



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

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CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

**RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOSTS PRESS CONFERENCE AT PS 9 TO DISCUSS
THE SECOND YEAR OF PRE-K FOR ALL AND THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL**

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Well, it is great to be here at P.S. 9. We had a great time out in the school yard meeting parents and kids from the school. There is a tremendous school spirit, tremendous good feeling about this school here and this community. So, I commend everyone who is a part of P.S. 9 for what you've achieved. There is a lot of excitement. First day of school – for all parents, there is a special excitement, of course, for parents whose kids are starting school and starting pre-k. And that's what we've been seeing all over the city today.

P.S. 9 is legendary. It is an incredibly vibrant school community. You agree? Yes. I have objective sources. It's a totally energetic school community, tons of parent involvement, a very innovative curriculum, heavy on the arts, and presents learning in a very, very engaging way. So, parents are really satisfied with the experience here. And for that reason, not surprisingly, we've seen ELA and math scores go up. We've seen attendance be consistently high. This is a school that is working and a great example of what New York City public schools are capable of.

I want to thank, of course, Principal Kate Witzke. This is her first day as principal. Congratulations. 11 years here at the school, worked her way up.

[Applause]

We are very happy for you. I got a look at the first day of school for kids in all five boroughs. 1.1 million kids and, of course, their families, experiencing this joyous day. And I think it was a great start. Thanks to Chancellor Fariña and her team, I think schools have gotten off to a very strong start, a very smooth start.

Again, this is not a typical first day of school because we've done something that's never been done before in our history – 65,000-plus kids in full-day pre-k. I've said before and I'll say again, that is as many kids as there are in the entire school system of Boston, or the entire school system of Seattle. That's just what we have in full-day pre-k today in New York City. And there are still seats available. So we're at 65,500. We expect that number to grow.

We really want to let parents know that if they want full-day pre-k for their child for free, all they have to do is pick up the phone and call 3-1-1 or go online – nyc.gov/prek. You can literally apply online, see all the sites available. Two page application – very, very straight-forward.

Now, this school is an example of what our Pre-K for All effort has yielded. This is a school that has never had full-day pre-k. It's a great, great school. It's a beloved school, except it had one flaw – it didn't have full-day pre-k. That has been corrected. And there are a lot of really happy parents outside who are part of this historic moment for this school and understand what will mean for the future of their kid.

Now, this is part of a series of things that are happening today that are going to change the nature of New York City public schools for the long-haul. 130 new community schools starting today, bringing together all of the different pieces that we need to help a child in their education, physical health, mental health, parental involvement. Things like free eyeglasses – really basic things that will change the trajectory of so many kids, particularly our disadvantaged kids.

Our renewal schools – 94 renewal schools that historically were underfunded, under-supported, ignored – that now, we’re pouring resources and high-quality personnel into. And we know it’s already yielding results. We expect a lot more. 40 new dual language programs around the city – obviously tremendous enthusiasm among parents for giving their children an opportunity to learn a foreign language early. We’re very, very excited about that.

I have said that for this school system to work as well as it needs to, we have to engage parents very differently. So, you’ll see, all over the school system, the effects of the new teacher contract – 40 minutes every week in which teachers engage with parents – not just twice a year at a parent-teacher conference – 40 minutes every single week.

You’re going to see the effect of more and more teacher development – teacher training, which is also baked into the contract, because we know that that’s how we transform the school system and keep our highest quality teachers here, is continuing to give them that opportunity to develop and to grow in their careers.

We believe that the PROSE schools – 120 of them – we’ve doubled the number of PROSE schools – schools that are voluntarily terminating their work rules, both their DOE work rules and their union work rules – freeing themselves up to innovate and make changes. That’s the kind of – we think – reform and experiment that’s going to yield a lot and is engaging educators intensely.

All of these pieces are going to yield a very, very different school system. And I would say pre-k alone is going to give us a different foundation. You think about a simple fact – 20,000 kids had full-day pre-k when I came into office – 65,000-plus now, and the number will grow.

It means in future years, every child will have been exposed to full-day, high quality pre-k. It’s going to change the whole system. It’s going to lift all boats. And so, this is a dawning of something very new in New York City public schools, and it’s exciting to share this moment with so many great and devoted educators.

P.S. 9 has a simple mantra. It’s one I believe we are applying throughout our school system. At P.S. 9 they say, “Every child at P.S. 9 will succeed!” That is the attitude we take for the whole school system. We can reach every child in every neighborhood, and we will.

