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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR ERIC ADAMS, CHANCELLOR DAVID BANKS AND
ASSEMBLYMEMBER JENIFER RAJKUMAR ANNOUNCE SUPPORT FOR DIWALI
AS PUBLIC-SCHOOL HOLIDAY**

New York Assembly Member Jenifer Rajkumar: When my parents immigrated to the United States with just \$300 and a suitcase, they never would've imagined that I'd be standing here as your state assemblywoman. Today, South Asian and Indo-Caribbean families like mine all over this city have made incredible contributions. And today, I'm proud to say, our time has come. The time has come to recognize over 200,000 New Yorkers of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain faiths who celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Lights. That is why today I stand with New York City Mayor Eric Adams and our school's chancellor, David Banks, to light the way forward to make Diwali once and for all, a school holiday in the City of New York. This week I introduced legislation in our state capital that makes room for Diwali in our school calendar. My legislation removes Anniversary Day, an obscure and antiquated day created in the 1800s so that it can be replaced with Diwali, celebrated by a growing number of New Yorkers.

When this is done, the New York City Department of Education will be able to institute the Diwali holiday on the school calendar. People have said that there's simply not enough room in the New York City School calendar to have a Diwali school holiday. Well, my legislation makes the room. In the words of the great Shirley Chisholm, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." I have brought this bill to the table so that all South Asian and Indo-Caribbean New Yorkers will have a seat at the table. State Education Law Section 3604 mandates that there be a minimum of 180 days of school instruction. If we're going to meet this 180 day minimum requirement, we cannot institute any more holidays. But in removing the antiquated Anniversary Day school holiday that is observed by no one, my legislation makes the room for Diwali to be a school holiday while also meeting the 180 day minimum requirement for days of school instruction.

I am so proud to have the mayor's support. Through our city-state partnership, we will finally realize the goal of Diwali becoming a school holiday in New York City. This is the first time in the history of our city a mayor has committed to making Diwali a school holiday, and for that I thank you, Mayor Adams. For over two decades South Asians and Indo-Caribbeans in New York have been fighting for the Diwali school holiday. I stand on the shoulders of those advocates.

And now we are finally going to realize that goal. We have a mayor that supports us and has committed to making it happen.

On the streets, they actually call him the Hindu mayor. He does it all. The plant-based diet, meditation. He truly fits the bill. To New Yorkers from India, Guyana, Trinidad, the Indo-Caribbean, Nepal, Bangladesh, and across the South Asia diaspora, we see you. Next week we will celebrate Diwali, a celebration of good over evil, light over darkness, of the human ability to overcome, exemplified by Rama's defeat of evil. We will celebrate the Hindu principles of interfaith, harmony, love, and tolerance for all New Yorkers. The same Hindu principles that inspired the great American civil rights hero, Martin Luther King, who will celebrate our culture's place in the great civil rights tradition of our country. The sky is the limit for our community. Today I am proud to say that New York City will soon join jurisdictions across the country and institute the Diwali school holiday. Thank you, and Happy Diwali to everyone in New York and all across the world.

Mayor Eric Adams: I believe that there were two things that stood out for me in Assemblywoman Rajkumar's speech. Number one, the story of her mother and family coming here as a child and seeing the beauty of the American dream of being able to not only come to find a life here in this country as we're watching thousands of people doing so now, but to become the first South Asian to be elected as a state elected official. It's just a significant moment for us. And when you are there, you use your powers and authority to right the wrongs that have impacted not only your community specifically, but in general throughout the entire state of New York. And it's going to impact the entire country.

But second, her quotation of two African American leaders. Number one, one of my heroes, Shirley Chisholm, who clearly stated, "Bring your own seat if there's not a seat for you at the table." And that is just important because the words of an African American leader, a Hindu leader, a Jain leader, those words are not unique just to a specific group. It is empowering for every group that's attempting to move their country, their city, and their state forward. I'm proud to be here today standing with an amazing assemblywoman, a real visionary around how we run our state better. And when we talked about this on the campaign trail, I learned so much about the Diwali holiday, what it means, the Festival of Lights. As we deal with so much darkness that is around us, we fail to realize the overwhelming amount of light that is around us. And when we take this period to acknowledge Diwali, we are acknowledging the light that is within us, the light that clearly can push away darkness and that is why this is so significant.

