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RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOSTS PRESS CONFERENCE AT PS 59 TO KICK OFF THE SECOND YEAR OF PRE-K FOR ALL AND THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

First Lady Chirlane McCray: Good morning!

Audience: Good morning!

First Lady: It's great to be here with all of you for many, many, many reasons. I am so happy to be your first lady, but today I am especially happy, because even though our children, Chiara and Dante, are in college, I still get to experience the first day of school. And there's really nothing like it.

On a day like this, you see a little bit of everything – joy and sadness, hope and fear, laughter and tears – and that's just from the parents.

As I watched the students say goodbye and head into school today, I couldn't help but think about how Bill and I were feeling when we saw Dante off to college a few weeks ago, and how we're going to be feeling in a couple of weeks when Chiara heads off to her senior year in college. It's all – it's all so bittersweet. And I have to admit that Bill and I did shed some tears when Dante left. But more than anything, Bill and I are just so proud of the young people that we have raised – the young adults.

Every parent should have the chance to experience that feeling, to see their child step off into the wider world with all the tools he or she needs to succeed. And that means every family should have access to pre-k, which study after study shows it plays a crucial role in a child's future success.

Today, every New York family does, finally, have access to pre-k, which should fill us all with hope and pride.

It is now my pleasure to introduce the man whose commitment to pre-k stretches back to our first day of school as public school parents, Mayor Bill de Blasio.

[Applause]

Mayor Bill de Blasio: I was thinking of that day – I think it was 1997, I've got to check my records – but for Chirlane and I, this is a very, very special day in terms of the work we do and what we hope all our children can achieve in this city. But personally, it's a – it is a bittersweet day – the first day in many, many years that we haven't taken a kid to school from our own family, and the first day that we don't get that joy, that extraordinary feeling of what opening day is like for everyone.

So really, I think Chirlane – we got a lot of the vicarious joy from the parents we met. And seeing children for the very first time coming to school, seeing the enthusiasm, the energy of a lot of these children, seeing the excitement of their parents, that was something wonderful.

And we went into a classroom – and I've got to say I was really struck by the ability of these kids, the energy, the fact that they were so excited to be in pre-k and were participating from the very beginning. So there is

something very special happening here – and it’s happening all over New York City today. That’s the amazing thing about this day.

This is a day that’s been talked about literally for a generation. We’ve heard the phrase “universal pre-k” talked about for a generation, but it was never really true until today. This is a moment in history we need to reflect on and we need to remember.

For the first time, any child, anywhere in the city, any 4-year-old can have full-day pre-k for free. And it’s just going to grow from here, year after year, and make our children and families stronger, and make our city better.

I want to thank a couple of our colleagues here today. I want to do a special thank you to a man who really was the architect of so much of what it took to pull this together so quickly last year and then build it further this year, Deputy Mayor Richard Buery – thank you for your leadership.

[Applause]

And then here at this extraordinary school – this is a newer school and it’s already a great success story, and part of it is because of great leadership – the founding principal, Carol Mongiello – let’s thank her.

[Applause]

You have a fan club.

Carol Mongiello: I knew that.

[Laughter]

Mayor: There is a very good vibe.

Let me give you my formal educational assessment – there is a very good vibe at P.S. 29, – at 59 – 59 – I’m about to talk about 29 [inaudible] – P.S. 59. P.S. 59 has a good vibe – I can tell there’s a lot of parent engagement, a lot of feeling for this school, and these parents have really gone all out with these t-shirts. Look at the very cool logos. Let’s give them a round of applause. PTA, we thank you.

[Applause]

So, let’s just remember, this is a microcosm here today. This school yard, these parents bringing their children to school – it’s happening all over this city.

When we came into office, 20,000 kids had full-day pre-k. Today, 65,000 plus and growing – it’s literally growing by the hour right now.

[Applause]

More and more kids want to take full advantage.

And I will take this moment to remind all of us – PTA members help us out – if you know any parent who has a child who is four or about to turn four and does not yet know they can have this for free, all they have to do is call 3-1-1 or go online – nyc.gov/prek – and they can literally sign up online, or when they call 3-1-1, they’ll be connected to an enrollment specialist. And we keep finding parents who still haven’t heard, and we welcome them.

