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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY**

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Good morning, everybody. Well, a great start to the day today because this morning all across the five boroughs in New York City, our high schools reopened. And what a good feeling? What a good sign? What a hopeful sign about our future? I had the joy of being this morning in the Bronx at the School for Law, Government, and Justice, which happens to be the school that our Chancellor was principal of for many years. And she'll speak to that in a moment. What a joyous homecoming for the Chancellor, but also to see teenagers just so ready to be back in school, you know, happy to be back with their friends, happy to be back with their teachers, a really supportive, warm school community. Where you know that every single day that a child is in that building with those teachers, with that staff, they're getting love, support, and getting the kind of incredible gifts that educators can give to kids. So, high school back all over New York City today, and that is a very, very good thing.

Now I have to thank everyone at the school for their warm welcome, especially Principal Johanie Hernandez. Incredible school community, one of 488 high schools reopening today. And most of our schools are providing five day a week instruction either for all their students or a majority of their students. And that's something we continue to add onto because we want as many kids as possible in that five days a week status. Now we talked about on Friday, very important new development from the CDC, the new guidelines related to school reopening. And the new opt-in, so opt-in for all grades – and I'm going to explain this carefully. We're going to do an opt-in for all grades, even though only some of them will be ready to open in the near term, we want to ask parents and kids across all grade levels, if they want to come back when the opportunity arises. So, the opt-in process will begin this Wednesday, March 24th, and it will go through Wednesday, April 7th. Again, what we can say for sure, based on everything we know now, and we all know with the coronavirus things can change, but based on everything we know now, we intend to have the opt-in period and then honor those who want to opt back in, bring those kids back during the month, April, by the end of April. For 3K, pre-K, elementary school, and District 75 special-ed, up through the elementary level. We still have more work to do for middle and high school. We're still not sure about those timelines. But as I said, the opt-in will include middle and high school students so we know what their intentions are, and then we'll be able to provide more information as we get more guidance. And as we see the overall situation evolve. Very exciting, I know so many parents, I know the Chancellor will speak to this. I've heard from parents, she's heard from parents, so many parents who want the opportunity to send their kids back. That opportunity has now arrived. Here to talk about that and our wonderful morning in the Bronx, our Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter.

**Schools Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter:** Good morning. I'm so excited. What an exciting morning in the Bronx? It was great to be back at my homeschool, the Bronx School Full of Government and Justice. I'm so proud of the work that Principal Hernandez is doing to continue to advance social justice issues. We got to visit classrooms where our students were talking about

the anti-Asian hate that's been happening across the city and the things that they can do specifically to address it, both in their school, in the community and across the city. It was wonderful to be greeted by our students and founding staff member Brenda Tucker, who's an amazing guidance counselor at LGJ and it's just great to see the work continuing there. And so, congratulations LGJ, you know, I love you. And it was wonderful, wonderful to be home. I spent 18 years as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal at Law and Government. And just looking forward to all the great work you all continue to do.

What this morning reminded me of though, is why it's important to open our doors. And why that guidance from the CDC is so critical for what we need to do for students across New York City. And it was an even more critical reminder of why we need to open the opt-in window now so that schools can start planning for the opportunity to welcome more students in. This weekend, I spent time with the Principal's Advisory Council, going over some of the details about reopening and I will continue to have conversations with principals and school staff. Because we know grounding this decision in health and safety is a priority. This morning, we let principals know about the opt-in window for all families, that will open this Wednesday. And it will stay open for two weeks to give everyone who wants a chance to sign up to return, an opportunity to do so. I just want to remind folks though that our first opening is going to be for elementary schools, but we want to give principals the time to plan. That's why the opt-in window is opening for all. I'm so excited to begin this process and we'll be also sending out messages to families to let them know how they can sign up on Wednesday. And schools will let you know as well, because all of my conversations over the weekend and this morning, were with people – people, school staff, teachers, principals, who were excited to continue to get more students in. And it was great to see students in class this morning. Remember, we want every single child who wants to attend school in-person to have the opportunity to do so.

And as we shared last week, there is a lot to do to get ready to do that. And we are clear about that. But thanks to our hard-working school staff, and I got to see some of them this morning at LGJ, Marlon, our custodian and Francisco, who've been keeping the building clean, just amazing. Linda from our cafeteria who continued to give out breakfasts this morning, Velez our school safety agent, who's always the first one to greet every student and was the first one to greet me this morning. In, all across the city, our SSAs, crossing guards, our assistant principals at LGJ this morning, who were holding down the fort and just doing great work to keep things going. I want to thank all of you because I know how much you've done to get our schools open, to get students in classrooms.

