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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer show on WNYC. And if it's Friday, it's Ask The Mayor day, my questions and yours at 11:05 for Mayor Bill de Blasio. 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag #AskTheMayor. And Mr. Mayor, it's been a few weeks, two weeks ago I was off for a long Labor Day weekend. Last week you had to be in Lower Manhattan because it was 9/11. So I hope you've been well. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: I thank you, Brian. How are you doing?

Lehrer: I'm doing all right. We live in complicated times and I don't envy you your job.

Mayor: Thank you. True statement.

Lehrer: Let's begin with schools. Actually. I'm going to see if we have schools callers. Because I'm going to let the parents do it and the teachers do it and the principals do it. I don't see anyone right up on the board. Oh, okay, here. Ellen in Brooklyn. Ellen you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi there.

Question: Hi. I wanted to ask the Mayor about the delay in schools. Specifically, he is citing the staffing shortfall as being the driving force behind this decision. But that staffing shortfall due to the change in model has been well known. And the principals have been talking about this for some time. This seems very late to make this decision. The school my children attended is a joint District 75 and District 15 school. So that's special needs and not special needs. And that school does not know if it's opening on Monday. So I – it's Friday. I don't know if my children are going to school on Monday. Why has the Mayor waited this long to make this decision? How are we supposed to manage like this?

Mayor: Ellen, thank you for the call. And if you're in District 15, that's obviously my neighborhood. And what I want to make clear is we are starting Monday, all District 75 classrooms, all pre K, 3-K classrooms are opening up. And that means next week, there'll be about 90,000 kids in classrooms in New York City. And then the following week, obviously hundreds of thousands more. This has been a real challenging situation. So I want to be clear. I do feel for any parent who is trying to make sense of this under particularly horrible conditions we're dealing with generally. But this is exactly why we ended up in this bind. We've been trying to restart the entire school system with in-person, with blended, with remote, fully remote, all those options. Get the staffing right to the right places with changing numbers constantly in terms of who is going to be in school, who's not, both staff and students. It's been a greater

challenge than anyone foresaw, even though we tried to make the adjustments and tried to put the resources in place in advance.

So look, it's painful, but we're going to get there and we'll get there quickly. And we're going to make sure it's done right. We're going to make sure it's safe. And so I ask everyone for some patience here. I do feel the frustration that parents are feeling. But when we're up and running and very few school systems in America are up and running with in-person education and doing it safely. When we're up and running, it will have been worth it.

Lehrer: People who I've been hearing from, other parents similar to Ellen, are frustrated that these phase-in plans came so late. And people have been asking, why didn't you see the need for this coming over the summer and announce it this way in the first place like Boston did with their phase-in plans? People say Boston. What would you say to those scrambling parents? Why didn't you see –

Mayor: I would say – no, I mean, look, I'm responsible. So I'll take any criticism Brian. You know, there is a mayoral accountability for education. So I'll take full responsibility. That said, what I've tried to do over months, working with the team at DOE is say that, you know, we have to stay to a rigorous timeline here because it means so much for parents and families. And we've been providing the resources and making the decisions to do that. I do think the sheer complexity here is like nothing we've ever experienced before. We've laid in the most rigorous health and safety standards anywhere in the world. That did take a lot of time and energy. We never have had to do this particular approach before. We've never been in the middle of a pandemic trying to start school. It got harder and harder as we went along to try and make the different adjustments. As I said, the staffing situation got complicated because it was often changing, what would be the exact number of staff and students available in each school. So there were real challenges here that we foresaw, but in practice were even more difficult than anyone realized.

It's all because we're dealing with a pandemic that's thrown us every conceivable curve ball. But that said, we will have kids in school starting Monday morning. And then the following week, everyone else comes in. It's a delay, but it's a small delay in the context of the whole school year. So of course I would have liked it all to have worked like clockwork exactly the day we planned it. But I'll tell you, there's no large school system doing anything like what we're trying to do. In terms of the sheer extent. We are going to have over a half a million kids in in-person learning in a matter of a few weeks. I still think that's the ultimate goal here. Because parents are saying to me loudly, they – so many of them are done with remote learning alone. It is not enough for their kids. They need in-person. And as frustrating as it is, whatever will get us to that mix of in-person learning along with remote – parents, many, many parents really need us to get there.

