

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Secretary Miguel Cardona, where I ask him: How can we make the grade on US education? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome you to this episode. I'm pretty sure this is a first for us, because we've interviewed cabinet members before, but they were, like, no offense to them because we love them. But they were former cabinet members. I think you're our first sitting cabinet member ever. Welcome to the show, Secretary Miguel Cardona, who is the Secretary of Education. And in fact, you're the country's 12th. Who knew?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:00:46] Isn't that something? Glad to be with you. Thanks for having me.

**JVN** [00:00:49] This is kind of our guiding question for today, because every episode of Getting Curious there's always kind of a different question. I know you don't have time to, like, sit around and listen to Getting Curious. You're literally busy running the Department of Education. But what our question is today is: how can we make the grade on US education? We just want to understand the Department of Education, we want to understand how it works. We want to understand how it interacts in our daily lives. But first, like, literally how are you? I mean, I'm sure there's a lot going on.

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:01:16] There's a lot going on. But I'm, I'm excited. I am doing well. I, we have a tremendous team here. You know, we have educators across the country that are ready to roll up their sleeves and help kids. And that's inspiring. Yes, we have challenges. Yes, we have a lot of, you know, politics jumping in where it shouldn't be. But you know what? At the end of the day, my money's on these teachers and school leaders that are going to do what's right for kids. So that inspires me. That motivates me, that, I'm doing great. And I know school reopening is going to be great. We're going to deal with what we have to deal with. But I'm doing well, I'm doing well.

**JVN** [00:01:54] I feel so assured, Secretary Cardona, I feel it. I also have to say, I'm obsessed with your pin. I see that you have a correct Pride flag. You've got the brown and the black stripe. We've got an inclusive, gorgeous Pride flag. So nice to see our Secretary of Education representing something that is just so great. So thank you for that. OK, are you ready to get into our gorgeous first segment?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:02:19] I am.

**JVN** [00:02:20] So what role does the Secretary of Education and the Department of Education play in each child's education?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:02:27] An important one. Right. So we kind of help across the country, set the tone around what we want to see in our schools with regard to inclusivity, ensuring that all students are learning at high levels, making sure that the systems across the country are giving all students access, making sure that our students with disabilities get the support that they need pretty consistently. Right. It can't be that in one part of our country they get one level of support and in another part they get a totally different level of support. So some of those federal programs, we're making sure that that's happening. We also look at data and monitoring to see that students are getting adequate education across the country. That's some of the role that we have.

**JVN** [00:03:05] So, love. And then what types of programs does the department fund and support?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:03:11] Well, we support programs like TRIO programs where it gives first generation college students an opportunity to explore college a little bit. We provide support for programs for students with disabilities to make sure that there's enough support there. Programs that address inequities, programs that address students getting access to college career and technical education, for example. You know, in high schools, we need high schools that are giving students an opportunity to see what's out there. So we provide some funding for career and technical education programming, among so many other things.

**JVN** [00:03:44] This is another question I just thought of: does the Department of Education, like, stop at high school or, like, who? Like, who? Like, who do the universities and the colleges and, like, and, like, community colleges, like, report to?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:03:56] Yeah, that's a good question. We, we also span higher education. We work with higher education across the country. That's two-year colleges, four-year colleges. We make sure that we're running the gamut from three-year-olds all the way to college. And, you know, some of the things that we do with our authority is move funds to those different entities and, for example, the Build Back Better agenda that the president is really pushing. And we're hoping, our fingers are crossed, that this makes it to the finish line because it's a transformational shift. Three-year-old programs, four-year-old programs, pre-K, which we know is so important, a solid foundation, and then access to community college. That's another part of the president's

Build Back Better agenda. So we would be the ones to help administer that throughout the country, that's part of our role, also, working with states.

