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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we mentioned before the break, today was a big day for city elementary schools which welcomed back hundreds of students for in-person learning today. That also includes 3-K and pre-K students. The reopening comes as the City tries to phase out blended learning and get students back in their classrooms five days a week. All while COVID-19 cases continue to rise all around the city. Mayor de Blasio was on hand to welcome back some City students today. He joins me now to talk about that and much more from the Blue Room Inside City Hall. Welcome Mr. Mayor, good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you Errol. How are you doing today?

Louis: Oh, just fine thanks. Tell me now, where do things stand? What are the neighborhoods that you are most worried about this week, based on the latest data?

Mayor: Look, Errol we are facing challenges all over the city. But I do want to begin where you began. Despite that, we were able to get schools up and running today. And this is a victory for parents and kids in New York City. But it's also a victory for our recovery, because this is exactly the kind of thing we're going to have to do over and over again in this city. Is prove that we can bring this city back, even under tough conditions. Our educators have been fantastic today, making it work all over the city. And parents were ready. Kids were ready. What I saw in the Bronx was beautiful, tremendous energy. But look, we are facing a challenge in many parts of the city with a growth in the number of cases. We need everyone to really buckle down in terms of mask wearing, getting tested, all of the basics. And we're going to make whatever adjustments it takes to keep protecting our schools, our kids, our educators so we can keep schools going, on the way to linking up with the vaccine distribution over the next few months. That really will turn the corner for us.

Louis: Part of the strategy is to test 20 percent of the population of every school? How close are we to that goal?

Mayor: We feel very confident. Our Test and Trace team has done an amazing job. Our team at the Office of Operations that put together this testing program. We're out in the schools already. We're getting a great response. Here's something that's interesting Errol. What I'm hearing is there's a lot of enthusiasm among parents for getting kids tested because they realize it's easy, it's free. It's a good time to get kids tested. We're getting a lot of cooperation. This is a real strong suit because we're going to be doing this every single week. And in combination with our situation room, it's going to give us layers of protection that no other school system in America has.

Louis: So now among older students, Mr. Mayor, middle school, high school students – are students with IEPs, individual education plans. Are they going to get priority when it comes to being welcomed back into school?

Mayor: So with the middle school, high school kids, if they're in a District 75 special education program, those will be open starting Thursday all over the city. But in terms of kids who might've been part of other schools, not District 75 schools, we don't have a plan immediately on middle schools and high schools. That's going to have to wait until January. But we're trying to come up with ways to serve kids with IEPs in the meantime. So we're working on that as we speak. And we'll have more to say on that soon.

Louis: Okay. One of our viewers, this is from Liza. She sent the questions via Twitter. In what case will an elementary school close now? In an orange zone, a red zone? Some very confused elementary school educators would like to know.

Mayor: Yeah look, everyone who feels a measure of confusion, it's because the coronavirus has been confusing for all of us. And it's changed so many times. The State of New York clarified its rules for the whole state at the end of last week. So now we're going to keep schools moving forward whatever zone they're in, we're going to keep these schools going because of this aggressive testing program that literally surpasses anything that the State has ever put into its different regulations. So, our goal now is to keep our schools going throughout all the challenges we face. They've proven to be incredibly safe. It's been proven over and over again. We have a gold standard in terms of health and safety measures, weekly testing. There's no place in the country that's doing it as intensely as we are. And we have the situation room. So, to the person asking the question, assume the school is going to be open throughout. The question always will be the situation room. If they find the specific evidence in a school that requires an investigation by Test and Trace, the decision on what happens next with the school will be determined by the investigators from the Test and Trace Corps.

Louis: In the past, there was this three percent threshold after which you decided to shut down the entire system. It was an educated guess based on the information you had at the time. You've subsequently sort of modified that. But there's still this nine percent positive testing rate that the Governor has suggested would shut down everything in a given area. Is that something you're concerned about?

Mayor: Look we always have to be thinking ahead. And we're working very closely with the State. I've had a number of conversations with the Governor about our schools, but also about our general strategy to combat COVID. I think right now, you know, look today, we were hovering around five percent in the City of New York. We're having very aggressive measures out there to fight back against the disease. The nine percent is out there, but it's certainly not what we're going to be facing in the short term. I think the central point here is the better we do at getting people tested in the schools and everywhere, the more chance we have of averting that kind of situation. And the more we can continually show how safe our schools are, the more ability we have to get them open and keep them open no matter what's thrown at us.

Louis: Right. So now let's talk a little bit about indoor dining. From listening to the Governor again, it sounds like indoor dining could be shut down as early as next week? Is that what you're expecting?

