

Education Secretary Cardona backs mandatory coronavirus vaccinations for students

Miguel Cardona celebrates back to school even as controversies over masks, vaccines rage

By [Laura Meckler](#)

September 23, 2021 at 8:35 p.m. EDT



DETROIT — Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said Thursday he supports mandatory [coronavirus vaccinations](#) for older teenagers, saying vaccines are critical to keeping students in school.

“I wholeheartedly support it,” he said. “It’s the best tool that we have to safely reopen schools and keep them open. We don’t want to have the yo-yo effect that many districts had last year, and we can prevent that by getting vaccinated.”

Cardona said that in general, he believes governors, not school superintendents, should implement the mandates. “I really want to make sure that governors and health officials are driving the communication around public health measures, which vaccinations are,” he said.

Cardona had been hesitant to vigorously promote vaccination, but he said that changed after the FDA gave full approval of a [coronavirus](#) vaccine for those ages 16 and up. Those ages 12-15 are eligible for shots under an emergency authorization.

His comments came as he travels the Upper Midwest in a relentlessly optimistic frame of mind, celebrating the start of a school year where virtually all children are back to in-person learning even as schools across the country continue to battle the pandemic.

However, as schools reopened, the highly contagious [delta variant](#) began to spread, and it has been hitting children far harder than previous iterations of the virus. Some school districts have recorded more positive cases of the coronavirus in the opening weeks of school than all last year, though most kids still do not become seriously ill.

Many school districts now require coronavirus vaccines for school staff, but only a handful have mandated them for students. Among them is the [Los Angeles Unified School District](#), the second-largest in the country, which is requiring the shots for students 12 and older. Some districts also are requiring the vaccines for some student-athletes.

As of last week, 54 percent of Americans ages 12 to 17 had received at least one dose of the vaccine, with 43 percent fully vaccinated, according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). The group said the number of children receiving a first dose declined for a fifth week and was at the lowest level since the vaccine was made available to those 12 to 15 years old.

Rates are significantly higher for adults. Some parents vaccinated their children the day they became eligible, but others — even some who have been vaccinated themselves — say they want to wait for more data before inoculating their children.

Cardona says that while he realizes the virus remains dangerous, it's important to focus on the positive progress the country has seen. A year ago, most students were staring at computer screens; today, they are in classrooms with friends.

"We're on the doorstep of a new day," he told leaders of the Capital Area Community Services' Head Start program in Lansing, Mich., on Thursday.

Powered by a big purple bus emblazoned with "Return to School Road Trip," Cardona's tour began with a pep rally at an elementary school in Eau Claire, Wis., on Monday. Around dinner time on Thursday, the secretary read a story to young children in Detroit. And in Lansing, Mich., earlier that day, he rolled Play Dough into snakes, tossed balls with preschoolers and quizzed toddlers on their counting skills.

"Where did you get this beautiful necklace?" he asked one 4-year-old girl at the Head Start center. "Where did you learn how to count?" he asked a boy at a nearby table. "Let's count the blocks. Can you help me count the blocks?"

The event felt a million miles from the battles over masks and the rising numbers of pediatric coronavirus cases. Nonetheless, back in D.C., Cardona's department continues to wage a battle with a half dozen Republican governors who have barred their school districts from requiring masks. This week, the department's Office for Civil Rights added Texas to the list of states being investigated for these policies. The department argues these states may have violated the rights of students with disabilities by barring the mask mandates.

The agency typically comes to settlement agreements with states and school districts under investigation, but it has the power to withhold federal funds from them.

Cardona said in an interview that he was willing to hold back funding if necessary.

"I am prepared to do it. I don't want to do it, but I am prepared to do it," he said. "The last thing I want to do to the students in Texas and Florida is to withhold resources that support them. That's not something that I would do lightly."

He added he would prefer to work with the governors but also acknowledged that the governors do not appear interested in working with him. "They don't, they don't," he said. He said it may be necessary for the Justice Department to file federal lawsuits to force policy change, but said he has not yet discussed such a move with officials at Justice.

Cardona said he is also keeping tabs on negotiations over President Biden's spending package, which includes unprecedented funding for preschool education and community colleges. Mindful that congressional negotiators are likely to shrink the \$3.5 trillion package, he said he is working to build support, engaging community college presidents and "trying to build a sense of urgency."

"This is our moment," he said. "We can't squander it."

Updated September 13, 2021

More on the pandemic school year

How schools are experiencing the pandemic:

K-12: Delta variant stress tests school plans | Two districts differ in response to pandemic | FAQ on masks in

schools | Los Angeles mandates student vaccines | Hopes, fears as schools open

Other DMV news: FAQ on masks, teacher vaccines and quarantines | Approach to quarantines frustrates families | Montgomery County begins new testing program | A bevy of testing, vaccine rules in Northern Va. | D.C. mayor pressed to expand virtual learning

Higher education: A second year under pandemic's shadow | Faculty worries | FAQ: How students can minimize risk | Colleges split on vaccine mandates | On-campus tours return

Tell us how school reopening is going: Parents, guardians and teachers | Students

By [Laura Meckler](#)

Laura Meckler is a national education writer covering national trends, federal policy and the Education Department. She came to The Washington Post from the Wall Street Journal, where her beats included presidential politics, the White House, health care, immigration and demographics. [Twitter](#)



Today's Headlines

The most important news stories of the day, curated by Post editors and delivered every morning.

[Sign up](#)

[Sign in to join the conversation](#)