

Secretary Cardona's ABCs of building respect for teachers

At a Monitor Breakfast, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona called on local governments to respect teachers, from granting more agency to providing better working conditions and competitive pay.

With school back in full swing, I was delighted to host Education Secretary Miguel Cardona at a Monitor Breakfast on Sept. 7. He certainly has a lot on his plate: The Biden administration's controversial plan for student debt relief. Learning loss during the pandemic. Parent uproar over contentious social issues. Teacher shortages.

Those last issues feed into a deeper theme that animates Secretary Cardona, who began his career as a 4th grade teacher: respect. He links a lack of respect for public school teachers to resignations – and to the need for teacher “pipeline” programs, now operating, that bring new people into the profession.

I asked Dr. Cardona how respect for teaching can be instilled in public consciousness, and he started with a story. As a 21-year-old student teacher, he said, he always wore a necktie. One day, a veteran teacher pulled him aside and expressed appreciation.

“We have to make sure that we look professional,” the teacher said.

But appearances are only the start. Dr. Cardona, like the teacher he is, used a mnemonic device to explain what he calls the “ABCs” of building respect for educators: A for agency, B for better working conditions, and C for competitive salaries.

Agency, he says, means granting teachers some autonomy in how they meet students' needs. Better working conditions can mean not having to teach a class of 27 kids in a 95 degree classroom. And competitive pay, that's a big one.

“Teachers on average make 33% less than college graduates with similar time and degrees,” Dr. Cardona says. “Teachers in, I think it's Montana, come in at \$32,000. Can you imagine?”

State and local governments, he makes clear, have to step up their game on teacher pay.

My [article on the breakfast](#) led with his defense of student debt forgiveness, as did [CQ Roll Call's](#). Fox News focused on [heat-related school closures](#). The Washington Examiner led with Dr. Cardona's comment that [hiring unqualified teachers](#) is “a slap in the face to the profession.”

The [C-SPAN video of our breakfast](#) can be viewed here.

As with all Cabinet secretaries, Dr. Cardona's life informs his work. For him, that includes growing up in Meriden, Connecticut, with Puerto Rican parents, and not knowing a word of English when he started school. It also means being the dad of two teenagers – a son now in college and a daughter still in high school.

Father, he says, is “the title I love the most.”