

White House press briefing
08/05/21
1:13:00 p.m.
1 minute and 51 seconds

NANCY CORDES: Well, what about states that are, say, prohibiting school districts from imposing mask mandates? Are you worried that there will be teachers unions that say, "If we can't keep the school safe the way that we feel we should, we don't want to come back."

EDUCATION SECRETARY MIGUEL CARDONA: I'm worried that decisions that are being made that are not putting students at the center and student health and safety at the center is going to be why schools may be disrupted, so we know what to do. And, you know, don't be the reason why schools are disrupted because of the politicization of this effort to reopen schools. We know what works. We have to keep our students safe. We have to keep our educators safe.

PSAKI: Tam.

TAMARA KEITH: Yeah. Reopening school is one thing. I think you just alluded to this. Keeping school open would seem to be another thing entirely.

CARDONA: Right.

KEITH: What are you most worried about in terms of the ability to keep classrooms open to keep kids, you know, running up that hill to the school over there?

CARDONA: We know what works. This is not our first time doing this. We have the benefit of the experience of last year. We have strong CDC guidance, the Department of Education has several handbooks. The back to school roadmap with tools, checklists. The tools are there. It's just: are we following the mitigation strategies? You know what I'm worried about? The adult actions getting in the way of schools safely reopening. Let our educators educate. Let our leaders — school leaders lead and we can get our schools reopened safely and another thing that I'm worried about that I want to share is complacency. Let's not go back to the school system of March 2020. Our students deserve more. The funds are there. The urgency is there, This is our time to build back better.

KEITH: Can I just draw out, what do you mean by adult actions?

CARDONA: Well when we make policies that go against what CDC recommendations are. You know, at the end of the day, we want to make sure that students are safe. We want to make sure the staff is safe. We know how to do that, so let's not get in the way of school systems, uh, doing policies that they know work for students and staff.

(....)

1:14:56 p.m.

1 minute and 9 seconds

FRANCESCA CHAMBERS: We know that vaccination rates among younger Americans, 18 to 24 or lower. We also know the vaccination rates among African Americans are also lower as a percentage of population. So what kind of guidance is the Department of Education giving historically black colleges and universities this fall to help keep their students safe?

CARDONA: Thank you For that question. I visited Howard University about a month ago and I was so impressed with how they stood up vaccination clinics in their facilities and we had students from Howard University administering vaccine. They're using their name in the community to build confidence in their community, the black community so that they can — felt comfortable coming in. We're also setting up pop up clinics in schools. You know, the President put a charge there. Let's get pop up vaccination clinics in gymnasiums. I visited a gymnasium at a high school in Washington, D. C. where, you know, parents felt comfortable with that school. They know the principal. They know the teachers. They feel more like — they're more likely to go get vaccinated in a school that they know the folks and another thing that we're gonna do is going to take advantage of our — of our youth. You know, student voice is critically important. Let's get our youth, our — our school students talking about it because when students talk to one another about how they're safe when they got the vaccine, it's more likely to lead to an increase. I'm excited about that.

(...)

1:18:55 p.m.
56 seconds

STEPHANIE RAMOS: Kids, at this point, have gotten used to wearing masks, my children included.

CARDONA: Right.

RAMOS: What is your message to governors like governors like Governor DeSantis in Florida and Governor Abbott of Texas who have banned mask mandates?

CARDONA: You know, don't be the reason why schools are interrupted. Our kids have suffered enough. Let's do what we know works. Let's do what we know works across the country. We shouldn't get politics — politics shouldn't — doesn't have a role in this. Educators know what to do. We did it last year, so I have calls out to those states. But at the end of the day, I want to work with Texas. I want to work with Florida. I want to make sure those students have access to in-person learning. So, at the end of day, we're all in this together, and it's critically important that we have conversations with governors directly with state chiefs directly. We want to be an ally and make sure that we're supporting our students. At the end of the day, we're talking about students being in classrooms. They — they've suffered enough. It's time for them to be in the classroom without disruption to their learning.

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1:22:04 p.m.

1 minute and 10 seconds

AAMER MANDHANI: You made the point that just again —

CARDONA: Sure.