Our school communities have been through so much this year. And that's why the Mayor said we will be holding schools harmless for register losses this year. And I can tell you, there are a lot of schools who are really excited about that. And we look forward to doing that for school communities, because we know how important the work is that we need to do. We were able to recently receive the federal stimulus funding. And as a former principal, I know what a huge relief this will be for our school leaders who have the opportunity to be forgiven the debt based on the register loss. And I'm happy we can do this for them, but more importantly, what this will do for our students during this most challenging time. Again, today was a great day to start the day opening high schools and opening up at my homeschool LGJ in the Bronx. You all continue to do great work. Thank you to DeeDee for all – my little swag bag. I'm rocking the LGJ mask this morning and just, you know, you all have just continued to do great work. And I know you will, as we go on. This is what we're going to continue to see. We're going to continue to see

students and teachers reuniting in classrooms. And we're going to continue to see vaccination numbers rise so we can beat back the virus. We can get all of our students back in school. And the Mayor this morning got to find out that I'm a grand principal, because we are so proud of the legacy of LGJ, that Latoya Taylor's daughter is a student along with Terrence Davis's son. So, there's so many legacy students at LGJ, and it speaks to the work happening not only at LGJ, but the work great teachers, principals and schools are doing across the city. And remember, as we make these moves and move into these moments, we will always keep health and safety at top of mind. And with that, I'm going to turn it back over to the Mayor.

**Mayor:** Thank you very much, grand principal. I'd never heard that phrase before. So, I've got a new one for the lexicon. And I love the joy you were feeling being back in your school again. And the joy people in the school felt seeing your success. It was really, really beautiful this morning. And now Chancellor, you actually read my mind because I was going to make the announcement related to school funding. So, I want to fill in that blank now because we've heard so much concern on this issue. And I particularly want to say the City Council has been focused on the issue. And I want to thank Speaker Corey Johnson who has raised this very directly, the need to hear the concerns of school communities about the funding that normally would be lost as part of the registration process, depending on what level of enrollment the school had. The DOE had taken some measures to try and relieve some of that loss, but there still was a real challenge there. Speaker Johnson and the City Council asked us to re-examine the situation. And we have done that. And obviously in the meantime, we've also gotten the stimulus funding, which is tremendously helpful. So, we will now return to these schools, the money that they would have had to give back to the DOE budget. That's \$130 million that now will be returned to these 877 schools. We will make them whole. And again, heard the concerns from the schools, heard the concerns from Speaker Johnson and the Council, and this is something we're able to do now. And the good news is, this money going back to the schools means more money for additional teachers, substitutes for tutoring, for social and emotional learning, for anything the school community needs as part of this crucial moment, bringing schools back and addressing the learning loss. We have to close that COVID achievement gap. We have to reach kids academically and emotionally. So very, very happy to say we are going to leave those resources with the schools.

Okay. Now, want to talk about another important piece of the equation, because when we talk about bringing the city back, we talk about a recovery, and a recovery for all of us, it has to include our young people. A recovery for all of us only works if young people are fully a part of it. And one of the best things that we can do for young people is give them some continuity over the summer. We want to make sure they have opportunities that enrich them, that help them move forward, to keep them inspired. Summer Youth Employment has been that for so many kids. And, literally, Summer Youth Employment has been life-changing for a lot of kids, it has proven to them what they are capable of, it's opened doors of opportunity, it's given them inspiration for a career ahead – extraordinarily effective program and it's something we're proud of here in New York City. We've been doing it for a long time. We have the largest Summer Youth Employment program in the whole country. Now, today, is first day that applications are open for Summer Youth Employment – starts today, goes through April 23rd. So, I want to make sure young people out there know this, parents know this – there are 70,000 available opportunities. We will be able to accommodate 70,000 young New Yorkers. And you can apply online, [nyc.gov/SYEP](https://nyc.gov/SYEP), for Summer Youth Employment program. You can also call 3-1-1, or go

to the Department of community – excuse me, Youth and Community Development – the community connect hotline, 800-246-4646.

Now, I wanted to give you that overview, but much more powerful will be to hear from a young woman who has benefited from Summer Youth Employment, what it has meant for her. And this is what makes us so inspired, when we hear a young person who was really, really the move forward by the opportunity. She is a junior at the high school of World Cultures in the Bronx. And it is my pleasure to introduce Norma Gottshalk. Norma, are you there?

[...]

**Mayor:** Thank you so much, Norma. And, Norma, you are doing great at public speaking. I think you – whatever you learned in SYP, it worked, because a wonderful presentation. And I'm really happy for you – happy for you, you got so much out of it. And good luck ahead. Thank you.