We’re going to find, through going door to door and to communities all over this city, more and more parents who still don’t know about this opportunity, but when they find out about it, they are quick to take advantage of

it. Richard and I saw that, Chirlane and I saw that a couple weeks ago in East Flatbush. We found two parents who didn't know and literally signed up on the spot. So that's something that we want to get the word out across this whole city.

65,000 – what does that mean? That is as many children as in the entire school system of Boston or the entire school system of Seattle. That's the number of kids we have in pre-k today.

And this school is a great example. There's so much energy here and there's so much excitement because there is more pre-k than ever. You had 36 seats last year – you have 54 seats this year, full-day pre-k.

[Applause]

Pre-k is the foundation.

We're going to talk a lot more in the coming days about the other elements that are going to allow us to transform this school system. But pre-k is literally the foundation, for each child, for each family, and for the change of this school system as a whole, because imagine – now every child starts with that strong foundation. We couldn't have said that at any other time in our history. Today we can say it.

Every child starts with that strong educational foundation. And that's going to make a huge difference.

And by the way, I've talked to a lot of parents who think first and foremost about their children and the future of their children, but they also have to think about their household budget. And they will tell you that saving the \$10,000 dollars or the \$15,000 dollars that they would've spent if it weren't for full day pre-k being for free, has changed their family's budgets and their family's lives. Can I get an amen, PTA?

Audience: Amen!

Mayor: Alright!

One story I want to tell you – a young woman who is here at this school – I met her this morning. I want to talk about her parents, Christine Dueñas and her partner Watson. They are performing artists. And they have been, like so many artists, struggling to get by because this society doesn't exactly over-pay artists. They would never have been able to ensure that their daughter, Opal, could go to this pre-k if they had had to pay for it. If they had had to go out and find a location and pay for it, they just wouldn't have been able to do it. But here, they can get high quality pre-k for free. And Opal is starting school today – and as Christine said, "It feels like we've won the lotto." I think there's parents all over New York City who have that same feeling today.

So, 65,000 young people – 65,000 families who won the lotto – everyone winning the lotto at once – and it's a game changer for all of them.

Let me say a few words in Spanish –

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, I want to turn to the leader of our school system – and I'm going to coin a phrase right now very pertinent to this day – Carmen Fariña, you're not getting older, you're getting better.

Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña: Oh, okay, thank you!

[Applause]

Mayor: And I say that – I slipped earlier and I said P.S. 29 because Carmen Fariña started out at a school I love and know very well – P.S. 29 in Brooklyn. She started out as a teacher there – and, my friends, that was 50 years ago. This is her 50th anniversary in the New York City public school system –

[Applause]

– and she has literally a lifetime of wisdom and accomplishment, and that is why she is such a great leader. For all the teachers, for all the administrators, for everyone who makes up this school system, they have a leader who literally stood in their shoes, walked the walk, did everything that they are doing, and did it in an exemplary fashion. And she has respect in every school in this city, which is why she is achieving so much. So I have a little presentation, Carmen – let's see if it's where it's supposed to – yes, it is, look at that.

Schools Chancellor Fariña: Aw.

Mayor: Carmen Fariña , happy 50th anniversary.

[Applause]

Schools Chancellor Fariña: Aw, thank you. Thank you. An apple for the teacher.

Mayor: An – I didn't even think of that – an apple for the teacher!

[Laughter]

Alright, ladies and gentlemen, our chancellor, Carmen Fariña –

[...]

Mayor: Questions on this topic, yes?

Question: So I know today is the celebration of pre-k for you two. I'm wondering how much you guys are looking beyond the first day of school for the actual academic year at renewal schools, some of your critics have said it's really time to double down on renewal. Is this your sort of top academic priority for the year? How much are you thinking about those schools?

Mayor: Well, we'll have a lot more to say in the coming weeks. We're obviously going to talk a lot about education in the month of September as school begins. Renewal schools are a huge focus for us and we're very, very excited about the progress that's already happening in renewal schools. And I'll give you a lot more detail in the coming days on that. So, we're focused on making the renewal schools work because we've invested in them in a way that's never been done before. Again, let's be blunt, a lot of those schools were left without the support and resources they needed. A lot of those schools happened to be in disadvantaged communities. We're changing that. We're giving them the support so they succeed. We are thrilled about what's going on with community schools, and this one of the most exciting things happening I think in American education, and now it's going to be happening on a very big scale here in New York City. We are thrilled about the fact that for middle school kids, every middle school kid who wants an after-school seat will have it this year. It hasn't gotten as much media attention, but let's be clear – every middle school child who wants an after school seat will have it for free this year. Pre-k, obviously, is a foundation for all of what we're planning to do, but there's some other pieces we're going to be talking about in the few weeks about how we strengthen the school system overall. Yes?

