

Transcript: Mayor Eric Adams Makes an Announcement on Mask Requirements for 2-4-Year-Olds

March 22, 2022

Mayor Eric Adams: Good to see you all. We are continuing our serious moment of peeling back the mask off the faces of our people as we start the process of getting our city really back to the level of normality that I am going to do in a very safe and a very strategic way so that we can get the city up and operating with no reverting back to the days when COVID controlled our lives. I always stated that we were going to follow the numbers and follow the science. Every morning, speaking with Dr. Vasan and our entire team, talking about what steps we should take, and I have just the greatest level of support from the team on how we get this right. The Department of Education is on the calls, the Health Department is on the call, all of our senior leadership is on the call. We take this issue so seriously and we're going to continue to do it in the right way.

Mayor Adams: We're currently at a low-risk environment. And so today, we're announcing that if the numbers continue to show a low level of risk, let me say that again, if the numbers continue to show a low level of risk, masks will be optional for two to four years old students in schools and in daycare. We're going to start this on April 4. Dr. Vasan was clear that we wanted two incubation periods, and he'll explain that when he comes up to the podium, to make sure that after removing the mask for our K-12—we want to have two incubation periods to make sure that we're not seeing a serious problem. And we continue to be in a low place. So it's important for parents, it's important for students. And let me tell you something, it doesn't matter what decisions you make on this, you're going to have vociferous people on both sides of the conversation, so we can't go by the noise. We have to go by the science. And we have to go by the safety of our children.

Mayor Adams: So we want to see our babies' faces. I said this over and over again. But the enthusiasm of seeing our babies' faces, speaking with parents in the street—I kept and will continue to say we have to do this right and get this right. And our children

want to see the faces of their loved ones. Every call that I receive from parents of two to four-years-olds, they say, "Can you do it right away?" I get another call from parents who are in school or daycare with the children saying, "Can you please don't do it." So let's not think that this argument or this conversation is one-sided. It is not. We're getting a large number of parents that are saying please don't take the mask off the children in school. We're getting a large number that is saying, "Please take the mask off." So the only way you do it right is to follow the science and follow the numbers. And that is what we're doing. It takes a lot of discipline to do so because this is a city where New Yorkers are not afraid to tell you what they think about you. And so you have to be willing to be thick-skinned enough to do what's right for this city. And so since we removed the mask mandate for K-12 students, our percent of positivity has remained low, which is a great sign that we are moving at the right pace and doing the right thing. And so now it's time to peel back another layer in this entire initiative.

Mayor Adams: Many of you have heard the opinions on this conversation. But we have to get it right. And it's imperative that we do so. I can't have my city and our city closed down again. I cannot see the real issues around our children dealing with a hospitalization. And some people will point and say, "Well, the hospitalizations are low." And Dr. Vasan is clear on every call, we should have a zero tolerance for hospitalization for our children. You can't, we can't really say its low, and it was really informative with Dr. Vasan, and I hope you touch on it today, about some of the long term illnesses of that children who are hospitalized is experiencing. This is—COVID is a level of uncertainty that none of know what is the impact of COVID and the long term impacts that we're going to experience. And I, I'll be darned, if I'm going to look back later and say I made a decision because of the loud noises I'm hearing. We're going to look back in our rearview mirror at this moment. We've had this uncertainty, and the most prudent, thoughtful, meticulous individuals who are moving at the right pace, history is going to be kind to. And I'm going to be among them because I'm going to make the right decisions for our city. So our children are safe, our families are safe, and we can get our city back up and operating. So I'm going to turn it over to the commissioner of Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. An individual—I'm glad that we have him on our team for so many reasons, as we deal with the mental health aspects of this, as we deal with other components of how we're going to deal with COVID. So Dr. Vasan, I turn it over to you.

Commissioner Ashwin Vasan, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. As the mayor said, our current COVID-19 risk level remains low. While cases are increasing slightly, our hospitals have plenty of capacity and our admissions

remain low. And a big thanks to Dr. Katz and his team at Health and Hospitals for ensuring that that's the case. Less risk means more choices for New Yorkers about which precautions are mandatory and which are optional. That's why if things remain as they are over the next two weeks, children between the ages of two to four-years-old will have the option of removing their masks in schools and childcare settings in early April. Over the next two weeks, we will continue to watch the numbers closely as we have throughout our pandemic response. And if we see the levels of risk rise, either before or after the mandate is lifted, we may be here having another conversation. However, right now, we feel comfortable saying that if the risk level holds, masks can become optional.