All right. That's an example of something really good about this city, that New York City is a place of compassion, and we try and give opportunity to people. People come from every part of the world, every walk of life, that's who we are as New Yorkers. But it's also a reminder of our responsibility to each other, and that means standing up and protecting our fellow New Yorkers when they're in danger. Once again, in these last days, we continue to see these horrible acts of hatred towards the Asian-American community. This goes against everything we believe in this city, everything we feel as Americans. It is unacceptable and we all need to fight it back in every way. What we've seen just in the last few days, two women attacked, an elderly man attacked simply because of who they are. This is just something that – it sickens me and it angers me and we will deal with it aggressively. I want everyone, in every way you can, to help support our Asian-American neighbors, speak up for them, help report anything you see. And we're going to talk about how important it is to report anything and everything, because we need to find the people doing this. I am – I think it's important to also recognize the crucial element of police response in this equation, the NYPD has apprehended two of the three perpetrators in these incidents. It's very important that we find people who do this and take them off the streets and make sure that they realize the consequences that they need to. And it sends a message to anyone else who has hate in their heart, that there will be consequences.

We're going to continue to build up NYPD presence in our Asian communities to provide support, to provide protection, to provide reassurance to Asian-American New Yorkers. So, you can expect to see increased NYPD presence out there to protect you. And, everyone, again, the way to defeat hate is to acknowledge it and report it. Even if you're not sure, please report it. If you're not sure if it was literally a crime, or maybe you thought it was biased, it was discrimination, but it wasn't a crime – still report it. We need the reports so we can follow up on each and every one and find the people doing these hateful acts. So, please, go to [nyc.gov/StopAsianHate](https://nyc.gov/StopAsianHate), and together we will overcome these horrible, horrible incidents.

Okay. I'm going to just spend a moment on what we do every day, the vaccine and the indicators. In terms of vaccinations, the effort continues to move strongly. We heard very good news at the end of the week about additional supply coming in April. Thanks to the Biden administration, we a very substantial increase in our vaccine supply in April. That's going to help us immensely. We want to increase the number of vaccinations we're doing every week. We are ready. But, as of

today, from day-one, we're almost to 3.3 million. The exact number, 3,295,812 vaccinations from day-one. And now, as to the indicators, I want to give you an update. We're not doing the full indicators today, because we are having a technical data issue with the State of New York. We are trying to resolve it, getting the information to be 100 percent accurate. So, today, we're just going to focus on the hospital piece of our indicators and hopefully that situation will be resolved by tomorrow. So, it's simply, indicator number one, number of people daily admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19 – today's report, 194 patients. That's a better number again than we've seen in recent months. That's a step in the right direction. Hospitalization rate per 100,000 – 3.63. And, again, we'll hopefully, by tomorrow, have the overall indicators corrected.

A few words in Spanish. And again, what we talked about at the beginning of the press conference, the focus on young people and opportunities for young people and bringing back schools.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, we will turn to our colleagues in the media and please let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

**Moderator:** We'll now begin our Q-and-A. As a reminder, we're joined today by Deputy Commissioner of the Youth Workforce Valerie Mulligan, Dr. Chokshi, and by Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma. First question today, it goes to Derek Waller from WABC.

**Question:** Hi, good morning. I have two questions, one about COVID and one about schools. I'll start with the schools. And I understand that – obviously, the UFT held their own event in Hell's Kitchen this morning, welcoming back students and the teachers. On Friday, they sent a statement out to the press that said, once again, the Mayor is at [inaudible] directive without any input from the union. I'm curious if you spent any time over the weekend, kind of, smoothing things over with them and getting their input about this opt-in period?

**Mayor:** Derek, look, we are just starting this. What's abundantly clear, the CDC rules give us an opportunity to opt in and get kids back. And we have said – the Chancellor and I have said adamantly, we want more kids back in school. Here's our chance to do it. We've been working closely with our health team. Everyone agrees this is something we can and should do. So, of course, we'll be consulting with the unions and all stakeholders in terms of determining exactly how to do it. It's still going to take weeks until any kids come back into a classroom who aren't there already. So, we absolutely will be consulting throughout, and that has worked well for us. But, in the end, we're making all our decisions based on the needs of our kids and families and on the data and science, knowing that it is healthy and safe to bring folks back and that's what the CDC has affirmed. Go ahead, Derek.

**Question:** And my second question has to do with this New York variant of COVID. And over the weekend, the former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, he said that he was – there was some concern that, you know, people who've already recovered from coronavirus could be reinfected or people who've been vaccinated could be reinfected. Could someone speak to that? And, you know, is that something that's being looked at?

**Mayor:** Yeah. Let me turn to first Dr. Varma, then Dr. Chokshi to speak to that.

**Senior Advisor Jay Varma:** Great. Thank you very much for the question. So, it's important to highlight a couple of important things that we know and what we don't know. What we know right now is the same thing that we've been discussing before, which is that there is no change in our recommendations for people regarding new variants. The same things that work for regular strains of COVID also will work against the variants right now. That means maintaining distance, washing your hands, wearing a mask, getting tested frequently, and getting vaccinated with the first available vaccine that you have. There is concern, absolutely, that some variants, including the strains that are now more common here in New York City may be less responsive to vaccines, or you have less protection from prior infection. We have not seen that so far in our data. We have been analyzing it continuously and I think Commissioner Chokshi can go through some of it, looking at people who had previous infection that was confirmed, looking at people who had previous antibody positive results. It doesn't mean that that might not happen, but we have not found it at all and we've been looking very aggressively and actively, and we will be revealing, you know, and reporting data as we find it. And if we do find anything concerning that changes what we do, we will absolutely be the first ones to let you know.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead, Dr. Chokshi.

