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NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 10, 2020, 7:00 PM

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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we told you just before the break, the official first day of school is just over four weeks away, but there remain many concerns about safety and a lot more questions than answers about how it will all work. But despite that, the majority of public school families have indicated that they want their children to return to the classroom for at least part of the week. Joining me now from the Blue Room inside City Hall to talk about that and much more is Mayor de Blasio. Welcome, very good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to see you, Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: I'm just fine, thanks. The big question around this school opening plan, Mr. Mayor, for me is, when it was time to require masking, social distancing, the closing of houses of worship and so forth, it wasn't put to a referendum, it wasn't – you know, the public wasn't asked to weigh in on it, really. It was just required because that's what the public health authorities told us we needed to do. In this very important case, it seems like we're allowing families to dictate what the city is going to do.

Mayor: No, that – I understand, it's a fair question, that you might interpret it that way, but that's not at all what's happening, Errol. We needed to know what families wanted to have a sense of how to proceed. For example, if the vast majority of families wanted to keep their kids at home, that would be very, very important information. But knowing that overwhelmingly basically three-quarters of families wanted their kids in the classroom setting, knowing it was much better for the kids in terms of education, in terms of development health, you name it, we then asked the question where does this fit in all the other things we're doing? And you've seen, there are some things we've – I've been clear, the State's been clear we won't do. We're not doing indoor bars and restaurants. We're not doing anything we think might spread the disease unduly. But the difference with education is that given how central it is to everything we need for our kids and to our society in general, meaning a whole lot of people depend on it for their kids, the question was, could we do it safely? And we had thrown in the kitchen sink – this is the polar opposite from March where this thing came up on us out of nowhere. Now, we've been able to lay in all sorts of health and safety plans so we could do this the right way. So, no, this has been about, of course, what do the people need and what the people want, but, much more importantly, could we do it safely?

Louis: Does it give you any pause when you see that – you know, Los Angeles, all distance learning; Chicago, all distance learning; you know, Houston, Atlanta, your buddy, Mr. Carvalho in Miami, all distance learning, at least initially, when the kids come back in the fall. New York seems to be really charting a very different path.

Mayor: We are. We have a very different health situation and that's where it all comes from. Look, we were the epicenter and we fought back and the people of this city did it, Errol. The masks, the social distancing, the shelter in place – we earned our way back as a city. And now, we've had extraordinary consistency over two months. I mean, that's a long time – for two months, we've had pretty much the same exact reality, well under three percent infection rate and the ability to go through phases one through four and keep going in terms of restart. So, when you think about all that, we're unlike almost any city in the country and that's what's allowing us to keep moving forward. But I've been clear, we need to stay below that three percent infection level. If we go above that for seven days or more, I'm not going to open schools. Now, again, I feel very good right now, but it all comes back to the fact that our health situation has stabilized in a way almost nowhere else in the country has experienced.

Louis: When was the last time you spoke with the union president, Michael Mulgrew, about all of this? His social media presence and other public statements seem to suggest that he's very, very wary about the plan you're putting together.

Mayor: Well, Michael and I go back a long way. We spoke last week. We're getting together this week. Our teams talk all the time. He's talking all the time with the Chancellor, with the First Deputy Mayor. Look, I think he's raising important concerns and his job is to raise the concerns his members have, but he's also been working, his whole team's been working with us, as have the members and leaders of CSA, representing the administrators. All of the educator unions are working with us to try and figure out how to do this appropriately, and safely, and in the best interest of kids. That doesn't mean they're not going to raise concerns and critiques, but there's a daily conversation about how to get it right.

Louis: When you hear from teachers, they're saying, look, we're municipal workers, why are we being called back into what could be a dangerous situation when the Mayor and other agencies are not all coming back into City Hall, the municipal building, and some of the other agencies?

Mayor: Well, I mean, first of all, I don't make any parallel between what I do and what folks on the frontline do. I have tremendous respect for our teachers, our health care workers, our first responders – they're the frontline folks. But, for me, at City Hall – I've been here every day since this crisis started, so have a lot of other people. And, look, our health care workers always stayed by their posts, so did our first responders – we've seen our sanitation workers out there, our parks workers. No, people have really done what was needed for the people of the city. But what has been absolutely true is folks who have those preexisting conditions, we need a methodology for making sure if someone needs that accommodation, they get it. Now, there's a lot of City workers who just want to be at work. They believe in their work. They want to serve people regardless of some of the health issues, but for anyone who needs that accommodation we've allowed that option with our educators. And, obviously, some have applied for that. But the vast majority – about 85 percent – did not, Errol. 85 percent of our workforce, of our educators are going to be on duty at where we need them in the second week of September. That's a very high number, and that certainly says that we have the team we need to provide our kids an education.

Louis: Okay. Fingers crossed with all of that. Let me ask you about the recent blackout and Con Edison, the Governor fuming, threatening to revoke their charter, if necessary. Are we supposed to just kind of wait for the next storm or is there some kind of long-term resiliency plan that the City can draft or commit to or engage in with Con Edison? What's that conversation like?

