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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON MSNBC'S MORNING JOE

Willie Geist: Welcome back to Morning Joe. Beautiful live picture 8:25 in the morning of New York City New York, once again now delaying its plan to resume in-person classes in its public schools. Mayor Bill de Blasio says he made the last minute decision after meeting with union leaders who've been warning that schools are not yet ready to open – and the Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio joins us now. Mayor de Blasio, good to have you with us this morning. I'm sure you've heard from outraged parents. They've moved from frustration to outrage about this. So, explain the decision, why the 11th hour change?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Willie, look, let's put this in perspective. We are opening the largest school system in the nation and we are opening. In fact, on Monday, we're going to start with our early childhood education kids, our special education kids. Next week, there's going to be almost 90,000 kids in New York City classrooms. The following week, hundreds of thousands more. We're going to be over half-a-million kids in classrooms in the next few weeks. So, I – look, I was a public school parent here in New York City. I understand it is frustrating that we've – we need to get it right and it's going to be hard to do in the middle of this pandemic, but we're getting there, and we are going to have our schools open for our parents and our kids. And that's really what I think matters here.

Geist: Mr. Mayor, you've cited safety concerns, ventilation in some of these older school buildings, a teacher shortage as well. These are all problems you knew were coming, so it's fair to ask, what were you guys doing all summer? Why did all of this just dawn on you now?

Mayor: Well, Willie, that's – look, all summer long we've been preparing – in fact, ventilation is an example where so much work was done over the summer to improve the ventilation in the classrooms. We set literally a global gold standard for what it would take to bring back schools. And I want you to understand this, no school system in the world, that I know of, has layered all these pieces on top of each other. Every adult and student has to be wearing a mask at all times, social distancing. And you're talking about New York City public school classrooms that's going to have ten kids in it, you're talking about constant cleaning. The things we're doing here are literally taking the best examples from around the world and combining them into one health and safety plan. It takes a lot of work. The staffing is something we realized we had to add more and it's going to happen. And schools are opening in New York City and it's going to be a big part of how New York City comes back because, Willie, you see it, there's more and more people coming back to work, there's more and more people on the streets and on the subways, things are happening in this city and we're going to be the largest school system, by far in America, that actually opens up schools. And kids need it. Here's the thing, Willie, you could do remote education, it's easier, it's by far less helpful to our kids and our families. If kids can't be in school, can't be with a teacher helping them, can't get the support they deserve, can't see their

friends, can't learn the most effective way, it sets them back and we're not going to let that happen.

Geist: So, if you're talking about retrofitting schools and fixing ventilation systems and hiring, perhaps, thousands of teachers and training them to get this program up and running, how are you going to do that in the next eight, ten, 12 days? As you say, the plan goes out as far as October 1st. That's only a week-and-a-half away. How do you solve these massive problems in that amount of time? Are you going to have to keep kicking this can down the road?

Mayor: No. I'll tell you, Willie, the teachers that we need to bring in, several thousand of them already work for our school system. They're being reassigned to schools right now. We have thousands of substitute teachers who have worked in our school system. They're signed up, they're ready, they're certified. We have education students, students who are planning to be teachers who want to start doing this work. We're going to be bringing them in. We have adjunct professors from our city university system who are idled right now. We're going to be bringing them in. There's an amazing pool of talent that wants to teach our kids and doesn't want to give up on them. And I want to remind you, when you only have remote learning, it exacerbates the disparities in our society. It means kids that are having a tougher time, kids that have more trouble learning, don't have that adult support from a proven educator, it actually takes the problems in our society and makes them worse. We're not going to let it happen. So, yeah, it's taking some extra work to get it done, but the talent is there, and we are opening our schools.

Geist: And parents agree with you about remote learning. It's brutal. It's hard on families. It's hard on kids, but that's the point. They want to know – you're just now talking about hiring education students and bringing in new teachers, why weren't you thinking about that in March, April, May, June, and all of summer?

