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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning, again, everyone – and time now for our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio every Friday at 11:05 am here on the Brian Lehrer Show. Our lines are open at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Our lines are actually not that open because we gave out the number before the news and they all filled up. But when people finish up, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, or you can tweet a question, use the hashtag #AsktheMayor. Good morning, Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. How you doing?

Lehrer: I'm doing all right. And let's start with schools. Your plan for a blended – you call it a blended school reopening system. Two or three days at school, two or three days at home. So many questions from people in different situations. I'm actually going to start with a caller from yesterday and turn part of her thought into a question for you. So, here's 30 seconds of Hoda from Manhattan, a working mother calling in yesterday.

Question: *I don't understand how we were able to provide child care for essential workers, no problem, and there was no COVID outbreaks. And I don't understand why we are not advocating for brick-and-mortar full-time school for students knowing that they are not the high-risk population, knowing the impact that it has to their mental, emotional learning wellbeing, and the detriments that this has to the economy. And as a working mother, I have fought for years, for years, to get to the position that I've been in. And now I'm being forced to decide between my career, my livelihood, and the care for my children.*

Lehrer: Hoda in Manhattan, calling in yesterday, Mr. Mayor. And I've heard similar things from some other parents. How do you address that group?

Mayor: Well, I really feel what Hoda is saying because – I do – that last part, and I understand people work their whole lifetime to reach a certain level of achievement and they don't want it to slip away. I feel that. And I also understand how tough it's been for parents trying to educate their kids while trying to hold down a job, or even the parents – especially the parents who lost their job, how tough that's been to not have a livelihood anymore. This is a really difficult time, Brian. And we just got to look at it in the face, this is the farthest thing from business as usual. So, look, our goal here has got to be health and safety first. I don't think I've heard anyone debate that point, which means we've got to do social distancing, which totally changes the math of how we do kids in schools. We got a lot of overcrowded schools.

Now, you go back to February before the coronavirus is here, you know, we knew a lot of our schools were overcrowded. Now, you take an overcrowded school or even a school that's just at its maximum, and now everyone has to stay six feet apart, immediately you are going to have to have fewer kids in that school. And if you're going to have a lot fewer kids, in some cases, many fewer kids, you are going to have to go onto some kind of split schedule. So, that's the reality. And we just don't have enough alternative places to go that we can make work. Two months to get ready, thank God, gives us time to get a lot done, but it doesn't allow us to, you know, create things out of thin air. Like, we have to work with the school infrastructure we have. We are going to try and create as many child care options as possible going forward. Our child care centers are reopening on Monday, this Monday. And I also am hearing a lot about parents creating their own kind of collectives and, you know, situations where they'll take turns, supporting kids, but we're going to have to do everything we can to help people through it. But we just have to focus on safety first. And that's what is dictating how many kids can be at a building at a certain time.

Lehrer: You mentioned alternative spaces. I think we have an alternative spaces call – Sam on the Lower East Side, you're on WNYC. Hi, Sam.

Question: Hi –

Lehrer: Whoops –

Mayor: Sam, you there –

Lehrer: No, he's not, actually, his line just clicked off. So, but I saw his question summarized and it was, can the City use a lot of the movie theaters that are closed – we talked about closed movie theaters last hour – as alternative spaces? And, you know, I could add to that, what about a lot of businesses that are closed, so there were more spaces, so more students at a time can be accommodated per day?

Mayor: We're going to look at anything and everything. You know, Brian, I think it's important to remember, we don't know if this crisis, as it is currently, is going to get better, is going to get worse. We don't know when there'll be a vaccine or a cure. Obviously, the sooner that happens, then we're going back to the traditional model. So, we're dealing with a lot of variables. We definitely are looking at alternative spaces, but primarily spaces that are already outfitted to be usable for schools. I think one should not minimize what it would take to turn a movie theater into something that actually could be used effectively for kids. And there's a host of things that go into a school building working, but wherever we can find an alternative space that we can get our hands on, that we can convert properly we're going to do that.