Lehrer: So let's take a call from a teacher next. Nina in Queens you are on WNYC, with the Mayor. Hello, Nina.

Question: Hello, Mr. Mayor. And thank you, Brian, for taking my call. Mr. Mayor, I really want you to know what is actually happening in the schools. I work in a high school and we have teachers and students that keep changing their plans. And a lot of teachers are getting accommodations to stay at home and students and parents keep moving, you know, either from

accommodations to in-school learning or in-school to accommodations. And it's really impeding our ability to be ready. And you know, you and the Chancellor asked schools to come up with a plan for their schools, for their communities. And many of us did and our plans were rejected. And you know, I need you to know that our school has 55 minute classes. We used to have 65 minutes. Now they're 55. Now they're 45 minutes. So the kids that are actually coming to school, you know, two days a week, one week, three days a week, the next week, are actually getting less time with their teachers because you haven't provided us with the blended, remote learning, you know, the blended teachers. So the plan is really shortchanging kids. And if you had listened to us, if you had listened to what schools really needed, we, we could be doing a better job to serve our students. You know, we should have been spending the summer improving our remote learning plans. And now we're short on teachers. We don't have enough teachers in our classrooms coming to our schools. And you just – I'm really frustrated because you and the Chancellor do not listen to principals and teachers who know their communities.

Lehrer: Let me get a response for you from the Mayor. Mr. Mayor you hear Nina's frustration.

Mayor: Nina, I respect first of all, whether we agree or not, I respect and appreciate the work you're doing. And I respect and appreciate your perspective. But again, you think from your perspective, people aren't being listened to. I just fundamentally disagree. The Chancellor was a teacher, was a principal, has spent a huge amount of time listening to educators, as well as parents. I have too. I truly believe we're trying to do something extremely difficult here, but I believe it is based on that most foundational concept that we asked the stakeholders, the ultimate stakeholders, the people we serve, the parents and the children, what they wanted, what they needed. And they said they needed in-person learning back. And in-person learning matters. And I've talked to so many educators who agree, knowing it's an incredible challenge to make all this happen. But even sometime in school does so much for children. And especially for kids who are struggling, especially kids who are experiencing the disparities in our society. And are less privileged. That time in school with educators is absolutely crucial. If it's not the perfect amount of time or the perfect structure to begin with, we're going to keep working on it literally every week to make it better. But we could have done what I think would have been the easy and immoral thing and gone to all remote. And all remote, maybe some families it works well for. And I think particularly for more privileged families it works better, but for many, many children, all remote would have meant a year without anything close to a proper education. And that's just not right. Especially in a city that has driven back the disease so effectively. So I truly believe we can do this. I believe we will make adjustments and improvements all the time. Where we start in September is not where we end. We're going to keep working to making it better. But we've been listening to people and trying to make the adjustments based on that feedback.

Lehrer: Do you think teachers are just in revolt over this and they won't ultimately go back. And they'll find more and more reasons to delay? Some of them have been sending me the Cynthia Nixon op-ed in the Times this week, comparing safety protocols on her current TV show on the set, to those in her son's New York City public school. The TV crew and production staff would be tested before they started work. And then tested one to three times a week. Actors who need to remove their masks would be tested every day. By contrast, she wrote teachers and administrators could choose to be tested for coronavirus before the school year began. And that

people entering the school could decide whether they wanted their temperature taken. First, is that factually accurate? And second, what do you say to teachers who still don't feel that that, and she went on to air purifiers, unlike in the schools and all this stuff. And you know, and there was an article that's gotten widely passed around about how an open window does not ventilation make for coronavirus purposes. Teachers don't feel safe. And I get that. I don't know if they're going to go back.

Mayor: Well, Brian, you're talking about tens of thousands of people. So I would really urge you not to –

Lehrer: Yes.

Mayor: – assume, because you've heard some voices and most likely the ones with the deepest concerns that that represents tens of thousands right now.

Lehrer: That's fair.