Mayor: Willie, clearly those things were being worked on all summer. As I said, a lot of talent has been brought in. This is a very complex equation because we're asking principals and educators to figure out how to do in-person, how to support kids who are part-time in-person, part-time at home, how to support kids who are only at home. It's never been done before. It's unprecedented. And, look, as with every huge endeavor, as we've been doing it, we've been finding some things that needed more work, but we're going to do it. And we're going to do it with health and safety first. I think this is a crucial point. We're going to make sure these pieces are in place. And if it takes a few more days to make sure that all of the bases are covered, then it's worth it because once we're up and running well over half-a-million kids going to school, nothing like that happening in America. Yesterday morning, Willie, when I looked at the level of positivity in this city, meaning the infection level for the coronavirus – 0.63 percent yesterday morning, 0.63 percent. The reason we're even having this discussion is because the people of New York City have fought back this disease heroically so we could be one of the only places to open up our school system on a massive level. And by opening our school system, it's going to be part of the bigger rebirth of New York City. So, yeah, there's been some things we have to fix, no question, and I'm responsible for all of it and I take that responsibility, but we are going to get there and it's going to be a crucial piece of why New York's comeback comes back strong.

Geist: So, it's the uncertainty, as you know, that has parents outraged, a single parent or two parents who've been trying to figure out child care or how to maybe have somebody cover their shift at work so that they can be home with their child who's not in school right now, can you say

with certainty now that these dates that you've laid out will hold for them so that they can start planning their lives?

Mayor: Yeah. Again, I was a public school parent. I remember when there was a snow day or any other disruption, it's very tough on parents to make new plans. So, I feel a lot of empathy, but I also know, and I've heard it from so many parents, Willie, that they want us to have the kids back in school. If we wanted to take the easy way and cheat our kids, we could have gone all remote a long time ago. We're taking the harder path, but it's the right path. So, I do feel for parents who are having to make new plans for the next few days, but then we're up and running. Then they have their kids in school a lot of the time. And that's what they've been asking for. A vast majority from day one, we've been surveying them nonstop, the vast majority from day one said, we want to see schools open again and that's what's going to happen.

Geist: So, again, for those parents who are watching, you'll guarantee that by October 1st, all the public school students who want to be in school will be in school?

Mayor: Willie, I need the health care situation to cooperate always, but I want to tell you, I think based on everything I'm seeing, based on how well New Yorkers have worn those masks and done the social distancing and fought back the disease, really in a heroic way, I feel very confident about that date.

Geist: Do you think, Mayor, there's any chance that you just bail on this altogether and go all remote for the school year? Which is what some parents at this point are saying, that's where it looks like it's headed.

Mayor: Yeah, no, Willie, if it was headed there, then why are 90,000 kids going to be in classrooms next week? Come on. We have an early childhood education system in New York City that's the envy of the country. I'm proud of it. We started Pre-K for All. We didn't have that before. Every kid gets pre-K education for free. Now tens of thousands of three-year-olds get a quality education for free. All of those programs are up and running Monday, Willie, Monday. Special-ed kids in school, Monday. 90,000 kids in the course of the next week, hundreds of thousands more the following week, this is happening. It's happening, literally, Monday morning. And that's what people need to watch. Watch the facts on the ground. We're going to show you this school system moving forward.

Joe Scarborough: Mr. Mayor, we've had you on a good bid through the years and we've talked about crime rates being historically low. I know I had you on after I read a New York Times article saying you have to go back to 1950 to find a time when crime was as low as it was a few years ago. Now crime is exploding, gun violence up 166 percent in August, shootings up, murders up. Let me ask, obviously, there are not only a lot of new Yorkers concerned about this, but also a lot of people that are going to want to travel to New York on business, for tourism when the country gets opened back up completely. What are you doing to drive these numbers down?

Mayor: Well, Joe, thank you for acknowledging what happened before this pandemic and before this perfect storm, because what happened in this city is there weren't jobs, there weren't schools, there weren't houses of worship, you name it. Things came to the point where everything that anchored society, wasn't there. And people went through such pain and frustration, and the crime levels did go up. But now we see the NYPD working with communities, fighting it back. A week

ago, the NYPD set a record for the last 25 years, the most gun arrests in a single week. So, they're fighting back. Communities are out there working with the NYPD. We've been through a very tough time. This city was the epicenter of the crisis, but New York City never gives up. And, Joe, I know you appreciate how great this place is and how great his people are. No one gave up. We went through hell and now we are coming back and you see more and more activity on our streets. You see more and more jobs coming back. You see the biggest school system in America coming to life, starting on Monday. Look, I'm very convinced we're going to turn the tide on all these things. The NYPD never stopped fighting crime. And the people of the city, even after everything we went through, they've been joining with the NYPD out there on patrol in their own communities, supporting the NYPD, showing that they are going to take back their communities from the very, very few people that do violence. So, what worked for us all those previous years, the same strategies are going to prove effective again. We're going to beat back crime again in New York City.