**Commissioner Dave Chokshi, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene:** Yes. Thank you. And just to build on what Dr. Varma has said, what we do know about the B-1526 variant, which was first identified here in New York City, is that it does appear to be more infectious than other strands of the virus. But for the other questions specifically, does it cause more severe disease? Is it more prone to re-infection? And are vaccines less effective against that variant of the virus? We do not yet have enough information to be able to answer those questions definitively. I do want to assure all New Yorkers that these are things that we are looking at very carefully, because it's very important for us to be able to answer those questions. Thus far, we do not have any evidence that indicates that it causes more severe disease, or leads to reinfection, or will reduce the effectiveness of vaccines. But we will continue to investigate this and keep the public updated on our findings.

**Mayor:** Thank you very much. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Andrew Siff from WNBC.

**Mayor:** Andrew?

**Question:** Oh, good morning. How are you?

**Mayor:** Andrew – it's camera one, Andrew. Camera one –

**Question:** Yes, we're ready. Mr. Mayor, I'd like to ask for your take on this. One of the folks who's running for your job, Andrew Yang, said that he believes that the UFT has been a significant reason why schools have been slow to open. What is your response to that?

**Mayor:** Look, I'm going to look forward, Andrew. We can all analyze what's happened previously, but, to me, the issue is where we go from here. We're continuing to work with the

UFT, the CSA, the other unions that represent school staff productively. But we're very clear, we will always want to hear concerns and we want to address them, and health and safety comes first, but the Chancellor's adamant, I'm adamant we're going to be bringing kids back both this school year through opt-in and then next school year, every child who's ready, willing, and able to be in a classroom – that's the bottom line. But I think we can do that in a productive way, in a cooperative way. Go ahead, Andrew.

**Question:** I know you want to look forward, but as a pundit, and you sometimes are, can you effectively run for Mayor of New York City while antagonizing a major union?

**Mayor:** I think it's – I wouldn't put it that way. I think the important point is that all candidates need to speak their truth and then it needs to be judged. If it's someone talking about the way they think is the best way to open schools, that's a valid discussion. Now, if it's any candidate being disrespectful of our municipal unions, that's a different matter. I haven't seen the comments, so I'm not going to speak to the specific comments. I would say a mayor needs to work with all municipal labor unions productively. This is something I'm very proud of that we've done here. You know, when I came into office, there wasn't a single public employee under contract. The Bloomberg administration had alienated the municipal labor movement, had allowed all the labor contracts to lapse. It was a very corrosive dynamic. Morale was low. We systematically worked it through and got almost every single union under contract. And I think you've got to work with municipal labor. That's the best way forward, but that doesn't mean there won't be disagreements, and when there are disagreements, you got speak openly about them. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Erin from Politico.

**Question:** Mr. Mayor, I just wanted to ask about – when you referenced the CDC guidance and talking about during this new opt-in period, so are you in fact going to reduce the amount of distance to three feet within the schools? And if so, does that also shake up, you know, the number of days that students will be able to attend if they're already in-person and everything like that?

**Mayor:** So, I'll turn to Dr. Varma and Dr. Chokshi to speak to the guidance. We want to obviously have the maximum number of kids back that we can do safely. We're going to follow the CDC guidance, but we are devoted to honoring whatever kids have now. So, if the kid, for example, now has five days a week, they'll continue to get that. As we bring in more kids to the maximum extent possible, we'd like them to be five-days-a-week. Some schools that will be more possible than other schools, really depends on the space situation and that school, and how many kids are already in. But our goal is maximum number of kids back, maximum number of days per child. To how we're going to handle the three feet and what the guidance says Dr. Varma, then Dr. Chokshi.

**Senior Advisor Varma:** Great, thank you very much for the question. You know, we were very excited to read the new guidance from CDC and even more important to see the fact that it's been developed based on very extensive studies that have been done in very diverse school districts, demonstrating that you can hold classrooms and conduct them safely when you adopt these types of measures. So, we are going to do everything we possibly can, as the Mayor has said, to get as many kids back in school and maximize their health and safety. So, a couple of important points.

We've already established that we can conduct in-person schooling safely and as we know, we have adopted a gold standard that has been, you know, uniformly effective. But we also know that we do need to get more kids back in school, because health is not just about preventing COVID, it's about all of the other social and emotional development that occurs in a school setting. So, we're going to do everything we possibly can to ensure that we maintain the health and safety standards that we have set, and then include the adopting a three-foot standard in the schools, and then where there are settings where we need to shift the six feet such as when children are eating, we're going to do everything we can to possibly make that happen.