Mayor: I'm sorry. It already happened, Brian. Right now across New York City, tens of thousands of teachers this minute are in their classrooms preparing, many of them to see kids for the first time on Monday. So I think the proof is in the pudding. They are back. They are doing the work, they're devoted to kids. The vast majority of educators, just like our health care workers, first responders, transit workers, everyone who showed up no matter what the risks and showed up under incredibly adverse circumstances. Our educators overwhelmingly are people who want to be there for the kids. In fact, have been pained that they couldn't be there with their kids over these last months. And they know that we've been working hard to try and achieve safety. And they certainly know their unions have been advocating for them. And look around the world, you've seen school systems open with higher positivity levels in their cities and in their countries than we have now in New York City. And successfully keep their school systems safe. And we are layering in many more safety precautions. We've thoroughly reviewed the ventilation situation. We are doing social distancing throughout schools. You're talking about ten kids in the classroom, 12 kids in the classroom. Everyone in the school, unlike almost any place in the world, everyone in the school has to have a mask on at all times, adults and students. This is the most thorough layering of health and safety measures anywhere in the country. And then I would argue almost anywhere in the world. And we know it can work because we've seen it around the world. We took every best practice out there. So I think what you're going to see is the vast majority of teachers are going to say, we're going to go and do this. And we've got to keep working to make it better. And they'll raise concerns and they'll expect to see adjustments and improvements. But they're truly devoted to their kids. And they know that kids are being cheated by all remote and especially less advantaged kids are being cheated.

Lehrer: On less advantaged kids. One more question on schools, then we're going to go on to some other things with some other callers. Gothamist has a story after months of preparation, DOE has yet to ensure all homeless students can participate in remote learning. And it says among the lingering problems, most shelters still don't have Wi-Fi access and some have inadequate cell reception. Children aren't allowed to stay in their shelter units without a parent. Some of them have to go to work during the day. The City's new free child care program will

have limited capacity. That's pointing out particular things that advocacy groups for homeless children are raising. What do you say to those?

Mayor: Well, one in terms of the child care capacity, which begins with capacity daily for 30,000 kids and is going to go up to a 100,000, priority is given to kids in shelter. So in fact, we can accommodate a whole lot of those kids. Remember the most sensitive reality is for younger kids, not so much need in terms of high school kids and all. But for younger kids, especially they will get that priority status for that free child care. And second look, DOE you can criticize Department of Education all day long. They have been fighting through a pandemic and they actually turned around and put up remote learning in a matter of a week and kept it going even when it wasn't perfect. And now they're opening the largest school system in the country when many wouldn't even dare to try, they have been fighting the digital divide intensely. This is something Chancellor Carranza feels very deeply, very personally, and in fact, when he and his team within a matter of weeks got 300,000 devices out to kids and families around New York City who had no technology that included – with internet service included. I mean, that was one of the biggest actions to address the digital divide in the history of New York City and it was done in an emergency context and people deserve a lot of credit for that. So any place, Brian, any kid who doesn't have a device can still get one for free, they just need to call 3-1-1. Any location where they're not getting access, we will work to add access to that location. If it's a homeless shelter doesn't have it, we need that reported in through 3-1-1 and we'll go work to get the access up immediately. But that has been going on literally since April ensuring that each and every child gets a device for free and the service to go with it.

Lehrer: Actually let me throw in one more here that someone wrote, why can't teachers teaching all remote kids teach from home? I guess the teachers have to go in to teach the remote students from the classroom without students in the classroom. Is that accurate?

Mayor: Well, again, I want to be careful not to get into the technicalities because a whole lot of different approaches are being taken here and different protocols, school by school. But what I'd say is that educators are working together, they're working as a team, when they think about the kids in the school building that day, the kids in blended learning are home that day, the kids that are all remote, there's a team approach being taken. There is a certain amount of communication and coordination that needs to happen with that. There is obviously things that have to happen in person that are different than what you could do remotely. So I think the bottom line here is what we're seeing from educators as they're going above and beyond because they want to serve kids. We saw it during the forced all remote of the spring, that it was amazing how much educators gave of themselves and worked out solutions together because everyone had to improvise. You know, I almost feel like when someone has a complaint –

Lehrer: But the specific question is why can't teachers who are teaching to remote kids work from home themselves?

Mayor: Again, it really depends on the circumstance and what's going on with that school and their approach. I don't want to speak to a generality. I'll finish the sentence though. The complaints get heard very loudly. I don't see enough celebration of the fact that teachers

continually create and work together because they want to reach kids better, and that's their central concern. How do they reach their kids effectively?

Lehrer: All right. Well, shout out to all the teachers. I know you support this, who seems like doing triple the work right now that they normally do. Elise in Sunset Park as we move on to the question of industry city, Elise on WNYC with the Mayor.

