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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON ROLAND MARTIN
UNFILTERED**

Roland Martin: Now let's talk about education in New York where Mayor Bill de Blasio is praising a plan to confront segregated schools where students are screened when it comes to the classrooms. That's a huge problem because for many black folks and Latinos, they are being frozen out of some of the city's most elite schools. Here's my conversation with Mayor Bill de Blasio.

[...]

Mayor de Blasio, glad to have you here on Roland Martin Unfiltered. First off this whole issue of integrating schools in New York – a lot of people of course they think New York City an extremely liberal and progressive but when you look at education for years it has been a segregated school, separated by the haves and have nots, in many cases based upon race.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Roland look, we have hundreds of years of American history that are playing out in this city and cities all over the country, there is no question about it. It's first and foremost about race and economics and the kinds of jobs people have, the kind of incomes they have, the kind of housing they had, where they were allowed to live and where they weren't allowed to live. And it's left us with a city where yes, our schools end up reflecting that and we have got a lot of work to do to address it. Now I've said from the beginning we can't address all of those realities through the schools alone and I think that's a really important point of honesty that we can do a certain amount through our schools to create more diverse classrooms, a lot of what we have to do beyond that is about raising wages, rising benefits, creating a lot more equality in our society across the board.

But what we are doing here and I'm really proud of what the parents of this city are increasingly doing – they are stepping forward with real specific ideas about how to diversify district by district. We have got 32 school districts in New York City, 1.1 million kids in our public schools and now we have had three of our school districts come forward and create their own grassroots plans with the help of our Department of Education that are going to create a real step forward for diversification and now are becoming a model that we can take citywide.

Martin: And Mayor, it's interesting because I'm looking at a New York Times story on September 20th where the headline was de Blasio Acts of School Integration but Others Lead Charge. And it says the plan was created not by City Hall or even the Department of Education but by parents in District 15 which includes the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Park Slope, Sunset Park, and Red Hook and so in many ways, again for me as a supporter of school choice or parental choice whatever you want to call it, I mean these are parents who are saying we want to be active in the education of our children and so I get their point but I don't have any problem having parents telling City Hall and telling the Department of Education, we want changes to how our kids are being educated.

Mayor: Well Roland, I think the reality here is we are looking for change that will last, that will be deep seated that will succeed in an ongoing basis. And I think in this instance – you know the history of efforts at desegregation around the country when it comes to education. It's a checkered history to say the least and often has left out the question of the quality of schools for kids of all backgrounds. We believe we have a broad mandate to fix our schools, to make schools high quality across all neighborhoods, all zip codes but meanwhile I think there's a really positive way to diversify our classrooms but it has to be with parental buy in and a real grassroots involvement to avoid the pitfalls and conflicts of the past. And that's what we are seeing here.

So in this case look, the Department of Education is a part of the process every step of the way or it wouldn't ultimately work. I mean we are playing a very active role but it is true that we are welcoming grassroots leadership. And we are welcoming tough community conversations for people to recognize how important the change is. And yes, it will come with changes that will affect their lives or families in some ways that some parents may be hesitant about. But it's going to get us to a greater goal of more diverse schools, more diversified schools that are better for everyone. And what we've found is if you give parents that seat at the table, they're really buying into, and they're helping to lead the charge. That's the difference from the top-down attempts at desegregation that often failed because they ran into a lot of community opposition and didn't address the core question of making sure all schools improve simultaneously.

Martin: And what jumps out at me – so, for folks who don't know about New York City, what is the current process? How does it work? Are all schools screening? And is this applied to just so-called specialty schools, magnet programs? So, explain it for the folks who are unfamiliar with how New York City operates.

Mayor: Okay so this latest step forward is District 15, and I'll explain and answer your question in the process. This is the part of Brooklyn you refer to – often called Brownstone Brooklyn. It's the area of Brooklyn that I come from and my kids went to public school in. It also includes some neighborhoods including Sunset Park and Red Hook that have been historically disadvantaged. So, it's an interesting mix of different types of neighborhoods.

This is about moving away from screening for our middle schools. Whereas, for example, elementary schools generally are done – there's a selection process, the application process is around geography and a zone you live in. And even that has been something we're trying to address and diversify by changing some of the zone borders in some parts of the city.

But historically elementary school is about where you live and what school zone you're in but choice starts to be applied at middle school and then of course high school. So, the choice programs included a lot of schools that were called "screened schools" and those were schools that were often considered to have higher standards and be very appealing for parents to get their kids into –

Martin: So, I got to ask though, those screened schools – so, again, I went to a magnet school in Houston and so I had to apply to get into the magnet school although another part of the school [inaudible] students who were zoned there went there.

So, for these schools here – now, granted that was a magnet program. So when we talk about these screen schools, are they specialized or schools are they just traditional public schools but because of the rigor or because of how other students have turned out, you have to be essentially be screened to get in?

