



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

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CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOSTS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good afternoon, everyone. I want to talk to you about the situation at the Department of Education. I want to start by putting things in perspective. First, very personally, my kids Chiara and Dante, went to New York City public schools from pre-K through 12th grade, got a great education thanks to our educators here in our school system.

Nothing matters more to me than the kids in our school system and the success of our schools. And we have devoted this administration to making our schools better. Our number one priority, you all know, was the pre-K initiative in the first term. We're continuing that with the 3-K initiative and the entire Equity and Excellence agenda.

And that agenda will continue on and we will have a great new Chancellor to do that good work. I want to talk to you about what happened today and I will say that I think like many of you, I was very surprised by Mr. Carvalho's decision. I thought we had found the right candidate.

We had an extensive nationwide search as a lot of you reported when the announcement was made – a candidate who was very impressive and had done a lot of good work in Miami. I had offered Mr. Carvalho the job and Dean Fuleihan had follow-up conversations over a week ago and he had accepted.

We talked to him yesterday afternoon about formally putting the information out via the Politico article. We agreed on a phone call with Eric Phillips and I. I spoke to him again last night, I think it was around 8:00 pm and we discussed the next steps for his announcement here in New York City.

So you can imagine how surprised I was to get a phone call from him a few hours ago.

I've been doing this work a long, long time. I've hired a lot of great people. I'm very proud of the people who serve in this administration and a lot of people I've hired before that – never have had a situation like this before.

But look, we move forward. Our nationwide search has resumed. We have been immediately reaching out to candidates and will continue the search and we will have a new announcement soon as we continue the transition at the Department of Education so we can move forward.

I'm very confident in our school system. I'm confident in our teachers. I'm confident in our principals, all our educators, and all our staff. They have been outstanding and they will continue to be.

Let me also tell you, I spoke to the Chancellor. The Chancellor will be continuing her role until the end of March and I want to thank her, of course, for all she has done for this city and all she will continue to do.

So, the bottom line is what makes this school system great is our educators, our parents. Everyone who is a part of this school system will continue to do good work and we will have a new Chancellor soon.

With that, I welcome your questions.

Question: Mayor can you tell us what the conversation was [inaudible] today? You know, how he conveyed his decision to you, and what you may have said to him?

Mayor: You know, he called me during a break in his board meeting and expressed trepidation and concern, and you know, second thoughts. I obviously reiterated to him that he had already accepted the job and we had put it out publically with his agreement. And you know we had a couple of different conversations, and he kept saying to me he didn't think he could take it after all, and that was his ultimate decision.

David?

Question: Where were you today when you received that call and what were you doing? What kind of meetings were you having?

Mayor: I had a meeting at Gracie Mansion and then was about to start a follow-up meeting on that and the first call came in and –

Question: What was the nature of the meeting?

Mayor: We were having a meeting about the plan to close Rikers Island.

Yes?

Question: Mr. Mayor, Carvalho went out of his way to say kind and complimentary things about you as a great leader and a progressive voice, and yet your press secretary, Eric Phillips, tweeted several tweets this afternoon including 'Carvalho backed out' and 'He was a yes for a week plus until he was a no 15 minutes ago. Bullet dodged'. How do you feel about Phillips doing that?

Mayor: Look, Eric's standing about 10 feet away and I don't mind saying this, I obviously think the world of Eric, I would not have said it that way. In the heat of the moment, you know, I don't – I'm not surprised that people expressed their frustration in the heat of the moment. And that's what that was. We're all confused at what happened here.

But no, look, I respect Mr. Carvalho, I wish him well, I wish the people of Miami well. We're going to move forward, that's the bottom line.

Yes?

Question: [Inaudible] new Chancellor named before Chancellor Farina steps down at the end of the month?

Mayor: It's just as simple as this, we're going to have a new chancellor soon. That's all I want to say about it.

Go ahead.

Question: So the timeline that you're describing would indicate that at some point Carvalho told something to either his press secretary in Miami or to reporters in Miami that was either not the truth or not your understanding. Is your impression that he lied at some point, either to –

Mayor: I'm not going to speculate. It's very simple, he was offered the job most of two weeks ago, he said yes over a week ago, he authorized the story being given to Politico. Very cool in the saddle, clear that it was time for the story to go because more and more information was starting to spread. I think he has been honest today that he did not keep his agreement.

