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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Bobby Cuza: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. We are keeping our focus on the surge in COVID-19. Cases have been increasing rapidly throughout the tristate area, and to prevent that same level of spike in the five boroughs city officials are calling on New Yorkers to get tested, wear a mask and stay home for the holidays. Here now for more on this is Mayor de Blasio who joins us from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Welcome as always to the program. Thanks for joining us.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you, Bobby. How are you doing today?

Cuza: I'm doing alright. So we got to talk about schools. You've talked about ways, if we have to close the schools, to get back as quickly as possible, we'll get to that in a minute, but first let's talk about the three percent threshold at which we would have to close the schools. That's a three percent positivity rate citywide. I know you've been asked about this 20 different ways at this point—

Mayor: It's a seven-day average.

Cuza: Seven-day average, right.

Mayor: I really want to make sure we're clear about that.

Cuza: But I guess my question is your message for parents of students in blended learning, who have their kids in school part of the time of which I am one full disclosure here. But you know, those parents, I believe there's something like 300,000 kids in blended learning – those parents, obviously by definition, want their kids in school, right? If they didn't, if they thought it was unsafe, they could opt out and go to full remote learning. So, you know, you've said there was a promise of this gold standard of three percent to keep schools safe. But what if these parents say, you know, “forget the promise, we think schools are safe, let's keep them open?”

Mayor: Bobby, look, I, first of all, I'm the guy who wanted our schools to open on the guy who fought to get our schools open, and you'll remember just a few months ago, there were a lot of naysayers who said we shouldn't open schools, we couldn't open schools, it wouldn't be safe. So I want to put this in perspective. I believed we needed to open schools for all the families, all the kids who wanted that in-person learning, I believe it is the best kind of learning and that we could do it safely, and we've proven that. Even some of our previous critics have acknowledged that it's safe, but that gold standard is about putting every health and safety precaution together to

keep schools safe and following the data and the science, and I said to folks, we're going to be so rigorous that if we go beyond the three percent positivity on the seven-day average, that we would pause our schools, and that was the promise I made to everyone, to parents, to the whole school community, teachers, staff, everyone. So I think it's important to keep consistency with that promise as we're dealing with this new challenge. But I also think we have an opportunity, if we even hit that point and I pray we don't because I want schools open, but if we have to close temporarily, the goal is a very fast turnaround where we set a new equation in place, we go to all the stakeholders and say, here's the new rules for the road. Let's all buy into this, get the State obviously most importantly to buy into it, and we come back with that new approach, and my belief is if we get to a closure, we can come back quickly. We can forge a new plan and a new agreement as to what makes sense and move forward.

Cuza: In terms of rules of the road, though I've gathered from some of your remarks last, last few days that that would involve maybe using a new metric, right? The, the idea that this citywide three percent positivity rate, maybe isn't relevant. If the schools are at a lower rate and looking maybe at a positivity rate in the school system, or maybe even school by school. Am I reading that right?

Mayor: Well, we have to look at all of that. The idea here – look, we have a variety of stakeholders in the State of New York, ultimately gets to the side on these things. They could defer to the city, but that's their choice. Obviously we care a lot about first and foremost, the voices of families, parents, and students, and then our educators. We care about our school staff, our crossing guards, our school safety agents, everyone, you know, the food service workers who stayed with us all through the summer. We've got to talk to the whole school community, but I think there are at least a couple of different ways you could do it, and the idea would be that we set a new standard because we have evidence now, Bobby, we didn't have a back in August and September when we were planning, we now know a lot more about what keeps the schools safe. I'm thrilled to be able to say things have gone as well as we possibly could have imagined. But we also have to be clear with people, with a growing problem all around us. as you described at the outset, what is a standard we feel comfortable with that everyone can buy into. I think that's crucial.

Cuza: Do you want to do more testing in schools right now? It's effectively sort of a random regime of testing. Do you want to see that happen daily or you know, in some, in some form or fashion more frequent?

Mayor: Well, right now it is done on a monthly basis in most schools. Obviously we have had schools in yellow zones where it's weekly, most schools, it's monthly, it's a sample, but remember that happens month after month. So you reach a very, very substantial amount of the school community. I'm certainly open to, you know, more testing as one of the pieces that can solve this and move us forward. But these are the conversations we're having right now with all the other stakeholders figuring out what's the best way back. If in fact we have to close for a period of time, but I want to emphasize that as a temporary closure, the goal is to come back as quickly as possible, and then to remember that we have hopefully very soon over the horizon, a vaccine that starts to get distributed and that changes the entire reality. Most of our school year, and I'm speaking to you as a parent, Bobby, and I was a public school parent too – most of the

school year's ahead of us. Remember our traditional school year is September through June. We're in November now. We're seven months ahead. So we have a long time to maximize the opportunities for kids and I don't rule out at all that there might be a point later in the school year where we could see a lot more kids back in school and kids even going five days a week on a normal basis, depending on when the vaccine arrives, and in what quantity.

