

Last month, Dr. Fauci said:

It's less likely for a child to get infected in the school setting than if they were just in the community.

But Big Labor special interests didn't appreciate science undercutting their political goals. The empire struck back, and the Democratic leaders who love to claim the mantle of science ran away from the science as fast as they could. Now the CDC Director admits that "the lived experiences"—whatever that is—of government employees got between the hard science and the final guidance. It is a lot of points for candor.

The unions had spoken. The goalposts were on the move. And the White House keeps endorsing the idea that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan to reopen, when the science disagrees. And furthermore, just 5 percent—5 percent—of what they propose to spend on schools would even be spent this year. Let me say that again. In this big COVID package, only 5 percent of what they propose to spend on schools would be spent this year. In other words, the spendout is over years ahead. You would think their view is, we are never going to get over the coronavirus.

The United Kingdom just announced they will have kids back in school in less than 2 weeks—2 weeks. Countries like Spain and France have had kids in classrooms for months already. The European Centre for Disease Prevention has no problem affirming the science—that closing schools is "unlikely to provide significant additional protection of children's health." Even here at home, private and religious schools have been teaching kids in person for months without causing any explosion in the spread of the virus.

Science tells us unambiguously that in-person schooling can be quite safe and that having young children spend all day staring into a laptop is a nightmare. The evidence is crystal clear. Big Labor bureaucrats keep refusing to follow the science.

In my hometown of Louisville, our union-backed school board vice chairman now asserts, with no evidence:

I think we're probably likely to see better instructional outcomes . . . if we stay [remote] for the rest of the school year.

Ridiculous. No facts. No evidence. Just a personal whim. These are the people controlling our kids' futures and their parents' lives.

One anonymous teacher told reporters:

We already have a schedule and a routine going. We don't need to be babysitting for six weeks because parents are upset.

Let me say that again.

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By the way, failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county. Failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county while these kids are stuck at home.

The Biden administration has a clear obligation to tackle the special interest madness head-on. Our kids are suffering, not because science says they must be—it doesn't. It is just because a small group of powerful grownups has decided they prefer it this way. Instead, the White House keeps parroting the anti-science myths. They back this notion that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan before they can reopen, except that science completely disagrees—completely; except that only a tiny fraction of the funding request would even be spent this fiscal year.

Our children's futures are literally at stake. The administration has got to stop taking orders from the public sector unions that give generously to Democratic campaigns. This is exhibit A in why relief legislation must be targeted to the actual needs we face now. American families should be the starting point, not preconceived political priorities.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Now, Mr. President, on one related matter, today, our colleagues on the HELP Committee will question Xavier Becerra, President Biden's nominee to run the Department of Health and Human Services.

Amid a global pandemic, the President has made a puzzling selection for this crucial post: the famously partisan attorney general of California. Mr. Becerra has no particular experience or expertise in health. His chief passion project in California seemed to be using the force of the government to attack Americans' religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

In 2017, the Department he is nominated to lead finally provided a religious exemption to a controversial ObamaCare mandate. Mr. Becerra led the lawsuit to challenge it. He used his taxpayer-funded office to sue Catholic nuns who didn't want government to force them to violate their beliefs. This is a pattern with Mr. Becerra. When a California law forcing pro-life crisis pregnancy centers to advertise abortion was challenged in court, Mr. Becerra defended it to the bitter end.

His absurd position in favor of government-compelled speech was slapped down by the Supreme Court. Over the last 2 years, the HHS Office for Civil Rights literally has had to hold California and Mr. Becerra in violation of conscience protections that are actually written into Federal law. His zealous refusal to respect the citizens' legal rights positioned his State to potentially forfeit hundreds of millions of dollars in HHS funding. That is how committed they were to these violations. And now the fox wants to guard the henhouse?

We will review Mr. Becerra's testimony today, but I am hard-pressed to see any way such a radical and under-qualified nominee should fill such a critical post at this crucial time.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, in his inaugural address, President Biden spoke about his desire to unify.

He said this:

Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation.

Admirable words, but words have to be met with action, and, right now, we are not seeing much of an attempt to unify from the President or his party. In fact, we are seeing pretty much the opposite. The Democrats have made it very clear they are determined to pass another COVID bill on a purely partisan basis, which is particularly disappointing because, up until now, COVID relief has been a bipartisan process. That is right. To date, Congress has passed five COVID relief bills, and every single one of those bills has been overwhelmingly bipartisan.

I might add, last year, when we were in the majority, Senate Democrats made it very clear that they thought the minority should have a voice in COVID relief and that any legislation should reflect the thoughts of both parties. The Democratic leader filibustered the CARES Act—our largest COVID relief bill—multiple times until he got a version that he was satisfied with, but now that the Democrats are in the majority, apparently, they have decided that it is their way or the highway. Forget the fact that the Senate is evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. The Democrats are determined to ensure that the Republicans and the Americans they represent don't have a voice in this bill.

The Democrats' move to use reconciliation to force through a purely partisan COVID bill might be understandable—and I add "might"—if the Republicans had made it clear that we opposed doing anything else on COVID, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The Republicans have made it very clear that we are willing to work with the Democrats on additional targeted relief. Just weeks ago, 10 Republican Senators put together a plan and met with President Biden for 2 hours to discuss a bipartisan agreement, but while the President certainly listened to them graciously, it quickly became clear that their efforts didn't matter. It didn't matter how willing the Republicans were to negotiate; the Democrats had no intention of reaching an agreement. They wanted to go it alone, and they were not going to let the Republicans stop them.

In a speech a few days ago, President Biden acknowledged that people have criticized his \$1.9 trillion plan but asked:

What would they have me cut? What would they have me leave out?

Well, let me offer a few ideas.