And, look, the first thing is to get ready for September. We've got two months, but if this is going to be a more prolonged crisis, we will keep making adjustments and we'll keep bringing in more and more options as we go along. Again, my hope is it's not a prolonged crisis and we actually resolve things in the course of the school year, which I think the most likely scenario right now, when a vaccine would be available. But we're going to look at anything that we can really practically put into play for September.

Lehrer: The caller, Hoda, who we played from before in another part of her call said, she was wondering if the teacher's union is an obstacle to what she considers doing the right thing, because teachers are concerned about their safety, and that's understandable, but that concern is winning politically over parents concerned about their kids' stunted development or their families' livelihood. What would you say to that?

Mayor: I don't know why Hoda comes to that conclusion because I've announced the vision and we've been actually working closely with the UFT and the CSA, the two major unions representing educators, as well as DC 37 and unions that represent staff in the buildings. The fact is we did the survey of parents, so we know exactly – and I worked for the parents. The parents have spoken – 400,000 survey results, 75 percent of them want their kids back in school. Again, we're not going to put kids in school in a way that's unsafe. So, we have to observe social distancing. That's the – you know, look, you know there's this fight between President Trump and the CDC. CDC standards are very clear and we agree with them. There has to be social distance and it has to be face coverings, hand washing stations, we're going to do all of that.

But the buildings that were already at capacity or overcrowded, those buildings by definition, again, we're going to have to do some kind of split schedule, just no way around it. That is not about teacher unions, that's about health. Where we can find alternative spaces, we will. Now there's another end of the spectrum and it bears noting, Brian, there are some schools, some public schools that actually don't have a maximum capacity and those schools will be able to take proportionately more kids. And there might even be some schools that can do five days a week in the short term in-person. But it's all done depend on the size and the enrollment of the school. And then if we can find nearby alternative spaces that actually add to the equation.

Lehrer: You mentioned the CDC guidelines. As you know, President Trump argues that the CDC guidelines for reopening, like with staggering and physical barriers and sophisticated ventilation systems, are so expensive that they will prevent schools from reopening that could safely, and he points to a number of countries in Europe that have full school reopenings without guidelines like that, and don't seem to be causing a spike in cases among the parents. What do you say to the president?

Mayor: Well, the president has never been a real fact-based kind of guy. I think – I don't understand how he's doing his reasoning here. The measures are common sense measures. They don't stop us from reopening schools. We're planning to reopen schools. They do affect how many kids can be in a building at a time and that's just smart. And again, it is about protecting everyone. It's protecting the families of those kids and the educators and staff in the building and their families. And we also have to recognize a certain number of people are not going to be ready to participate at first. And we understand that. Some teachers are going to have legitimate health exemptions. A number of parents are not going to want to send their kids at first, we're going to need remote learning in any scenario. So, I don't follow the president's reasoning at all here.

And also pointing to other countries that had very different realities doesn't make sense. We, in New York City, we are a bigger, more densely populated location than almost any place on Earth. And so, we have to be particularly cautious, but then for the rest of the country, you know, unlike a lot of parts of the world where the disease has been in decline, in so many states in America, it's surging and school is two months away or less than some places. So, no, I don't

follow. We have to do a health and safety first approach. That's all the CDC is saying. It's not an impossible approach. It takes real work, but it's the smart approach.

Lehrer: Liz in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Liz.

Question: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. I am calling, I have a few different issues that I'd like to discuss and I'll be very – as quick as I possibly can. So, with regard to safety, you know, I'm thinking, you know, one of my kids' schools has a lot of these outdoor space. I have a 10-year-old and a 16-year-old, right. The 10-year-old, like, I could see some things happening in that school space where it could be safer with some of the things you're talking about, but my other daughter – my daughter goes to school in one of those kinds of prison-like, you know, I forgot what era that was, but you know, the one that's right by Marie Bertram, like Marie Bertram style – very few windows you know, it's massive, there's 4,000 kids. So, my question is about, like, do you have exposure scientists who are going to help you – each school understand, like, what's really possible in their particular, actual, real life setting with scientists and not like what happened with, you know, UFT reps and principals going around and kind of coming up with what they think their plan could be. You know, a friend of mine is like, I'm not an epidemiologist, which is exactly why I didn't answer your survey because I'm not an epidemiologist. So, that's one issue.