Mayor: So, just to – great question. I'd say these are not the kinds of middle schools and high schools that we still have plenty of that are based on a geographical area. They are schools that kids apply to from a wider geography that have a specialty typically that have certain standards that historically they have held in terms of whether it's grade-point average or have a portfolio of work that you've done or other standards that defined how kids got in versus, for example, a school that is something you're geographically zoned for where all kids got in equally.

So, what's happened here in this district in Brooklyn is that the parents said we want to actually get rid of these screens, we want to get rid of those filters, and just say kids are welcome at any of the schools in our district, any middle school. And then we're going to ensure fairness by having a system of ensuring that each school basically reflects the demography of the district.

So, for example, if lower income kids make up about half of the student population of our elementary schools in that district then each middle school should reflect that pretty much and that's going to be a factor in how we create balance and get representation from all types of neighborhoods. And kids would be welcomed in regardless of their academic achievement levels, and it would put the responsibility on the school community starting with the principal and teachers to help kids of all backgrounds – all working together in the same school to lift all boats.

That's the underlying idea that the screening although – I think the screening was done in many cases with no ignoble intent. What happened over time was it did create that kind of skew and it did create a situation where a lot of classrooms were not diverse enough.

And what the parents are saying – and Roland, a lot of educators are coming forward saying they believe in this even if it might mean honestly more work for them, is they want a more diverse student body. They're ready to take on the challenges of some young people who haven't had as much educational opportunity and they believe they can help all kids simultaneously.

Martin: Just a couple of more questions and first of all, according to this New York Times story, this is going to impact 11 of the city's roughly 600 middle schools. Is that correct? Or is it going to be more schools impacted?

Mayor: Well, this district is the one – and don't know if 11 is the exact number – but is one of our 32 districts and just the middle schools, but what really matters here as I mentioned – two other districts have done a variation on this approach with their elementary schools. So we now have three districts that have either elementary school or middle school or both where they're creating diversification efforts with a lot of parent buy-in and that have real grassroots support. So this is now a model that we'd like to see go farther. We're providing grant money, as is the state of New York, we've got 10 districts now that are ready to act on creating their own plan, again, starting with grassroots involvement. And we think this is just going to keep spreading, and we're going to encourage it, I'm going to help it every step along the way that I can as mayor, but what I think is so powerful here is this is an honest grassroots momentum fueling this where more and more parents are saying you know this is just the right thing to do. And every time they see another district do it effectively and without a lot of rancor. I mean there's always going to be some angst and there's always going to be parents worried that in some way it might affect their kid that they don't want to see. But mainly what we've heard is voices saying we can do better, and let's find a way to do this together.

Martin: So you of course have been trying to take over the schools and wanting to be more involved in education and also—

Mayor: But we have mayor – just to interrupt – we have mayoral control of education here it has to be renewed in our state legislature, but that is the reality right now.

Martin: And one of the things that, so the legislature has not renewed that correct?

Mayor: They have to next year—

Martin: Got it.

Mayor: —so we have it, then there has to – we have to go through the process again.

Martin: So one of the things that jumps out at me again is that and I've been following this of course because as I said earlier I certainly support school choice – there's no form of school I don't as long as works so for me that's traditional public, charter, magnet, home school, online school, technical school, I don't care. So there's been this constant back and forth in New York with charter schools and what not. Do you believe that charters can play a role if, and again, from my position, they must be successful, just like I believe traditional schools must be successful, why do we have to have the either or? Why can't we operate with and?

Mayor: Well Roland, I agree with the concept there's room at the table for all schools that work. I think what's happened here is that the debate got skewed and I really feel like this was true before I came into office, that there was a bias in our Department of Education in favor of charter schools, that in some ways was not about the quality but was a philosophical favoring of charter

schools over traditional public schools and I think that was a mistake. The fact is that the charter school community is very diverse – there are some schools that are absolutely outstanding. There are some schools that are extraordinary at teaching kids in a very modern progressive way, critical decision making, and critical thinking, and problem solving, and the things that really typify what we need in education today and bluntly there's some other schools in the charter world that are incessant test prep factories and that earn their reputation with great test scores but taught kids exactly the way that's been rejected by most educators. So there's a lot of range there. I want to see the schools that are doing things the right way and succeeding get our support and we, by the way – my number one signature initiative in general was Pre-K for All. We did that with charter schools. They were welcome to the table, religious schools were welcome to the table, community organizations – that's part of why it worked. So no, I think we can break down that kind of artificial debate, artificial barrier, that used to exist but with a clear, philosophical in quality, consideration, that is not all charters are good or all charters are bad but with charters, we need to see them take all kids like our traditional public schools do, including special-Ed kids, English language learners, kids who don't test as well – treat them with equal respect, equal support, and not make the curriculum all about test prep.

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