

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 13, 2020, 11:05 AM

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

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

Brian Lehrer: Good morning again, everyone. And it's time once again for our weekly Ask the Mayor segment Fridays around 11:05 am – okay, it's 11:06 am – my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 646-435-7280, 646-435-7280, or you can tweet a question. We'll watch our Twitter feed go by. Just 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 okay. Thank you. And my questions will be mostly on schools and indoor dining and the pandemic and new questions about police reform. First, the weekly average for the coronavirus testing positivity rate was 2.6 percent, if I saw it right, as of yesterday. That's getting very close to the three percent one-week average that's supposed to trigger a citywide public school shutdown for in-person learning. Do you have a new number as of this morning?

Mayor: Yeah, let me go over our indicators for today for the city just overall real quick. Our hospital admissions are now at 121, hospital positivity rate for COVID is 28.8 percent among those admissions. New reported cases, this is the seven-day average, 916. The daily number, not the seven-day number, the daily number of New York City has gone up markedly from yesterday 3.09 percent. But the number you're referring to, and this is the number that is decisive, the overall number for the city, seven-day rolling average. This is the number we look at the most. This is the number we make the decisions around schools on, that is 2.83 percent. So, that is a high number. That's the number that's gone up since yesterday. It is still below three percent, so schools remain open, but that number has gotten quite close to three percent today and we are making preparations as a result in case that number does exceed three percent, and in the event that we do have to temporarily close our schools.

Lehrer: So, if it takes the same jump tomorrow that it took from yesterday to today, the weekly average would be at three percent and you would make this announcement tomorrow, right?

Mayor: Yeah. This is – look, quick context here is very important, and I'll give you the specifics that people need to know. The context is we set a high bar to bring our schools back and we all worked together, and we did. And New York City has not only one of the – not only are we one of the few big cities to have our schools back, but they've been extraordinarily safe. But they are extraordinarily safe because we set a high bar, because we required tremendously strenuous measures in the schools to keep people safe. And we said, we'd only open if infection levels were low. And if they went above three percent on the seven-day rolling average, we would close the schools temporarily. But I want to emphasize temporarily. If we get to that point, then the goal is to bring them back as quickly as possible. And New York City has a really great track record of

fighting back the coronavirus. So, if we get to that point, Brian, let's say it is over the weekend, we'll immediately alert parents that school would then be closed in that instance as early as Monday. So, people should get ready. I want to now speak to parents understanding this is such a challenging situation for parents in general, everything with the coronavirus. When schools were shut, extremely difficult for parents, even open it's still been a really, really tough situation. And this is not something any parent you know, wants to have to deal with, but we should get ready and parents should have a plan for the rest of the month of November. I think that's the safe way to think about it, have an alternative plan for beginning as early as Monday for whatever will help them get through this month if school is not open.

I want to note, and it's important exceptions, Brian, that our community-based organizations that provide pre-K and 3-K, those will continue to be open as opposed to the public school buildings. Those community-based organizations will continue to be open. Even if we go beyond the three percent. Our Learning Bridges program, which is the childcare program that's being provided for free, that will remain open with a priority being given to essential workers. So, there are options that will be available if we get to that point, but I want to urge parents to have a plan ready that they can put into effect as early as Monday. And we will make an update – give an update to folks tomorrow morning, as soon as the indicators come in and Sunday morning, as soon as they come in, to let people know where we stand.

Lehrer: Wow. There's so much to follow up on there. Let me ask you a couple of things. One, why the difference for the 3-K and pre-K kids, if they're in a public school building, as opposed to, if they're in a private community group building?

Mayor: It's a different reality, they're much smaller facilities. And this whole concept is based on safety. Look, remember when we put these standards together, we had just gone through the hell of the spring. And the understanding we had was we could never let that happen again in New York City. And if we were going to open our schools unlike every major city in America, if we were going to open our schools they had to be safe, consistently safe, but again, they have been because we held that high, high bar, and we're going to keep doing that. But these other programs are much smaller, many fewer kids. It's just a different reality.

Lehrer: Is there also a union, non-union staffing difference?

Mayor: There's unions who represent all these different pieces of the equation, but they're just different structures. A public school building in New York City by definition is a larger group of people. And we want to keep everyone safe. Remember our public school buildings, we have food service workers and school safety agents and teachers and administrators, we have kids. And our obligation, of course, is to the parents to protect the kids. So, we set a standard, a safety standard, that really has been the reason why we've been able to get as far as we've gotten. And now we may be in a tough situation, but again, how quickly can we come out of it is the question? My hope is that if we all do what we have to do in the city as a whole, that this is something we can overcome in a matter of weeks, if we get to this point.