The second issue is around remote learning. And so, I understand that students in summer school this year are using the platform, iLearn. If families opt for remote learning in the fall in full or in part, is that what we are opting into? I've heard that lessons delivered via iLearn are pre-prepared and limit teachers' ability to individualize instruction for students. This will only heighten inequities between those of us – sorry, those who are able to attend in person and those who are not. Will children be reporting to a teacher within their schools if they select 100 percent remote learning or will this involve a separate pool of teachers?

Lehrer: All right, let me get the Mayor to answer both of those questions. Two very different questions. One about facilities, one about the vulnerable students and whether the remote learning systems are really as individualized as they need to be.

Mayor: Yeah, Liz, these are really important questions and they are very different, but let me do my best quickly to answer. First, on the question of keeping the schools safe and the health guidance. So, the health guidance does come from the epidemiologist and the health experts whether CDC or State Health Department or City Department of Health, working with the Department of Education. All of this has really been looked at very carefully over months and those basic standards, the standard of cleaning that's going to be necessary every day, the hand washing stations, the hand sanitizers, the number of kids in the classroom, the use of face coverings. We're still working on what we're going to do with entry each day and how we're going to do screening. We're going to have more to say on that next few days. But there's a huge effort being made to get the health care piece right and consistent. That would be the same for every school. The principals are not expected to do original research. They're expected to follow what the health authorities are telling them. The survey, just to note this, is really about parents expressing their decision about their children. They have rights. If a parent is ready for their child to come back, and about three-quarters are now – and, Brian, a survey that gets 400,000 responses, I think you would agree, that goes beyond any normal concept of sample size, that's

the people speaking directly. A vast majority want their kid to come back. But anyone who is not ready, they will have that choice.

Now, to the remote learning. It'll be available for everyone at any point – something the Chancellor emphasized yesterday. If you want, in-person learning, tell us before the school year, and there'll be a process for people to sign up. If at any point you're in remote learning, you want to come back to in-person, you can do that on a quarterly basis at any point, sign up for the next quarter. But parents who want remote will have it available. It will involve more – the Chancellor spoke about this this week with me – more direct teacher contact. Remember when we did the in-person – excuse me, when we did the remote learning for April and May and June, it was all on an emergency basis and the first time it'd ever been attempted on such a vast scale in New York City. We had a huge number of kids that didn't even have the devices. And we had to address the digital divide. I mean, everything was done on an emergency basis. Now there's been a chance to reset and figure out how to do things better and more thoroughly, and to lay in remote learning plans for the whole year ahead that can be deeper in effect and reach kids more deeply. So, that will be in place. I don't know the specifics of the names of the different remote learning programs. So, Liz, if you give your information to WNYC, we'll have someone from the DOE get back to you and tell you what that approach is going to look like.

Lehrer: Liz, if you want to do that, we can take your contact information off the air. Let me go onto policing issues and crime, Mr. Mayor. New York State Attorney General Leticia James, as you know, issued a report on Wednesday saying because of the violent police behavior caught on many videos during the protests, “it is impossible to deny that many New Yorkers have lost faith in law enforcement.” And she recommends that an independent panel, no longer the mayor whoever the mayor is, should appoint the police commissioner, and oversee the hiring and firing of officers, an independent panel. Will you support and facilitate that change?

Mayor: No, Brian, I don't agree with her supposition to begin with. I respect the Attorney General a lot and worked with her very closely for years and years back in the City Council. We actually, together, led the charge to stop Mayor Bloomberg from giving himself a third term. So, I have a lot of respect for Tish James and the work she's done. I'm glad she did this report and we're going to work – I have not seen all the details of it, but we're going to work with her, for sure.