Question: Was it your understanding that he changed his mind during the televised meeting or that he went into that – you know, he indicated today that he'd changed his mind over the last 18 hours. He had conversations –

Mayor: Again I can't speculate. I can't – of course if he had made the decision he should have reached out and I don't understand why there wasn't more of a dialogue. My last conversation with him, as I said, was about 8:00 pm last night and all systems were go. So I can't speculate as to how his thinking evolved from there. And I'm not going to – by the way guys, I'm just not going to do a lot more theoretical.

Question: Was he able to reach you in that first break that you mentioned during the meeting?

Mayor: I believe it was the first break but I wasn't paying attention to the details. He –

Question: And did you try to convince him to –

Mayor: I stated the obvious that I was very surprised and there should be more conversation if he had concerns. But that this process had been going on for quite a while. We've been engaged with him for many weeks, multiple meetings here in New York, multiple conversations by

phone. I mean obviously that involved leaving Miami. So, again, I'm very, very surprised. I have a lot of respect for him but I'm very surprised.

Henry?

Question: Do you take this decision by him as a rebuke or a rejection of you or an insult to you

—

Mayor: No it's not how I think about things. This is a — this job we're talking about, Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, is the number one education job in America. 1.1 million kids. This is the flagship public school system in America. There's nothing even close in terms of the size and importance of this school system. Educators all over the country want this job, and we've had a huge amount of interest. He told me repeatedly this was his dream job.

And obviously whatever happened here is quite unusual, but if he wasn't interested in the job I don't know why he fly up here several times and had incessant conversations about all the details and agreed to the release of the information publically. Something else happened here and maybe you guys can figure out what it is.

Grace?

Question: Looking ahead to the search for a new superintendent, do you think this makes your —

Mayor: Chancellor — we call it Chancellor.

Question: Excuse me, thank you —

[Laughter]

Mayor: We're in New York City now.

[Laughter]

Question: Sorry — from watching the Miami school board meeting.

Mayor: We're not in Miami, we're in New York City.

Question: The search for a Schools Chancellor in New York — does this make your job harder? The fact that you — you know, it's clear that you had a first choice, it didn't work out. And secondarily, the salary that he had been offered —

Mayor: Let me do the first one first. I'll come back to you. I've been at this work a long, long time, and, as you know, I have been involved with the federal level in different ways as well. I have seen extraordinary leaders of all kinds, and I've seen this happen in different ways — not quite like this, but certainly a first choice not accepting a job ultimately, or it being known that someone else is getting the job who was not the first choice. This is very normal at high levels of

government, and, in the end, there are a lot of people who want this job, and we're going to get a great Chancellor. What was your second question?

Question: The second question was, his – the pay that he had been offered was \$118,000 more than Chancellor Fariña makes. Does that – are you going to be expected, do you think, by other candidates to also offer them that same salary?

Mayor: So, it's a simple equation. You know, when Chancellor Fariña came in, she had an unusual situation – she had already retired, she was already receiving her pension, it was legal and appropriate for her to continue to, and the salary was pegged at the salary level that it had been at previously, and we just continued that. In other cities around the country, including much smaller cities, the salary levels are much higher for the head of the school system. And proportionally, again, it's not even close – the size of this school system is so much greater than any place else. Perfectly legitimate for people to say, hey, wait a minute, I'm being better compensate for a much smaller school system – what's wrong with this picture? In this case, his request was for us to consider a matching current salary, we thought that was fair.

Who hasn't gone?

Question: Mr. Mayor, you're pretty good at keeping your temper, but did you find yourself having to suppress any sharp comments that might have been going through your mind when you heard – I mean, given all these phone calls, you have all this reassurance –

Mayor: Rich, we've known each other a long time, I've been through a lot of things, I've seen a lot of things – I haven't quite seen something like this. I was quite – I was probably more surprised and confused that this could happen than anything. Of course, I'm really disappointed. I'm not going to get lost in the past. My job is now to move forward and, as I said, the search has resumed already. One of the things I had been doing between the time that I heard this news and the time of this press conference is restarting the process, and we've been reconnecting with candidates, etcetera. So, I don't dwell in the past. I don't understand the thought pattern, but I don't dwell in the past. We're going to move forward and get another Chancellor.