**Mayor:** Dr. Chokshi?

**Commissioner Chokshi:** Nothing to add on that, sir.

**Mayor:** Great. Go ahead, Erin.

**Question:** Thanks, and then – Governor Murphy in New Jersey this morning said that they're essentially going to pause the reopening, they're not doing any more steps because of their high case levels. New York, as you've mentioned before, has had similarly high case levels, and I know you've been somewhat critical of the way Governor Cuomo has been approaching these decisions. So, I'm just wondering, do you think that the Governor should be changing course and kind of pausing these reopenings the way New Jersey is doing?

**Mayor:** Yeah, Erin, I think it's time to reassess for sure. A good example is with indoor dining, you know, in the city now getting up to 50 percent, certainly we got to stop there. That would be my strong view while we see what happens with these variants and the overall situation. You know, obviously we have a real disagreement with the State on the fitness classes. You've heard from Dr. Varma and Dr. Chokshi about that. But indoor dining is an example of something that let's stay at the level we're at now and not having any further expansion until we get a lot more information about these variants and see how we do. So, we're going to be watching, we're going to be talking about the data constantly, and if we see something else that we think needs to be adjusted, I will certainly – and the doctors will be very, very public about it. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Jessica Gould from WNYC.

**Question:** Hi, good morning. This is for Chancellor Porter. I know you said that you spoke to Principals Council over the weekend. What kinds of concerns, logistical or otherwise, did you hear from them about the new opt-in period? And why not talk to them before the announcement? And I'll just mention a couple that I've heard of concerns, ICT classes and the, you know, students eating in the classroom and needing to be six feet apart, curious how we can bridge those concerns.

**Chancellor Porter:** So, the principals overwhelmingly this weekend were excited about the possibility and had similar concerns in my conversations. They had mostly about eating and common spaces, and they were really interested in continuing to be about part of the conversation going forward. But, you know, they had heard the news from the CDC at the same time that we heard the news, and so they were wondering what it meant as well. And so, I think that there was a level of excitement about knowing they could start thinking forward, but also



creating a clear pathway to have conversations and answer questions that they have going forward.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead, Jessica.

**Question:** And as we referred to the opening of high schools, many parents reach out to us and say that their kids will continue to do remote learning in school buildings. I know you've talked about this before, but I'm wondering if there's a sense of how staffing can be adjusted, particularly now that more teachers have been vaccinated so that more students can have in-person teaching in schools, in high schools.

**Mayor:** Great question. I'll turn to the Chancellor, Jessica, but I'd say, look, we are definitely – we see opportunity opening up here. You know, the last number I had again for educators who's been vaccinated is over 40,000, and that number we believe is lower than the real number, because we haven't heard back from all educators who got vaccinated. So, we've got a really high percentage of our educators vaccinated. That's great. And the new CDC guidance opens up opportunity for us. So, I do think we'll be able to do some things differently and better at going forward, but, you know, what we've said about high school students in particular, in some cases, yes, they may be in a classroom doing remote work from that classroom, but that is not the norm. And even in that context, as I saw today in the Bronx, they're surrounded by educators, they're surrounded by supportive adults. There's a lot of you know, help there available for them. It's a whole different reality than sitting in your apartment alone. But yeah, to the basic question you're asking, I think we're going to be able to do a lot of things better now. Chancellor, you want to add?

**Chancellor Porter:** Yeah, we are continuing to be in conversations about how we can bring folks back who are vaccinated and want to come back, and we've had interest in that from staff members, but also just want to honor that the decision around whether they be in-person or remote is a personal family decision. And so, we want to open the doors safely and give parents all the information they need to have to make those decisions, but we want to honor that it is their decision to make.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Nolan from The Post.

**Question:** Hey, good morning, everybody.

**Mayor:** Hey, Nolan. How are you doing?

**Question:** I'm all right, Mr. Mayor. How are you?

**Mayor:** Good.

**Question:** So, the follow up on the school's questions, you keep saying that it doesn't seem to be a common experience for kids to be in class without teachers teaching them in-person, and I know you've gotten a bunch of questions about this over the last week. I know my inbox has been flooded with complaints from parents about this, parents with kids as LaGuardia, kids at

Bronx Science, kids at Russell Sage Middle School in Forest Hills, kids at the Academy of the Americas in Long Island City, to name four, again, of the schools represented in the 30 or 40 emails I got in the course of a single day about this. So, I'm wondering where's the disconnect between what you're representing as the reopening and what parents and students are getting?

**Mayor:** Well, you know, we're talking about many tens of thousands of students, so I don't disrespect at all the 30 emails you've gotten, but I would say, and I'll turn to the Chancellor who, you know, understands this system deeply and everything she's done over 20 years. What we are seeing consistently is again, at the high school level, in some cases, yes, it's happening, and I think we'll be able to address it better now because of some of the changes that we're talking about. But the norm always is kids taught by teachers as per usual, and even when a child, because of a specialized subject or whatever it may be, needs to do remote from the classroom, it's still a superior situation to that child being at home. I think I've answered it before, and I believe that's the honest and right answer. Chancellor?