But I want to disagree first with the assumption about what New Yorkers feel, because I have been listening to New Yorkers for seven years. In fact, we've been serving New Yorkers constantly in that timeframe to understand better what they're feeling about policing. And in fact, the majority of New Yorkers clearly want things to work with communities and police. They want to be part of constructive solutions. They know that police are necessary to a safe society, but they want better and more respectful policing. So I disagree – I think, yeah, were there were real profound issues raised in the last month or more that we need to address? 100 percent. Were there situations that people saw with their own eyes that were unacceptable? Absolutely. And they need to be addressed. But I disagree that that means that a majority of New Yorkers don't want to work with police, or don't think that policing is important done the right way. We have to do it the right way. We have to continue the reforms. And remember you know, seven years ago, everyone said the city would be more violent if we got rid of stop-and-frisk. We got rid of stop-and-frisk. We reduced arrests radically. We reduced mass incarceration. We've done neighborhood policing, de-escalation training, implicit bias training. All of these things are

working and we're going to deepen them. And we're taking money now from police, putting it into Youth Services, we're going to do a whole host of reforms.

But you cannot have the police department be unaccountable in the way that the Attorney General is proposing. I mean, that doesn't work. You can't do fast and sharp and meaningful reforms if it becomes an unworkable structure, a structure where no one is in charge, a structure where politics takes over, competing political interests and officials. That describes what we had with the Board of Education for years, it was a mess. And it actually held back a host of reforms that were needed. And once there was mayoral accountability for education, you saw the graduation rates shoot up and you saw the school system move forward. And I was able to do things like Pre-K For All. I could never have done that with the Board of Education. So no, the Police Commissioner needs to be hired by the mayor, accountable to the mayor and the people. And that's actually how we make the changes we need.

Lehrer: But the mayor, position of mayor, you or any other mayor is also subject to politics, the politics of the police union putting pressure on you and by many people's analysis, you're feeling that you can't lose their support beyond a certain point, affects policy. And so maybe an independent panel appointing the commissioner would restore a faith in a way that would be more insulated from politics?

Mayor: Brian, I have the deepest respect for you, but I want it – so I'm not going to say this about you. I have seen that kind of analysis and it can only be described as idiotic. There's some times when I look at the political discourse in this city and I just gasp at how broken it is. The police unions opposed my election. They opposed my reelection. They had picketed me every year, every place, every time for seven years. And we have made change after change, reform after reform. I, and again, there's five different unions. Let me hasten to say each one of them is different. My main problem has been with the Sergeants and the PBA, because I think both of them have been constantly divisive and tried to pull New York City backwards. But this is just, doesn't stand the smell test here. I have been in opposition – they have been in opposition to me the whole way through, and it's never stopped our program. And we just moved an initiative with the City Council to move money out of the NYPD, into Youth Services and Social Services. I took money out of the capital budget to create recreation centers for young people, to create broadband access for NYCHA residents. We announced the end of the anti-crime unit, obviously faster discipline system. There's all these changes that are happening, but I just don't buy this simplistic analysis and lazy analysis that somehow I've been thrown off by police unions because they've done the same thing to me for years and years. And I've never changed who I am and we're going to make a hell of a lot more reform in the next year and a half. And police unions can picket me all they want, the change is coming.

Lehrer: Policing question from Ruco from the Bronx. You're on WNYC, hello Ruco, if I said your name, right. Did I?

Question: It's Rocco.

Lehrer: Sorry. Hi.

Mayor: Rocco as in R-O-C-C-O?

Question: That's the one. Yes.

Mayor: Well, that's a classic – that's an Italian classic. Hello, Rocco.

Lehrer: Sorry. I had it with U. I apologize. Go ahead.