Scarborough: Yeah. So, anybody who's watched this show for the best ten years certainly knows that I and Reverend Al and other people have been critical of how young Black men are treated differently than young white men, how young Black women are treated differently than young white women by police officers, that there is a cultural problem. So, let's just say, yeah, that is a – there is a problem with systemic racism that needs to be corrected. At the same time we can hold two competing thoughts in our minds at the same time because God gave us that type of brain – I'm allowed to ask, and New Yorkers are allowed to ask you this question, do you have cops' backs? Can a guy put on his badge, can a woman put on her badge at night, go out, do a dangerous job, not know if she or he are ever going to see their family again, and can they do their job without fear of, you know, if they do it the right way, without fear of not having support of you and not having the support of other politicians?

Mayor: Well, Joe, we can think about two crucial issues at the same time. You're right. And I appreciate the question and I know how much you care about the city. Look, I want to give you an example, which I think answers your question. A few weeks ago, I was in Southeast Queens, one of our biggest African American communities. I was with a minister who happens to be a close protege of Reverend Al Sharpton. The minister was holding a prayer event to support the local police. And he said, 'look, I'm a social justice guy and I want to see changes in the NYPD, but we also need our officers to protect us and we need to work with them.' And I spent time with officers at that event and very powerfully, I talked to a Latino officer, I talked to a Black officer, I talked to a white officer, and what they said to me was the exact same thing. When they walk the streets in Southeast Queens people thank them for the work they're doing. People want to work with them. People want respect. Joe, you're right. There is a culture problem in American policing. There is systemic racism that must be weeded out, but you know what? In communities of color in this city, people want the police to be there for them and they want to have a relationship with the police, but they need it to be grounded in respect. Actually, when you talk to everyday cops out on the beat and everyday New Yorkers, they will say, that's both what they want. So, I believe that's where we can go and we will go. I really believe that. I've seen it with my own eyes.

Scarborough: I think it is fascinating, I've seen this in articles in the New York Times, I've seen it in articles in the Seattle Times, I've seen it across the country over the past month or so – it's interesting that representatives, politicians in predominantly Black neighborhoods that have

been, unfortunately, fighting crime, especially over the past three or four months, they are quoted, especially, I'm sure you saw the New York Times article where they're saying we don't want some woke white people telling us that we don't need more cops on the street that we want to defund the police. There's even, you know, some complaints about other leaders in gentrified neighborhoods. Very easy for them to say, yeah, let's defund the police, let's cut the number of cops in schools or the number of cops that are on the street protecting these neighborhoods. What do you say to those Black representatives? What have you said to those Black representatives that are telling you, we need cops in our schools, we need cops on the streets, don't defund the police, support the police?

Mayor: Joe, I want to tell you what you said, I've heard constantly out in communities around the city. I mentioned Southeast Queens, that was Reverend Phil Craig, but I had another experience even during the height of the protests. I was out in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn with Council Member Robert Cornegy. He talked about protesters who weren't from the community coming through. And they had their own ideas of how to approach protests and community leaders said, you know what, this is our neighborhood, it's one of the proudest, largest African American neighborhoods in all of New York City – Bed-Stuy. And they said, this is our neighborhood. We will determine how the protest goes and we'll determine how to work with our police in our community. We respect outsiders who come with good hearts and want to support the community, but you also have to believe in self-determination. If you really are serious about changing structural racism in America, then you have to acknowledge and respect self-determination for communities. And what I hear from clergy, elected officials, community leaders in communities of color, all over New York City, I talk to them all the time, I hear the exact same thing – of course, we need our police and we want to see our police visible and present in our community, and we want policing to keep changing. We instituted neighborhood policing to create an actual, respectful dialogue between police and community, to actually get people to know each other. Because that's not what was happening in New York City before this administration.