**JVN** [00:04:45] Is to kind of, like, help disseminate whatever funds and programs the administration, like, wants to prioritize, which obviously it goes without saying that this administration has, like, a lot of different priorities than, like, the previous one, especially when it comes to inclusivity and the tone that is set for inclusivity generally, which is great. So how does the Department of Education interact with, like, the White House and the other branches of federal government, like, you know, Department of Health or, like, Transportation, stuff like that?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:05:20] You know, it's really important that we look at ourselves as a piece of the puzzle. We all work together to serve families, right? The students that I serve and the families that I serve are also served by Health and Human Services and by Transportation. So it's really important. And President Biden does it so well. He picked people that know that their job is to work as a part of a team. We cannot work in silos. So the White House really has a clear direction. And I'm so fortunate to be Secretary of Education with the Bidens. I mean, having a teacher in the White House really helps, right, Dr. Biden. And they really understand the role of education. So for us, we work closely with the White House to make sure that the president's plan, and having education, really serve as the foundation of our country's growth comes to fruition, but we also work with Health and Human Services to make sure that our students have access to the right health, you know, resources. We work with USDA to make sure kids are being fed and that kids don't go hungry. We work with all different agencies and we're part of a team.

**JVN** [00:06:20] You know, I have a lot of personal feelings about, like, you know, how things are taught, et cetera. I'm, like, "Oh, I feel like I learned so much when I became-, in my 20s." But I think one thing that I did certainly learn about growing up is our Constitution, the way that our government works, is that there's a strong separation between federal powers and our state powers, honey. So how does the Department of Education, which is like a federal entity, stay connected to local and state governments and their educators?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:06:47] You know, I was a commissioner before I was secretary, so I was leading a state education system. And you're right, the state education system has more authority over, like, curriculum and specific programing in the schools and local boards do, too. But at the end of the day, we all, we're all on the same team right at the federal level. We really, you know, we use this as a soapbox, too, to talk about those issues that are really important, like making sure more students have access to college that's affordable. Making sure that all students across the country feel welcomed in our

schools. So we make sure we're pushing policy there. But we work with our states. We also administer grants, right. And, you know, in partnership with, like, CDC, for example, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, we work with them to come up with, like, a national strategy on safe reopening of schools. And then we work with our states to help them implement it with their local health departments and so on and so forth.

**JVN** [00:07:43] So, like, each state has their own, like, Department of Education or, like, their own like...

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:07:48] Yes.

**JVN** [00:07:49] So which one were you at beforehand?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:07:51] I was in Connecticut.

**JVN** [00:07:42] Fun! We love Connecticut. OK, but like, the head of the state of Texas' Department of Education doesn't, like, report to the Department of Education federally or do they?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:08:03] No, they have, they have their own state board or they report to the governor directly. The federal agency works to support states, but also we help drive civil rights across the country. So that's where we sometimes have to jump in and step in a little bit more. But we also, you know, provide funding to states around things that we believe are really important.

**JVN** [00:08:24] How does, like, the Department of Education work with Congress? Are you guys, like, allowed to?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:08:27] We can. We have conversations regularly. You know, when I visit different states, I usually meet with elected officials and we have conversations and we visit places where people would be positively impacted by the Build Back Better agenda. So, for example, I've been visiting community colleges and talking to students with the legislators there, talking about the impact of community college on their life. And really just selling, like, "This is possible for everyone across the country if we do this right." So, yes, we're working with our partners on the Hill and helping, helping them understand what we see from our perspective, me from my perch and education, how this could benefit students and our economy in general.

**JVN** [00:09:10] So, OK, I think, I, I think I understand some of the key players at hand now. So I want to get to know a little bit more about you. Does that sound fun? OK, great. So

what are some standout moments from your own primary and secondary education? Was there any memorable courses, teachers, or enrichment opportunities that led you to find yourself in this very influential role as the Secretary of Education?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:09:36] You know, thanks for that. So I'm a middle child, you know, the first one in my family to go to college. But I grew up, I always say, you know, I was born rich, but I didn't have a lot of material possessions. But I had a good family, a supportive unit. And I remember just going to school as a little kid and in second grade having an art teacher that, you know, he was, like, I looked up, the lesson he was teaching was something I was really getting, I looked up and I, that's when I recognized, "Wow, I have a male teacher who's Black, teaching me art, which is something that I love." So I always wanted to be like Mr. O'Neill. Right.