MADHANI: — that politicians don't be [sic] the reason why schools close. On the flip side, if you're a parent in one of these states, should families feel safe, sending their children to schools where there aren't mask mandates?

CARDONA: You know, as a parent myself, I would make sure that when my wife and I are making decisions about sending their children to school, I want to make sure that they're going into a safe learning environment. I know that I can send my children into school with masks although both of my children were vaccinated. If that's the rule in the — in the school, that's a — what we'll follow. I do ask parents to communicate with schools now and make sure that they're comfortable sending their children to school and I'm also going to be monitoring where places have rules that are limiting mask use, whether or not students that need to be in school are not going because of a lack of confidence. To me, those are adult actions preventing students to their right of public education.

MADHANI: And is there any — if you find that that's an issue, is there anything that, from the federal level, you can do? Any leverage that you can —

CARDONA: It — right — if we find that because of poor policy, students are not accessing the right to public education, we will have conversations with those states and take that very seriously.

(....)

1:23:22 p.m.

2 minutes and 42 seconds

YAMICHE ALCINDOR: My question is you talked a bunch about science not being in the way — not — not — politics not getting in the way —

CARDONA: Right.

ALCINDOR: — of — of science. I wonder what mechanisms, what sticks, What — what sort of consequences might the Education Department have in its toolbox to ensure that in — in districts where we see school leaders fighting with, frankly, politicians when it comes to CDC guidance that — that the Education Department might be able to back some of those school districts up? We're seeing — we're seeing places where school districts want to mandate masks but obviously,

state leaders are saying they can't do that. What — what could the Education Department do to ensure that those leaders have —

CARDONA: Sure. We're going to constantly work with those states with those leaders. At the end of the day, we're on the same team for the kids, right? And you know, I applaud Governor Hutchinson for what he's doing, and I recognize that we have to be malleable to address the increase in spread and that requires partnership. You know, withholding money — what — that's gonna hurt kids. That's gonna hurt kids more, so we're going to continue to work with those states and do what we can to help them understand how important it is to make sure students are getting into school. And my hope is that students going to schools in those communities as well. But if we're starting to notice as soon as you're not going in because they don't feel confident, then we're gonna have to have conversations about that.

ALCINDOR: A conversation that you say you don't want to withhold money — is there anything else that the department can do if it's not that won't hurt kids but can send a message that science and politics can't mix? We're in this to stay and we want to make sure those kids get into school and we're gonna do everything we can to make that happen. Thank you.

PSAKI: Alright, Jeff.

JEFF MASON: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Can you give us an update on the proposal to teach more black history in schools? Did the Republican black backlash over that have an impact over your plans?

CARDONA: You know, I always say, I trust my educators across the country to make sure that our curriculum promotes the beautiful diversity of this country, and we could do so as educators in a way to unifier our — our students in our country and show respect to others. That's another example of something that's become politicized and I have confidence in my educators and I have confidence in their ability to teach students about our history and, uh, in the process, we can learn about one another and become a stronger nation. Thank you.

MASON: Still on track? That proposal?

CARDONA: Which one? You're talking about the priorities?

MASON: Yes.

CARDONA: Yeah, the priorities are still what they are. I think, for us, the way we put it forward allows districts to — in states to put in their proposals and how they want to teach it, but I think again, it became a politicized the issue that didn't need to and it took us away from what I think is most important: our build back better agenda and getting students safely back into school.

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1:32:40 p.m.

30 seconds

RAMOS: Also on the Covid front, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is now fundraising off of President Biden's comments to "get out of the way" as people trying to help battle the Covid surge in that state. DeSantis has said, "I'm standing in your way, not going anywhere" referred to the President as a "power hungry tyrant." What is your response to the governor and the administration's response to the governor and is the President considering reaching out to DeSantis to talk this over?