It used to be cops got sent to any community, changed around, never got to know people. And it was like a foreign presence in the community rather than of and by and for the neighborhood. So, neighborhood policing says your officers stay, they get to know people, first name basis, give them their cell number, give them their email. And what I hear because of neighborhood policing is officers say, you know, people come up to me in the community and they tell me where there's a problem, they tell me who has a gun, they tell me that something is about to go down so we can stop it and keep people safe. They thank me for what I'm doing for them. That is the kind of policing we need to build. And we can, but if you're talking about what neighborhood leaders actually want, they want good and fair and just policing, but they definitely want police there for them.

Scarborough: Gene Robinson with the Washington Post is with us. And Gene has a question for you –

Gene Robinson: Mayor de Blasio, I want to get back to the virus in the schools for a second, because when you do open the schools, confident that you will, you'll have hundreds of thousands of students coming back together, and there will be cases. So, what is the procedure when there is a case in a classroom, does that classroom shut down or does it continue? Does the school shut down? How do you contact trace? What is the procedure?

Mayor: Gene, it is a foundational question. I thank you for it. I mean, first of all, yes, Monday next week, about 90,000 kids back in our schools. So, this is going to be the real thing and what we have, we call it the situation room. It's an apparatus where we have our Health officials, Schools officials, our Test and Trace team. We have over 4,000 Test and Trace team members here in New York City, able to move very quickly if a school community needs it. So, a single classroom, Gene, they're all on a kind of pod system or cohort system. So, one classroom has only a few teachers who will ever be in front of that classroom. God forbid, there's a case, a confirmed positive case, all those kids, any teachers who are with them all go home for two weeks. But the rest of the school keeps going. If you have multiple cases, there's then an investigation. If it's different classrooms, there's an investigation. Schools shut down for at least 24 hours. Full investigation, determine the sources. If they are isolated situations, school keeps going, but you pull out any individual who was exposed. If, God forbid, a bigger situation, you might have to close down a school longer. But what we really believe with this kind of pod approach that's worked in much of the world, if we see a specific case, we're generally going to be able to isolate it and take only a few people out and keep them home. The rest of the school can keep going, but we're talking about the reason why everyone's wearing a mask, everyone's socially distanced, a lot of focus on cleaning, a lot of focus on ventilation. This is not going to look like any school you've ever seen before because it's built on a health and safety model for this pandemic to fight this pandemic.

Geist: Mayor de Blasio, one last question, before we let you go. As someone who, as you know, lives and works in New York City, I love the place, these headlines that I see that, you know, New York is dead, are preposterous. We all know that, but there's no denying when you walk around the city, that things feel different, that there are a lot of empty storefronts. You can see it in the rental rates in apartments. You can see it in the real estate market, obviously in the unemployment numbers, quality of life matters. You got that letter from a group of CEOs last week asking you to do something about quality of life in New York City. So, how do you respond to people who say, 'I love New York, but I have to say it does feel like it's slipping a bit.' What do you say to that?

Mayor: Willie, I want to start where you began. People who are going to bet against New York City – I mean, every time people have said New York City can't come back, they've been wrong. Every time. 60s, 70s, millions of people left. Guess what? New York City came back strong. A whole new generation of people came here. A lot of people stood and fought. New York City was left for dead. Came back. Came back after 9/11, came back after Hurricane Sandy, came back after the Great Recession. How many times are we going to go to this movie? New York City's greatness. The greatness of our people is eternal. So, yeah, we're going to come back and we will come back stronger because we're actually going to focus on a lot of the disparities that this crisis dredged up, things I've been talking about for a long time that we need to address. So, when you talk about quality of life – look, Willie, how do you define quality of life? We have to bring back our schools because that's quality of life for millions of parents and family members and kids. And we're doing that. Jobs are coming back, more and more people on the streets, more and more people taking mass transit. We've got work to do to fight back crime, but we're doing it because we have the finest police force in the country. We have work to do to keep city streets clean, but we need resources too, Willie. This is the challenge, no stimulus from Washington to help cities and states. We all thought that would be months ago. We're still waiting. We need

help from our State government. Haven't gotten that. But we're fighting through it. And here's the thing about New York City. We never give up. We don't know how to give up. It's our DNA, New Yorkers are going to fight through this, and they literally will come back stronger because every single time they have. So, real issues to confront and we will. But, Willie, don't bet against New York City.

Geist: I do not. Mayor Bill de Blasio, thanks so much for your time this morning. We'll be keeping a close eye along with a lot of other parents on those schools. Thanks for being with us.

Mayor: Thank you.

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