Fast forward, like, ten years. Then, now, I'm, like, a junior, senior in high school. And I have, I was doing this mural about, you know, inclusivity and just kind of, "We're all together. We're all one race, the human race." And I had an art teacher in high school that saw that I was using my art to talk about justice. And she said to me, "Would you consider a career in teaching? I think you'd be a great art teacher." So she was to me what Kathi Dooley was to you and, yeah, and just connected with me. She saw me and I and that drove me to want to become a teacher. So, you know, those are two experiences at the beginning of my school career and then toward the end of my school career, that really made me say, "I know I wanted to do public service, but education is where it's at for me."

**JVN** [00:11:06] So, and then, what about your time as an educator and is there any, like, student that you saw just, like, grow massively or is there any like what are like for me? I feel like as a hairdresser, it's, like, when I really fix some, like, crazy box red, like, messed up haircut, and the person sees how good it looks, I'm like, "This is why I do what I do." Do you have any of those stories as being an educator?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:11:29] You know, there was a student, I was a principal of a school. I was fairly young as a principal. So I used to connect really well with the kids. And there was this fifth grader who, he, he was always, he was a great kid, always followed the rules, always serious. He became a safety patrol. You remember safety patrols? How important, how important a role that is to patrol the school as a fifth grader? So he was a safety patrol and he was, took that job really serious. And I remember telling him back then, this was, man, this was, like, fifteen, twenty years ago. I said, "Someday you're going to be the principal of the school." Again, I was the principal. He was like, "Oh, thank you." Because he made sure kids walked in the hallways, not run. He just told me yesterday he was appointed the assistant principal at that same school.

**JVN** [00:12:18] Aw, that's cute!

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:12:19] Yeah, yeah. So, you know, things like that. And I still have students that I taught, like, in the 90s, in the late 90s, that still connect with me, and their parents. And that connection is still there, because, you know, you've seen them grow. And, yeah, so many powerful stories of students. As you know, you say, they say that you touched their lives, but really they touched yours.

**JVN** [00:12:42] That's cute. For some reason, when you very first started telling me that story, I thought that you're right to be, like, "And now that person is Michael Phelps." And but that wasn't exactly We're. But I just, I thought there might turn out to be, like, super famous person or something. I was like, "Really?" That's, like, my daydream went there. But your story is even better. Even better. But I just think I had to tell you that, like, an intrusive thought came in, that I thought, that's where you were going with it but it's not.

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:13:05] That's awesome. I'll be honest with you, though. He swims really well, this kid.

**JVN** [00:13:08] Really? [CROSSTALK] Wow. My intuition was, like, almost, kind of had, like, that, but not really, as it turns out. Who knew. So you've been in education for, since the 90s, and you have occupied so many different spaces within the educational system. I mean, you've literally risen to like one of the most if not, I mean, the top job in, like, all of the education system and all of the United States. Have things changed? I just feel like now it's, like, there's a literal pandemic and people are literally not like, we can't even agree on reality. Are we going to make it, honey?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:13:47] We're going to be fine. Our kids are fine. My kids, I have a 15-year-old and a 16-year-old. They're good. This is, it's Thursday. Tomorrow is going to be another day, we're fine. You know, they're going to be good. We're worried about it because we know what it was like when we were growing up. And we're comparing it. They're fine. And matter of fact, when I'm around high schoolers, when I'm around middle schoolers, I have more confidence in our future because they're good, they're good, they're more tolerant, they're more accepting. They're more forward, it's more adults sometimes that, we have issues, we're good. The kids are good, they're fine.