PSAKI: Well, first from day one, we've approached this not as a political issue, but a public health issue. We remain in touch with officials in Florida just like we're in touch with officials from around the country about how we can provide assistance from the federal level to help address this public health crisis. What we — what I have cited and what the President has cited is publicly available data about public health and the impact in Florida. It is factual, and it is a fact and data that you all are aware of that 25 percent of hospitalizations in the country are in Florida. It is also a fact that the governor has taken steps that are counter — counter to public health recommendations. So, we're here to state the facts. Frankly, our view is that this is too serious, deadly serious to be doing partisan name calling. That's what we're not doing here. We're focused on providing public health data information to the people of Florida to make sure they understand what steps they should be taking, even if those are not steps taken at the top of the leadership in that state.

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1:40:19 p.m.

4 minutes and 11 seconds

PETER DOOCY: Democratic Congresswoman Cori Bush is saying that she favors spending tens of thousands on private security to keep her safe and that people should, "suck it up. Defunding the police has to happen" Didn't President Biden say a few weeks ago that anybody who refuses the party of being anti-police is lying?

PSAKI: Well, I think we shouldn't lose the forest through the trees here, which is that a member of Congress — and elected official is concerned that her life is threatened, and that's disturbing that any elected official have to suffer death threats and fear for their life, so I'm not going to comment, of course on their security arrangements. I don't have any more details on that. But I think we should start with that point first. I will say that the President has been crystal clear that he opposes defunding the police. He has said that throughout the campaign — his campaign for office, his record over the last several decades has made that clear. He has proposed increased funding for law enforcement and the COPS program, increase funding from his predecessor who was, as you might note or be aware of, a Republican. So, I'd note that his record is pretty clear on this. There may be some in the Democratic Party, including Congresswoman Bush, who disagree with him. That's okay. But I would say the majority of Democrats — we've seen this in polling and the majority of members also agree that we should not defund the police.

DOOCY: Is there a greater concern, though — I understand that's not the president's position, but is there a concern that defunding the police or “suck it up, defunding the police has to happen” might become a big Democratic message ahead of the midterms?

PSAKI: It does not appear to become — be — becoming a democratic message, even though there might be a desire for that on the other side of the aisle.

DOOCY: Okay, and then there are reports the administration wants to require all foreign visitors to be vaccinated. Would that include migrants arriving in Texas and Arizona and then released into border towns. [BRIAN KAREM COUGHS OR LAUGHS]

PSAKI: Well, I know there were a range of reports about this, So let me just give you a little bit of an update on this. One moment, and I know you asked kind two questions there, and I promise I'll address them both. Uh, we — one, let me reiterate — and I know Francesca asked a question about this the other day — the importance of international travel, um, given where we are today, with the Delta variant, we will plan to maintain existing travel restrictions at this point. However, what our interagency working groups are focused on and this is, I think, what was reported, is working to develop a plan for a consistent and safe international travel policy, and that will be done through the prism of providing consistent guidance, equitable guidance, digestible guidance, and there's a lot of confusion about what the restrictions are now and you all have asked a lot of good questions about it because it feels inconsistent and it is. But that's what our focus is, so that is — is certainly under strong consideration, but it is under a policy process review right now that I won't get ahead of myself. As it relates to, I know there was also reporting about the vaccination of migrants. That's not what the CBP is doing. There are NGOs and other international organizations who are vaccinating migrants as they come across the border, and as they work in partnership with us. Certainly, that helps keep a range of people safe in the — in the country.

DOOCY: But do you think that it's keeping people safe in McAllen, Texas, where 7,000 confirmed Covid-positive migrants have been released into the city since February, 1,500 in the last seven days?

PSAKI: Well, I think it's important to note what's actually happening in McAllen. So there's actually been a — they signed a disaster declaration — approved setting up a temporary emergency shelter to provide a space — to create an isolated space to mitigate this issue, and what happens is DHS — since the process of what happens — the agency, one, we're continuing to enforce Title 42, resulting, first, in the expulsion of the vast majority of those encountered at the border. We also — CBP also provides migrants who can be expelled under Title 42 with PPE. They're required to wear the PPE. if any exhibit signs of illness and see if you CBP custody. they're referred to local health systems for appropriate testing, diagnosis, isolation, and treatment, and obviously there are steps taken as needed, as this is certainly evidence of.