For starters, it might be a good idea to cut out the sections of the Democrats' bill that have nothing to do with combating COVID. The Democrats are calling this a COVID relief bill, but in actual fact, much of this bill has little to do with the coronavirus. In fact, less than 10 percent of the bill is directly related to combating COVID.

If President Biden wants to know what sections of the bill to cut, I might suggest starting with the bill's minimum wage hike. The Democratic bill would more than double the Federal minimum wage at a cost of an estimated 1.4 million jobs—that according to the Congressional Budget Office. That would be problematic enough at a time when we are already dealing with substantial job losses, but it is even worse when you realize that the people most likely to lose their jobs as a result of this hike would be lower income workers.

I would also suggest that the President cut his \$86 billion bailout of multi-employer pension plans, which has nothing to do with emergency COVID relief.

The President could also consider cutting his \$350 billion slush fund for States and localities, which would be used mostly to reward States that shut down their businesses for extended periods and, therefore, have higher unemployment rates.

It has become clear the majority of States are doing OK financially despite the pandemic. A number of States actually saw higher tax revenues in 2020, and a majority of States have the resources needed to weather the rest of this crisis. Three hundred fifty billion dollars far exceeds projected State need.

And while we are on that topic, the economic stimulus provided by President Biden's bill, in general, far exceeds the economic need and may actually harm the economy.

Even without a dollar more of stimulus spending, our economy is expected to grow at a robust 3.7 percent in 2021.

The massive amount of spending that the President is proposing to inject into the economy runs the very real risk of overheating the economy and driving up inflation, and you don't have to take my word for it. Even some liberal economists have expressed their concern over the size of the Democrats' coronavirus legislation and the damage that it could do to the economy.

Then, of course, there is the money the bill includes for schools. Now, while children in some places, like South Dakota, are in school, we need to get all kids back to in-person learning. In-person learning is important for kids' academic, social, and emotional health, and as Republicans have demonstrated, we want to ensure that schools have the resources they need to get back into the classroom safely.

Our previous coronavirus bills contained more than \$100 billion for education, and I think it is safe to say that

every Republican would support additional dollars, if needed, but the fact of the matter is, schools still have billions of dollars from previous coronavirus legislation that remains unspent. And the Biden bill would appropriate an additional \$129 billion for schools that schools would get—they would get—whether or not they get kids back into the classroom.

On top of that, most of that money would go to schools beginning next year and stretching all the way to 2028; in other words, long after the pandemic will be over. In fact, less—if you can believe this, less than 5 percent of the education spending would occur this year.

Ultimately, the Biden bill's school funding ends up looking less like a plan to get our kids back in schools and more like caving in to the teachers' unions.

So if President Biden would like to know what to cut, I would suggest he start with some of the things I have highlighted. And I would ask—I would ask that he and the Democratic leadership abandon their plan to shove through a bloated, partisan bill, paid for with all borrowed money—every single dollar goes on the debt—and to start trying for the unity that the President has talked about.

The President could show that he really meant what he said in his inaugural address by sitting down, in a serious way, with Republicans to develop targeted relief legislation.

We are ready to come to the table. The ball is in the President's court.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCOTT of Florida. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I rise in support of the nomination of Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be the United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

Our next U.N. Ambassador will inherit the monumental task of rebuilding our frayed alliances after four years of isolation and division, in which the United States retreated from our leadership role in promoting democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. There is no person better suited to this task than Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield.

In a Foreign Service career spanning more than three decades, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield served with distinction both in Washington and around the globe, including at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations that she will now lead.

As the son of a Foreign Service Officer and cochair of the Senate Foreign Service Caucus, I am also acutely aware of the significance of President

Biden selecting a career Foreign Service Officer for this position. For 4 years, members of the Foreign Service have been maligned, demeaned, and marginalized by the people trusted to lead them. The selection of a career Foreign Service Officer to represent the United States at the United Nations marks a sharp turn away from that shameful chapter.

I look forward to working with Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield as we take on the difficult work of restoring our standing in the world, rebuilding our alliances, and investing in the men and women of our Foreign Service. I am proud to support her nomination.

VOTE ON THOMAS-GREENFIELD NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Thomas-Greenfield nomination?

Mr. SCOTT of Florida. I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent; the Senator from Kentucky (Mr. PAUL) and the Senator from Pennsylvania (Mr. TOOMEY).

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LUJÁN). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 78, nays 20, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 61 Ex.]

YEAS—78

Baldwin	Hickenlooper	Reed
Bennet	Hirono	Risch
Blumenthal	Hyde-Smith	Romney
Blunt	Inhofe	Rosen
Booker	Johnson	Rounds
Boozman	Kaine	Sanders
Brown	Kelly	Schatz
Burr	Kennedy	Schumer
Cantwell	King	Shaheen
Capito	Klobuchar	Shelby
Cardin	Leahy	Sinema
Carper	Lee	Smith
Casey	Lujan	Stabenow
Cassidy	Lummis	Sullivan
Collins	Manchin	Tester
Coons	Markey	Thune
Cornyn	McConnell	Tillis
Cortez Masto	Menendez	Van Hollen
Crapo	Merkley	Warner
Duckworth	Moran	Warnock
Durbin	Murkowski	Warren
Feinstein	Murphy	Whitehouse
Fischer	Murray	Wicker
Gillibrand	Ossoff	Wyden
Graham	Padilla	Young
Hassan	Peters	
Heinrich	Portman	

NAYS—20

Barrasso	Ernst	Rubio
Blackburn	Grassley	Sasse
Braun	Hagerty	Scott (FL)
Cotton	Hawley	Scott (SC)
Cramer	Hoeben	Shelby
Cruz	Lankford	Tuberville
Daines	Marshall	

NOT VOTING—2

Paul Toomey

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid