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Turmoil in US Schools Puts Biden Education Chief in Crosshairs

With culture wars raging in schools and student loan bills landing again, Miguel Cardona is in the eye of the storm.

By Akayla Gardner

(Bloomberg) -- Education used to be a reliable vote-winning issue for Democrats. It's not looking that way now -- putting one member of President Joe Biden's cabinet in the eye of a political storm as the 2024 election nears.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona is racing to patch together a new plan to forgive student debts, after judges threw out the administration's last one. He's seeking to rally Democratic voters against conservative efforts to shape teachings about race, gender and sexuality in classrooms. Pandemic school closures -- which left many children falling behind, and enraged parents -- added to the angst.

Even the existence of Cardona's agency is under threat: Republicans fired up by culture wars are vowing to abolish the Department of Education if they win back the White House.

"We have a really tough agenda. We're not taking this lightly," Cardona told Bloomberg News. Yet the former fourth-grade teacher has limited powers to fight the battles he's gotten sucked into.

On the big college questions, he's constrained by recent Supreme Court rulings. In K-12 education, the department under Cardona has added personnel to offer guidance on fights over book bans and curriculums, and it sometimes weighs in -- but sparingly, because the federal government leaves decision-making largely in the hands of states.



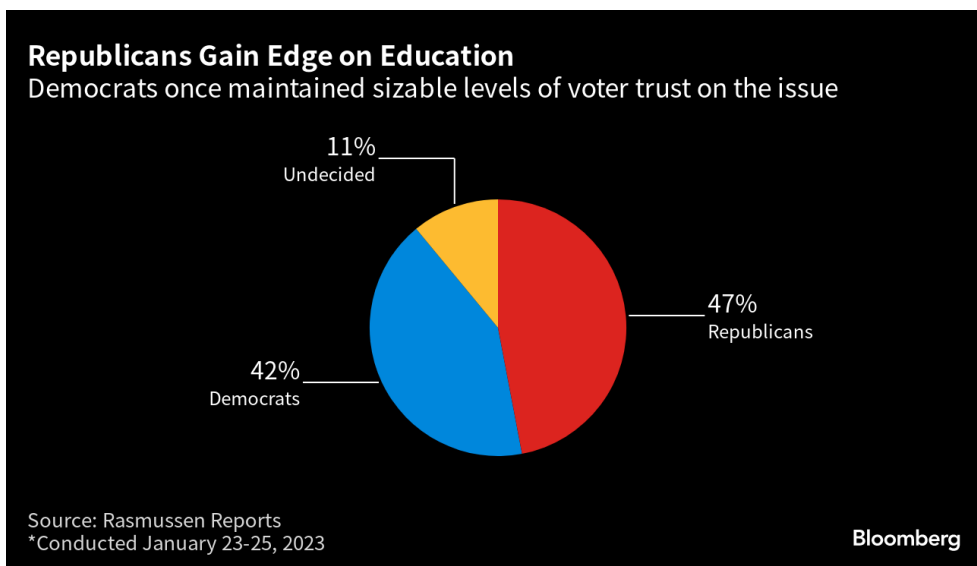
Cardona, center, and staff on their tour bus as part of the Department of Education's "Back to School Bus Tour 2023: Raise the Bar" campaign in Kansas City, Missouri, on Sept. 5.

Both sets of issues could be vital in next year's election. In 2020, Biden won more than 60% of the vote among Americans age 29 and under, after he ran on a promise of debt forgiveness. Now, with the writedowns on hold, his approval rating in that cohort has slumped. Meanwhile, various polls suggest the decades-old advantage that Democrats enjoyed as the party more trusted on educational matters has narrowed – or even disappeared – amid the controversies of the past few years.

"There's no way education should be a losing issue for Democrats going into the next presidential election," says Arne Duncan, who was education secretary in the 2010s under former President Barack Obama, and regularly speaks to Cardona. "There's really, really a sense of urgency to better articulate to parents what's changed for their kids and why."

Culture Wars

It's been a traumatic period in American schools. The pandemic kept children out of the classroom for months, leading to learning loss. And there's an escalating fight over what Republicans have branded as "wokeness" – school programs addressing race, gender and sexuality that some parents say should be watered down or scrapped.



The culture wars over education have raised the profile of GOP state governors like Florida’s Ron DeSantis and Virginia’s Glenn Youngkin. DeSantis is challenging Trump to face Biden in the 2024 presidential election, while Youngkin has drawn speculation that he could be a late entrant into the primary.

Last year saw a record number of attempts to censor library books, mostly written by or about the LGBTQ community or people of color, the American Library Association reported. And in several states, new laws are driving book bans and changes to classroom content.

In Florida, for example, a new social studies curriculum allowed room for the claim that some enslaved people received “personal benefit” from skills developed during their servitude – sparking national outrage. The state also rejected an advanced course on African-American history for high-schoolers. The moves came after DeSantis enacted a law dubbed the Stop WOKE Act.

Some Democratic lawmakers want Cardona to pursue more aggressive investigations against that kind of state-level policy. The education chief has the power to deprive school systems of federal funding – but he says it’s not a decision he would take lightly.



Florida Governor Ron DeSantis speaks after signing HB 7, dubbed the Stop WOKE Act, in Hialeah Gardens, Florida, on April 22, 2022.

'More, Not Less'

"I would withhold dollars if I believe that they're using federal dollars to harm students," Cardona said in an interview this month during a trip to Kansas. But there's a downside. "Withholding dollars in Florida is withholding dollars from students who are being attacked for being gay," or "Black students whose governor says their history shouldn't be taught," he said. "I need to give them more, not less."

The department's Office of Civil Rights is the main vehicle for Cardona to address such concerns. Earlier this year, it appointed a coordinator to respond to a spike in book bans, by training and engaging with schools, libraries and teachers.

An example of how the office works: in May, it ruled on a complaint alleging that Forsyth County Schools in Georgia created a hostile environment by banning or restricting access to books by LGBTQ authors and people of color. The office decided that no rights had been violated, but it ordered the county to offer supportive services to students affected by "negative comments" from parents at school board meetings.

Many Republicans would like to end such interventions from Washington – by abolishing the department altogether. Even Betsy Devos, who held the education post under Trump, has said it should be shut down.

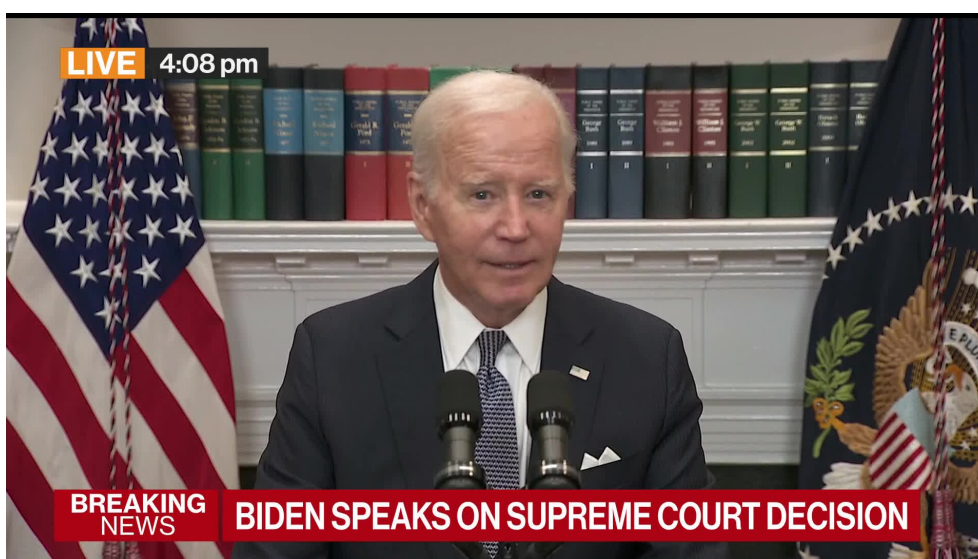
'Took Us Backwards'



Cardona during a bus tour kick off at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, last month.