Lehrer: But I do want to ask about the UFT's role in this. So, just to finish – follow up on the question I asked a minute ago, is it UFT staff in the school buildings, obviously, yes, and is it non-UFT staff in the community group buildings, even if they're in other unions?

Mayor: Yeah. They're not UFT, they are other unions –

Lehrer: And –

Mayor: But this standard, the three percent, I want to make clear is something the City decided, it's not part of any collective bargaining agreement. And this is a standard we set of when we thought we would know the difference between we could keep things as safe as we wanted to versus something that was getting more challenging. Now, let's see what happens in these coming days and weeks in this city, because I think we have a chance here, obviously, to turn things around, we're going to be making a series of other decisions with the State, obviously, and people's behavior is the biggest element of this. When New Yorkers actually have tightened up in the past, it has had a huge impact. When folks have gone out and gotten testing, obviously when they wear the mask, etcetera. So, our goal here is to figure out how to quickly, if we get to this point, get schools back and then figure out where we go from there because the world's changing, the vaccine is coming now. That is definite. Therapeutic treatments are now starting to be used that are much more effective. The hospitalizations, thank God, are not resulting in as many folks in ICUs, or as many people passing away. There's a lot of changing circumstances here. So, my hope is that we're going into a much better time after we get through this immediate challenge.

Lehrer: And with all of those things, you know that many critics, Scott Stringer, Maya Wiley, the New York Times Editorial Board are saying, you've got the plan backwards. At three percent, indoor dining should be stopped, not just curfew to 10:00 PM, but the school should stay open, something you've been the biggest champion of in the past because cases in schools have been very few, it's like a 0.1 percent positivity or something [inaudible] –

Mayor: No, it's 0.16 percent positivity.

Lehrer: Yeah, so that low and the in-person experience has been so important for the kids whose families are choosing it, so why doesn't the current policy have it backwards? Why don't you say the three percent number looked right originally for schools, now we realize whatever else we do, we should keep schools open?

Mayor: Because we have to always focus on health and safety first. Folks who, you know, want to offer their critique, that's fine. But I'm telling you, you know, we've had to manage this process from the beginning, focused on health and safety, and that worked with the schools because we were so cautious, and we set a standard and we asked everyone to trust in it. And part of keeping trust is staying consistent. And –

Lehrer: Why is that the standard?

Mayor: The standard was based on what we understood at the time to be the numbers that would indicate that we are reaching a bigger problem. And, in fact, we now have a better situation with health care overall, thank God, but there is a bigger problem we're facing right now, that's obvious, here and around the country. We're going to keep fighting to avoid this. There's still a chance these numbers could turn and that's job one –

Lehrer: Some of the [inaudible] –

Mayor: If they don't turn then we're going to figure out what we have to do going forward. But I'm very clear about the fact, we set a plan out there, we said to everyone in school communities, believe in this and trust this, everyone came forward. It was, in effect, a social contract and it worked, and people trusted in it and people were safe. And we've got to keep that faith because we will be bringing the schools back. And when we bring the schools back, if they do go down, when we bring them back, people are going to have to believe in that situation as well. This is not just about what happens this week or next week, Brian, this is about a school year that has seven months ahead, and we've got to get it right for the long-term here.

Lehrer: Some of the suspicion is that the teachers' union rules the roost here, and an informal agreement you have with them to stick to this three percent, they would rather have everybody out of the schools under these circumstances. But here's a clip of epidemiologist Celine Gounder, from NYU and a member of President-elect Biden's coronavirus task force interviewed yesterday – I'm sorry. I may have said her name wrong – Celine Gounder – as interviewed yesterday by WNYC News.

Dr. Celine Gounder: Well, I think unfortunately what's happening is you're seeing business interests and union interests having more sway politically than the public health and science here. And I think if we consider schools to be an essential service, and if we want to keep schools open, it means that we're going to have to do everything possible to keep community transmission suppressed. And that's not what we're seeing in terms of policies right now.

Lehrer: So, she says too much political influence by the teachers' union, with respect to closing, too much political influence by the restaurant lobby, with respect to staying open.