Question: It's quite alright. I just wanted for the Mayor to, and I came in a little late on this last little call in. So I apologize if I don't know exactly what the question was, but I just wanted the Mayor to commit or recommit to making sure that police are held accountable. You know, I saw a video of a car driving through protesters through Times Square. And those two drivers were immediately released after, you know, causing bodily harm and harm to people's property. And nobody's being held accountable. And it's shocking that in this state of, you know, our city and our nation, that people are still not standing up to it. And that means people in divisions of power like yourself Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Yeah, Rocco. Absolutely, it's not recommit. It's commit. Throughout the whole concept here has been to change the nature of policing in New York City. And to create like a whole host of – I mean, again, look at what we did with de-escalation training, implicit bias training, body cameras on every officer. These are all about accountability, changing the culture of policing, changing the on the ground reality. And of course, I agree entirely, if someone says, has the discipline process in the NYPD been effective enough and fast enough? No. And I have spoken to this in recent weeks. We have got to speed that up. And in fact, I want to note with appreciation that Commissioner Shea has amplified that point, not in words, but in deeds. And brought forward the suspensions of officers who did the wrong thing during the protest, brought forward the suspension of the officer who put his arm around the neck of the guy in the Rockaways. There's been clearly an uptick and along needed uptick in the speed of the discipline process.

So in this case that you're referring to, I'm waiting for a full answer on this too. There's still gray as to what exactly happened. And I do think Rocco, it's important to note whenever there's a confrontation like that, we need to know what happened on both sides of the confrontation. And we need there to be accountability, I agree. What I understand was a civilian vehicle in a crowd, but how it got started, who did what to who, we still don't have the clearest answers. But we are going to get those answers and make them public. And of course the police are accountable in every instance. And nowadays, because of body cameras and cell phone cameras, it's very vivid accountability. But we have to do a better job of showing people consequences. And the internal discipline process is about to restart, coming out of the coronavirus. Because we got the law change in Albany that I've been asking for, for years, we're now going to be able to put the disciplinary records of officers online for everyone to see, the result of internal trials for everyone to see. So what this movement achieved and it is historic, is finally giving us the tools to show the outcomes of police discipline that had been by State law, hidden up to now. And I actually think it's going to be very good for New York City to have that all out in the open.

Lehrer: And about the spike in crime. NYPD brass has been quick to blame COVID releases from Rikers and bail reform and the defund movement. But I believe even you say that you don't actually have the data yet to say whether those things are true or not. And if that's your position, why are you allowing the NYPD, including the Commissioner to make these kinds of misleading statements? Isn't that enabling fear-mongering?

Mayor: I don't think it is. I think that there are times – look, I do respect that the folks who do this work to keep us safe, bring a perspective. I don't think it's always a political matter, Brian. I think sometimes bluntly, the professional dynamics get taken out of the equation. I don't think that's smart. I think we have to be smarter than that as a city. This is not just about politics. This is about what professionals believe they're seeing. I don't always agree with our analysis. Guess what? That's part of life. I'm the civilian leader. I'm elected by the people and I make the policies in the end. But if someone in my administration comes to me and says, I think there's something wrong and I'm talking -- I want to tell you what it is. And even if I disagree with them, they say, I want to say this because I think it's important to be said publicly. There was a thorough process. I respected that they had a difference of interpretation. I don't agree with it, but I think that if they believe something needs to be said, it's valid to say, look, we got a lot of factors going on here. My view, Brian, is that the much more important factors are related to the coronavirus. That what has happened here is we have the criminal justice system entirely on pause. We have no gun prosecutions going on. We have total dislocation communities. I think that's much more important than anything that happened with bail reform. It's much more important than Rikers releases. I'm the person who authorized the Rikers releases. So obviously I believe that was the right thing to do. I think what the Commissioner and others are saying is all these things are adding up and we're seeing a huge spike in crime. And that is definitionally true.

How they are adding up and which factors are having the biggest impact? I don't think any of us knows for sure, but I am much more interested in how we change it. And today at City Hall, we had the leaders of the Harlem community talking about how people in Harlem are going to work from the grassroots with police to make that community safe again, after this horrible spate of shootings. I am much more interested in the solutions rather than continually debating the analysis. Right now, it's about how do we end this crime upsurge in violence, upsurge we're seeing in our community? And we can only do that working with communities.