Question: Mayor, its – one point I think you mentioned the number of 73,000 as the estimate of pre-k seats. Can you just sort of explain the difference between that and the 65 today? And then you mentioned people can still sign up, until when can you still sign up?

Mayor: Sure, we're at about 65,500 at this minute. But again, this is literally a number that's going to change day by day from this point forward. It's what we saw last year too. A lot of parents came in in the first week or two but some parents signed up even well into October. And we will certainly welcome them. So, the original estimate was we could go as high as 73, I think at this point we're obviously going to be in the high 60s, but we don't know for sure until we get there. But what we have is a seat for everyone. And this efforts going to continue year after year, meaning whatever number of children want full-day pre-k – whatever number of parents want to sign up their children for full day pre-k from this point on, it is guaranteed to them. So, I think you'll see variations year by year, but I also think what you're going to see there's a big word-of-mouth thing happening. I have witnesses here that as parents experience full-day pre-k, they tell their friends, their neighbors, their family members, and more and more parents want to take advantage of it. So this number is going to grow this year, and I'm not going to be surprised that it continues to grow in future years.

Question: What's the deadline for sign up?

Mayor: A [inaudible] deadline, explain how it works.

Deputy Mayor Richard Buery: Yeah, so this – let me take a minute to explain the whole process. So, families apply for pre-kindergarten seats – they're made an offer, and that 65,000 number – those are the number of families who have actually registered, which means that they've taken the affirmative step of bringing their paperwork in, and actually signing their kid up to school. It's an ongoing process, so as the mayor said; families can continue to apply, really well into September and October. We don't really stabilize final admissions until the end of October and so families should continue to dial 3-1-1, nyc.gov/prek. There are literally seats in every single neighborhood of New York City, so there's no four-year-old who will be turned away this year.

Mayor: Let me just add that the reason parents should act quickly, and again talk to some of the parents here who will tell you, if you want the seat that works for you best, that's nearest to your home, or nearest to your work, the faster you act, the more chance you'll get the seat you want. But, every child is guaranteed a seat in their district under all circumstances. Yes?

Question: Total number of eligible four year olds in New York City for pre-k?

Mayor: Richard.

Richard Buery: There are approximately 100,000 four year olds. And, again, as you can imagine – just like not every child enters public kindergarten – not every child enters public pre-k. And so again, we have enough capacity to meet every child that can considerably come up, and as the mayor said we think it will be somewhere in upper six thousands – 60 thousands, but we won't really know until families actually show up and enroll.

Question: I was wondering this whole ritual of the first day of school – what are you going to miss most about – you know, you're empty nesters now, what part of that ritual do you guys think you'll miss the most.

Mayor: Very, very – Chirlane may have her own views –

[Laughter]

– but I'll start.

It's very exciting. I think we can say our children keep us young. And we live through their lives and so many ways as parents. And the first day of school is always filled with hope. You know, you see a child's growth each year as they get ready for the next step. There's something very powerful and exciting about it. So for me, you know, especially when they were younger it was amazing. And I remember, you know, the beginning for Chiara and Dante in pre-k was so exciting and they were ready just like the kids we saw today. You know, it's

one of those moments where you can feel them grow before your very eyes and that's what every parent dreams about.

Would you like to add?

Chirlane McCray: Sure. There are so many things I'm going to miss. Learning is fun and I think one of the first things I miss is just finding out what they're going to be learning about; what they're going to focus on during the school year – the books that they'll be reading; and sharing those books with them; reading at night; finding out who their new friends are; why they like this one or that one, and having those friends come to our house and hang out. School is just an expanding experience for children. But it's expanding for the parents as well. I was learning as they were learning. There are things that they studied – that even in pre-k that I would never have known about if I didn't have the opportunity to talk with them; talk with their teachers about what they were doing in the classroom. And I'm going to miss that.