Did you have a follow-up?

Question: I was just wondering whether you actually did have to hold yourself back from saying something, maybe –

Mayor: Again, I think my first response was just profound surprise.

Question: Mr. Mayor, you [inaudible] when people ask about personnel decisions, that's when you [inaudible] ready to announce it they'll make that announcement. When you make those announcements, the person is generally standing next to you in this room. Is there anything about what happened today that's making you reevaluate, given that you announced it differently through the media?

Mayor: No, I think – look, this was an unusual situation for a lot of reasons, and obviously when you are recruiting from out of town there are some different dynamics – never saw something like this. We always know, when we’re planning an announcement, that for any number of reasons information might get out prematurely, and we have the option of putting it out ourselves, even ahead of a scheduled event. So, that was all – you know, we had a plan-B in place, and we activated our plan-B when we started to see information traveling around. That’s all very normal – I’m not going to change the process because sometimes you don’t get to the hour of the formal announcement without the news traveling.

Question: Mr. Mayor, did you ever turn on the TV to watch the spectacle unfold live?

Mayor: No.

Question: And will this in any way affect the 1.1 million New York school children?

Mayor: No, because – look, we’ve had a great Chancellor for the last four years. She’s done an outstanding job. So many ways I could tell you about the improvements made in this school system by Carmen Fariña – obviously, higher graduation rate, better test scores, what’s happening already with pre-K, 3-K, AP for All, Computer Science for All. That legacy is going to continue. There’s a huge amount of buy-in among our educators to keep doing that work and do it better than ever. And we’re going to have a great new Chancellor – there is tremendous interest in this job. We have a lot of people to choose from. We’re going to have a great, new Chancellor.

Question: The Speaker of the City Council said that he should have made that call before the live broadcast of the meeting. Do you agree with that assessment? And do you think that he did that on purpose?

Mayor: Again, I’m not doing speculation. Of course, he should have, but that’s water under the bridge.

Question: Mr. Mayor, a couple of quick procedural questions –

Mayor: I’m only going to go so far into procedural, and then, I’m just telling you guys, if you want to talk about any other topics, I’ll give you a chance, but I’m not going to do procedural –

Question: Was he your first choice?

Mayor: Absolutely.

Question: And was there someone else who was in the running that you’re now going to –

Mayor: Not going to get into details. As I said, there has been a huge amount of interest. There are a lot of great candidates. There’s a lot of candidates interested. We’ll have more to say soon.

Who has not gone? Yes?

Question: Just curious – you said he said yes last week. What was the nature of that agreement? Was it just kind of a verbal confirmation? And was it to you?

Mayor: Again, let me stipulate that I have done this hundreds and hundreds of times. He told me yes. He told Dean Fuleihan yes. He negotiated terms and conditions in detail with Dean, affirmed his plans many times over with for how we would go through an announcement. On the phone with Eric and I yesterday, I think it was around 5 o'clock or so, confirmed that he was very comfortable with us giving the information to Politico.

Question: About that – normally, when a person is hired, they also contribute some kind of quote or confirmation, and that didn't happen in this case. Did you guys ask him to say anything publicly at that point?

Mayor: Again, there was an unusual situation in terms of some news starting to move around. His school board, as a result, called this meeting. He felt he had to go before them formally to speak before he could say anything publicly. I understood that – it was unusual, but at least I understood the logic – but again, approved our release. So, guys, we can go over this all day long. It's really unusual. We can say that for a fact. I have not experienced anything like it. I don't think it has bigger ramifications. He was offered a job, he accepted it, he was going to take it, and then he changed his mind.

Willie?

Question: [Inaudible] that you had two – a couple of conversations. So was there more than one phone call –

Mayor: Again, today I spoke to him a few times. And I have already told you I'm not getting into any more detail.

Question: [Inaudible] –

Mayor: I've said, I spoke to him a few times. Go ahead, Michael.

Question: Given the way it played out today on television, do you feel like you kind of dodged future problems with this guy? That you dodged a bullet? That this decision kind to seem to play out in real time in front of everyone?

