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CENTERPIECE TOP STORY

‘DOING IT RIGHT’

U.S. Secretary Of Education Visits Bluestone Elementary School As Part Of Tour

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record
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U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona speaks with Boys and Girls Club members at Bluestone Elementary School in Harrisonburg during a stop on his Road to Success Back To School Bus Tour on Tuesday.

Photos By Daniel Lin / DN-R

When U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona needed a school to visit in Virginia that was “doing it right,” former Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction James Lane told Cardona, “I have the school for you.”

That school was Bluestone Elementary School in Harrisonburg, and on Tuesday afternoon, the Biden administration Cabinet member sat down with parents, community members, former students, elected officials and higher education educators to talk about community engagement, diversity and what resources Harrisonburg could use.

Cardona is on his Road to Success Back to School Bus Tour, which has taken him to Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia and will take him to West Virginia, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The point of the tour, Cardona said, was to highlight what is working in schools across the country.

"Schools like this that have inclusivity and welcoming environments as their core, the students succeed," Cardona said of Bluestone Elementary School. He also wants to highlight how American Rescue Plan Act money is helping schools across the country and making sure they are focusing on what is working for schools and not going back to the past.

Cardona started his visit to Bluestone Elementary School by visiting the school's partnership with the Boys and Girls Club before his roundtable with community leaders and parents.

Cardona said his tour is about "lifting up what is right in our school and what we want to see duplicated."

Michael Richards, superintendent of Harrisonburg City Public Schools, shared some information about the division with Cardona as the discussion began. He spoke of the diversity of HCPS and how the demographics in the division are matching those of the United States. Richards talked about elected officials including School Board Chair Deb Fitzgerald and City Council member Chris Jones, who were both in attendance on Tuesday.

"They don't get involved in a lot of political squabbles," Richards said. He also highlighted the dual language program that HCPS offers, and a former student of the first cohort of the program was in attendance Tuesday.

Finally, Richards highlighted the community partnerships, such as the Valley Scholars program, between HCPS and James Madison University. President Jonathan Alger was in attendance Tuesday.

But mostly, Cardona, who grew up speaking Spanish in his childhood home in Connecticut, wanted to hear from the parents and the liaisons who support families, particularly families that don't speak English when they come to Harrisonburg.

Muna Shamisalla, HCPS Arabic translator and family and school liaison, said it's her job to make families feel welcome and to connect them with resources in the community they might need.

"It's important to make families feel welcome and safe, especially those that do not have the language" when they arrive, Shamisalla said.

Community connection, particularly with parents and with the help of liaisons, was a big theme during Tuesday's discussion.

"Liaisons being in the recipe, you're onto the right things," Cardona said.

He talked to current Harrisonburg High School student Braeden McGrath, a former Bluestone Elementary School student and among the school's first cohort in the dual language program. From kindergarten through ninth grade, McGrath traded off between English speaking days of school and Spanish speaking days of school.

Cardona told McGrath that leaving high school being able to speak a second language was like having a "super power."

"I'm grateful I learned Spanish," McGrath said. "I can talk to millions more people."

Cardona spent the last few minutes of his time at Bluestone Elementary School chatting with teachers, many of whom remained at school despite it being well past last bell. He said the excitement, and not just because of the visit, was palpable at Bluestone.

"Keep up the great work," Cardona said. "You have fans in D.C."

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