

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**Statement by Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education**

on

School Reopening During COVID-19: Supporting Students, Educators, and Families

Good morning, Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr,

It is a pleasure to speak to you today alongside Secretary Becerra about the critical work of safely reopening our nation's schools and campuses and setting all students up for success this school year.

President Biden made clear on the first day of his Administration that getting all of our students safely back into the classroom for full-time in-person learning was one of his top priorities. We know that school buildings are so much more than four walls and a roof. They are the heartbeat of towns and cities across the nation. Schools are where our young people come together to learn side by side, and forge deep bonds with their classmates and teachers. Schools are where our students play, and develop critical social, emotional, mental health, and academic skills, and where they explore their passions in the theaters, laboratories, gymnasiums, art rooms, and computer science labs that can only be found on school grounds. And schools allow for parents and caregivers to get back to work and for students to access critical school services, including nutritious meals, counseling, and social services. In short, school buildings are the best vehicles we have for empowering our young people to live up to their full potential and to maintain vibrant and thriving communities.

Since the beginning of the Biden-Harris Administration, our expectations have been consistent and clear – we want all schools to safely offer all families five days a week of full-time, in-person learning. At the U.S. Department of Education this remains our top priority, and for the past several months, under the leadership of President Biden, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and many more, federal officials have been working tirelessly to support a healthy, equitable, and joyful return to school.

While the work is far from done, we saw these efforts pay off last winter and spring. In January, when the Biden-Harris Administration took office, 23 percent of all K-8 schools were operating fully remotely, leaving millions of students without the ability to learn in-person, and many without access to remote learning even when offered. By May, the percent of all K-8 schools operating fully remotely had dropped to only 2 percent and nearly every school in America was offering in-person learning. Early estimates from this school year show that about 96 percent of school districts are offering families fully in-person instruction. Only a small percentage of schools are switching on a temporary basis to a hybrid or remote model to contain the spread of an outbreak in the school and then quickly returning to in-person once it is deemed safe, and a proper quarantine process has completed.

Steps the Biden-Harris Administration has Taken to Accelerate the Safe Reopening of Schools

The Biden-Harris Administration has taken several critical steps thus far to help States and local school districts safely reopen our Nation's schools, and support schools in meeting the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of our students.

Funding

- We provided \$122 billion in American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to help schools safely reopen – including to implement strategies recommend by the CDC to prevent transmission of COVID in schools, address inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, and support the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students.
- The Department of Education also distributed \$800 million in American Rescue Plan funding to help States and school districts identify students experiencing homelessness and provide wraparound services to support their full participation in school activities.
- We released more than \$3 billion under the American Rescue Plan to support children with disabilities, helping more than 7.9 million infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities across the country.
- In April, the Department of Health and Human Services distributed \$10 billion in funding for COVID-19 screening testing for teachers, staff, and students in K-12 schools.
- FEMA is providing 100 percent reimbursement for school reopening costs.

Resources to support state and local leaders

- Our Department has provided three volumes of the COVID-19 Handbook focused on safely reopening schools and meeting the needs of students in K-12 and higher education, and launched a clearinghouse of best practices to share with educators across the nation.
- The Biden-Harris Administration, including the Department of Education, has also released several resource and guidance documents to support the implementation of best practices on ventilation; hosting school-based vaccine clinics; using community school approaches to meet the needs of the whole child; strategies for effective instruction when students are temporarily unable to attend school in-person, like when they are in isolation or quarantine; addressing lost instructional time, including the impact on the mental health of students; and supporting all students' rights in educational environments during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Our technical assistance has included the “Lessons from the Field” webinar series, which has focused on a range of issues including safely reopening and sustaining in-person operations, improving indoor air quality, addressing mental health needs, and re-engaging the students most impacted by the pandemic. We also launched the Summer Learning and Enrichment Collaborative to bring States, school districts, and community-based organizations together to focus on evidence-based summer interventions to support students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic success.
- Our Office for Civil Rights released a [Question and Answer](#) document that provides answers to common questions about schools' responsibilities under the civil rights laws and is designed to help students, families, schools and the public support all students' rights in educational environments. We published [Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students](#), a report that explores how the

impacts of COVID-19 are falling disproportionately on students who went into the pandemic with the fewest educational opportunities. We also released a fact sheet [that provides information about “long COVID”](#) as a disability, and, together with the Department of Justice, we put out a fact sheet on [Confronting COVID-19-Related Harassment in Schools](#).