**Chancellor Porter:** Yeah, I – you know, our priority is to make sure our students are surrounded by caring adults. This has been a difficult transition, the immediate shift to remote learning and then, you know, getting back into school. And so, the priority is to make sure students are surrounded by caring adults, but also that they are receiving the instruction from the content area teachers that they need remote or in-person and our teachers across schools are working in partnership to make sure that that happens.

**Mayor:** Go ahead, Nolan.

**Question:** Is City Hall getting briefed on the percentage of classes where there's actually a teacher providing in-person instruction. If so, can you provide those stats?

**Mayor:** Yeah, we'll get you a sense of what we are hearing, but it's changing constantly as we make adjustments. And again, I'm satisfied that every school is maximizing in-person learning and when they have to use remote for students, they do, but it's still a superior situation to that student being at home. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Juliet from 1010 WINS.

**Question:** Yeah, hi. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Good morning, everyone. So I did want to follow up with the school question also. What about the spacing and the distancing, even with the new CDC guideline for three feet, how are you planning to do that? If more children opt-in and if let's say most kids come back, where are you putting everybody if you need still the space?

**Mayor:** Well, I'll start Juliet and turn to the Chancellor. Look, I, you know, if you go to the schools, what you're seeing in the schools now is the original precautions taken for COVID. And I think you've probably toured some of the schools and seen this. A New York City classroom that used to have 20 plus kids is set up for eight kids, nine kids, ten kids, whatever it may be. And yet, on top of that, we know in some schools, even those seats have not been fully utilized every day. And so, we know we have available space by definition, but everything's been set up for a six-foot standard. We know a single teacher can serve eight kids or ten kids or 16 kids or 18 kids, we know the teachers used to having a room full of kids. So, I think that the commonsense

piece of this Juliet is that we have such artificially low classroom size that we know we can do a lot more with the teachers who are already in the schools and can accommodate a lot more kids, and we know a lot more kids would benefit. Chancellor?

**Chancellor Porter:** Yeah, the Mayor is correct in his analysis of the current situation in schools. We haven't had every student that we could potentially have in-person be in-person. We also have been doing an analysis anticipating the potential three feet, and so we're happy to bring more specific details around what that looks like, but we are very confident that we are prepared to accept more students in classes, based on a three-foot rule, even at this moment with the six-foot requirement based on the number of students who actually have returned to school.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead, Juliet.

**Question:** Okay. Thank you. And my next question regards the variants. You just spoke of concern with it and whether or not restaurants should be increasing capacity, but is there any more data or science that we can look at in reviewing the variants? I know Dr. Chokshi and Dr. Varma just said they don't see anything at this point in time of, you know, further infection rates or problems after the vaccine, but is there more that can be looked at as far as studying these variants to find out if in fact that's the case?

**Mayor:** Yeah, let me start as the layman and I'll turn to Dr. Varma, Dr. Chokshi. Juliet, I think for all of us this last year, it's been incredibly frustrating to be dealing with a disease that humanity didn't even know existed, you know, not much more than a year ago and is simply under examined. I mean, there's just not enough information about the coronavirus. There hasn't been enough time to study everything about it. And so, when you get the variants on top of that, the scientific community is always playing catch up. And I think what the doctors constantly say, we talk all the time, and they say to me is, look, this is what we know so far. We're not going to judge too much based on very preliminary information, but as we get more definitive studies, we make better conclusions. I think the answer to your question is we're going to learn more literally every day, but at least we have seen some trends so far that tell us we can beat these variants if we continue to aggressively get people vaccinated, but we got to take them seriously. They do pose a threat. Dr. Varma, then Dr. Chokshi.

**Senior Advisor Varma:** Yeah, no, thank you very much for the question, and I really want to echo some of the things that the Mayor has highlighted there. You know, first of all, we are concerned. You know, one of the reasons we see this you know, very high plateau or very slow decline here in New York is due to these variants. As we've said earlier in this press conference, we know that these variants that are here present in New York City are more infectious. That is, you know, one person is more likely to infect another person, and that is a very strong reason for why we continue to have a very high rates of disease. So, we are concerned about them. The second is that, you know, we also have to make decisions based on the information we have today, and as the Mayor has said, you know, the pace of science is generally years or decades. But we don't have that luxury right now. So, we have to make decisions based on what we think the best available evidence we have at any given moment, and also be humble and honest, that information may change, and we may have to change our recommendations.

Everything we've seen so far indicates that all of the measures that we take to protect against sort of the original strains or the classic strains of COVID work against these new variants. There are

some indications that some variants respond a little less effectively to vaccination, but they still appear to be effective enough, you know, far above the threshold that the NIH and other people have said. So, we really do feel strongly that we need to continue the most important measures that we know work right now, and we'll continue to evaluate information, and if we learn more change our recommendations accordingly.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Dr. Chokshi?