Mayor: Well, I think it's a strong likelihood at this point. I've had this conversation with the Governor. We are watching these numbers very, very carefully. Clearly for the recent weeks we've seen the numbers go in the wrong direction. I will immediately say, thank God, our hospital capacity is strong. Thank God our hospitals are doing much better handling the disease than what we saw in the spring. But the number of cases has continued to grow. And so we are, unfortunately it looks like very likely we will get to the conditions that the Governor talked about. Which would lead to the closure for a period of time of indoor dining. I don't say that with anything but sorrow for these businesses and their employees. Obviously outdoor would continue under this scenario and outdoors now permanent and has been for a lot of these restaurants, weatherized. So it can work even in colder months. Takeout and delivery would continue. And this is, if it happens, a temporary measure until the time that we fight back this second wave. And as the vaccine has more and more impact, and this is crucial Errol you're going to see the vaccine have a real impact on the playing field in January and into February. It's going to change the reality on the ground with every passing week, more and more. So that will give us the chance to get anything back online that did have to be closed – does have to be closed temporarily.

Louis: Well, just as with schools we changed the educated guests and strategy based on new information and watching what was actually happening in the schools. Shouldn't that same logic be applied to indoor dining? For instance, I haven't seen, maybe you could tell us if you have seen specific evidence suggesting that indoor dining is a vector, is a transmission vector.

Mayor: The reality of indoor dining in terms of what we've seen from Test and Trace Corps, you're right. And we've been very open about that. We're not linking a lot of cases specifically back to specific restaurants for example. That being said, the experience all over the world has consistently shown that indoor dining along with gyms and some other activities are amongst the most sensitive and the ones that contribute the most because of their specific conditions. People are not wearing masks. They are indoors. When you're eating, drinking, obviously you have your mask off, you're indoors. Often folks are pretty close together. In gyms people are exhaling intensely. There's very specific evidence from around the world that these are areas to be particularly concerned about. When you have your cases going up, you got to choose some places to focus that you think will have the biggest strategic impact. So it's not just about, did we get a massive body of evidence from Test and Trace? That's important, but it's also what we learned from every place else in the country and the world over the previous nine months that tells us that's an area we have to treat with real sensitivity.

Louis: You know and of course the real dilemma for bar and restaurant owners who you know, they're being told, they can't make a profit. They're not getting relief money from any level of the government. It looks like their choices – what are they supposed to do? Are they supposed to like declare bankruptcy and apply for welfare?

Mayor: No, look, Errol. It's been a horrible situation for bars and restaurants. And I do really feel they're like truly, truly the essence of this city. And hundreds of thousands of people who work for them need an income. But that said takeout and delivery has continued throughout, outdoor dining for so many bars and restaurants has been a tremendous step forward. And that is now permanent. They can depend on that going forward for years to come. Indoor, we've had up for a period of time. If in fact it closes, it will come back. This is a temporary measure, what the

Governor's talking about to get us through this last wave. Errol, the second wave is the last wave. Let's be really clear. We have an opportunity because of the vaccine to end this second wave, and then that's it. Because you're going to have a city where more and more people are vaccinated, literally every day, on top of the millions who have already been exposed to the disease and for all intents and purposes really don't have much chance of getting it again, or getting it in a serious fashion. With every week, once the vaccine starts to be distributed, it's going to be a very different reality. So if there's a closure, it is temporary. And then you go into the end of the winter, beginning of the spring, you're going to see a lot of economic uplift. I truly believe it because things are going to open up more and more.

Louis: Okay, let's take a short break here. Standby, Mr. Mayor. We'll be back with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio. He's joining us from the Blue Room. Mr. Mayor, a hearing on ranked choice voting was held today at the City Council. Do you agree with the critics who now want to delay the implementation? It was scheduled to go into effect, I guess in the next few weeks, starting in January. And what do you think of the charge that it disenfranchises minority voters?

Mayor: Well, I'm worried, Errol. I mean, look, the idea of ranked choice voting was to create a system that didn't require a runoff. And some argued it, you know, would engage people more. Others said it wouldn't, but, you know, the people did vote for it in a referendum. But when you hear community leaders saying, look, we're not getting the education we need, we have a major election in six months and people don't know how to use this yet, that's a cause for real concern. So, I think it immediately says what's the game plan at the Board of Elections for truly educating people deeply in this new system to make sure that folks feel ready to participate. We just had amazing voter participation last month, a really good sign for this city and this nation. We don't want to see it drop off because people are confused. So, I think it's incumbent upon the Board of Elections to show us a plan. And if they're not showing us a plan, this becomes a real problem.

Louis: But it's not entirely their responsibility, right? I mean, you have a sort of a voter participation commission. There are other parts of government that are always free to put out public messaging telling people how it is they're supposed to get through this next season.