Vaccinations

- The Biden-Harris Administration has prioritized vaccine access for school staff, by issuing a directive making teachers eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine in March, setting a goal of getting all school staff who wanted the vaccination to be able to get at least one shot in the month of March, and resulting in about 90% of educators vaccinated today.
- The Biden-Harris Administration is also working to expand access to the vaccine for young people, by issuing a call to school districts to host on-site, pop-up vaccination clinics at schools, in partnership with the federal pharmacy program; and incorporating COVID-19 vaccination into sports physicals for student athletes.

Return to School Roadmap

For the 2021-2022 school year, we launched our [Return to School Roadmap](#) for parents, educators, schools, and districts to prepare for the safe and sustained reopening of schools this fall. The roadmap includes actionable resources and examples from the field on how to address our three priorities in returning to in-person learning safely: (1) prioritizing the health and safety of students, school personnel and families, (2) building school communities and supporting students’ social, emotional, and mental health, and (3) accelerating academic achievement by addressing learning gaps accumulated from lost instructional time.

I will touch briefly on each of these three pillars, and now that the school year has begun, will provide a quick glimpse into the incredible work we are continuing to see from school communities across the country in these three areas.

Ensuring Safe and Healthy In-Person Learning

We learned last school year that with the right safety measures in place, schools can safely offer in-person learning to all families five days a week. [Studies show](#) that schools that consistently implemented layered prevention strategies – as recommended by CDC guidance – showed lower or similar levels of transmission than the communities in which they are located. This is due to the heroic work of our teachers, school leaders, and school staff, who were able to implement mitigation strategies while also keeping learning fun, engaging, and high-quality.

For the current school year, CDC guidance makes clear that K-12 schools should prioritize in-person learning and do so by continuing to implement layered prevention strategies (using multiple strategies together consistently). This includes helping everyone eligible get vaccinated, universal and correct indoor masking regardless of vaccination status, diligent sanitization and hygiene practices, using contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, improving ventilation, and maintaining physical distance to the maximum extent possible.

There are so many great examples of districts using ARP dollars to go above and beyond to safely reopen schools for students. We know that effective ventilation systems clean and disperse

air, decreasing the risk of various airborne illnesses including COVID-19. We also know that our nation's underserved students are attending schools that often do not have effective ventilation systems. Adequate ventilation has been a concern in Philadelphia's school buildings. The district responded to concerns by using their funds to purchase air and surface purifiers to reduce the number of contaminants in the air.

We know that vaccines are the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To support vaccine access, several Maine municipalities and district sites also served as vaccination sites in the spring of 2021, and this fall many are working with local providers to host COVID-19 vaccine clinics for age eligible students and staff. South Carolina has launched a vaccine community confidence campaign complete with toolkits and easily distributed materials for families. Minnesota has developed and promoted the Roll Up Your Sleeves campaign to increase vaccination rates, which includes targeted outreach to 12–17-year-olds as well as connecting local public health departments to school districts and charter schools to provide onsite school vaccination clinics for students, staff, and community members.

To support testing, New Mexico is leveraging ARP dollars to offer screening testing for students and staff at all of their schools. Alaska is facilitating diagnostic and screening testing in schools and will continue to work with its state Department of Health and Social Services to provide resources and supports for mitigations plans for districts and schools.

We also know that there are some states that are standing in the way of school districts implementing strategies aligned with CDC guidance to maintain health and safety. To support local educational agencies (LEAs) that adopt and implement strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 consistent with the guidance from the CDC, the Department of Education launched the Project to Support America's Families and Educators (Project SAFE) grant program. Project SAFE is intended to improve students' safety and well-being by providing funding to LEAs that are financially penalized for doing so by their state educational agency (SEA) or other state entity. The Department has awarded the first two Project SAFE grants, which will protect students in Alachua County (FL) Public Schools and Broward County (FL) Public Schools.

Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health

We know that in order to excel academically, students need a strong social and emotional foundation. Students have suffered so much over the past 18 months, and we cannot unlock a student's potential unless we also help them heal and recover from all the trauma and hardship the pandemic has brought. For many students, schools are the only place where they can access mental health professionals, school counselors, nurses, and support structures they need – including their friends – to help them through the adversity of the last year. I'm pleased that across the country, we're seeing American Rescue Plan funds being used to prioritize our students' mental health needs, and tend to their social and emotional development, by hiring more of these invaluable education professionals.

Nevada is reserving ARP funds to hire 100 school-based mental health professionals, , and Alaska is using ARP funds to help social workers offer key services to remote districts such as virtual lessons in self-care and methods to reduce student stress, depression, and anxiety. ARP funding will also allow the Kansas Department of Education to address a state-wide shortage in

licensed professionals trained to address the documented social and emotional needs of students. According to Communities in Schools (CIS), CIS of Washington is expanding integrated student support services to four counties and 16 rural schools with ARP funding, anticipating serving approximately 2,500 students. The New York City Department of Education is using ARP funding to hire over 600 mental health professionals to provide care as students returned back this fall. This means that every school will have at least one full-time social worker or school-based mental health clinic.

Addressing the Impact of Lost Instructional Time

Every parent and caregiver across the country knows how challenging the last year was for our students. It was tough for us adults, too – with many of us taking on the role of parent and teacher at home. I want to give thanks to all the parents and caregivers across America.

Over the last year, what was made clear is that sitting behind a screen simply isn't the same for most children as learning in a classroom among their peers. And we know that many students may have been disconnected from their school communities for weeks, months, and for some, over a year.

It's our responsibility—as leaders and as educators—to do everything in our power to help our students excel. This is especially important for communities hardest hit by the pandemic, who may have been furthest from the opportunity to learn and succeed to begin with. This means investing in building teacher capacity to meet students where they are and accelerate learning, high-quality, evidence-based tutoring programs, extended learning options, and other opportunities to support student academic success during the school year.

Many state leaders are meeting this challenge. The Louisiana Department of Education will allocate ARP funds to school systems through grants that prioritize those students most impacted by the pandemic. The State's plan emphasizes accelerating learning—which connects instruction to new learning rather than remediation—and includes tutoring in reading and math. North Carolina is seeking to address the impact of lost instructional time through interventions such as \$30 million for high-impact tutoring statewide, \$19 million for updated assessment tools and new testing platforms, and \$35 million for a competitive grant program for summer school and after-school extensions. New Hampshire has launched the *Recovering Bright Futures* program which creates for students who suffer from anxiety or who have experienced learning loss, small, in-person, multi-age learning pods. Students receive individualized instruction and participate in project-based instruction in the pods, with the goal of rekindling curiosity and accelerating learning so they can catch up with their peers.

Building Back Better

If prioritized together, the three landmarks in the Return to School Roadmap will enable more students and communities to heal, learn, and grow together this fall. However, we cannot go back to the way things were in March 2020. Our students deserve more. The American Rescue Plan built a strong foundation for us to begin to recover. It has empowered schools across the country to bring their students back into the building and address critical social, emotional, mental health, and academic priorities. But we owe it to our students to Build Back Better from

the pandemic and overcome the inequities that existed prior, and we can do so by passing the Build Back Better agenda.

From creating universal high-quality preschool, to fixing our nation's school infrastructure, to investing in educators, to improving career pathways, to providing free community college, we have an opportunity right now to transform American public education for generations to come. We can build truly equitable schools that finally close the opportunity and achievement gaps that have existed in our education systems for far too long. We can set all our children up for success by investing in our strongest asset – our people – and ensuring that America remains competitive in a global economy. These resources will allow us to build an education system more equitable and excellent than ever, where every student – no matter their race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, income, disability status, age or background, is seen, valued, and set up to succeed.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to share about our priorities for a safe, joyful, and equitable launch of this school year. I am committed to working collaboratively with each of you and to set all of our students up for success.

Thank you, and I will do my best to respond to any questions you may have.