Mayor: And the borough president just reminded me that the – Pete the Cat – I never would have read about Pete the Cat. He said remember, he had red shoes not red socks. I think that was very witty.

[Laughter]

Very insightful, but Pete the Cat bought something new to my life today.

Morning.

Question: The weather challenges today – many schools in the suburbs actually closed or are closing early. How's the city deal with this? I know it's probably only hopefully a one day thing, but how does it deal with the hot weather with children inside?

Mayor: I'll let the chancellor to speak to that. I mean, look we're always sensitive to weather dynamics. And you know, we take precautions always making sure kids are hydrated – one of the key things. But we feel good about today and being able to make sure today goes smoothly.

Schools Chancellor Fariña: One of the advantages of someone who's been in the system 50 years – I remember when there was no air conditioning whatsoever.

[Laughter]

So, like I say to my children – and I gave my grandchildren the other day the story of all the things they have that I never had, and I managed to survive. So, certainly the recommendation today is a lot of water; asking kids to come to school with water bottles, also water drinks – water fountains in schools. And making sure that also that students, you know, don't go outside and play for too long in the sun like all of you are sitting here right now boiling. So, it's just about being smart and safe, but the reality is that the world doesn't have air conditioning and they still survived. So I do think this I part of it, but teachers are very much aware of the precautions they need to take today.

Mayor: I also want to note, when she was a child Carmen Fariña walked to school barefoot.

[Laughter]

Mayor: Uphill and – uphill both ways – uphill both ways. So, we don't know what you're complaining about.

Question: What kind of impact do you think New York City will have in this program nationwide?

Mayor: Look, I will borrow from the famous song if you can make it here you can make it anywhere. This is a school system that certainly has its share of challenges and always had. But we're proving you can do

something big and new and bold here. And this is for everyone. Every child – it doesn't matter what neighborhood you're from; what background you're from; what language you speak. Every child is welcome in full-day pre-k. And I think that proves that there are big things yet to be done in education and New York City's going to show just how far we can go. I also think what you're going to see in just the next few years is – these children having a strong foundation – it's going to change the whole school system. We've never – it's like a huge variable in the equation. When I came to office 20,000 kids had full-day pre-k. Now, 65,000 kids – that's going to have a structural impact on a school system going forward. So, I think what you'll see is cities around the country are going to look to see what they can do next. We've had interest from a lot of cities. And I believe we're moving towards a day in this nation where pre-k is going to become the norm. It's going to become the assumption. Just like once upon a time first-grade had to be established as something for everyone, then kindergarten. In today's day and age – I think we're moving towards a society where pre-k for all can and should be the norm.

Question: How do you judge the success?

Mayor: We evaluate it constantly. Because we want make sure it's the best it can be. By the way, that means, you know, we have been selective of our teachers who will be teaching. You know, who have a focus on early childhood education in terms of preparation; we are going to constantly look to see what they need in terms of training and professional development. We're going to look and see the results. We're going to see how it moves our kindergarten classes the next year. And we're going to bring in – and we have been bringing in outside evaluation firms to help us do that, but this is something that we see as – again, it's a – I always the building a house analogy. You know how to build a house? You first lay the foundation. This has to work so everything above it can work. So we want it to the highest quality.

Question: Can you talk about some of things you're going to be doing this month to get the word out to get those pre-k seats filled?

Mayor: Sure, absolutely, I'll start and Richard you may want to jump in on this. So as I mentioned, Richard and Chirlane and I were out in East Flatbush a week or two ago literally going through beauty salons and barber shops on a weekend. And it's amazing, when you walk up to parents and you say we want you to know what this; what it can do for your child; it's free; it's nearby, parents immediately become interested. And in the busyness of modern life – even with all the promotional activity some parents just hadn't heard or they didn't know it was free. I mean, you know, it's not an unfair assumption. Again I'll look at my fellow parents – if you hear here's this thing that too good to be true, you don't always assume it's free. But it actually is free. And so a lot of parents need to be reassured that was the case. So we are going in neighborhoods where the enrollment hasn't been what we think it should be. We've been going door to door. We've been working with clergy and community leaders – you want to add?

Richard Beury: Absolutely, so we – you know, my favorite movie is 'Fields of Dream' keeping with a baseball theme.