We have an agenda that's transformational in education. We have an agenda that's trying to provide pre-K for three- and four-year-olds. Talk about closing gaps. We have an agenda that's talking about college for everyone. Talk about economic improvements for our country, because that's such good to talk about. So my eyes are on the prize. Equity is, you know, that's critically important. And we can do that while unifying the country. We want to

build back better. We don't want our school systems to be what they were when we shut them down. We want it better. And we have a president that gets it, putting money there to make sure that schools have the resources that they need to thrive.

**JVN** [00:14:56] So I love that story. I feel like the older I'm getting, the more I'm realizing and I actually need to write down "agenda." I want to come back to that: "agenda," underline. So I love that story. I feel like the older I get, the more I'm realizing that, like, a binary way of thinking is just, like, not serving me well, probably pretty much anywhere. Obviously, I'm a non-binary person. I also, someone was telling me, my friend Aly, it's, like, "This is the year of both and," and my friend ALOK also says this. And so the point is, is that, why I underlined agenda is this: like, what's the agenda? I want to hear more about this gorgeous agenda. Honey, it's sure better than what else was there. We're getting back better. We're doing pre-K for the children, and we're doing free community college for people under. What's that story? What's all the stuff that we're doing?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:15:46] It's all in there. In terms of the agenda, you know, I think we can talk about community college for all. We can talk about increasing Pell grants, which means up to eighteen hundred dollars more for college for, for anyone that wants to attend. We know graduates of community college earn up to twenty one percent more than high school graduates. So this is good for the economy. You know, we talk about closing achievement gaps, right. And opportunity gaps. Well, if we give good quality programming to three- and four-year-olds, We're leveling the playing field before they get into gaps. Right. So there's a lot there. But we could talk about that or we could talk about the fact that we have a president that finally, I've been in education for 20 years, twenty three, twenty four years. We have a president that understands the transformational power of education and investing in education.

So, you know, yes, this pandemic is providing a challenge. But, you know, when we opened up the show, I talked about how excited I was. We have an opportunity here to really transform what education can be, we have an opportunity to make sure that our schools are places where all students want to be, where they feel supported, where we don't have to have bake sales for, for, for music programs, where we don't have to, you know, cut the arts or or limit opportunities for students because we have a president and a team that understands the important role of education. And I'm so fortunate to be a part of that system that can really usher in this new wave of education across the country.

**JVN** [00:17:11] But then we're still going to have bake sales because they're tasty, but because we wanted to, not for the arts!

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:17:17] Because we love cupcakes. We love cupcakes. Yes.

**JVN** [00:17:25] OK, now I have another question, kind of same vein, but in a different way, more concise, more clear, more gorgeous. So because you've been a student, you've been an educator, and you've literally become the secretary of the US Department of Education. Is there any, what has it been like to reflect on these moments from your position as Secretary of Education and potentially be able to change them for the next generation? So as to say: you have experienced the education system and now you are the head of it? When you were growing up, was there anything that you really wanted to fundamentally change? And what has been able to happen as the secretary of education that you are, like, "We are on the road, we are doing that?"

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:18:04] Yeah. You know, when I was, I mentioned before, I was the first of my family to go to college, so, and I went to a technical high school. I loved it. I studied automotive for four years. You know, we came from a big family of cousins. So my oldest cousin went to a technical high school and like little ducks, we just followed him in. So I'm over here studying how to take apart engines, and I loved it. I said, "Well, maybe I'll do that." But as I said before, I had an art teacher that really influenced me and pushed me toward education. But anyway, the reason why I share that is because when I got to college, I was the first in my family. I didn't know what to do, what classes to take. I was like a fish out of water. And it shouldn't be that hard for students to be able to access college in a way that's a seamless throughline, right, between high school and college.