A few words in Spanish –

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, I want to bring forward a real expert. She is beloved. I’m going to give the statistics here – Nancy Stitham, pre-k teacher at P.S. 9 for 21 years – am I right, Nancy?

Nancy Stitham: Yes.

Mayor: 21 years – has used a lot of wonderful, innovative tools in her classroom. A lot of use of music – she’s used traditional things like guitar, but now she’s going all the way – she’s using ukulele this year – big moment at P.S. 9.

[Laughter]

And Nancy's done an incredible job for the children of this school. And this is a real school community where kids come in at pre-k and go all the way through. And I met a woman outside who – she went to P.S. 9, now her child's going to P.S. 9. So it's a real community but, again, with one flaw only – it was only half-day pre-k. Now Nancy has a full day to teach the children all she has to teach them with. It is my deep honor to bring forward a real pre-k hero, Nancy Stitham.

[Applause]

[...]

Mayor: Let's take questions on this topic. Yes?

Question: [inaudible]

Mayor: Kyle, we know who you are by now. You don't need to keep introducing yourself.

Question: Not a problem. I have a question for you, Councilmember Rosenthal, Borough Council President –

Mayor: Borough President Brewer.

Question: Borough President – and I also have a question for Ms. Stitham.

Mayor: Go ahead.

Question: First to you mayor, why is so important for you to have this initiative of full-day pre-k?

Mayor: Because I think you need the foundation for all children. I really believe this, and I use the simple analogy, if you build a house you need to create a strong foundation. I think the research has proven that early childhood education is a difference maker for all children. I think it's a particular difference maker for children who are less advantaged. And when we look at the challenges in New York City public schools, it has never surprised that we weren't making enough progress because we weren't beginning at the beginning. We weren't addressing the potential of our children by giving them full-day pre-k, high-quality pre-k – at the point in life where they could learn with particular ability. And I think that's what has actually been under discussed so far when this has been considered. It is a scientific fact that children can learn at ages like three and four in a more advanced way proportionately than they learn later on. They are just intellectual sponges at that age. I always use the example of foreign languages. If you or I went to a foreign country right now we would learn the language eventually, but if you put a child in a foreign country they learn tremendously quickly and with very great agility. That is why pre-k taps into a special moment in life. If you give every child that strong foundation – and I agree with the point of not just intellectually, but also the social, emotional foundation – it changes their trajectory. We're going to have a lot more kids that succeed in school. We're going to have a lot more kids who actually are hopeful about their future and continue on a positive path because we laid this foundation for them. Continue.

Question: Thank you. And Ms. Stiffen, my question for you is, when you start the day for school what is the first thing that the children say to you or you say to children to prepare them for the work ahead?

Nancy Stitham: I greet each child by their name. And I say hello to them. And we gather as a community in a circle and we sing and we speak with each other.

Question: And to the borough president –

Mayor: What about the ukulele? I was waiting for that.

[Laughter]

Go ahead.

Question: And to the borough president and Councilmember Rosenthal, what is it like for you both to be here today and be a part of this event?

Borough President Gale Brewer: It's very special for me because P.S. 9 is such an excellent school, and it's great to see the quality continuing. But I do want to say in terms of – something even more important about pre-k that may not be relevant to P.S.9 but is relevant to the experience – a lot of the pre-k's are in non-profits. And the fact of the matter is some of them have Head Start, which has always been for low-income children, and now there's a pre-k classroom. And in the past, it was always young people who are in the Head Start would stay in the Head Start and that trajectory, but now you got mixing going on between the pre-k and the Head Start. So it's another advantage that the mayor might not have mentioned in terms of getting people to work with each other, collaboration, and cross-cultural experiences. So, I just want to mention that because it didn't come up earlier. I just love being at P.S. 9.

Mayor: Amen. Helen?

City Councilmember Helen Rosenthal: Well, you know, I think everyone's covered all the territory about P.S. 9 and how exciting it is to be here. I think the thing that I was really struck by today was how the parents went agog for the mayor. And were crowding him – I mean I had to get out of the way, and they're pressing and all over. Everyone wants a selfie with the mayor. And there were parents who came up to me afterwards and proudly showed me the picture of the mayor on their selfie – on their phone – a picture of the mayor and their child, and said – saying to me this is my child's first day of school, and asking me, by the way, if they could get you to sign the picture – but so proud. Now, I unfortunately – I was like I'm here. They don't care.

[Laughter]

And that was really – that I think is a reflection of how people feel about the mayor. He shows up and he gets crowded, you know, with people wanting these selfies. It's pretty important.