[Laughter]

So you know they said, you know, if you build it they will come. So, we've taken the exact opposite approach. So we have a very intense outreach effort to ensure that parents are aware of pre-kindergarten opportunities. That includes a number of things; we have done robocalls to a million families. We have had live staff make 400,000 phone calls which is a person to person phone call to families. These are not cold calls. These are families that we have reason to believe from public records or other records have a four-year-old in their home. Literally, hundreds of events around the city – and as the mayor said, lots of focus work now as we get into the beginning of the school year in certain neighborhoods like Central Brooklyn. We really wanted to make sure those families are taking advantage of the opportunity – ongoing efforts with clergy, with community groups, door to door. So it is very much an on the ground grassroots campaign effort involving paid media, free media, door knocking, and phone calls. And as you can see my the numbers we are finding families and are really excited that families are sending their beautiful four year olds to us this year

Mayor: Okay. Last – yes.

Question: I have heard some stories Chalkbeat and elsewhere, and the chancellor has commented on them about reviewing enrolment policies to try to reduce segregation. Can you talk specifically about what you envision to address that issue in New York City?

Mayor: I think some of that is already happening, thank God, because we have such vibrant choices throughout our school system – and again Chirlane and I experience that at both the middle school level and the high school level, but I think pre-k is adding a new element. I think after school for all middle school kids is adding a new element. You looked at the schoolyard today, wonderful United Nations of children, and this is an opportunity. When you say to people, here is something that didn't used to exist for you, that is now available and free and high quality, it brings in all sorts of people, every background, and then the children start learning together and experiencing things together, and the parents start getting to know each other. So I think these are exactly the kinds of things that will help to bring people together more, and bring particularly children into awareness of all the other types of people that make up a city.

Question: Just to follow up, I mean specific changes in enrollment policies that you might envision, such as set aside for school for low income children, that kind of thing.

Mayor: Well again, I think I'm starting with what we have, which I think is having an impact. We're certainly going to always look at other options, but I think what we're starting with is strong. Do you want to add in any way?

Schools Chancellor Fariña: We're studying a lot of things – come in on Saturdays, to have these discussions, but the reality is diversity is beyond ethnicity, and beyond socioeconomic, it's also about English language learners, it's about special needs kids. We have 40 dual language programs starting today in New York City, which is actually putting together in our schools kids who speak English only with kids who speak another language, and may learn English or can also learn English. So we really feel we are putting a lot of initiatives. We have a lot of high school that we're saying more fair share of special-ed kids. So I think diversity has many, many facets, and one of the things that we'll be talking to parents about is having sister schools. We now have a new head of family engagement, and one of the charges that I gave Yolanda Torres is to figure out how to get parents across the city to talk to each other, not just in their own neighborhoods. So I do think that's parts of what we're looking at, and I think there will be a lot more to come.

Mayor: I have an update on Richard Buery's device here. Mr. Borough President, we told you this year 4,837 kids so far registered for full day pre-k in Staten Island, last year it was 3,299 – two years ago, when I had the honor of taking this office, the number of Staten Island children in full day pre-k was 800, so Staten Island has had a huge jump. I hope you don't mind that Staten Island has had a disproportionately strong jump in pre-k. Are you ok with that? Ok Debbie, are you ok with that? Ok Lindsey.

Question : Can you tell us what you're going to do with year to sure up a long term renewal of mayoral control?

Mayor: I think mayoral control is working. I think it worked under Mayor Bloomberg. Its working in this administration because its allowing us to improve the school system. There is no way we could have achieved full-day pre-k without mayoral control. There is just no way it would have been physically possible. There is no way we could have had after school for every middle school student, or community schools, or renewal schools, or so many of the things that we're moving. So, the proofs is in the pudding. You know, the facts on the ground, obviously we're thrilled that there has been progression on test scores, we want to go a lot farther. All of that is made possible by mayoral control. And I think it's clear that there is no good alternative, and that's part of what we're going to show people, here and in Albany. We're not going back to the bad days of chaos and corruption, and that's what it was. I saw it with my own eyes, what we had with the previous model, in too many cases, led

to a dysfunctional school system, and in too many cases, sadly, at least in some districts, led to corruption. Mayoral control of education works, and we're going to make the case, and were going to prove it with facts.

Thanks everyone!

[Applause]

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