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

**Brian Lehrer:** It's Brian Lehrer on WNYC, and now as usual on Fridays, it's our weekly "Ask The Mayor" segment – my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag #AskTheMayor. We'll talk about the departure of Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, who's replacing him, and other things. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

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

**Lehrer:** I'm doing okay, thank you, and we've been reporting on the departure of Chancellor Carranza, and I know he's saying he resigned because he needs time to grieve for the 11 family members, 11, oh my goodness, and friends, he lost this year to COVID, and was emotional about that at the news conference, but there are reports that it was also over his desire to desegregate the schools and that you aren't going fast enough down that road for him. What will you say about that?

**Mayor:** Totally inaccurate. Just blatantly inaccurate. This is a man who's been through hell this last year, and he and I talked about it many times and, you know, he chose today to make it public, but this has been going on for a long time. It has almost been impossible to imagine, as he has told me, each time another family member was lost. Each time a childhood friend was lost. It has taken a huge toll, but he kept going somehow, and I admire it, but he also, you know, to his credit, was able to bring out that he was really suffering, and he had been through a trauma, a repeated trauma, and he needed to get away from the stress and the intensity of this job, and just have time to grieve and address what he was going through. That was his choice to bring that forward, and it was his choice to take this action, and we, you know, talked it through a number of times and he said, really, this is the time I have to do this, and, you know, we were able to have tremendous continuity because his successor Meisha Ross Porter is someone he actually elevated to Executive Superintendent for the Bronx. So, there'll be a really clear handoff here.

But look, on the question of change that we've tried to create. I just have to say this quickly, the Chancellor and I fundamentally both agree in changing education in this city, in the name of equity, which is why we tried to change the specialized high school admissions. We put a lot out there to try and get that done. That was rejected by Albany. I think that was a huge mistake. Specialized high schools are just not representative of the city. We have been changing a number of things. Our school diversity advisory group offered a whole host of recommendations. We implemented almost every one of them immediately. The one we needed more work on was Gifted and Talented. We've announced that that old system is going to be

phased out immediately in September. There'll be a brand-new system, much more inclusive. We're changing "screen schools," it's been an area of real concern, we've already announced changes, more are coming. We've agreed, intensely on what we need to do. We sometimes have to figure out how to do it, and everyone had different opinions around the table of how to do it, but we all have agreed on the direction and we've moved in that direction consistently.

**Lehrer:** Talk about the replacement for Chancellor Carranza, Meisha Porter.

**Mayor:** Meisha Ross Porter, amazing New York City story, and she will make history as the first African American woman to be chancellor of the nation's largest school system. She is a born and bred New Yorker, started out in Southeast Queens, moved to the Bronx in her youth, and decided she would become a teacher like her mom and her aunt before her, and then decided she would be a teacher in the Bronx where the need was greatest, and she never sought to go any place, but where kids were having the greatest struggles, and experiencing the horrible challenges of economic injustice and structural racism – she wanted to be there, so she built her whole career in the Bronx. She was seen early on as a rising star, became a renowned principal of a school that she helped to start as part of the Urban Assembly Initiative. And then Chancellor Farina, my first Chancellor saw her talent, and made her a superintendent. My second Chancellor Richard Carranza made her Executive Superintendent in charge of all the schools in the Bronx, and Brian, you'll appreciate this. If you just took the schools and the students in the Bronx, and it was its own school system, it would be alone, one of the largest school systems in America, and Meisha Ross Porter has done an amazing job running our schools in the Bronx. So, she's ready, and she comes in with a really strong sense of social justice, but also, she's been an academic star. She's helped improve graduation rates. She's helped close the achievement gap and bring up students of color. She's shown consistently that she can get academic results and move social justice, simultaneously.