Cuza: How would that work though? Would every student have to be vaccinated in order to be allowed back in the classroom?

Mayor: Well, it's an interesting question, Bobby. I don't want to presume, and this is a conversation we'll have with our health leadership and of course all the other stakeholders, but what we do know is the more and more people get vaccinated, the more you're going to limit the spread of this disease. We also know there's a very substantial number of New Yorkers already have been exposed to the disease. Our health experts believe is between two and three million people. We know there's not a lot of evidence of reinfection or in cases where there have been reinfections, limited impact. So I think you have to think about both the impact of a vaccine as it's distributed, the impact of having so many people, having previously exposed those two together mean you don't need to wait until every single person is vaccinated, in my opinion, and our health care team, our Health Department's ready to start vaccinating people immediately, the facilities are already in place, the refrigeration. They're ready, so as soon as we get it in quantity, that's when things start to change.

Cuza: So, I'm interested in that, given that so many people have already been infected and there being some level of immunity, do you feel confident that we're not going to get back to where we were in the spring? We're close to three percent positivity now, I mean the numbers are trending in the wrong direction, right? Couldn't we go back to five, six, seven percent or do you think that that's not a feasible scenario?

Mayor: We were a lot worse than that in the spring. It's too early to tell, and obviously we want to take measures with the State to stop this growth of this positivity rate quickly, and that's an ongoing conversation with the State and it certainly interplays with the school's discussion, but Bobby I would say, no, we cannot. We cannot [inaudible] we must not ever go back to what we experienced in the spring. It was horrifying and so painful to so many families in this city, but I also know we won't go back to that because of a variety of factors. Yes, a lot of people have been exposed. We have an entirely different approach among the people, the mask wearing is very widespread, a lot of recognition of social distancing. We have Test and Trace Corps, which has been a huge game changer, really helping to reduce the amount of spread. We have hospitals that are handling patients entirely differently. They now have the information they didn't have in the spring. Their approaches are much more effective. You see that hospitalizations have been much more limited and thank God we've not seen a huge increase in ICU admissions, and we have not seen a major increase in deaths, the most important factor. So everything is different than what we experienced the spring. In the spring we knew so little, we had so few resources, we didn't have testing. Friday, we had – 75,000 New Yorkers went and got tested. That's fantastic. We need that number to keep climbing though. We need people to decide that they're going to help fight this second wave and what New Yorkers can do, I want to just emphasize one thing, Bobby, everyone has a chance to participate and make an impact. Getting tested helps us stop a second

wave, wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, avoiding gatherings, canceling, travel plans. All of these things help us to stop a second wave.

Cuza: All right, Mayor de Blasio stay right there. We got to take a quick break. I'll have more with the Mayor when we come back, stay with us.

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Cuza: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm joined once again by Mayor de Blasio. So, Mayor, remaining on the COVID topic a lot has been made of the fact that we're talking about possibly closing down schools at a time when indoor dining remains in place, albeit only till 10:00 pm under a restriction put in place by the State. This is a State decision. Do you think we should roll back indoor dining at this point and some of the other non-essential services?

Mayor: Well, Bobby, this is a conversation we're having with the State right now. We have to look at a range of options for what we can do to stop the spread of COVID, the most important things I truly believe are what every day New Yorkers do. So again, everyone going out and getting tested, wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, these are the most essential actions far beyond anything government does. But we're certainly discussing with the State different choices around businesses. Look, I've said from the beginning above two percent positivity rate, I think indoor dining should be reassessed. So we're certainly there now and we're having that very serious conversation with the State. It's – we should remind ourselves indoor dining right now is only 25 percent. It comes with a lot of health and safety precautions, but nonetheless, given the challenges we're facing and so many surrounding states are facing, we've got to reassess that right now.

Cuza: You mentioned the City's Test and Trace Corps., the contact tracing program, they try to get in touch with anybody who's tested positive and their close contacts to try to stem the spread of the disease. But right now we're up to more than a thousand cases a day, which is multiples of what they're used to dealing with. So at a certain point, they must be overwhelmed, right? We lose the usefulness of contact tracing if there's a certain level of community spread, how close are we to that point?

Mayor: Right now, we feel very good about the capacity of Test and Trace, it's over 4,000 people, we continue to add. But what we've found is interesting, Bobby, it's typical that in terms of close contact, a lot of people who have tested positive do not have a substantial number of close contacts. They have one person, two people, three people, it's not like a vast number because the close contact standard requires some actual close contact and for a meaningful amount of time. So we've actually found that Test and Trace can keep up with a high volume of cases, but we want to keep building up Test and Trace. I've told them, keep growing, we need to be ready for anything, and their presence has been tremendously helpful. I mean, thousands and thousands of cases were stopped, I'm convinced, thousands of people did not get infected because Test and Trace was able to identify a contact and make sure that they handled themselves right, was able to make sure, sure people were quarantining. I think it has made a huge difference

Cuza: Quickly before we move on to another topic, the positivity rate and the number of positive cases have been trending up, but not the number of hospitalizations. Why does your Health Department think that that's the case?

