commissioner Cardona in extending remote learning services to thousands of Connecticut students whose schools were suddenly closed.

America's public television stations do this work everywhere, and we look forward to being constructive partners with Secretary Cardona in a nationwide remote learning collaborative, both during the pandemic and afterward, when the benefits of remote learning will remain essential components of the "new normal" in education, providing specialized enrichment and remedial instruction, preventing "summer learning slide," and more.

In addition, public television stations are providing educational datacasting services in a growing number of states, linking students without broadband access to the same instructional materials as those provided to students on the Internet, and helping to bridge the "digital divide" that disadvantages millions of students nationwide.

Through our success with Ready To Learn, the pre-school educational initiative long supported by this Committee, public television stations have helped millions of young children get ready to learn in school and succeed in life, and helped narrow the opportunity gap in education between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers.

Commissioner Cardona has been supportive of all of these educational initiatives undertaken by public television stations.

Beyond this potential for partnership, we also find the prospect of a former teacher and school principal as Secretary of Education immensely appealing. Dr. Cardona's inspiring life story and career history qualify him in an exceptional way to work with teachers, students, parents and other caregivers in improving the quality of education for all.

America's Public Television Stations enthusiastically recommend Dr. Cardona's nomination, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with him and this Committee to devote the resources of public television even more comprehensively to teaching America's children.

Sincerely,

PATRICK BUTLER,
PRESIDENT & CEO
America's Public Television Stations

EVERY HOUR COUNTS
February 2, 2021

DEAR SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE:

I am writing on behalf of the Every Hour Counts network to express support for Dr. Miguel Cardona, U.S. Secretary of Education nominee, ahead of his Senate confirmation hearing. Our network is impressed with Dr. Cardona's experience in education and supporting students; we wholeheartedly support a swift confirmation.

Every Hour Counts is a national coalition of citywide intermediaries dedicated to increasing access to high-quality expanded learning (after-school, summer and expanded in-school learning) opportunities, particularly for underserved students. Our intermediary partners have worked tirelessly to establish longstanding partnerships with more than 3,500 schools, districts and community-based organizations that provide high-quality after-school and summer programming, building systems that collectively reach 500,000 students each year.

Our network looks forward to the opportunity to work with Dr. Cardona to prioritize the needs of all students and keep equity at the forefront of education initiatives and COVID-19 recovery efforts. This pandemic has created urgent crises that need attention and solutions. The work of our intermediaries is more important than ever before, as the students we serve are navigating learning loss, as well as trauma due to food insecurity and racial inequity exacerbated by the pandemic. Dr. Cardona's background in bilingual education demonstrates his desire to support an inclusive education system.

Dr. Cardona's dedication to serving as a public school teacher and principal in his hometown of Meriden, Connecticut illustrates his commitment to community. Our networks operate as the link between schools and communities to help keep youth safe and healthy, increase academic engagement, achievement and career readiness, and provide youth with innovative, individualized enriching opportunities throughout the year. We believe that Dr. Cardona has demonstrated a commitment to the values that our network upholds through his public service.

Every Hour Counts stands ready to support Dr. Cardona as the U.S. Secretary of Education and further enable high-quality expanded learning programs to be essential community institutions and important drivers of neighborhood vitality. Our network applauds Dr. Cardona's expertise and dedication to serving youth and we look forward to his tenure as U.S. Secretary of Education.

Sincerely,

JESSICA DONNER,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
1201 16TH STREET, NW WASHINGTON, DC
February 9, 2021

*Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions,
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building,
Washington, DC.*

DEAR SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE:

The 3.1 million members of the National Education Association are proud to enthusiastically support President Biden's nominee for U.S. Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, and we urge you to vote YES on his nomination. Votes on this issue may be included in NEA's Report Card for the 117th Congress.

NEA members teach, support, mentor, and nurture students in public schools and on public college campuses across America. They know what it is like to look into a student's eyes to determine who's getting the lesson, and who's getting left behind—and they know the challenge of devising new methods to reach and engage students in the context of remote learning. They understand the importance of being present for children who are coping with losses or struggling with adult-size burdens, or the need to counsel students who must juggle classes, families, and full-time jobs. Dr. Cardona, a longtime teacher and elementary school principal who has also been an adjunct professor, knows this work intimately.

As an educator and as Connecticut's education commissioner, Dr. Cardona would bring to the Education Department desperately needed firsthand experience. He would advance the department's mission of "fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" because he has devoted his career to these goals. His commitment stems not only from professional expertise, but also from an understanding of the hardships students who are learning English face—hardships he dealt with as a child whose family moved to Connecticut from Puerto Rico. Those struggles helped him to become the dedicated, compassionate, and forceful advocate for students that he is today.

Dr. Cardona is known as a consensus builder and problem solver who listens to and actively collaborates with educators, families, and communities. Whether as a classroom teacher, principal, or state education leader, he has pressed for the resources students deserve. Additionally, he has worked with higher education leaders to secure and expand students' opportunities for postsecondary education.

His depth of experience was on full display during his confirmation hearing this month, when he was questioned about a variety of issues, including mental health resources for students and the need to reform the department's Office of Federal Student Aid so that it works on behalf of student-loan borrowers. NEA members were particularly heartened by Dr. Cardona's commitment to "make sure our learning environments are places that are free of discrimination and harassment for all learners."

Given the many challenges our Nation continues to face, we have confidence that Dr. Cardona will help us to provide the high-quality education, safe and welcoming public schools and campuses, and support that all students must have in order to thrive.

Sincerely,

REBECCA S. PRINGLE,
PRESIDENT
National Education Association

[Whereupon, the hearing was adjourned at 2:38 p.m.]

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