We found a way to do it. We put our heads together. The goal of this is not saying get stuff done when it's easy to do, but get stuff done to think about moon shots, thinking about beyond what's in front of us, and that's what we did. Chancellor Banks and his team sat down and looked at the requirement of school days. Instead of looking from a place of deficit, we looked from a place of surplus. And because of that, we were able to identify a way of using legislation, partnering with the assemblywoman, and using data to identify the days that we can use to have this important Diwali holiday without our young people missing days of school in the process.

We already have taken a step previously on canceling alternate side of the street parking during Diwali, but we wanted to go further. We wanted to send a loud and clear message to the

countless number of people who acknowledge this period of time of celebration. And my involvement with the communities that will be directly impacted is clear. I spent a lot of time in these communities, they're hard working New Yorkers. They contribute to our society. They believe in family, they believe in public safety. Some of the highest educational achievements are among this community. The highest, almost middle class living standard is among this community. This is a solid community, not only in our city but throughout our entire country. So I'm proud to be here with the assemblywoman and the chancellor of the City of New York, understanding the importance of education.

But at the same time, this is an educational moment because when we acknowledge Diwali, we are going to encourage children to learn about Diwali. We're going to have them start talking about what it is to celebrate the Festival of lights, and how to turn the light on within yourself. There's too many children in our Department of Education that believe their lives are one dark moment after a dark moment. The more and more we come together to show them the lightness in education, as the chancellor has stated over and over again, education must be a place where we develop the full personhood of our children, not only to make them academically smart, but emotionally intelligent — and that intelligence comes from acknowledging and seeing each other.

We've done this before, identifying holidays. We've done it with Eid, we've done it with Lunar New Years. We do it with so many other days and so many other cultures that we acknowledge. It is long overdue to say to our Hindu, Sikhs, Jain, and Buddhist students and communities that, we see you, we acknowledge you. The inclusiveness of this city is extremely significant and this is our opportunity to say that in a loud way. So I thank you assemblywoman for your tenacity, your vision, your determination, and we can get this done during this legislative session so next year we can say as the City of New York that Diwali is a school holiday. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chancellor.

Chancellor Banks: Thank you. Good morning, everyone. First of all, before we even talk about this, I do want to recognize also that today is in fact National Domestic Violence Awareness Day. And the reason that the mayor and I both have our purple on is in recognition of that. And so if there's anybody that you know who is a victim of domestic violence, we are here. The city has a whole range of supports. You do not have to suffer alone. And it's very important that we state that on this day. I'm thrilled to be here. I'm thrilled that the mayor had made this promise that we would recognize Diwali when he was campaigning to become the mayor. And we are well along on this road now for a promise made and a promise kept.

And that he has a great partner in our assembly member here who was going to drive it forward with her leadership. And it's important not only for the young people who celebrate and who honor Diwali, but it's important for all students. When we talk about the education of New York City students, we have to recognize, the whole world lives here.

Mayor Adams: That's right.

Chancellor Banks: There's a reason why this is the greatest city in the world, because the whole world actually lives here and they all go to school here. And it is important that we honor and we

recognize all of our young people. And so the recognition of Diwali is yet another opportunity for us to begin to celebrate, to uplift and to honor those young people, their family and their faith. The celebration of light, the triumph of light over darkness is critically important.

The only challenge that we faced here was that by state law, we are mandated to have 180 school days. We call them aidable days. No matter what, we must make sure that we have 180 school days, and we've really got about another day that we could adjust to and that's the reason why we made this decision. This day has been known traditionally, as I came up in the school system, as Brooklyn Queens Day. Those who've been in the system for a long time, we remember it as such, now it's Anniversary Day. In many ways it's an obscure day, it's a day that's been on the calendar for a long time.

I think it's the perfect example, assembly member, of a day that we could substitute that for something much more meaningful, much more purposeful, and something that I think will have a great deal of relevance for all of our young people as we move forward. And so I simply want to say that I'm happy to join the mayor and to join the assembly member and to join the others who will be in fact part of this as we go forward from this day. To lift up the best of New York is really what this city is all about— and to make sure that for all of our young people, that we are raising their consciousness about the multicultural city that they live in. I'm proud to lead as the school's chancellor. Thank you so very, very much.

Mayor Adams: Thank you.

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