



[Re] Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition

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1/18/2021

To: Roberto Rodriguez & Carrie Pugh,
Biden-Harris Education Agency Review Team

From: Kevin Sullivan & Mary Filardo, 21st Century School Fund/BASIC

Re: Recommendations to Incoming Secretary Cardona and Deputy
Secretary Cindy Marten

The incoming Secretary will join the Department when reopening schools and the health and safety of the on-site school environment is a pressing national priority for President Biden and Vice President Harris.

The conditions of public school buildings and grounds, especially in low income communities, are a barrier to reopening. The effects of crumbling schools on teaching and learning and the health of children have been a problem for decades, well before our nation was faced with the current public health crisis, and exacerbate the inequities already structured into public education.

The funding in the recent COVID-19 Relief Bill and President Elect Biden's proposed funding for schools in his American Rescue plan are critical. However states and districts also need leadership and guidance on how these funds can address the triple burdens of deteriorated facilities, learning loss, and socio-emotional stresses. We urge the Landing Team to view school facilities through both a health and civil rights lens.

We know from webinars that we have facilitated with state and school district leaders that the challenges of operating school facilities through the logistics of closings, openings, hybrid, and on-line education are shared. The U.S. Department of Education needs to provide leadership that will help districts navigate these difficult times. However, the Department of Education is unprepared.

Twenty-five years ago, Secretary Richard Riley used his bully pulpit to make school facilities a national concern as a result of record-breaking national enrollments. With no funding or an office to support him Secretary Riley was nevertheless able to secure \$2 billion in a Clinton budget deal for emergency school repair, organize the first national summit on school design, create the National Clearinghouse for School Facilities, and help inspire the community schools movement into existence.

However, since that time, the Department of Education has little experience with school facilities. Although there has been some financing of charter facilities, and a Green Ribbon Awards Program, the National Clearinghouse no longer exists, states

and districts have had no direct federal funding for facilities since 2001, NCES has no facilities data, and IES has done little to understand the impact of facilities on teaching and learning. There is no office in ED with expertise, data, or a voice to improve the health, safety, educational suitability, or equity of our public school facilities.

Create an Office of School Facilities:

The incoming leadership of the U.S. Department of Education, Miguel Cardona and Cindy Marten, urgently need to build capacity inside the Department, not only for the immediate challenge of opening schools, but for the long term, especially if RASA becomes law later this year.

The 100-day priorities of this office in support of communities safely reopening all of our nation's public schools would be to:

- Model stakeholder collaboration to help restore trust in school opening and closing decisions being made in districts and states across the country, first by preparing guidance, as necessary on CARES, and other ED funding, as it relates to facilities.
- Work with CDC to update guidelines and provide apolitical, data-driven guidance for when schools can reopen, how, for whom, and in what conditions, including with an analysis of the impact of school reopening on community spread and subgroup impacts of when schools have reopened as compared to those who didn't.
- Serve as a clearinghouse on national and global research that informs school districts on how schools can safely reopen and stay open during a pandemic, including the fiscal impact of various protocols, policies and practices.
- Mount a national public service campaign on the new CDC guidelines and school reopening.
- Advocate for and facilitate priority vaccinations, testing and tracing for public schools, particularly for teachers and administrative staff.
- Work with FEMA to supply school districts with tents and other furniture, equipment and supplies to support outdoor learning.
- Track and report in a publicly accessible, online database, school level data on COVID cases, as well as an up-to-date reporting of school openings, closings, hybrid, or distance educational delivery models being used.

The urgent work of this office to reopen schools will benefit from a parallel track where the office develops its capacity to help reduce the structural inequities in the conditions for teaching and learning in our public school buildings and grounds; and also develops its capacity to ensure as schools are built, modernized, operated and maintained, so that they respond to climate changes and the need for resiliency for our communities. To support the educational, environmental and civil rights issues manifest in our public school facilities, an ED office of facilities needs to:

- Support the Secretary as he takes the lead position to support the passage of RASA including appearing before key congressional committees.
- Manage Rebuild America's School Act (RASA) grant program should RASA become law.
- Work with EPA and FEMA on school resilience and mitigation practices as part of the President's climate change initiative.

- Fold the Community Schools & Promise Neighborhoods program into this office; schools are “anchor institutions” and help rebuild poor neighborhoods. Both the Brookings Institution’s Task Force on Community Schools <https://www.brookings.edu/> and the new Reimagine America’s School initiative <https://www.reimagineschools.us/> have a range of suggestions on how this can be done
- Fold the Green Ribbon Schools Awards Program and Charter Schools Facilities grant programs into this office.
- Re-establish the National Clearinghouse for School Facilities (\$1 million annual budget)
- Work with IES and NCES on research and data collection priorities to advance facilities equity and responsiveness to climate changes.