Mayor: Look, I am not going to speculate. As a lot of you reported, this is a man who has done a lot of good in Miami, and had a very impressive record – National Superintendent of the Year, all sorts of other things.

I believed I was getting – what I saw was what I was getting. And I'm obviously very, very surprised by today's events but I'm not going to comment further on. I'm not going to characterize. Okay, guys, I'm going to take a few more and if you want to ask about anything else, this is your chance. Go ahead.

Question: [Inaudible] some Council members have expressed a desire for a Hispanic chancellor given the population of New York City [inaudible] –

Mayor: Look, we are going to get the best chancellor for all our kids. We have an incredibly diverse school system. We need a chancellor who understands our children, who can support our children and our parents, who can work with our educators, and move the school system forward.

That's the bottom line. I want a government that looks like New York City. You've seen a lot of evidence of that. But this is one of the most important decisions a mayor makes under mayoral control and we're going to get a great chancellor and my central concern is a person who can lead us forward best and build upon Carmen Farina's legacy.

Let's see if there's anything else?

Question: Did you sign a contract?

Mayor: No.

Question: Within moments of the announcement of this [inaudible] the PBA issued a statement saying that the Mayor's Office of the City [inaudible] salaries and yet the City's not willing to do that with PBA –

Mayor: It's an entirely different situation. The leader of a school system of 1.1 million children, a job that again in most parts of the country is compensated at a much, much higher level for a much smaller school system with a huge, huge budget. The budget of New York City public schools is bigger than the budget of many cities, probably a number of states as well.

Let's be real this is apples and oranges. Okay anyone who hasn't gone yet? Hasn't gone yet? Okay, and has gone yet.

Question: Off-topic?

Mayor: Yes, please.

Question: Okay, I'm wondering if you see Courtney Gross had a story on NY-1 about the State sending an increasing number of parolees –

Mayor: Yep.

Question: – into the city's homeless shelters. And I'm wondering, did you see the piece? Are you familiar with –

Mayor: I have not seen the piece but I have been alerted to both the problem as we've seen it started to grow and then the specifics of the report which were very – was a very detailed report and a very important report by NY-1.

And look, every New Yorker should be concerned about this. This is exacerbating our homelessness problem. And what is happening here isn't helping anyone. The State needs to step up because in fact it's not only making homelessness worse in New York City, it's not helping these formerly incarcerated individuals who we want to get back on their feet. We don't want to dump them into a homeless shelter. That makes no sense.

So, what the City is doing with inmates in our Correction system is we're doing re-entry planning literally from the first day they get there, we're providing five hours a day of education and training. We're providing a transitional job when they come out if they've been sentenced.

I don't know if the State's doing any of that. All I know is the State is dumping these parolees right into our shelters. That's not fair. The State needs to step up and give these parolees some actual support. Help them get housing, help them get a job, give them an education, but why on Earth would you put them into a shelter?

Question: A follow-up on the salary question. Do you intend to give the person ultimately hired the same salary you had offered to Alberto Carvalho?

Mayor: I think matching existing base salary is fair and is important again given how giant the responsibilities of the chancellor's role is.

Question: I want to ask you, there were some allegations about inappropriate conduct within the Bronx DA's office –

Mayor: I haven't seen it.

Question: [Inaudible] –

Mayor: I haven't seen that. I have a lot of respect for the DA. We work very closely with her. I have not seen the allegations.

Question: [Inaudible] Carvalho, he has some aspirations of his own for political office maybe one of the reasons why he ultimately decided to stay in Florida. What do you think happens to this sort of reflect on your status nationally in the Democratic Party that someone [inaudible] –

Mayor: I don't think it does. I think it's obviously a very individual and personal decision. You'll have to ask him about that.

Question: Were you concerned about discussing matching salaries given – I know you didn't ask him what his salary was, if his salary was public information, but given the salary history ban and the focus there on [inaudible] –

Mayor: No, he asked for – he asked for a certain level of salary. He asked if we could match his base salary. It was a perfectly fair request.

Okay, last call. Going once, going twice, Rich? Final word.

Question: Any present plans to vacation in Miami?

[Laughter]

Mayor: Funny man, Rich. There's a lot of other great places to vacation. Thank you.

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