Mayor: The conversation is always going on. I mean, we learned some painful lessons last summer. There was a brief, brief blackout in Manhattan, but a major one, but much more importantly, what happened in Brooklyn and Flatbush, that whole surrounding area in the summer. And that showed some real gaps in Con Edison's approach, both in terms of the equipment and the communication, the strategy. And what I said last year, I still feel – this is a private company that too often acts like a private company. I mean, you and I both could say, well, they're almost quasi-governmental on one level, but they don't have the accountability a government agency does – they just don't. They don't have the transparency. So, yeah, we've been working with them for the last year to try to make things better compared to last summer, we made some progress, but then along comes this where, yeah, they were thrown a real tough curve ball here, but clearly they were not in the kind of position we would have wanted them to be in. My question remains, why is this being done by a private company? Can a private company even possibly be responsive enough to the people? I'm not sure. I think the bigger conversation, Errol, is, should this be a publicly owned utility that we can hold accountable?

Louis: Well, you don't have enough on your plate now? You want another agency?

Mayor: Well, it could be City. It could be State. It could be something different. But what I'm saying is, what we see – I mean, it's very frustrating. You've said it – what New Yorkers are feeling, I'm feeling. Things happen, they get fixed, but they don't get fixed necessarily quickly. We don't feel – do you feel like they're accountable to you? I don't feel like they're accountable to me or anyone else I know. They'll talk to us, and I respect that there's a lot of good people over there, and they did a lot of tough work this last week, but that's a different question than whether they're accountable to us. The answer is no. A public agency is accountable to the people.

Louis: Okay. Stand by, Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break here. I'll be right back with more from Mayor de Blasio in just a minute.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio who's sitting in the Blue Room right now. And Mr. Mayor, I wanted to get your response to what we heard from the Treasury Secretary, Mr. Mnuchin, suggesting that a financial control board might be an order for New York as was the case when we had the brush with bankruptcy in the 1970's.

Mayor: Well, first of all, it's not the 1970's. New York City is a powerful global economic capital, as recently as February this year, the most jobs in our history. Let's not kid ourselves, all these people talking about the 1970's don't know what the hell they're talking about. There is no comparison. Second of all, I'm not going to listen to some Wall Street titan who clearly is more interested about the finance industry than the people in New York City and a guy who works for Donald Trump on top of that. It's just outrageous. No, the answer is he should do his job, get us a stimulus so we can move forward, restart our economy and do the things we have to do as we've done for decades to make New York City stronger. And Errol just – look, you're going to hear everyone try and make a comparison to a time long gone and everyone who does that is not thinking very hard about the reality of today's New York.

Louis: Well we need a bailout in some ways that's more direct and dollar wise even adjusted for inflation, probably bigger than what was needed back then. But – so, let's talk about the here and now, what's the scenario for New York if there is no federal bailout? Because we've had, you know, sales taxes are down, property taxes are down and are going to continue to fall, I imagine, because a lot of rent is not going to be paid. The landlord's property will be assessed at a lower value. The property values will fall. The property taxes will fall. And, of course, the income tax is down radically. What's the scenario that we – that gets us out of this other than a direct infusion from the federal government?

Mayor: Well, first, we should keep fighting for the stimulus right here and now. There's still a glimmer of hope. We also have to remember election now, 85 days away, and I think that election could lead to a very different reality in Washington and a very different investment in New York City in the country as early as January or February. So, that's not what we need right now, but that's not irrelevant to this discussion. Second Albany, I talked about it today at my press conference, Albany has a chance right now in light of what appears to be an abject failure in Washington to step in, give us the borrowing authority so we can avert layoffs and keep moving forward as a city. That doesn't work, we're moving forward layoffs on October 1st, I don't want to, it's 22,000 employees. I don't want to do that. It would be horrible for them and their families, but that's what we will do to get through if that's our only choice. So, New York City is going to make it through one way or another, but if our federal government or State government would help us, we could do it so much better.

Louis: You know, you say federal government, you say State government, I mean something we've certainly all seen and learned over the years is that it's really in part about individuals right? Like, I see Secretary Mnuchin and you – pull up his biography, he went to school right here in the city, right? I mean he made his fortune in the city. He knows the city. It seems to me that a little bit of finesse, a little bit of the personal touch might perhaps maybe change the conversation. Doesn't necessarily change the politics or change people's vested interests, but some of this has got to be done at that level. Right?

Mayor: I would have liked to have believed that before the Trump administration. I've talked to Secretary Mnuchin, many times. I've talked to Jared Kushner many times. These are both New Yorkers. By the way, I've spoken to the President a bunch of times, he was born in Queens, this is not the politics these guys are dealing with. I mean, let's be clear. Donald Trump has created a Republican Party out of control and now he's being held hostage by these same realities in a sense. He should be providing leadership. He should be standing up and saying, we need this stimulus. That would right there move the US Senate, but he won't do it. So no, it's not about finesse. It's not about being nice to these guys or appealing to their New York City patriotism. They have made their bed in a very different reality. They bought into a very extreme conservatism and now those chickens are coming home to roost. That's just the reality.