**Lehrer:** So, one more question on this before we go to the phones. Middle schools reopened for hybrid-learning yesterday, as you know, and I see you also hinted that you might open another opt-in for kids who had previously chosen remote-only. People who have wanted more opt-in periods all along so they can make personal judgements based on changing conditions just as the City and State make policy-level judgements based on changing conditions, and I'm told that at the news conference this morning, Incoming Chancellor Porter said she's ready to go on high schools. So, what can you tell us about high schools and a new opt-in window?

**Mayor:** Yeah, and you said something powerful there, as I answer the question, I want to just note your frame, Brian, that, you know, people want maximum personal choice, and at the same time we as leaders have to think about, you know, the whole collective. We have to think about the whole city. So, I'm someone who my kids went to New York City public schools. I understand parents would like choice at all times, but in the middle of a crisis and a pandemic, we've had to create some ground rules that made sense. So, here's what I can say: high schools, we're going to have a plan to reopen high schools, and you'll be hearing about that very soon. Our new Chancellor is adamant that kids need to be back in school. She adamantly wants to open high schools as quickly as possible and wants to see the entire system back in September, and I know she will achieve that.

In terms of opt-in what I've said publicly, and I want to make it real clear is I would love to do it, but we're not there yet. Another opt-in window would require some additional improvement in

the health care situation and obviously the ability to accommodate more kids in the buildings. We are not there yet. Now, important – one more fact – important point yesterday, in addition to opening middle schools, we had our highest day for vaccinations ever—

**Lehrer:** Multiple high school teachers have told me they feel that they are more at risk than the lower grade teachers, because the high school students will always take off their masks as soon as they leave the school building.

**Mayor:** Well, I've asked our healthcare leadership, consistently – Dr. Varma, Dr. Chokshi, Dr. Katz, you know, is it time to take the next step and bring back high school? They absolutely adamantly believe it is because of the level of vaccinations. As I said – yesterday, 61,000 people were vaccinated in New York City, highest number we've ever had in a single day, because we know there's going to be more and more vaccinations with each passing week, and I mean, the rate's going to increase steadily. We do see the level of coronavirus starting to go down in the city, substantially. So, but more importantly, the gold standard we've set in the schools. We've proven we keep schools safe, those same standards of course work for high school students, they've worked for adults, for God's sakes, in all of our schools. That's why we've seen such safety for all the teachers and staff in our schools. So, now it's time. We are definitely ready.

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

**Question:** Hey Brian. I spoke to you a few times over the pandemic and I'm a really big fan. Hi, Mr. Mayor, I've lived in New York for ten years and I have to say there's something to the pandemic has been less than optimal. In the last nine months I've lost my grandmother and aunt to COVID-19. Last Monday, I felt slightly under the weather with body aches and began to isolate and fears that I had COVID although I do not have a known exposure. I continued to isolate and tested Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, because luckily my insurance covers testing at 100 percent and any hospitalization I might need. I received negative tests on all PCRs until the Thursday's tests, which I only received back on Saturday. The new policy for stadiums that would have allowed me to attend an event at Barclays or Madison Square Garden and potentially in fact, 10,000 people that weekend while actually being positive for COVID despite having many negative PCRs, luckily I didn't and remained isolated. And on Tuesday I was actually hospitalized due to neurological symptoms and saw a man die and many other sick people getting treatment in our hospitals from our amazing health care workers who are also experiencing PTSD to the pandemic. Why are you – why is the window going to be 72 hours for this test to allow people to congregate in the tens of thousands. This goes against what we know about COVID, infection, and how testing works as you can hear from my study – from my one-person study and probably all of the data you have here.

**Lehrer:** Well, Lauren, thank you so much. And just for our listeners, when she refers to 72 hours, I think people will be allowed into these facilities as long as they've tested negative for COVID in the last 72 hours and so, in addition to everything else in her story, Mr. Mayor, she's asking is that too big a window of time to be safe?

