

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 APPEARS LIVE ON NPR'S ALL THINGS
CONSIDERED**

Mary Louise Kelly: I'm Mary Louise Kelly in Washington. With schools across the country reopening, or carefully, warily tiptoeing towards thinking about reopening, it feels like a moment to check on how things are going in the nation's biggest school district, New York City. The City's 488 public high schools are set to reopen one week from today – welcome news, especially for high school seniors desperate for a few weeks of something that even vaguely resembles a normal senior year. But, of course, also a step that brings risk and which has required a lot of planning. We are joined now live from City Hall by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, to talk about schools and, also, about the embattled governor of his state, Andrew Cuomo. Mayor de Blasio, welcome.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you so much, Mary Louise. Schools are my favorite topic. We're bringing them back.

Kelly: Well, let's dive in right there, because I have to note, you liked schools last fall – you tried to reopen schools last fall and then you had to shut them again six weeks later. What gives you confidence you can avoid a repeat?

Mayor: Listen, we were able to continue. Once we went through that difficult moment – you're absolute right – we were able to pick it back up, start up our elementary schools again, then middle schools, and now finally high schools. And I'm absolutely convinced we will now keep them open for the rest of the year, because we've figured out how to keep them safe.

Kelly: Rest of the year is to late-June? That's the end of the school year?

Mayor: Yes, the end of June.

Kelly: Okay. But how, again, because I have to note, New York City has the highest per capita COVID death rate in the country, higher than any state, and, as we know, there are new variants circulating. How is this going to be safe?

Mayor: Because we test – literally, test every school every week and we have seen extraordinarily low – extraordinarily low incidents of COVID. And the reason is, we literally create a gold standard. We said, what are the healthiest practices in schools all over the world?

We said, every child will wear a mask, there'll be constant cleaning, better ventilation, social distancing. We put all these pieces together, plus weekly testing in every school, and it's been amazing. Literally, the safest places to be in New York City are in our public schools. Our health leadership says it and we're convinced this is for the duration now.

Kelly: How many high school students are you actually expecting to return to campus? Because many will continue learning from home, right?

Mayor: That's right. The current estimate is about 55,000 more coming back. But here's the interesting thing, Mary Louise, as the health situation improves in New York City – and we do see that markedly now – there is the possibility that in the coming weeks we might be able to open up schools further. This is something we're examining right now. And I've turned to our doctors and said, what would it take? And they said, look, there's a conceivable scenario. As more – we've got 3 million vaccinations done already. At a certain point, you vaccinate enough people and the virus runs out of room. So, that's what we're fighting for right now.

Kelly: Well, we certainly wish you luck in that. Absolutely. I am wondering what guardrails you will put on this, because no matter how careful you are, there will be positive cases. Right now, the protocol for you is if there are two cases founded a school, you shut it. Your critics, as you know, say that's too restrictive. Where are you on this?

Mayor: Well, we're definitely reevaluating that. I mean, just in terms of the cases, our schools have been averaging under one-percent positivity now for quite a while, just to show you how extraordinary it's been. But yes, that two-case rule is an area of concern. It was built for a time when we still didn't know if all these health and safety standards would work. They have worked, the virus is being beaten back. We're going to look at ways to proceed that give us more ability to keep schools open, but, of course, always put health and safety first. That's the balance we're trying to work through with our school leadership and our health leadership.

Kelly: Teachers, are they on board?

Mayor: Teachers have been extraordinarily enthusiastic. You know, there were a lot of concerns in the beginning, the unions raised a lot of concerns. But I'll tell you something, I remember the first day when we opened up pre-K, teachers were the most enthusiastic, even more than the parents who were certainly relieved to have their kids back in school. The teachers wanted to be with their kids. It is their life. It's what they love and they see – they see how safe it's been.

Kelly: And they've been given access, since January, to the vaccine. Is that right? They were given priority.

Mayor: Absolutely. I had to fight the State of New York to get them that priority, but we finally won it. And now, the last number I had, we've had well over 30,000 educators who have been vaccinated. That number is growing all the time, so that helps a lot as well.

Kelly: Speaking of fighting the State of New York, let me switch gears and ask about Governor Cuomo, who is now facing allegations of sexual misconduct from six women, also allegations

that his administration covered up the scale of deaths in New York nursing homes. He says he is not going to resign. You say he should. Why?

Mayor: Mary Louise, he is, right now, in the way of our recovery efforts, in the way of our battle to fight COVID, because what we've seen from the State is very arbitrary decisions. I'll give you two very powerful examples. I asked the State back in March to have shelter in place in New York City, the Governor wouldn't let it happen. He dithered for a week and I think it had a horrible impact. And more recently, I asked him for the freedom to vaccinate teachers, firefighters, police officers, senior citizens – he wouldn't agree until the public uproar finally forced his hand. This kind of decision-making is hurting our ability to fight COVID. And on top of it, he has so much to answer for here that he's not giving answers to.

Kelly: So, if I hear you right, you're arguing he should resign because of his record on COVID, not because of these scandals that are now embroiling everything in Albany?

Mayor: No, I'm saying both. I am convinced based on what we know – we know, his top aides said that they withheld the truth about the nursing homes. I believe the six women who have come forward. I think with that alone we have enough evidence why he shouldn't be Governor any longer. But on top of that, he is creating a huge distraction for the State and he's making decisions for political reasons, not for what's best for the people and for their health. In this moment, he's literally making it harder for us to fight COVID.

Kelly: I will just note for the record that we have an interview request out for Governor Cuomo as well, and we would love if he comes on the show and takes our questions and defends his record. But let me – we just have a few seconds left, but let me ask you this, because you have been very public in tussling with each other over COVID, and lockdown restrictions, and schools in New York, but the stakes are too high in a pandemic for you two not to work together for as long as he is governor and you are mayor. Will you commit here to trying?

Mayor: I've tried for seven years and I learned long ago it doesn't work, because he doesn't seek collaboration with others. I think that's coming out more and more. Bottom line, I'm going to defend the people of New York City. If I have to do that very publicly and if I have to challenge the Governor, I will. And I look forward to a Governor I can work with in the future.

Kelly: We will leave it there. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. Mayor de Blasio, thanks for taking the time.

Mayor: Thank you, Mary Louise.

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