Mayor: I appreciate her analysis, it's just not accurate. The decision we made was made with our health care leadership and not with the unions at all. I mean, literally the three percent decision, I remember vividly the meeting in which we decided it. It was not a proposal from the unions. It was not a collective bargaining matter. It was our health care leadership working with me to determine what we thought was a standard at that time. And I will say things in many ways have improved. Our knowledge has improved and many things we know now are better and clearer. That's the good news. But at the time we said that was a standard that meant something bigger was going on. And that was the appropriate time to pull back both in terms of the safety of everyone, that school community, and what it would mean as part of an overall strategy for the city.

So that's just not accurate because the origin of that three percent concept came from the health care leadership in our internal discussions. And on the business community, it's not – I don't know who she thinks that influence is. I think this is about people's livelihoods. That's the other balance that people need to take into account here. Folks have suffered intensely in this crisis. A lot of the federal support has worn off. There's not the same support that people need. They've used up their savings. I'm very cognizant, even though the State makes the ultimate decisions here on the industry issues, I'm very cognizant of the fact that we have to keep people's livelihoods in mind here while managing the overall crisis. So, no, I think there's a lot more going on here than that.

Lehrer: But if restaurants and bars and gyms are such major vectors then it's not in the interest of long-term recovery to keep that spread going, if you keep them open, right?

Mayor: Well, I think they have to be reassessed for sure. I think the State was right, Brian, to reduce the hours on restaurants. And, you know, obviously we're talking about bars that serve food as well, not the kind of bars that we think of when we just think of people going out drinking, but those hour reductions, I think, were a smart step. Obviously, indoor dining has to be reevaluated. I said that even when we'd go over two percent on a seven-day average, I think it has to be reevaluated now. I think of those pieces, but the question is really how we balance the bigger factor. I don't want people to think that indoor dining and gyms are the magical solution to all our problems, because in fact, our Test and Trace operation is not showing, you know, the kind of impact from those locales that you've seen in other places around the country. We have something much more generalized here.

But the question really is, how do we get out of this overall situation as quickly as possible? And what we do know is more people getting tested and more people practicing those basic approaches like mask wearing indoors and outdoors makes a huge difference. And also, Brian, crucial – folks should not travel for the holidays. It's painful. I feel awful even saying it. I feel awful for my own family that we're not going to be traveling but they should not travel. They should not have large holiday gatherings. That's really going to be one of the most decisive pieces. We talk about restaurants or gyms, but much more decisive will be if we can successfully limit travel and limit indoor gatherings.

Lehrer: Patrick in Brooklyn you are on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Patrick.

Question: Yeah. Hey, good morning, Brian. Good morning Mr. Mayor. I had a quick question about the remote blended learning model number two, which is what my niece is in. And she goes to school one or two days a week, depending on the week and the rest of the days she's remote. But the teachers don't have any kind of curriculum set up or any kind of classes set up for her when she's not in school. So, between three and four days a week, she's at home with maybe 45 minutes of schoolwork to do. And I can't get through to anybody at the school to change anything. And I work from home and it's extremely difficult to keep her gainfully educated at this point.

Mayor: Yeah, no, but then Patrick, that's – go ahead. I'm sorry.

Question: Oh, sorry. I was just wondering if there's like a method to, or any suggestions to the school that I could make, like in order to sort of help this problem along?

Mayor: Yeah. Please do give your information to WNYC so our Department of Education folks can follow up with you directly and address that situation for you and your family and your school. Look, that's clearly not what's supposed to be happening. And I've talked to a lot of parents, a lot of teachers. We, I think know that this is an imperfect reality to say the least, having some kids remote, some kids in blended, everyone trying to do their best to make it work. But that, what you described should simply not be happening. And we have to fix that for you and your family. And look, we're going to, we've now had, you know, a month or two of school, but the vast majority of the school year is ahead, there's a lot we have to do to keep improving

education under whatever status we're dealing with. And that work is happening all the time because we're all learning how to do something in a brand new environment.

Lehrer: And this weekend also happens to be the end of the two week period for families to opt back in for in-person blended learning for the rest of the school year. As that deadline is upon us, how many more families signed up? Do you have a number?