When it comes to higher education, it's the Supreme Court that has been making Cardona's job difficult. Starting this fall, universities largely aren't supposed to consider applicants' race or ethnicity, after the court deemed the practice unfair.

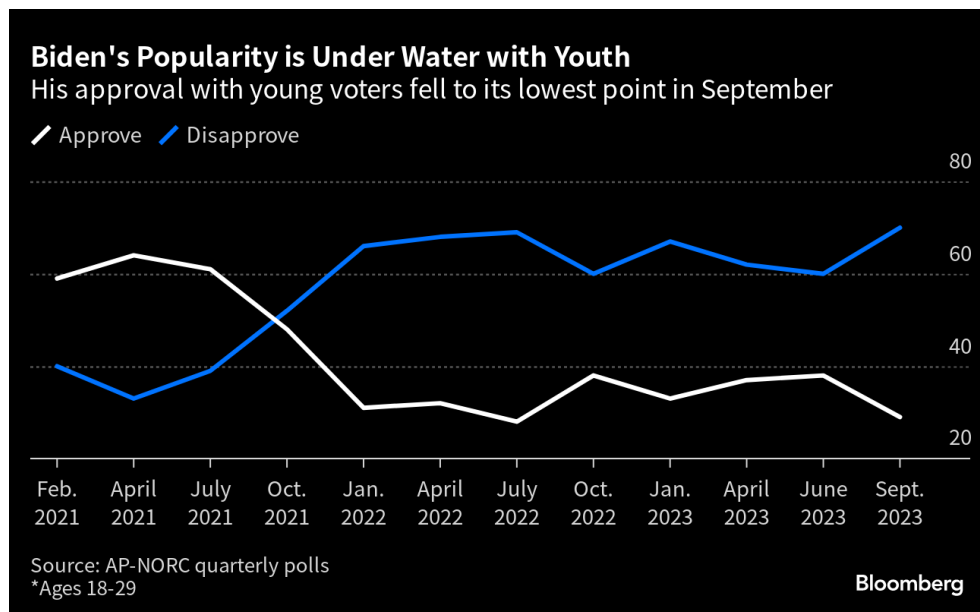
"Now, to the greatest extent since the last century, we're seeing racist attitudes and policies being embedded in our laws and institutions, often with the thin veil of so-called race blindness or or both sides-isms" Cardona told the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – the country's oldest civil-rights organization – in July, citing the affirmative action ruling among other risks. His department is giving universities guidance on how to foster diversity without breaking the law, such as early recruitment among underrepresented groups.



Biden Lays Out New Plan for Student Debt Relief

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The court also nixed Biden’s flagship student–loan plan -- which means borrowers are having to resume repayments this month, after the Covid–era moratorium expired, without the promised debt relief of up to \$20,000 for eligible borrowers. The policy was especially popular with key Democratic constituents, including young voters and people of color.



A new forgiveness plan is in the works and will be announced in 2024, Cardona said, without giving details. He said the department is “very mindful” of the Supreme Court’s verdict that the executive branch had overreached its powers – which means any do–over has a narrow path to success.

Republican Congresswoman Virginia Foxx, who chairs the House Education Committee, has led efforts to thwart multiple measures by Cardona to address student debt, including a new income–driven repayment plan that cuts payments for lower–earning borrowers.

“There are a lot of people in that program who will never pay back a dime,” Foxx says. “The taxpayers will eat the bill. That's wrong.”

Cardona said the administration is well aware of all the political and legal obstacles – and determined to overcome them.

“At every corner I turn there are going to be those who fight it because the president is putting it forward,” he said. “We’re not gonna stop fighting just because we’re going to get sued.”

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