**Mayor:** Okay. First of all, most importantly, Lauren, I'm so sorry, you know, everything you just said what the losses you've had in your family, but also everything that you've been through and, and you're right, and you've seen a lot of trauma there. This is an everyday thing we have to grapple with. This is something that's happening with so many New Yorkers. So, to your

question, look I will frame this by saying I believe in local control and local decision making and we don't have that right now in the State of New York. The State of New York made this decision about the stadium. We are going to do everything we can to implement it safely. Now, to be fair, there are some real safeguards in place in terms of social distancing, mask wearing, people only being in their own groups. You know, there's a lot in place, and I know each of the sports facilities and the entertainment venues are all taken really seriously the safety standards. But this was a decision made by the State, what I've said is we're going to watch this very carefully and we're going to be led by the data and science, and if it's working, that's great, and if it's not working, we're going to be very vocal about it. I'm certainly – I've had to challenge the State so many times in this crisis. I'll do it again if I have to. But, you know, we are hoping that with all the precautions put in place that this is the right and safe way to do things and we'll know a lot more, obviously, as we go along.

**Lehrer:** Christine in Kensington, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Christine.

**Question:** Hi, my name is Christine. I am an essential worker working in a non-profit that deals with people with, you know, mental health issues and things like that, and so we were able to get our first vaccine in January. Yesterday my second vaccine was moved from George Westinghouse in Flatbush Avenue to the 49 Flatbush Avenue Extension location. I arrived at a quarter to one for my two o'clock appointment. The lines were going all the way around the block, all the way around Flatbush Avenue –Tillery around the corner, six blocks away, and they were not honoring appointment times. You know, I got a manager there who said they're coming first come, first serve, and I'm like, this is my second shot. I need to get this one in a certain amount of time, and you know, I had to get on the back of this line. So needless to say, I didn't, because it was going to be over three hours. I later find out that a friend took her father to Abraham Lincoln High School down on Ocean Parkway and also had a several hours wait and another friend went to the Army Terminal also with a several hours wait. Is there some reason why people that were getting second shots were getting mixed in maybe with the first shots yesterday?

**Mayor:** It's an important question and I'm concerned for sure about what you're saying. Christine, what site was that where you said they said first come, first serve, because that is not the way things are supposed to be done. Where was that?

**Question:** Okay. My location was 49 Flatbush Avenue Extension, which was a New York Health and Hospital appointment. They were not even escorting the elderly people with canes and walkers to get to the front of the line. They were also waiting on this big, long line. You know, and to be told by a POD manager there that they're letting people come first come, first serve was really disturbing.

**Mayor:** Yeah, it is disturbing. Okay, this is first of all, I want to thank you for raising this because I got to hear things exactly as they are, and this is not acceptable. First of all, no one should ever be saying first come, first serve. That's not how it works. It's by appointment. We have said from the very first moment, I said as recently as, again, this week that everything has to be appointment, by appointment, or we would have huge lines that are not good for people's health and wellbeing. So, I need to find out if someone is doing the wrong thing there and I assure you it will be corrected, and they will be corrected quickly. We should be escorting folks who are dealing with special challenges, particularly elderly folks, or anyone with a special need.

We should be escorting them in and assisting. That's been the standard. So, I want to know what's going on at this site. We'll address it aggressively, but in general, to the point about lines, we do not want long lines and say the least. We do not want people to be put through that, especially in cold weather. We want it, in fact, the whole idea of the appointment systems to avoid the lines. Some people are coming very early on purpose, and that is creating a problem with the lines because – and I understand why people doing it because they want to be very, very safe – but that is one of the things is contributing, even where we have things moving very smoothly with the scheduled times, a lot of folks are coming hours early just to be sure. But no, I got deal with this site and I will, I'll follow up with the folks involved to make sure we correct it. And, Christine, please, if you're having any trouble getting your second shot, please leave your information with WNYC and our team will follow up with you today and make sure you get that appointment.