Louis: This other question, which is in some ways related, the very wealthy people in New York City, the high income earners, let's call them, I think the last time I looked, these are figures for 2016, the cutoff for the top one percent of income earners in this study was around a little over \$700,000 a year. And those folk – and then within that group, there's about 3,500 people who were paying like, you know, more than a quarter of all of the, the income taxes that you collect. Those folks should – you know, when asked about this, you, you know, you've quoted the Communist Manifesto in this kind of a thing, but those folks are, are an important resource,

right? I mean, surely there's some way that we either go ahead and figure out a way to tax them, if that's the only way you can do it, or again, a different kind of conversation with them?

Mayor: Errol, once upon a time I think there was an assumption of a certain sense of local pride or civic pride among the very wealthy. And I do know some New Yorkers who happened to have done really well, who really care about New York City. There are some individuals I can absolutely say that about, but as a group? No. As a group, let's be real. These are folks who have done very well and their allegiances to themselves and their wealth. They're more and more mobile. They're more and more portable and global than they've ever been. We should not kid ourselves. It's not about if you're nice to them they make a decision to stay. They'll stay if they have personal or, you know, kind of cultural reasons, if you will, they want to stay or family reasons they want to stay. Some will stay because it's the right place for their business, but not because you're nice to them. And we should not let that cloud our judgment about the fact that they should pay their fair share in taxes.

I mean, this is where your question's a fair one, but then it starts to morph into this thing that we hear from too many Democrats, all like, be nice to them, don't alienate them, they might go away, they might take their money with them. That is a really dangerous path, because in fact the wealthy are not paying their fair share in taxes. They haven't for decades. Right now, you've noticed the stock market, wealthy people doing really, really well while working people are suffering. So no, they should be taxed at a much higher level. They do very well being here in New York City. They get a lot of benefit from being here in New York City. We got all looked at in the eye and then let's talk about working people. We got to keep rebuilding the New York City economy, not on the basis of what a few very wealthy people need, but on the basis of what millions of working people need.

Louis: Yeah. Have you had any kind of conversation of this kind with Cuomo? Because the Governor has a very different approach, shall we say, to all of these things.

Mayor: That was one of the great understatements of the year. I've had this conversation with the Governor for years. We just part company. I think this notion that oh, New York City and New York State, you know, we've gone too far. We should be cutting taxes on the wealthy and everything should be about the wealthy and the business community. I think it's a fool's errand. I think the fact is build your whole foundation with working people and the needs of working people. What working people need should be the question, and that's who have sustained New York City in good times and bad, Errol. I mean, for God's sakes, you saw what the city went through in the 70's, the 80's, the 90's, it wasn't the rich people who brought us back. It was working people who stood by their neighborhoods and refused to give in.

Louis: Well, but here again, and this is not about, you know, being "nice to them" but you, you, you remember when labor leaders like the late Victor Gotbaum would talk with the bankers, would reach some kind of accommodation with them, commit union funds in a common path to try and rescue the city because everybody understood that you don't want the city to go belly up, right? I mean, it's not, you know, it's not a sign of weakness to say to people like, look, you've got some ideas and experiences, I've got some ideas and experiences, we've got to rescue this city but before the bottom falls out?

Mayor: I think it was a very different time with a very different cast of characters. There's no question right now labor leaders are coming to the fore and working with us to try and win the stimulus, to try and win borrowing authority from Albany, to find ways that we can avert layoffs, that conversation's happening all the time. There isn't the same kind of group of civically minded local business leaders that we had back then. There are some, I don't want to say for a moment there are not some, but the whole idea here is to recognize, you know, you cannot sit around hoping the private sector is going to save you. That's just not the way it works. What we can do is ask the private sector to help use their influence of Washington to get us a stimulus. Yup. We can ask to help us with some important investments, and for example, purchasing from New York City small businesses to help them come back, that's real. Employing the maximum number of New York City residents as they make their comeback, I know a lot of them are looking at that right now. But the big structural changes we need are not going to come from being nice to rich people. It's going to come from doing the much harder work of changing our political circumstance. We need to fight for change that will reach Washington through the election in November. We need to change the conversation Albany to in fact focus on taxing the wealthy. That's the best way for us to get the resources we need right now, not trying to have nice civic conversations, perfectly respectful of them, but they should be paying their fair share of taxes. That would be actually the best and quickest way to help New York City back on his feet.

Louis: Okay. We're going to leave it there for now. As you remind us every day where you've got the nice little countdown graphics, so we're 85 days away from the election and perhaps that will change the conversation. Thanks so much for joining us. We'll see you next week, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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