Mayor: I don't have the latest. We had a meaningful number for sure, sign up. But what none of us could have anticipated is that this signup period is now overlapped with this sudden surge first around the country and now hitting us. So, you know, we'll complete that on Sunday. We're going to implement that. If schools remain open, we'll implement that on November 30th. If they shut down again, the goal is to get them back up very quickly. Look, the Chancellor and I said in the beginning of the school year repeatedly that unfortunately we had to have models for education that ran the gamut from if we, God forbid had to be all remote for a period of time, we would. Straight on through to the day when we go back to a five day a week for everyone. And every step in between. We've known, we might have to turn the system on or off at various points. My goal here, if we do have to shut schools is to do it for as brief a period as possible and come back up. And then all those parents who want blended learning, who signed up will be accommodated. And we'll keep making the adjustments as we go along.

Lehrer: How does the threshold changing over time affect the opening and closing of schools? So for example, if the seven-day average is 3.1 percent on Sunday, and you announced the shutdown for Monday. But then the three-day average goes down and it's 2.8 percent, two days later, do you reopen the schools on Wednesday or how would that work?

Mayor: Yeah, we're going to come out with a policy in light of everything we've learned. We are now going to come out with a policy on what reopening would look like, if in fact we do have to shut down. We obviously want to make sure that when we reopen it's on a sustainable basis. So if we shut down, the goal is to reopen and then stay reopened, obviously. So that is where we have to make sure we – lord knows we don't want daily fluctuations. We don't want to be, you know, shut down for two days and then open for two days and shut down for two days. We don't want something like that. We want something more sustainable. So we're going to look at the standards, we'll look at everything that we've learned. And we'll put that out quickly. And then that will be how we proceed.

Lehrer: But I saw you say yesterday if I understood it correctly, that you might not enforce the same threshold on the way down as on the way up? So if that's accurate, why would three percent be unsafe today? But four or five percent could be declared safe on the way down in a few weeks?

Mayor: It's – I don't think that's an accurate reading of what I said. I said, we're going to look at everything that we have learned from this, and we're going to figure out what standard makes sense in this moment. We're in a different moment. We're in a different reality, both because of the surge around the country, which is clearly affecting us because we have the holidays, which are a huge challenge because of travel and gatherings. Those are our big problems. But on the plus side, we have much better therapeutic capacity to address the disease. We have not seen the kind of uptake so far in ICU admissions that would have been expected. We do have a vaccine coming. There's a variety of new factors. Brian, this is really hard to explain to anyone who

hasn't lived through every day and hour of the decision-making process during COVID. But the one thing we learned a long time ago is this disease and the ramifications of this disease, everything changes all the time. So we need to make sense of where we go from here under the conditions now, which are very different than the conditions in August or September.

Lehrer: Marie in Manhattan. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello Marie.

Question: Good morning, Mayor. Good morning Brian. The SHSAT is mandated by the Hecht Calandra Act. And there are 30,000 to 40,000 students that are waiting to hear when the registration will open. Do you have any idea when that's going to happen and when the test will be administered?

Mayor: Yeah Marie it will be administered. The timing we're working on and the conditions for doing it because obviously, you know, historically many of the standardized tests are in-person and that's not a scenario we are likely to do, especially with what we're talking about right now. So we're going to work out that time and we're going to work out the methodology. We'll have an announcement on that and certainly in the next few weeks. But you know, we've got to first deal with this immediate challenge right now that we're talking about.

Lehrer: Taher in Yonkers, a New York City cab driver. Taher, you are on WNYC with the Mayor.

Question: Yes. Good morning, Brian and good morning, Mr. Mayor.

Lehrer: Good morning.

Question: I'm a New York City cab driver. I applied for the extension almost more than, almost six weeks ago. In the meantime, I had to go to the TLC product inspection. They didn't let me go in. I can't work. I've been calling them, nobody picks up the phone at the Beaver Street. I sent them that email, no answer. Is there any way you could help me? I can't work right now. And I don't have the resources to put a brand new car. It is almost \$40,000.

Mayor: Yeah. Thank you for raising the concern because we don't want to see anyone without their livelihood. So please give her information to WNYC. I'm going to ask the Chair of the TLC to call you directly because I want her to hear your story and make sure that it is addressed properly. So give your information here and we will right away see what we can do to help you.

Lehrer: Taher hang on. We will take your contact information to share with the Mayor's Office. Juno in Brooklyn you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello Juno.