That shouldn't be, I shouldn't be a counterexample, you follow? I shouldn't be a counterexample. So I am thrilled that we're going to be super aggressive making sure that students as early as middle school start thinking about, "Hey, what opportunities exist for you? What do you want to do? How do you tinker with this or go get an experience over there doing an internship over there so that when you're getting ready for college, it's not even optional. You can choose to do it if you want or if you want to join the workforce, you're going to have skills," like, we need to close those manmade gaps between high school and college. So it's not so foreign to so many of our students who are first gen students, like I was. You know, I wasn't that kid that could go to my parents and say, "Hey, which courses should I take so I could graduate in three-and-a-half years, or which internship?" So our system needs to evolve better to be better support for our students so they can have access like everyone else.

**JVN** [00:19:48] You know, you said something in the beginning of the interview that you said you were born rich, but not because of money. And I think really what you're talking about is social capital. You had people in your life and sometimes that can be a parent or a family member, but can also be a teacher or an educator or someone that really does, you know, steer you towards that direction to say, like, "You should take this course," or, "You



should do this or you should do that." I remember I had a teacher in fourth grade, Mrs. Cashelsky. She was like, "You're an entertainer. You're meant to be an actor." And then I was like, "No, I'm too scared." And I was like, afraid of rejection. But ultimately, she was kind of right.

And so, you know, teachers are so important and they're important to everyone. But they really are so important to young kids. They're important to helping everyone realize all of their potential. And it's really about giving people their opportunity to live through them, to get the American dream, you know And and I think, you know, so many of us are realizing, like, "Oh, the American dream isn't everything we always thought," but we always have a chance to make it better. And we always have a chance to make, you know, to make this country a more equitable place and a country that really does have equity. Yeah, which is, which is great. So it sounds like what you're saying is, is that growing up for you, really what your life was post-high school was not something was being prepared for. We weren't thinking about it enough, weren't talking about it early on enough and not something that you guys are really being able to do now, which is amazing. So what else do you think is possible for American education and how can we all get there?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:21:17] So some of the things, you know, access. Right, access to higher education, I'm really excited about what we're going to do. When I say evolve our high schools, you know, I want to make sure that our schools are connected to what the college and workforce needs are. Right, so that our schools evolve to what the needs of the workforce are and the professions are so that our students are able not only to embrace higher education learning, but also be prepared to have a very lucrative future in whatever they choose to do. So I'm excited about those connections that we're going to be able to make to give more students access, but also to connect them into fields that exist. You know, we have to make sure that we're preparing our students for the jobs of tomorrow and the jobs that haven't even been invented yet. Right. So we need critical thinkers and we need to make sure that, you know, there's a, there's a better through line between our K-12 system and our higher ed system. I'm really excited about that.

**JVN** [00:22:14] And how are you guys doing that? Tell us more about it.

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:22:16] Sure. So we're really going to be focusing on career and technical education pathways that could start as early as middle school. Right. If you talk about, like, let's say, the technology field, multimedia field or health care fields, let's give students exposure to that earlier so that they could explore careers there. And, you know, we played around last year with hybrid learning where you're in school sometimes and then you're home sometimes. Why not just take that model and say, "You spend three days in school and you spend two days out in the, in the hospital, interning, learning about

radiology by standing next to a radiologist and helping out.” So being more open and thinking about how we're giving students opportunities to learn by doing, that's exciting.

And then why shouldn't those high school programs give you college credits, if they're connected to the curriculum in college, so that a student has a leg into college already and feels like, “I'm already a part of this college community before I even graduate.” And then once they're in the college, the college is connected to the workforce so that when the students are a year into college, they're already thinking about how they're going to be employed with a major employer in the region that's, you know, high paying jobs, high skill jobs. We have an opportunity to build all that. And our offices at the Department of Education now are working aggressively to make sure that we can make that happen. And again, if Pell increases and if we provide community colleges for all, community college access for all, the exponential growth in that goal is going to be so, like, transformational, it's going to be like nothing we've ever seen before in education, where we have not only our students leaving high schools, but our adults that want to go back and reskill, going back and reskilling and going and joining the workforce and feeling good about themselves.