**Commissioner Chokshi:** Yes, thank you, Mr. Mayor, and, you know, I'll start by saying that as the Mayor has said now is not the time to throw caution to the wind. You know, we have made progress in our fight against COVID-19, and so now is the time to redouble our efforts, particularly now that we have vaccination as such an important tool in our arsenal.

With respect to the situation around the variants, you know, we now have evidence that the three original variants of concern – that's the B117, and B1351, and P1 variants, the ones that were originally identified in the UK, South Africa and Brazil, each of them has now been identified in New York City residents along with the B1526, which was first identified here in New York City. So, these are all things that we know, that we've been able to discern from the investigation that we do, which proceeds in the laboratory. It proceeds in our clinics and hospitals, and also with respect to the epidemiologic studies. At the end of the day, all of that knowledge has to be translated into the real-world effects, and those get back to what Dr. Varma has said, which is we have to recommit to the things that have worked to slow the spread of COVID-19: masking, distancing, hand washing, staying home if you're ill, getting tested, and getting vaccinated when it's your turn, and if we do those things then I hope that very soon, we'll be able to finally turn the corner on this pandemic.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** We have time for two more for today. The next is Kristin Dalton from the Staten Island Advance.

**Question:** Good morning with the Mayor. How are you?

**Mayor:** Good, Kristin, how you been?

**Question:** I'm good. I'm good. Just building off of some of the other questions, parts of Staten Island do have a high infection rate that is close to 15 percent. Is there any chance that the City could begin implementing restrictions again, should the positivity rate get really high and, you know, what, what would it take for the City to do that?

**Mayor:** Kristin, it's an important question. We're watching this all the time. I don't want to do theoreticals, because I don't think that does justice to the subject. I'd say it this way. We need to get everyone vaccinated. We can get vaccinated as quickly as possible. That is the one piece of the equation we fully control, and that is you know, a firm's specific reality once someone's vaccinated, they're vaccinated changes the whole reality. So, that's what we need to do and constantly reiterate the precautions that people need to take, and I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi in a moment and he can do that. You know, those simple precautions and people need to be smart about travel. We don't want to see, you know, folks thinking that travel is no longer filled with

challenges because it is, and we need to be careful about that. So, I'd say, Kristin, we want to keep doing the things that have been working, but if we see a turn, if we see the numbers going in the wrong direction, if we see particularly the number of folks in hospitals going up and-or the number of folks we're losing going up, those are different realities, and then we would put different options back on the table. Dr. Chokshi?

**Commissioner Chokshi:** Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Just to build on it briefly, you know, in addition to those individual precautions that I've mentioned you know, with respect to masking distancing, et cetera you know, some epidemiologists call this the phenomenon of sharing indoor air. You know, those are the things that we need to try to avoid, particularly when risk is high in certain places. So, that means any gatherings, you know, that are indoors, particularly when masks are unable to be worn consistently and properly, and particularly when the group size is larger, those are the places where we start to get worried about a much higher risk of transmission. So, there are steps that each of us can take to protect ourselves, and part of it is in making smart decisions, particularly as we navigate through this phase of the pandemic.

**Mayor:** Yeah, I want to get Dr. Varma in this too, because obviously we're seeing an uptick and travel the country and, Dr. Varma, there's a right way and a wrong way to go about travel. Could you speak to just guiding New Yorkers will understandably, you know, will be traveling a little more now in some cases, particularly to see family after a long time, but could you guide folks on the right way to do that, please?

**Senior Advisor Varma:** Yeah, no, thank you very much, Mr. Mayor, you know, and as we continue to caution that you know, the best vacations are those that are held close to home right now until we get to the other side of this epidemic. For those who do have to travel, because we know how important it is to stay connected with family and loved ones. There are really some important things. First of all, if you have any symptoms at all, or you've been exposed, you know, please recognize that you are at very high risk of transmitting to other people and follow public health guidelines and stay home. It may involve canceling plane tickets that you spent a lot of money on or a vacation you were planning, but if you are sick, if you've recently been exposed, it's really critical to stay home, that's number one.

Number two is get tested before you travel, because we know that even if you don't have symptoms, you may be in that early stage of disease or one of those people that never developed symptoms, and so you need to know your status before you go, and that applies to you and all of your family members regardless of their age. The next is if you are at a travel or a crowded place, try to keep your distance from other people, make sure you're wearing a well-fitting mask. In some situations, wearing two masks and medical surgical masks covered by a fabric mask is important. Keep it on at all times, and really importantly once you're on your way back to New York we'd really readvise you in what you strongly to get tested both before you leave, as soon as, and also when you return back, we know that the quarantine rules in New York will be changing, but we still think it's important for people to observe those that, that guidance that exists, which involves staying home when you return, and making sure you get tested at least on day three after you.