Mayor: You know, Errol, I've for years now said, unfortunately, the Mayor's Office has had to in many ways do the things I wish the board would do more of in terms of educating voters. We will do everything we can, but let's start at the beginning. The board has the first responsibility. That's why they're called the Board of Elections. Where's their game plan? How are they responding to honest voices from communities of color saying, we feel people could be disenfranchised and they're not getting the education they need on this? The board has to show us a plan. We'll help, but they have to show us the plan.

Louis: Okay, new topic last week, we aired a story showing people fighting and using drugs and so forth on 36th Street in Manhattan where two hotels are operating as homeless shelters. The residents say that the situation there has become a public safety crisis. I was wondering if you were aware of those – the problems on that particular street, and if there are any plans to deal with it.

Mayor: Look I've heard the broad strokes and I'm concerned. I don't want to see any community feeling that those problems have become so intense in their midst. And so, what we got to do is continue the work of ensuring that over time we get out of the short-term hotels and we get into the purpose-built shelters. That was the plan I announced over three years ago. That's what works best with the services there to help folks who are homeless and help them on the way to self-sufficiency. We'll follow up with homeless services, with NYPD to work on that immediate situation on the West Side. But, you know, I think the point is there's a bigger plan that we are working on, which involves getting out of hotels altogether, going forward.

Louis: Yeah. Even before becoming mayor, when you were chair of the general welfare committee in the City Council, you know that there are differences. There are some nonprofits that work hard and some that hardly work at all. Are there any consequences for nonprofit providers who don't seem capable of managing a shelter?

Mayor: Yeah. This is a conversation Commissioner Steve Banks and I have had many times that we're very clear if an organization can't handle it, we need to move them out and get one in the can. And there are some very good organizations that have been willing to take on more of the work. But again, getting into the purpose-built shelters helps because you have a template that actually works as opposed to trying to deal with these short-term hotels and other temporary solutions. This is why we really believe – and we've seen it work. I was in a shelter up in the Bronx a few weeks back right around the time of Halloween. An amazing community-based shelter. That was one of the purpose-built shelters created under this administration. And you could see how – you know, the community problems you were seeing, other places just didn't exist because it was made to address the problems from the beginning and to support the people in the shelter. Hotels don't do that. This is why we got to move forward to the right kind of shelter from this point on in this city.

Louis: Okay. A new topic, there's a City Council subcommittee that's going to be voting this week on this proposal to rezone parts of Flushing. I'm wondering if you have an opinion, if you plan to weigh in on this project before it arrives at your desk.

Mayor: Not yet, Errol, because there's a lot of other things, honestly, that I'm focused on more basic to the future of the city, obviously the fight against the coronavirus and reopening the schools and many other matters. But I want to make a broader point. You know, this is a private application. This is not one of the rezonings the City of New York sponsored. And with the private applications, the bar is high, and it should be high. It is incumbent upon developers to respond to community concerns, to produce affordable housing or public space or both, to provide a decent wage to workers who will work on the site. This is part of what I fundamentally believe is the future of development in New York City. It has to be just, it has to be about the public good. In the past, certainly under my two previous predecessors, the benefit of doubt always went to the developer and there were not tough deals to ensure the public good. I think the world has changed, thank God. We've tried really hard to drive a very hard bargain for the public and we don't have to approve a project unless it's going to provide sufficient public good. So, to me, this is not the status quo of the past. We've been through a horrible moment in our history, tons of disparities uncovered, a lot of change we need. That includes in the development process. If developers are not giving a good enough deal to communities, don't expect those plans to be approved.

Louis: You said something similar about Industry City, which was a, you know, a huge swath of valuable waterfront property in Brooklyn. The result was that nothing happened at all at an estimated possible cost of 8,000 jobs. Surely, you're concerned about that.

Mayor: I'm concerned, but I'll tell you something, at the same time we're sponsoring rezonings – SoHo, NoHo, Gowanus, Governor's Island. You know, the City of New York is sponsoring rezonings that really do focus on the public good, affordability, public space, things that people really need. And those I have no doubt will be approved. Some of the private applications come from developers who really heard the voices of communities and elected officials and created plans that people could begin with – I mean, could believe in. Sorry, to believe in from the beginning. And those got approved. Again, when a developer actually listens to the fact that in today's New York City communities are demanding equity, they're demanding actual public benefits they can have guarantees around, most notably affordable housing and maximum local hiring whenever possible, that's the kind of thing that meets with approval. So, in the cases where that doesn't happen, I say with all due respect to developers you had a chance to win people over and folks do want jobs, they definitely want jobs, but they need to know development will actually serve communities. The onus is on a developer to come up with a plan that people can actually believe in.

Louis: Okay. I guess we will have to leave it there for now. We will see you next week. Thanks for spending some time with us, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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