Question: Hi Brian. Hi, Mr. Mayor. Thanks for taking my call. I'd like to ask the Mayor why the City isn't sharing data from DOE priority testing sites with schools? Mr. Mayor, you've said all along that we need to depend on the science. And there should be a comprehensive city-wide effort to coordinate this data. So if I get my kids tested at a DOE site and they're positive, our school and the DOE should be told that, and likewise, if they're negative. But my understanding is that they aren't. And that this info isn't factored into the school infection rates that the City is publishing? And that that info isn't being shared, it's just engendering more mistrust. We need to be able to depend on this data. And I say this – I'm a parent of a second and a fourth grader in

blended learning. I desperately want schools to stay open. We know that the data shows that they're safe, but there are real concerns among parents and school staff about whether the statistics that the City is publishing are real. And those concerns in turn are engendering another push to close the schools. Please don't close the schools. Close the bars, close the gyms, invest in data gathering, Test and Trace, prioritize our kids and then decide if schools should close.

Mayor: Well Juno, I appreciate it. And clearly we've invested a huge amount in Test and Trace. And this is part of why we were able for so long to fight back as a city, reduce the infection rate, get our schools open when other cities couldn't and keep our schools safe. And we're continuing to build out Test and Trace, no question there. In fact, as we send Test and Trace out to schools, we've gotten very good results. As we send Test and Trace out to communities that have had challenges – we saw this in Brooklyn and Queens, we actually saw a remarkable turnaround. I'm hoping the same thing is happening as we speak now in Staten Island as more and more testing and outreach is being done. But to the question you raised, which is really important, about the data. We've been, I believe truly transparent about what has been found in each school and that's governed by our situation room. And that's when we made decisions about whether, for example, a classroom had to be shut down for a quarantine period or even a whole school. And that information has been readily provided to school communities.

I think I understand your question to be, are we also taking into account when students are tested away from the school site and making sure that is fully acknowledged as part of the data for the school and the actions taken for the school? Generally, my impression is yes, but I will go and double check that. I'd like you to give your information, please to WNYC, so we can follow up with you directly on what you've experienced. But generally, that's been a yes. I know there were at least a couple of situations where that didn't happen the way it was supposed to. And we ordered our Department of Health and Department of Education to better coordinate and Test and Trace to better coordinate their efforts. That even if a New York City public school student was tested anywhere that we would get that information back into the school and the situation room. So I do know that's an area that had to be tightened up, but I believe it has been. But I want to make sure of that, so please give your information. And I agree that transparency, I mean, this is just like the indicators for the whole city we're talking about now. Transparency has been one of the things that's empowered New Yorkers to act. Department of Health puts out a huge amount of information, including the ZIP code by ZIP code data again now. The schools have been putting out a lot of information. That has actually been working to keep our infection rate low and it now needs to work again.

Lehrer: We're almost out of time. I gather you want to react to a story on the news site The City today on COVID equipment. I haven't had a chance to read it yet. I just got word of this too late so I'm not going to be able to do them justice, but what do they report? And what's your issue with it?

Mayor: Look, I don't want to characterize their report except to say, I think it's questioning the work that was done on an emergency basis in March and April and after, to get the protective equipment for the first responders of the city, our health care workers, and the supplies we needed for our hospitals. And I think there's a tremendous amount of misrepresentation in that article. We had to put together a massive effort to somehow overcome all the breakdowns in the global supply chain and get the PPE where they were needed and get the supplies, the ventilators, anything that was needed. And it actually thank God, worked. And I – the public servants who

did this, they worked literally nonstop for months. And they managed to get things to every New York City hospital and clinic that was needed. And it was herculean while literally the private sector structure was falling apart before our very eyes. So, I really want to emphasize, I think that article misrepresents the efforts of a lot of public servants that actually saved a lot of lives.

Lehrer: And finally given the big news that you broke here today, parents should be ready to make alternative plans for their New York City public school kids as early as Monday, given the direction of the COVID positivity rate on the tests. I just have to ask you this one last thing. I assume, Governor Cuomo, who likes to overrule you and I think could on this, do you have a commitment from him not to do that?

Mayor: Look, I won't speak for the Governor. I will say the Governor and I had a long conversation about this and our teams have been talking, particularly in the last 48 hours, as we've seen these numbers moving. And I certainly think there's a recognition by the State that we set a clear standard out of an abundance of caution. And we've got to keep faith with our school communities and be consistent about that. But again, I won't speak for them. I will say there's been a high level of communication and coordination.

Lehrer: Thanks as always Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

###