**Mayor:** Thank you very much. Go ahead, Kristin.

**Question:** Thank you so much, everybody, and about vaccines. Senator Schumer announced, you know, now New York is going to be getting over one million vaccines per week, beginning, sometime in April. What is the City's timeline for making places like Empire Outlets and the Gotham Vanderbilt Clinic that we're supposed to be 24-hour vaccination sites, bringing them up to full capacity?

**Mayor:** Yeah, we are getting more supply, and that's what we've been needing. So, we do intend to see Empire go to 24/7 in the next week or two, and I've got to check on Vanderbilt, the exact timeline, but this has really been the issue, just getting the steady supply. There's a number of sites that are well-suited to 24/7 so long as we can get enough supply. So, you should expect that with Empire for sure. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** Last question for today goes to Yehudit from Boro Park 24 News.

**Question:** Good morning, Mr. Mayor. How are you?

**Mayor:** I'm doing good, Yehudit. They got the whole title of the publication in this time. Did you see that?

**Question:** Yay. Thank God. So, 11 days ago, I mentioned that not one Jewish ZIP code was included in those that the New York City Department of Education selected as those hardest hit by COVID and therefore were eligible to apply for 3-K and Pre-K that begins on July 1st. You said you hadn't seen the email and that you would get back to me considering – to consider adding in the ZIP codes of the Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods. So, I sent your Press Office the DOE letters, and however, I, nor the many school principals in the Jewish neighborhoods have heard any updates on whether our ZIP codes will be included in what the DOE is considering hardest hit by COVID, which of course was a designation that was definitely the case in the era of the red zones just months ago. So, while we have heard that the DOE has pushed back the deadline to apply for the request for proposals from tomorrow to March 31st, which is in nine days. I'm wondering whether you Mr. Mayor, can please take action and add the Jewish ZIP code to the list of eligible ZIP codes for the DOE fund.

**Mayor:** Okay, we lost you a little at the end, but I certainly understand the question you know, Yehudit, the answer is, and I have looked into this that there's going to be additional opportunities for the achievers to apply. There's multiple strands going on here of how we're approaching Pre-K and 3-K. There was a special focus on some of the communities hardest hit by COVID. That's true, but there's many other elements of what we're doing with Pre-K and 3-K. So, the bottom-line question here is will yeshivas still have additional opportunities to apply to participate in Pre-K and 3-K? The answer is yes, and I will have Deputy Chancellor of the Department of Education Josh Wallack, who's one of the early architects of Pre-K and 3-K, I will have him talk to you directly to clarify the new opportunities that will exist for yeshivas and for other providers as well, to apply all over the city. Go ahead, Yehudit. Can you hear me? Yehudit? Okay, well, I think that may – you got it? Okay. You're back. You're back.

**Question:** Can you hear me?

**Mayor:** There you go.

**Question:** Okay. Sorry. I'm just going to turn mine down so I can hear you. It's a celebration of many miracles with eight days of meals and a lot of joyous, meaningful community events. So, particularly on Saturday and Sunday night, a lot of Orthodox Jews all over the city will be walking home very late night after Seders. So, we have heard from the NYPD and the community board about an increased police presence and other protections for a community that last year was unfortunately, had the largest percentage of hate crimes in the city perpetrated against them. So, we just want to hear from the Mayor that the City has aware of our perhaps increased vulnerability so that we can celebrate a very joyous time without any anxiety.

**Mayor:** Oh, absolutely. I'm, I'm very, very appreciative that you raised that, Yehudit. I will be saying soon and wishing everyone [inaudible] and we want to make sure it's a very wonderful time for the Jewish community, and we of course will have additional and NYPD presence. That's what we've done year in a year out. It's been important to do, to reassure the community and protect the community, and one of the things we do is whenever we see something where it's important to add additional focus, we do that. So, yes, the community can rest assured there'll be a time of special vigilance and protection, and we want everyone to have a very special time together.

All right, well, everyone, as we conclude today, I want to just end where we started, which is with our children, our families, bringing our kids back to school. It's so amazing. I've had the opportunity now to be at schools as young people have come back and the relief, the relief that parents feel, the joy that kids feel, the satisfaction that educators and staff feel. Everyone wants. The same thing we want. Our kids back in school. It is where they belong. It's where they can get the help they deserve and the love and the support they deserve. It's where we move the city forward, and I'm really, really happy to say that things are every day moving in the right direction in terms of bringing kids back more and more for this school year, and it's starting really strong in September with every child back in school who's ready to be back. This is one of the single most important things we can do for the whole city, but really for the kids and for their parents. It's precious. It's a chance to start moving forward. It's a chance to start moving on with their life that the lives have been on hold in so many ways. It's a chance to start addressing the pain they've been through. It's a chance to start closing that COVID achievement gap and moving us forward. It's an exciting time. So, we're going to do everything it takes to bring our kids back the right way, and that's going to help to move this whole city forward. Thank you, everyone.

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