Commissioner Vasan: For our youngest New Yorkers, these changes are possible because of the many public health tools that guard against the worst outcomes of COVID-19, particularly vaccines, including boosters and treatment, including antiviral pills, which are our newest tool in the response. The Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy, said it best, we have more tools than ever before. Our focus should be on preparation, not on panic. We want New Yorkers to be prepared if there is another wave, but able to engage with the world according to their comfort level. Get vaccinated. And if your time has come to get a booster, please do so today. And know that treatment is widely available. It works best if started soon after you begin feeling symptoms. So get tested right away. And if you test positive call 212-COVID-19 to get the treatment that's right for you.

Commissioner Vasan: Finally, as a parent, I have experienced how personal this issue of masks can be in playgrounds, at schools, and in my own neighborhood, and certainly on my social media. Whatever we require, as a city, some children and some parents will choose to stay masked, and some will not. Let's be respectful of whatever choice families make. Let's be kind to each other when it comes to how we each manage our own risk. You don't know what life circumstances someone might be accounting for in their choice to remain masked. Let's remember that our shared experiences over the past two years should be a bond, not a wedge. We've been in this together and the only way to get through this is indeed together. Our collective well-being and our mental health now and into the future depends on us. Thank you very much.

Mayor Adams: Let me bring my two partners in government of Councilmember Schulman and Councilman Moya.

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Mayor Adams: Dr. Katz, and you weren't for DOE? Yes. Why don't you do that?

Mitchell Katz, President and Chief Executive Officer of NYC Health + Hospitals: Thank you, Mayor, and good morning, everybody. We're so excited to be here. To announce this additional step under the mayor and Chancellor Banks, Stay Safe Stay Open policy, we have been able to do exactly that. Stay open, but stay safe. Dr. Vasan talked about the extremely low levels of infection that we're seeing in our schools right now and our schools are all open every day for all of our students. We're seeing attendance rates up over 20 percent from where we were in January. So we're very pleased to see as additional stuff for our little ones. We have definitely heard from plenty of parents and students who are looking for this step. And we hope it's as the mayor says, another step and the return to normalcy so we can get back to thinking full time about helping our kids learn and grow. Thank you very much.

Mayor Adams: We'll have your on-topic for the doctor or me.

Question: Yes, two questions, Mayor. First of all, if the numbers are so good, why not also lift the private employer mandate at the same time? And the second question is, Governor Hochul yesterday said that cases are actually going up, so why make this decision now at a time when BA.2 is trending in the wrong direction?

Mayor Adams: The safest place for children is in the school. And we must pivot based on each encounter to make sure we get it right. And we believe we're doing that and Dr. Vasan if you want to respond to Andrew over there.

Commissioner Vasan: On the on the issue of cases, cases is just one data point we're looking at to calculate our overall risk levels. I think what we know about BA.2 is that it is more transmissible. It is not yet shown to be more severe in any way. And we are going to see some rising cases. We are more prepared than ever to tolerate that in our hospital systems, but also with all of the tools we have in the community to keep ourselves safe, keep ourselves out of the hospital in the first place. For New Yorkers, that means go get vaccinated, go get fully vaccinated or go get boosted. And if you do test positive get treated right away.

Question: [Inaudible] BA.2 in relation to children, do you see any effects on long term effects or getting sicker? Because [inaudible].

Commissioner Vasan: As we said with BA.2 we're not seeing any signs that it causes more severe illness in any age group as as yet. We did see, as we saw in Omicron, pediatric cases rose significantly, much as they did with overall cases. At this case, at this point, we're very concerned about the long term effects of COVID in everyone. We're concerned about the long term effects in our children, and we're constantly monitoring that. Right now overall risk remains low. Overall cases in children remain low, hospitalizations in children remain low, which is giving us comfort to make this decision at this point.

Question: Dr. Vasan, following up on Friday's press conference, you mentioned that children under the age of five are disproportionately getting hospitalized compared to all children. And this announcement specifically talks about kids two to four. So I was wondering why is that number being specified in terms of that specific age range? Or is that kind of the same as when we're saying under five—those are the kids that are old enough to wear masks? So can you kind of specify, kind of a little bit follow up on my colleagues questions, about why now, especially with children possibly getting hospitalized? And also just targeting this two to four age range?