Question: How do feel that the coordination goes between you and the mayor?

Councilmember Rosenthal: Oh, it was easy. I am just a little bit annoyed that there were no pictures with me.

Mayor: That's a coordination issue.

Councilmember Rosenthal: Yeah

Mayor: Go ahead.

Question: Mr. Mayor as you know, last year there was a study that came out finding New York City has some of the most segregated schools in the nation. And a number of principals are talking right now about whether they should reserve seats in their schools for kids from other neighborhoods. The chancellor was asked about this yesterday on Brian Lehrer's show.

Mayor: And this morning.

Question: And she said she still hasn't come up with a solution. So, I just want to know where you are on this? And what you would want the schools to be doing?

Mayor: Look, I believe we had a long history that we're trying to overcome, in this city and in this country, of division. And I think we always do better when we find greater unity and greater coming together. So, I think right now, as Gale pointed out, the pre-k program is starting to do some of that on its own – the after-school

programs are, all of the school choice programs at the middle school and high school levels. But as the chancellor said earlier, we are looking for other ways we can do things. We want to be creative. We want to see if there's other ways we can further this work, because it really is historic and necessary work. But we also don't have, you know, the perfect solution yet, so we're going to keep working on that. Yeah?

Question: I've got a question for Nancy. First –

Mayor: [Inaudible]

Nancy Stitham: [Inaudible]

Question: First, please, if you could spell your last name.

Unknown: Spell your last name.

Nancy Stitham: S-t-i-t-h-a-m.

Question: Let me ask you – when you see a child in a half-day program – from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, what are the major differences that you see, and what do you expect with full-day now?

Nancy Stitham: Well, today, I got to see most of the kids that were in my program last year in kindergarten, and I was moved to tears at how they had grown. And I feel that they're extremely prepared for kindergarten. Going forward with a full-day program – which is a new for me – I expect that we're going to go a little deeper, do a little more. And I'm very, very excited about it. I mean, I just love teaching children.

Question: But [inaudible], when you say “fully prepared,” what do you mean by that? In what ways?

Nancy Stitham: With literacy, with – I think a lot about social development. That's a strong orientation I have. And I like to think that, whether the children were with me for a half-day or a full-day, that they are kinder kids – that they know how to have conversations with each other. And they're going to be strong leaders in our world. That's – [inaudible].

Mayor: Thank you. I just want to steal from Helen Rosenthal on the previous question – I always appreciate a good assist. And Helen makes the point that, on the question of, you know, how we overcome some of the barriers of the past – you have the schools as one piece of the equation, but affordable housing is a really important piece of the equation. The program we have for 200,000 units – so, enough for half a million people – a lot of that is going to be new affordable housing – about 80,000 units. That'll average out, you know, let's say three people per unit – 240,000 people. That's also going to be something done by a lottery that brings people together across [inaudible]. And that's going to be another force for, you know, a more unified city. Okay, who else? Yes?

Question: You hinted this morning that you will have more things to say about renewal schools and about K-12 education in the next few weeks. Can you give us any clues about what sort of [inaudible]?

Mayor: Well, that would really give away the secret, wouldn't it?

[Laughter]

No – I'll be speaking a lot during September. We – I want to be very clear – from the beginning, we've said we have to do a system-wide reform. And pre-k, to me, was prerequisite to all the other changes we had to make. But – and I mentioned the middle school level, which is something Chancellor Farina talks about a lot as a level that hasn't gotten the support it deserves. You know – the after-school programs have been part of that, but there's more to come. We obviously want to focus on college readiness. There's a host of areas that we want the

people of this city to understand there is a full plan related to for this school system. So you'll be hearing more about that in the next couple of weeks.

Question: Other topics, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: We're staying on this topic – education. That's what today – no, we're just doing education today.

Question: On long term funding for this initiative, [inaudible] do you feel comfortable that this will be there in years going forward? And secondly, is there any thought on making pre-k mandatory across the city?