Question: Oh, hi. Thank you so much, Brian for taking my call and it's an honor to speak with you, Mayor de Blasio. I am very fortunate. I live in Greenwood Heights. I own a condo unit but I am a very passionate supporter of people who live in Sunset Park. And I'm calling because I wanted to find out if you're going to keep your word to local activists in Sunset Park regarding the rezone application. I know that you met with local activists last month in Sunset Park and you said that you'd be interested and willing to listen or consider an alternative proposal to Sunset Park. I think we both know that given everything that's happened this year it's unlikely –

Lehrer: Give us – give the listeners not familiar with this and listeners by way of a half a sentence of background, and we did a segment on it earlier in the week, a few already by now this big proposal to rezone the waterfront in Sunset Park, the part that includes Industry City for big development that would provide thousands of jobs. Local people are worried about gentrification and unaffordable housing as a result. What's the alternative proposal that you're talking about in a nutshell, Elise?

Question: Oh I think - I'm learning about this proposal but I'm on board with Carlos Menchaca and local community activists regarding a different plan for Sunset Park in terms of – so I'm not, I think there are –

Lehrer: Alright, you can't go into it too much and for time I'm going to leave it there, but Mr. Mayor, have you expressed a formal position on the Sunset Park rezoning pro or con?

Mayor: Alright, let me clarify couple of quick things and let me first say that, Elise, please give your contact formation to WNYC because I'd like to see – when you say I met with activists, they happen to be in the park in Sunset Park when we were actually doing work around COVID and making sure people got tested for COVID in the park. So I spoke with a few activists briefly, and I said, please if you have an alternative plan, get it to me. I haven't seen it. They may have may have sent it. I haven't seen it, but if we could connect with you through our team today, anything that's been written up by the activists about what they think is a better alternative, I do want to see. Brian, no, this is what's called a private application the developers have been put in, I am going to get more information on it, but my broad understanding is it's the theory of this applications that would create about 20,000 jobs in an industrial area. There is no housing involved to the best of my understanding of any kind market or affordable or anything. This is just about commercial activity. So I certainly understand why people in Sunset Park – I know Sunset Park really well, I used to represent it when I was a school board member very locally – I totally understand the gentrification concerns. I also know people in Sunset Park and beyond are very concerned about jobs at this moment in the history of the city. So it's a private application, it's not sponsored by the city, it's being reviewed by the City Council. I have not taken a position. I've said, this is something the City Council has to look at first, but I would be very

happy to hear an alternative vision from the community, because I haven't heard that. I've heard the opposition to the private application and some of the reasons, but I haven't heard what the alternative would be, and obviously a private application comes with private investment, which sometimes is a very good thing. Sometimes not. It depends on the ground rules but I want to see what the alternative being considered is.

Lehrer: At the all day City Council hearing on this, this week, people on various sides seem to want you to weigh in and lead more on that, to say what you think or you want to be done, or see done, and exert pressure, especially with respect to protecting the area from gentrification if it does go forward.

Mayor: Well, again, let me clarify, if this was a city sponsored proposal, obviously I'd be strongly advocating for it, but private proposals go before the City Council all the time, and a whole lot of the time I don't get involved at all. This one to me is I want to hear the rationale, both why this is a good idea or why it's not a good idea or what the alternative is, I want to see all those facts laid out. I want to give the Council space first to go through their deliberations. But if I, and seeing more and more of the details, believe there's a role I should play, of course I will. I'm not ever going to be shy, but to date because it is a private application, I truly believe the first consideration has to be by the Council.

Lehrer: And Council Members are on various sides of this at the moment. Will you take a position before they take a final vote?

Mayor: I don't know, and I'll tell you why, because I want to see what the Council is thinking first, if they are serious about deeper consideration of this, then I'm going to get more deeply involved in trying to understand the pros and cons and alternatives. If they're not proceeding with it, then it doesn't make a lot of sense to put my time there when there's so many other challenges that we have to deal with.

Lehrer: Here is a restaurant dining question from Thomas in the East Village. Thomas you're on WNYC with the Mayor.