**Lehrer:** Another vaccination question. I'm sure you know the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is under FDA review today. It might get emergency use authorization very soon. That vaccine is said to be 89 percent effective against severe disease, which would be more or less on par with Pfizer and Moderna, but the efficacy drops by a quarter for moderate disease, which can lead to chronic or long-haul symptoms. I know you've pledged to release general data on how many vaccine doses are going to each of the city sites. Will you also release once the Johnson & Johnson presumably begins to be distributed how many Pfizer, Moderna, and J & J doses are going to each site so that we know everyone has equal access to what they might consider the best vaccine? Is there a question of equity in your mind if the J & J vaccine comes out and it is somewhat less effective?

**Mayor:** No, the honest truth is known, and I feel that because of the conversations I've had with our health care leadership who are adamant that for the purpose of what really matters, keeping people alive, the stopping people from having the most serious impact from COVID, keeping people out of the hospital, that Johnson & Johnson is proving to be just as good as Moderna or Pfizer. So, we're making real life decisions here about how to protect people and the notion that, from everything we're seeing so far, you're right, there's additional approvals going on right now, but our doctors are adamant that any effort to portray Johnson & Johnson as lesser is misguided because of the whole job one here is to save lives and protect people from ending up in the hospital, or, you know, -

**Lehrer:** Even if it allows moderate disease that are short of hospitalization?

**Mayor:** Yes, because we are – look, it's a wartime dynamic. Johnson & Johnson, this is a single shot vaccine. So, we're getting more done more quickly for folks. And it does not require as much refrigeration, which means we're going to be able to get it to a lot of places and use it more effectively. No, this is – in a wartime dynamic our job is to save lives and our job is to protect. I guarantee you, I've talked to a lot of senior citizens and I fought for their right to be vaccinated, and they have told me how much fear they lived in, but once they even got the first shot, which is presumably about 50 percent efficacy with Pfizer, Moderna, just the first shot, knowing there was some protection meant the world of difference. Johnson & Johnson is going to give people a lot of protection. So, I don't want people being – my humble, but blunt advice is, you know, don't replace your own personal judgment for the judgment of doctors. Our doctors are being really clear and really consistent that this is going to work and work on the things that matter most. And we've got to get people vaccinated –

**Lehrer:** And one other –

**Mayor:** So, we'll be using it. We're certainly happy to be transparent about how and when we're using it, but we're going to be using it because it's going to allow us to vaccinate a lot more people.

**Lehrer:** One other health care equity question relevant to the caller from Kensington, sent in by a health care worker who lives in a hard hit part of the city says, 'why not open up the vaccines to all people of all ages in the largely Black and Brown and hard hit communities, maybe by ZIP code, that way we might be able to get herd immunity quicker where we most need it, partly because more people in those communities will be vaccinated plain and simple. And partly because as more people get it, they'll spread the word about how to get access. And it might also reduce vaccine hesitancy as the word spreads.' Have you ever thought about doing it that way?

**Mayor:** Thought about it, but don't agree that it's the right approach. Look, I want to say to your caller that the underlying concept that people will be moved by word of mouth, I agree with entirely. There is definitely a kind of momentum question of as more and more people in the community get vaccinated and have a good experience with it, they talk to their friends, neighbors, family members, people start to have more faith. That is true. Herd immunity, I am far less sold on from having talked to our health care leadership throughout, who certainly do not buy into the notion that that's achievable anytime soon, given the sheer numbers. But I think the most important point, to answer the question, Brian, is we have a massive amount of demand, growing amount of demand in communities of color, amongst the folks who are already eligible. Remember, now about five million New Yorkers are eligible because once we took all the folks in the first categories of public servants and health care workers, and then you added all folks 65 and older, and then you added everyone with serious pre-existing conditions, it's now added up to most New Yorkers are eligible. It's going to be quite a while before we can meet that demand. And what we're seeing in African-American and Latino communities in particular is demand is steadily increasing. So, we've got lots and lots of people who want the vaccination, especially among the seniors. I think it's a better approach to address that demand. That will also create momentum, that will also create word of mouth. And then as we've made more success there, start to open it up to more and more communities, and more and more age groups.