Lehrer: Sharon in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Sharon.

Question: Hi, thanks for taking the call. Mr. Mayor, I have two questions. I am a business writer by trade and have a degree in public policy analysis. And I'm concerned about the long term life of the city. But not human life, but the vibrancy of the city itself after the pandemic. And I'm wondering if you have anybody or a committee of people, who are looking beyond your own term at the two to five year framework of what the city may look like at a time when retail can be open, but it isn't. When we have office towers, skyscrapers that are empty? When we have 500,000 people already who have left? What do you think the fabric of the city might look like? And, but more importantly do we have anybody like a panel of people, economists and strategists who are actually considering this problem? That's my first question. And my second question is I'd really like to hear how you personally feel about what has happened in New York City in recent months?

Mayor: Thank you very much, Sharon, let me do them in that order. The first question, yes, of course. So Sharon, we've had so much to focus on in the last four months, right in front of our face and dealing with crisis after crisis. But of course there's a whole team of people working on the future of the city. Whether it is our Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development, Vicki Been and her team, and the folks at the Economic Development Corporation, the Fair Recovery Task Force that we've named, which includes leaders who have decades of experience

helping New York City through other previous crises and helping to bring it back. There's a huge amount of work being done. And top of that, every sector of our economy is represented in advisory councils we put together -- larger businesses, smaller businesses, culture, entertainment, you know, a whole broad swath of our economy and our life in the city. Leaders and experts from those communities, those sectors meet weekly with the administration, talking about right now problems, but also projecting ahead years. What are the kinds of things we're going to need to do to bring the city back? And we've heard tremendous commitment from business leaders, that they are grappling with, you know, what amount of work will be in person versus remote, short term versus long term. But where there's absolute consensus is the city can and must come back. The city has overcome before and has such intrinsic strength in a globalized economy that it will be strong again, the future. And people will want to reengage in person, once we get past this disease. Which I bluntly believe will happen at some point in 2021, that's the most likely scenario for a vaccine. And then we'll go through the process of rebuilding and restoring our vitality. But there's tremendous faith in the business community that I've heard. We are going to have to do some new things, but we're going to find a way as we always have.

To your second question, Sharon, what have I felt? It's been extremely painful but not hopeless. So humanly, it's so painful to try to find a way to protect people and help people against such a difficult foe and obviously so much unknown. That's been the worst part of all this. There's no one who still fully understands this disease. And we don't, we've never had all the tools we needed, started with the tragic reality of not having had the testing when we needed it. But the way it's affected everything, every aspect of life. The fact that we were talking earlier in this broadcast about a crime spree, which is clearly related to the coronavirus. And it's just been domino falling after domino falling. It's been very painful humanly for me as a leader and a person, but also feeling the lives of the people I represent and lead, just seeing so much pain out there and being out in communities and feeling it.

But it's not hopeless because here's what I think the media respectfully misses, the ingenuity, the fight back, the spirit of New Yorkers, the way they just create things. I've been out in communities. I've been amazed at what people have done to help each other and to survive this and uplift each other. I do not hear hopelessness at the neighborhood level. I hear purposefulness. So in the end I just have tremendous faith in New Yorkers. I don't live in the world of elites and elite institutions. I never have. I believe if you just go out to neighborhoods in the city and just talk to people, it restores your faith very quickly that they're going to fight through. And the last thing I'd say, Sharon is when I started my career in public service, I remember vividly some days I spent in the South Bronx the first half of the 1980's. And if you had looked at that community then, rubble strewn lots as far as the eye could see, you know, fires everywhere, vacant buildings everywhere. I mean, you would have said, this was like a post-apocalyptic movie and you could never come back from it. You go to the Bronx today and you know, it's been this extraordinary renaissance and you can't even see what was the reality 30 or 40 years ago. So we can come back from anything. New Yorkers are just that strong and that's truly what I believe.

Lehrer: So on that personal and optimistic note, we are out of time. Thanks as always Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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