Let me tell you a quick story, Jonathan. I was in Michigan about two months ago. And we were talking about, like, so this president's plan. What does it mean for you? And I had this lady who's about 60 years old. She said, “I have health issues and this pandemic really made me rethink life. And if I could have access to Pell Grants, I'm going to go back to college. I'm going to get a nursing, into a nursing program, and I'm going to help people for the rest of my life because after Covid, I rediscovered myself and I want to give back now.” We have that potential across the country if we move this forward and would give access to, to college for not only our high school students, but for people across the country.

**JVN** [00:25:41] So that is just so interesting. And I feel like I want to hear more. So the whole Build Back Better agenda there, is there one for kind of, like, every department?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:25:52] So we have, yeah, the Build Back Better agenda really combines American Family Plan, which is really aimed at supporting the whole family. There's child tax credits there, as I mentioned, education, you know, health care, support for families to we know the American Jobs Plan was really about jobs and infrastructure. So what we're doing now is, you know, the work that they did over the last couple of weeks to move the infrastructure bill forward. We're also trying to push more for families, for schools, and that's what the Build Back Better agenda is. And we're working really hard because we know people across the country would benefit from it. I visited over 17, 18 different states and I've talked to students like the one that I mentioned.

Her name is Ruth, I've gotta mention her by name. She inspired me. People like Ruth will benefit from it. People who have two- and three-year-olds would benefit from having them in programs that are high quality. So we're really pushing this build back better agenda because it's more than just a bunch of, you know, strategies to help families. It's transformational to make sure that our education system is top of the world. You know, we have other countries catching up. We have to raise the bar, up the ante a little bit to make sure that we "win the future," as the president says, we win the future.

**JVN** [00:26:09] And so the major prongs for building back better in the Education Department is two- to three-year-old pre-K programs. Right?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:26:19] Universal pre-kindergarten programs. That's high quality for three and four year olds.

**JVN** [00:26:23] Yes, universal pre-K. And then it's the Pell Grants for everyone? That wants to go back to college?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:26:30] Yeah, Pell Grants for students that want to go back to college or high school students, a total of eighteen hundred dollars additional, which is significant for students that are debating whether or not they can afford to go to college. And we know college isn't just tuition. It's fees. It's making sure they have a place to stay. Books are expensive, so it's taking care of some of those incidentals that are determining factors, whether or not people continue their education.

**JVN** [00:26:58] And what about the free community college thing for isn't that part of it, too?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:27:01] Oh, yeah. It's access to community college for students across the country. You know, it's adding four more years of education, really, two at the back end, you know, with the community college and front end with the pre-K.

**JVN** [00:27:15] But how would people access that? Do you need to live in the state for a year? Do you need to, like, what are the things that people got to do if they want to go to community college under this program?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:27:23] Well, it would be across the country. So we would work with the states. Some states have models already where students have access to it or governors have done a great job prioritizing college access. For example, Michigan, I know they've done a lot of great work, Governor Whitmer, over there trying to give access to

college already. So we're going to work with those states. Some are further along in this process than others, but we want to make it so that students across the country have access to lawyers like community college.

**JVN** [00:28:50] What about governors that, like, aren't so eager? Are you able to make inroads with those types of people for, like, for community college stuff?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:28:57] We're on the same team. You know, we don't agree on everything. We don't agree on mitigation strategies. I tend to lean on what the science says and CDC says. I think we all agree we want access for our students to have higher education because there's earning potential for these students that goes back into the economy. It makes economic sense. When you have a student graduating with a higher skill set, they can get higher paying jobs and they can contribute to the economy better. So it works.

**JVN** [00:28:20] But where are we in that whole you know, 'cause that was, like, a big thing. And people were really excited about, like, free community college. Like, where are we? And like, people being able to like, is it going to happen in the next four years, or will it happen before, like, 2024?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:28:32] I'm hoping it happens before 2022. We're working really hard right now to push the Build Back Better agenda. And we have our colleagues and our friends over on the Hill discussing it. And, you know, that's why it's really important we get this message out for everyone.