Commissioner Vasan: We've only ever—so thanks for the question. We've only ever mandated masks for children two and up understanding that for babies it's just really hard to get them to mask. My son won't keep a mask on or hadn't until he turned around two and a half. So it's tough. So that's why we're talking about two to four specifically. Hospitalizations have consistently remained higher in this age group compared to other age groups, pediatric age groups. They still remain higher, but they overall remain extremely low. So while the relative difference might be high, the overall the absolute level is very low, which gives us comfort to do this now.

Question: The parents who argue that they want to see the mask taken off these young kids argue that this comes at a time where development is very crucial in terms of socialization, speech development, and things like that. And I wonder if those concerns also played a role in your decision to unmask the kids because it's such a crucial time in terms of development.

Commissioner Vasan: I think the research is still very early on the impact of masking on social and emotional and language development. It's still quite early to tell if and what that impact may or may not be. I understand the concern, certainly there are parents that think that way and feel that way. We're trying to make this decision based on the COVID data, what we know about the pandemic, what we know about children's risk of getting COVID and getting sick and hospitalized from COVID.

Question: [inaudible] would factor in long term development in terms of ability to function.

Commissioner Vasan: Again, I think it's too early to tell whether there will be any long term impacts. COVID is only been around for a couple of years. What we do know is that children do catch up very quickly from other traumas of being taken out of school. We know this from disaster settings, from humanitarian settings where children aren't able to go to school for long periods of time. We know that they can catch up in certain age ranges. But this is a different, this is a different situation.

Question: [inaudible]

Mayor Adams: I think the doctor really answered that question. Well, you know, let's be clear. This is unprecedented territory we are in right now. And anyone that can say what the short term long term what's going to happen, if anyone is saying that, they're lying. And that's why the doctor said we need to research. You know, we don't know what COVID is going to put in the future for all of us. And we just have to make the right decisions, the best decisions based on the science, based on the information and really based on compassion because, you know, people—this has been a very strenuous period for people around COVID. So we got to make the right decisions.

Question: Regarding the private employer mandate, what is—what are you guys to looking at in order to [inaudible] concerning the next step. That's something that you're getting pressure from sports teams also, opening day. And just what are you still looking at?

Mayor Adams: First of all, I do not feel any pressure doing this job at all. Because I'm going to do what's right. That is what I'm going to do. Let me tell you what pressure is, pressure is being a transit cop in 1984 riding the trains by yourself with a radio that didn't work. I'm ready for what it takes to move our city forward. We're going to do it in

the right way. We're going to follow the science. I trust and that's why we bought brought Dr. Vasan, Dr. Katz, our team together. We're going to make the right decision. And in New York, no matter what you do—this is 8.8 million people and 30 million opinions, so you're never going to satisfy New Yorkers. So you must go with the logic, your heart and the science.

Mayor Adams: And so we're going to slowly peel back, as I stated over and over again. We want to do it layer by layer, and each layer, we peel back, we're going to do an analysis, "Are we okay?" And if we have to pivot and shift and come back here in a week, and say, we're going to do something different, we're going to do that. I'm not going to hesitate to say, this is where the numbers are taking us. This is where the science is, and this is what we're going to do. Because I'm not going to only view this from where we are in the crisis, I see myself out of crisis. And people are going to look back later, like they did with the schools. Remember they did to us when we were talking about keeping the schools open, you know. I said, don't worry about the noise, team, we're going to do the right thing for our children. And people going to look back later and say, "You know what, we don't want to admit it, but this administration got it right." And they going to do that again. So right now, we're going to take some complaints. But when this is all said and done, people are going to realize this is a thoughtful administration. And we got it right. And so baseball, basketball, businesses, all of those things, they have to wait until that layer come and right now we're announcing just our two to four-year-olds.

Question: [Inaudible] keeping that in place right now. Is there anything that you're like—you still want to wait?

Mayor Adams: Yes, yes. You know, believe it or not a lot of our businesses, they love the mandates. You know, when I speak to a lot of my businesses, getting people back in the office, that mandate is allowing them to feel safe in the office for those who feel that they will rather the vaccine mandate to be in place of—but again, we're going to do it in layers. And when we feel that it's the right time to look at that if we do so at all, because the work environment is an important environment. We're going to make that determination. We're not there. We're not there yet.

Question: You know, you talked about following the science throughout the pandemic. What in what you're seeing in the science will trigger vaccine mandates for public school kids? You know, Mr. Mayor, you said, I think, this is something you're looking at. Where

are we on that? What's the time [inaudible] will happen? I understand their considerations [inaudible] concerns about parenting.