Mayor: Bobby, another topic we talk about a lot. I've talked about this with the Head of Health + Hospitals who runs, you know, the biggest public hospital system in America. We think it's better approaches in hospitals, from everything they learned from the spring that they're having a much better ability to support their patients. That's why we're not seeing ICU admissions go up a lot. We're not seeing deaths go up a lot, but also we think it's everything else in what New Yorkers are doing. Folks are protecting themselves. So you are seeing some more cases, but the amount of exposure that people are getting is a lot less because of mask wearing alone, that helps immensely, and it's a combination of factors for sure, but it's just – I think the whole city is handling itself in a very smart, careful manner, and we've also really educated folks who are vulnerable to be very, very careful, which is, again, something we didn't understand enough in the spring, but I think a lot of people now are taking a lot more precautions if they're older, if they have preexisting conditions, all of these things are helping us.

Cuza: All right. Mr. Mayor, changing gears a little bit, I want to ask you about the Civilian Complaint Review Board, the CCRB, that's the city's independent police watchdog agency. There was some reporting over the weekend, the New York Times had a story they delved into the data from the last couple of decades and found in a lot of the most serious police misconduct cases, the CCRB's recommendation was basically ignored by the police department. They either ignored it altogether or opted for a less severe discipline, and that's their right, right? The way the system is built is that the police department, the Police Commissioner can impose their own discipline. They don't have to abide by what the CCRB recommends. Do you think that the system is ripe for some type of redesign?

Mayor: I think the basic design is right, but I think we have more reforms we have to make, Bobby. I – in fact, I was in this building that day in 1992 when Mayor Dinkins signed the CCRB law, I was working for him then. It was something that we had been waiting decades for in this city. CCRB finally got set up and then it was immediately undermined, and in many ways its power was taken away first by Mayor Giuliani, then by Mayor Bloomberg. My mission has been to reinvigorate the CCRB, to give it the kind of budget it deserves, to strengthen it in a variety of ways, and right now it's a much stronger body that can get a lot more done. That's the good news, but there are still areas where we need reform unquestionably. I certainly respect the notion of the Police Commissioner making the final decision, but there needs to be more guidelines and requirements in that process. So we have a discipline matrix that we've proposed, which would make very clear what kind of penalties must be applied depending on the kind of offense, and I certainly think when the CCRB has achieved a guilty plea that, that should right there be sufficient that a Police Commissioner needs to respect that part of the process. So I think there's things we have to do to tighten up, to reform, to clarify, but I think the basic structure is a lot better, a lot stronger than it was seven years ago.

Cuza: Your administration today announced a deal with the sanitation workers' union for some labor savings. I believe there's now \$722 million worth of labor savings in the budget for this next fiscal year. What does that do to the need for layoffs? Are we completely taking layoffs off

the table until next year? And also I wanted to ask you a couple of months ago, you promised to a furlough yourself for a week as did other municipal employees, did you take your furlough?

Mayor: I did take my furlough in October. We, you know, we took away a week's pay, obviously I just kept working. But a lot of the other teams here in City Hall has either done it already or is in the process of doing it and other key leadership throughout city agencies. So that's a decision, it was – I hated to do it to people because these are hardworking leaders, hardworking public servants, but we had to lead by example and so, you know, we've all sacrificed something and we're asking others to help us. And labor's really stepped up now, Bobby, I mean, that's a lot of money, over \$700 million, that gives us so much relief we need to get through to what I think will be a stimulus from the Biden administration and the Congress in February. We need that. So right now the layoff situation, thank God, there's a lot of pressure has been relieved so we can avoid layoffs if we get a stimulus. If we don't get a stimulus, then unfortunately the concept of layoffs comes back on the table at some point next year.

Cuza: Last few seconds, I wonder if you've had any discussions yet with the Biden transition team?

Mayor: Yes. I had a great conversation with Dr. Vivek Murthy who's leading the effort against COVID, an extraordinary leader, a great choice, someone who's worked very closely with our First Lady as well, Chirlane's done a lot of work with him on mental health issues. I think he's going to be a tremendous partner for New York City. I've talked to some of the other folks in the central transition apparatus. Very receptive. Everyone knows that New York City needs a lot of help and everyone knows there's a lot to learn from what we went through and how we overcame COVID the first time. So, it's like a breath of fresh air of being able to have conversations with the Biden team and everyone says, can we help, and I know they mean it.

Cuza: All right, Mayor de Blasio, as always, thank you so much for joining us. We appreciate the time. We'll see you next week.

Mayor: Take care, Bobby.

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