**JVN** [00:28:47] OK, and I know that you're really busy and sought after because you're the literal Secretary of the Department of Education. But I need you to just answer these last two questions, kind of rapid fire, because I think I only have you for three more minutes, but I really want to get them asked. How can we ensure that this is kind of a big one, but you can do it. I know you can. How can we ensure that students are supported holistically in social, emotional and mental health. And why is that so important?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:29:12] Listen, we just, we're in the middle of a pandemic, and we can talk about what they missed in reading and math. Students miss their communities, they miss their second families. Schools are second families, you know this. And for so many students, including our transgender students, they need that network of support that they have in their schools. And reopening schools, that's why it's so important. When we reopen schools, we're thinking about improving social emotional learning, improving access to mental health supports. The pandemic affected a lot of us. It affected all of us, but it affected some of us more. There's students that dealt with loss in

their family. So we need to make sure that we're embracing our students, showing them love and giving them a nurturing, welcoming environment to learn and grow.

**JVN** [00:29:58] Everyone deserves, you know, health and mental health and stability, you know, social, emotional, mental health. But it's especially true for children because they have longer and, like, this stuff that happens when you're a kid, you're dealing with it for the rest of your life. So we really want to make sure that we're showing up for young people. The last question is, and you kind of led me to it is: how can we prepare students to return to school after 18 months of remote learning, of hybrid learning, that has been such a difficult time for everyone. Do you have any advice for parents, specifically parents who may be in states that have been a little bit more adversarial, like, if you live in a state where you really would wish that you could be more with school guidelines but they're not, or if you're just even wanting more support, more resources for your child, for your student, for whatever reason. How can the U.S. Department of Education help them?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:30:45] Well, we have a return to school roadmap that really lays it out, so check it out: [ed.gov/roadmap](https://ed.gov/roadmap). It's number one. You have to make sure that you're telling parents and showing students that they're going to be safe, not only physically safe from the pandemic, but emotionally safe, that they're going to be walking into a welcoming environment that embraces all students for who they are. That's number one. Number two, providing that social, emotional support that we talked about that you got to meet kids where they are. You can't come in and say, "OK, we missed a year and a half, so let's open up our books to page...." You've got to meet them where they are. And number three, make sure you have the supports because they did miss out on instruction. So meet them where they are academically, provide incremental support, but just nurture them, embrace them. Check out the Return To School roadmap for more information.

**JVN** [00:31:28] That was a great answer. And then I think I know that there's just one really tiny one. Is there anything that people can do just because they are so heated and people are just, like, so, like, "ah!" about the kids right now. Anything that people can do to just calm down a little, maybe anything that you see effective that people are doing. Do you ever see people do something really effective to calm down?

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:31:51] I know people are stressed. You know, you know, seriously, be around students like let's take their lead, man. I told you just before the interview, I'm confident. I'm enthusiastic. I feel so excited about school reopening because I'm around students all the time. Just be around the kids and listen to them take their lead. The adults will chill a little bit if we just follow the lead of our students. That's my advice.

**JVN** [00:32:14] Ah! Secretary Miguel Cardona, thank you so much. We appreciate your time. You're amazing. Thank you so much for all of your work. We appreciate you so much. And thanks for coming on Getting Curious.

**SEC. MIGUEL CARDONA** [00:32:23] Thank you, Jonathan, nice to see you. Take care.

**JVN** [00:32:29] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Secretary Miguel Cardona.

You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, honey, introduce a friend - show them how to find that little podcast button. It's a tricky little button on your phone sometimes, it's, like, "Where is it? How do I download it? What do I do?" Just show your friends! Or you can just say, "I love Getting Curious," who knows? And then maybe show them how to subscribe. Which is what I just said. Which is why maybe I shouldn't ad lib on my scripts but sometimes we go for it and it works! And sometimes it doesn't. Who knew.

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