Question: Hello, Brian. Hello, Mr. Mayor. I hope you're both holding up well. I'm calling about the sidewalk dining, which I think is great. I love how it looks, but in my building, we're having a real problem because the restaurant right across the street plays live music about two feet in from there open door, six nights a week, five hours a night, and anywhere from a five-year-old girl can't sleep to a senior citizen can't talk on the phone and we really haven't been able to have the police or anybody else help us, and I think as a case of unintended consequences and something has to be done to control live music blaring out like this, and I'd like to know what you can do to help us, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Thank you, Thomas, and I hope you're holding up as well. This is a fair concern, obviously. Thomas, please give your information to WNYC. We'll follow up. I mean, look, I believe fundamentally in what we've done with outdoor dining, I think has helped save a lot of restaurants, a lot of jobs. I think it's been great for the city as we come back, but all dining establishments have to be respectful of their neighbors and, you know, to have outdoor dining

doesn't necessarily mean to have live music, obviously. So we have to make sure that is done respectfully in a way that works for the community. We actually have an office, our Nightlife Office does a lot of mediation to make sure that these kinds of issues get resolved favorably and community members are listened to. So certainly they'll be part of resolving this and I'm going to be hopeful that we can find an outcome here you'll feel comfortable with.

Lehrer: So September 29th for the higher grades for school, September 30th for indoor dining at restaurants, I think you see too much resistance to reopening schools and that there was too much pressure for reopening indoor dining. Do you think politics and the media are getting it backwards from the COVID safety and general public interest point of view?

Mayor: Well, it's a good question, Brian. I mean, again, October 29th –

Lehrer: September – September 29th.

Mayor: Is the K-5s and the K-8s. I'm sorry – September that's it has exactly. September 29th, K-5s, K-8s. October 1st is middle school, high school.

Lehrer: Alright, so I was a little off on that. Go ahead.

Mayor: Yeah, just by two days, but I just wanted to clarify that. So I'm going to do it one more time so we're all tight. Pre-K, 3- K, District 75, special-ed, this Monday, the 21st. Tuesday, the 29th, K-5, K-8. Thursday, October 1st, middle school and high school. I think the importance of bringing back our schools needed to be looked at more deeply. I think the fact is that it is – kids went through so much those last months. You know, they missed a lot of education. They went through a lot of trauma. They need the support of loving, compassionate, trained adults in a school setting. We're talking about a generation of New York City kids that if we don't start helping them now, we let another year go by before they got that support and that contact, we'd really be damning the future of the city. And I think that has been underrated in the dialogue, let alone the fact that bringing back our schools as part of our rebirth and we need to move forward. The city has done an amazing job. The people of this city have done an amazing job, keeping the health care situation strong, beating back to the disease. We've got to keep moving forward because it's the only way to bring back people's livelihoods too, and their hope. I think some of that's been underestimated but the indoor dining, look, I think it's wonderful in terms of jobs, and I love our restaurants. I truly, truly do. It's so much part of our identity. I think the putting health and safety first, sometimes that got lost in the discussion. I think we ended up in a pretty good place, but I've been clear, we're going to watch our data, our scientific data really carefully to make sure that each step is one we can sustain, and we're going to be very public about that, Brian. If we think anything is not working and there's a health and safety problem, it's my job to call it out early so we can make the adjustments.

Lehrer: And when people who eat indoors in a restaurant need to leave contact information for test and trace in case somebody who was there at the time that they were there comes up positive?

Mayor: There's a protocol, and I'll be always careful when I don't have every detail. There's a protocol, I think it's – if I remember correctly – one member of each party at least has to. There's a protocol for keeping information, for sure. And I certainly want to encourage restaurant owners to be rigorous about that because it really is important for test and trace. You know, I think our restaurant owners have to be really careful, like all New Yorkers, but we've seen around the world where people weren't careful, that indoor dining was a nexus for the spread of the disease. So what I think is crucial here and I think the State was right and we agreed with this part, the small startup, you know, 25 percent capacity, lot of careful health and safety restrictions. Let's keep careful information. Let's see how that goes. If it's going well, of course let's keep expanding. But at the same time, we have to see how it interacts with everything else, opening schools, and the obviously increased level of activity we're seeing in the city in general. But thank God there's increased activity in the city. I mean that again is a sign of rebirth. We just have to watch literally daily how all these pieces are coming together, and if it's allowing us to sustain our progress on health care for the people of this city.

Lehrer: We're out of time for today, thanks as always Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian, take care.

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