Commissioner Vasan: Getting our children vaccinated remains a huge priority of this administration. Our five to 11-year-old vaccination rates is behind other age groups. My colleagues at DOE in partnership with us that DOHMH and H+H have launched a concerted vaccination campaign for five to 11-year-olds and across the DOE system this week to increase those numbers. I think we've seen time and again, mandates are an important tool to getting vaccination levels up. And as you know, we mandate a lot of vaccines for children to go to school. And so we're looking at the data every day on our vaccination levels, as well as the state of the pandemic, to make those decisions at the right time.

Question: I was curious, I know you mentioned Governor Cuomo, do you think he has a path to public office this year? Would it be wise for him to pursue?

Mayor Adams: He has to make his decision. As I stated, I thought it was important for him to step down at the time and I thought it was the right decision. And now he will make that determination of what he's going to do with his life in the future.

Question: Mr. Mayor, Comptroller Lander is out with a report this morning that says bail reform had a negligible impact on pretrial for the arrest rates between 2019 and 2020. What data are you looking at in calling for rollbacks that he's not seeing in this very comprehensive report?

Mayor Adams: And what I say this term, over and over again, there are many rivers that feed the sea of violence, we have to dam each one. So have you start peeling back and not damming each one you can—you'll say, "Oh, it was only five guys that were repeated offenders." Five shooters, five lives. Five lives and shootings that's impact in our overall number. We have 29 shooters. 29 shooters. And I'm amazed that when I talk about the shootings, and I talked about putting in place of, you know, the units to go after guns, that you have those who are more worried about the cops that are doing the job than the people who are shooting. This is like them—this is the most fascinating thing I can think of.

Mayor Adams: 29 shootings and they're critiquing that Eric has the audacity put a unit in the street to go after guns. So if those who feel that, well, it's only been five cases of

people who are shooters that were released, why you complain about those five cases. Let them do that. I complain about every dangerous person that's released, everyone. We don't need dangerous people on our streets. And so when you look at the raise the age, carrying a gun, treating like a child, when you look at all of these other aspects is contributing to the sea of violence that we are experiencing.

Question: There's been already a lot of pushback after Governor Hochul's proposal came out. If parts or most of it barring passed by the legislature, what is your next step?

Mayor Adams: And that's so important. That's a great question. Because I say this over and over again. I need help from the federal government to stop the flow of guns. When I was in Chicago, last week, speaking with Mayor Lightfoot, she took 12,000 guns off the street. That's a frightening number, yet the guns keep coming. So I need the federal government. Let's go after those gun dealers. Let's beef up ATF. Let's do things that they're supposed to do. My blueprint on gun violence, I pointed out what I needed from the state, what I needed from the federal government and what I need to do as the mayor and the New York City Police Department. If I don't get the help from them, I still have to keep the city safe. I'm going to do my initiatives like we did yesterday.

Mayor Adams: My guys are out. Our police officers were out in the new unit for six days and removed 10 guns. For six days. And so I need their help. But with or without their help, I have the finest police department on the globe, New Yorkers have. We're going to continue to execute our plan. We're going to put in place initiatives to try to stop the guns from coming in across our border, at our port authorities and other locations. We're going to do our joint partnership that we do in the morning every day at 10am. So we're going to push our initiatives forward. But I believe the public is going to start looking towards those who are not giving us the help that we need.

Question: [inaudible] to have more federal cases made against trigger [inaudible].

Mayor Adams: That's a great question. We met with the U.S. attorney in the southern and eastern districts. We're hoping that they will look at some of these cases, that we can get longer sentencing because of the crimes that are involved. But also we think it's information sharing, we were looking to see the legality around being able to share information across state lines. But we're hoping that the feds would take more of these cases. We started preliminary conversations, and we're going to continue to speak with

the eastern and southern districts. We were happy to sit down with them. We think there's some great leadership there. And they see the need of dealing with this violence.

Question: Mr. Mayor, I'm going to take you back on topic when you say baseball, basketball, businesses are going to have to wait does that mean you're considering lifting the private employer vaccination mandate? Because the [inaudible] that are Friday thinks that that might be indefinite. Are they in place [inaudible] are you considering lifting?

Mayor Adams: No it does not mean that I am or I'm not. It means that they have to wait to find out what we're going to do. And I think the commissioner can speak for himself, but I thought there was a little creative journalism based on his interview.

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