**Lehrer:** Amir in Williamsburg, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Amir.

**Question:** Hi, good morning, Brian and Mayor de Blasio. Thank you for taking my call. You know, my question brings us back to the topic that you began your call with today, Mr. Mayor, about your vision of education is one married to social justice. And I'm a little worried that we may be falling short because the Education Department and the NYPD is planning a \$20 million investment, and hire nearly 500 NYPD officers to police, brutalize, and criminalize kids in our schools. And this all but will turn the school-to-prison pipeline gateway into a gaping black hole. And this relates to another issue that's come up in the news lately, where your administration is defying the Board of Corrections and is punishing young adults in solitary cells for up to 17 hours a day. How does this approach really underscore the need to listen to stories about the violence trauma and just the brutalization that police and prisons and jails cause in our communities, targeting kids, especially Black kids, other youth of color, LGBTQ youth, who get thrown into this school-to-prison pipeline?

**Mayor:** Well, Amir, look, I can – besides the obvious fact that you have a strong belief system about these issues, which I appreciate, I can tell the questions very much from the heart, but I will tell you that I don't agree on some of the way you're framing this. And I want to be honest about it. Where I think we have immense agreement is on the last point that we need to end punitive segregation. And again, I understand as a progressive, as someone who comes out of movement politics, movements will always push for the next goal and the next goal and the next goal. But, you know, before I came along, punitive segregation, solitary confinement was being used wantonly in this city by Mayor Bloomberg, by Mayor Giuliani. It was a norm. We ended punitive segregation for younger folks who were in our jails. Then we ended it for more folks and then more folks. And now I've said this year, we will be ending punitive segregation entirely in New York City jails. So, I'm very clear, and we will be very shortly finishing that plan and putting it into action. And we've proven that you don't, that – first of all, I think punitive segregation, I think solitary confinement is not the way to change behavior. I think it sets people back. I think it makes matters worse. I don't think it's humane. I don't think it's about bringing people to the place of redemption, if you will, that we're trying to achieve in a correction system, which is why we've been steadily moving away from it. And we will end it once and for all. And we can do that while keeping people safe. Everyone who's in our jail system who works there and is incarcerated.

On the question of the schools. I just fundamentally have a different understanding. I don't know about your experiences. I'm here, I'm going to speak about my experiences. I've been a parent in New York City public schools, and I've worked on education issues now for over 20 years, including having been a school board member when we had local school boards. I've talked to more parents than I could count. They want safety in the schools. They want it to be fair. They want it to be humane, but they want safety. School safety agents who are overwhelmingly people of color, particularly women of color, do this work, not in the way you suggest, with all due respect. They do not brutalize. But if you talk to actual parents about their experiences with school safety agents, what you're going to hear is about people who look out for kids, try and keep them out of trouble, work with kids a lot, nurture kids a lot. I'm not saying that everyone has done everything perfectly. And I've actually led with my team changing school safety years ago, before recent debates. We changed the power structure within school safety to emphasize the power of the educational leaders. We ended a lot of the practices like the use of restraints, the way they have been done again for decades. We ended that. But we do need school safety agents to keep kids safe. There has been a historic problem of crime and violence in our schools that, thank God, has been greatly reduced in recent years, but it's not over. So, there's a right role for school safety agents. That role is being transferred to the Department of Education. But I don't think it's fair to –

**Lehrer:** And on the number – we just have 30 seconds left –

**Mayor:** [Inaudible] to finish, Brian. It's not fair to say that these women of color are brutalizing students. That's not accurate. And the specific decisions on whether to add more agents have not been made yet. That's just not a final decision. And when we make a decision, we're going to talk about how we also invest in more mental health services in those schools. Something we've announced already.

**Lehrer:** Who makes that decision and when?

**Mayor:** I present a budget in April and we ultimately negotiate it with the City Council in June.

**Lehrer:** Mr. Mayor, thanks as always. Have a great weekend. Talk to you next week.

**Mayor:** Take care, Brian.

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