Mayor: Excellent questions as usual. [Inaudible], I commend you. The – one, I feel very confident about the funding. When we first went up to Albany for the funding, you know, there was some controversy. But what was also true was there was tremendous public support, and the support of this city was felt in Albany. And the fact it was across every neighborhood, every borough – I think it opened the eyes of a lot of people in Albany, to realize how much the public was demanding full-day pre-k. And I think also the impact of this initiative is already being felt. There's so many parents I've talked to in just the last year who tell me what it did for their child and their family – that's going to just be magnified year after year after year. So there's a very powerful constituency of parents who demand it, and I think that will continue to be heeded in Albany for the long term. On the question of whether it should be mandatory – I would say it a little differently. I would say this is the shape of things to come. There was a great piece today on the successes in Oklahoma, which has been one of the states that's actually been most advanced in terms of pre-k, particularly the city of Tulsa. You're seeing this in a wide range of city and state – cities and states – a greater emphasis on early childhood education, and a recognition that the modern world demands it, the modern economy demands it. So, I think first, it will start, as we have done, with a universal program that's voluntary. I'm not going to be surprised if, in the not-distant future, this country comes to the conclusion that pre-k should be something every child has, because it's simply necessary for the modern world.

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: Well again, let's take one thing at a time. Right now, we, you know, have developed this as something available to all. And you know, I want us to have a couple of years of that experience. We'll certainly look at other options going forward. But I'm speaking about what I think is a bigger societal change – that people will come to the conclusion – just as we, once upon a time, decided kids needed first grade and then they needed kindergarten. I think we're going to come to the conclusion that all kids need pre-k.

Question: [Inaudible] I know you want to make parents more involved in struggling schools?

Mayor: Yes.

Question: How so?

Mayor: Look, I think that the lack of parental involvement is one of the reasons why our schools haven't been good enough for decades. There was never a strategy for parental involvement. When I became a school board member in 1999, I was shocked. I went into the training for school board members, and it became apparent to me that the school system didn't value parental involvement. In some ways, it kept it at arms-length. That doesn't mean there weren't schools that didn't value it. This school is a great example of one that does value the role of parents. But system-wide, it was not valued strategically. There wasn't a sensibility that students needed to be a part of decision-making in the building, they needed to be volunteers, they needed to be welcomed in, but most especially, that they needed to be a part of the experience of teaching their child. I always say, we as parents are the first and last teachers of our children. And we – when we looked at the contract last year, and we realized we were doing something very arcane. We were having two parent teacher conferences a year. And generally, those were very brief experiences for parents. It wasn't strategic. It wasn't going to build a partnership between parents and teachers. So, in the contract, we said 40 minutes every single week – parents are connecting with teachers, teachers connecting with parents by phone, by email, in person – building a real

working relationship that says – the teacher is literally going to say, here’s what’s up with your child, here’s where we need some help. Please get him to focus on his reading at home, or we need you help emphasizing the importance of finishing the homework. We’re going to do that in a very grand scale, and I think, particularly in the struggling schools and our renewal schools, it’s going to have a particularly big impact because those parents were never invited into the process to begin with.

Question: You talked before, this morning, about mayoral control. You made the case for it. How do you plan on convincing the governor to renew it for more than a one-year term next time around? Do you have, kind of a specific plan for that?

Mayor: I think the facts really will speak for themselves. I think the success of pre-k last year now amplified on a much greater level. I think the success we’re seeing on test scores, the progress we’re seeing on renewal schools, the impact of greater professional development, which I know is going to help us retain good teachers. We’ve obviously been assertive about helping teachers who shouldn’t be in the profession to move along. So, I think all of those facts are going to add up. And I think, again, the people are going to demand that it be continued on a longer scale, because it’s part of what allows us to keep our school system improving.

Question: It was mentioned – overcrowding – how serious a problem is it and how do you solve that?

Mayor: It’s a real problem, particularly in some districts. Central Queens is one of the most meaningful examples of this in the city. We have a real challenge in Central Queens with overcrowding, and in some other areas as well, certainly in parts of Manhattan, North Shore of Staten Island, and some other areas. We’re trying to address that as quickly as we can with additional capacity. And this is something that will take time to achieve. You know, we’re putting in very major capital investments. The good news is it is a problem in part because people are coming into our public schools, a lot of whom didn’t before. And I think that’s an important trend to look at too. We’re getting folks into our public schools from every demographic now. I would say – Gale Brewer and I are old enough to remember – there were a lot of folks in the city, a lot of middle class folks, who didn’t consider a local public school once upon a time. And I think the story you just heard here – this is a school, once upon a time, that needed a G and T program but now, it’s all good. Everyone has faith in every class being high quality. So, something has improved. You know, I give a lot of credit to people over the last years who helped to strengthen a lot of our schools. But I think the assumption that New York City public schools can and should be a place for everyone is growing. And that’s part of why we have some challenges some districts. We’re going to keep investing until we get to the point that we really can make sure we have the kind of classes – sized class that we want everywhere. Okay, last call? Good enough. Thank you, everyone.

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