

White House Press Briefing (via ABC News Live)

07/22/21

1:07:14 p.m.

4 minutes and 46 seconds

NANCY CORDES: Also, we now know that Hunter Biden is going to be able to meet with prospective buyers at two art shows where his paintings are going to be on display later this year. How does this square with the goal of keeping him in the dark about the buyers of his art as a means to prevent even the appearance of undue influence?

JEN PSAKI: Well, this showing that was — that you're referencing, was previously public. He's not going to have any conversations related to the selling of art. That will be left to the gallerist, as was outlined in the agreement that we announced just a few weeks ago. We believe this is a reasonable system that has been established that allows for Hunter Biden to work in his profession within appropriate safeguards. So, he's not going to discuss anything related to the selling of art, and I would reiterate that the gallerist will be the only person who handles transactions or conversations in that vein and will reject any offer that is out of the ordinary.

CORDES: Wouldn't it be more transparent to just release the names of the buyers so that everyone would know who purchased this art and how much they paid?

PSAKI: Well, we don't — we won't know who the buyers are. Hunter Biden won't know who the buyers are. So, I think, the reason — the origin, I think, of this line of questioning, which is understandable, is about whether this would provide a situation for undue influence. But we won't know who they are, so there's no scenario where they could provide influence.

CORDES: Couldn't they just announce on social media that they bought a painting?

PSAKI: Again, I think we have set up a system, which we feel is appropriate — has appropriate safeguards. We believe that Hunter Biden, just like any child of a president, should be able to pursue their professions and their passions. And any selling of the art would be through the gallerist. Go ahead.

PETER DOOCY: Thank you, Jen. Thank you, Jen. On schools, first, now that the Education Department admits they made a mistake in their guide for reopening by —

PSAKI: How so?

DOOCY: — well, they included advice from the Abolitionist Teaching Network and they came out and said that was not supposed to be in there. Is the administration going to follow up with school districts to make sure that the Abolitionist Teaching Network material is not in lesson plans?

PSAKI: Well, just to be clear, for the context, because I know you love context —

DOOCY: Yeah.

PSAKI: — of what you're asking about here. What you're referring to is a citation in a report of which there were a thousand citations, so I'm quite impressed with your researchers for finding one of a thousand citations.

DOOCY: [INAUDIBLE].

PSAKI: It was an error in a lengthy document to include this citation. The specific site does not endorse, does not represent the administration's view, and we don't endorse the recommendations of this group. And I believe it's been removed or is in the process of being removed.

DOOCY: But we are close to schools reopening and is there any concern, if you don't endorse this material that was in there, citation or not, that it's in lesson plans?

PSAKI: Well, first I would say that, it was said many times before, we don't dictate or recommend specific curriculum decisions from the federal government. That is, and will continue to be handled at the local level. And we believe that the American people trust teachers to make those decisions, not government.

DOOCY: And then on masks, a few weeks ago, the President said we were closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus. Is that still the case if you guys are now reportedly considering asking vaccinated people to wear masks again?

PSAKI: Well, first of all, the CDC director, who oversees decisions along those lines and all of our public health decisions, made clear that that was not a decision that had been made just a few hours ago. So I — I point out that first. Second, I would say what the President was referring to and continues to talk about as he did last night at a town hall, is that we're quite proud of the progress that's been made. People over 65, more than 80 percent are vaccinated. Almost 70 percent of adults are vaccinated. 162 million Americans are vaccinated. That is certainly progress. But we are still at war with the virus. We've never said that would be over. We've always said that we'd be continuing to focus on ensuring we're meeting people where they are and getting them vaccinated, keeping them safe.

DOOCY: The President said in May, vaxxed or masked, is — I — I think a lot of people got the vaccine because they were hearing him say, if you get the vaccine, you don't have to wear masks anymore. So —

PSAKI: And that continues to be CDC guidance.

DOOCY: — and you can say that that's going to be the guidance forever?

PSAKI: I am not the CDC director.

DOOCY: I understand but people don't care who tells me to wear a mask.

PSAKI: They should care.

DOOCY: If it's the White House — if it's the White House —

PSAKI: Shouldn't they care —

DOOCY: — or the CDC. What difference does it make.

PSAKI: — if it's a doctor, a medical expert or a spokesperson? I think most Americans actually do care.

DOOCY: It's the government.

PSAKI: Okay.

(...)

1:13:24 p.m.

3 minutes and 59 seconds

KELLY O'DONNELL: Last night the President said, "you're not going to get COVID if you have these vaccinations." Why did he say that when that is not what the science says?

PSAKI: Well, what the science says is that 97 percent of hospitalizations are people who are unvaccinated. So yes, there are cases of individuals who are vaccinated, to be absolutely clear, who do — have gotten COVID. It is a very small percentage and a small number of people and those cases, vast, vast, vast majority are asymptomatic and they have — they have minor symptoms, which means that you are largely protected. That was the point he was trying to make last night.

O'DONNELL: Been a couple of days since we talked about the breakthrough case on the campus here, and that you acknowledged there were additional breakthrough cases. Can you give us now the number of breakthrough cases that have occurred during the Biden presidency?

PSAKI: Well, I would say first that our medical experts, our health experts have been conveying from the beginning as have we that there would be cases of individuals who were vaccinated, who tested positive for COVID. There are 2,000 people who work on the campus. And of course, so that means that just statistically speaking, there will be people who are vaccinated individuals who get COVID on the campus. What I announced yesterday or conveyed yesterday was what our policy would be moving forward. But no, I don't think you can expect that we're going to be providing numbers of breakthrough cases, no.

O'DONNELL: Really? That's not transparency to give us a number — not the names — but a

number of these cases. You must have that information.

PSAKI: Well, Kelly, I think, one, we're in a very different place than we were several months ago. The vast, vast, vast majority of individuals who are vaccinated, who get COVID will be asymptomatic or have mild cases. Every individual at this White House has been offered a vaccine. And we have been very clear that we will be transparent with anyone who has had close proximity contact with the President or any of the four principals as deemed by the White House medical unit with all of you. And if they — if they approve having their name released, we will also release their names, but we will protect their privacy. That will be our policy moving forward and we understand and agree that that is in the public interest. Go ahead.

STEVEN PORTNOY: Jen, last night at the CNN town hall, the President was asked by a restaurateur about the worker shortage that the commerce secretary just called acute. She described it as a skills gap, but the restaurateur said that he had right now job openings he can't fill. And he asked the President if there's anything that his administration can do to help him and his business. The President seemed to struggle with an answer. Is there anything that his administration can do to help that restaurateur or people who are similarly situated with this acute worker shortage?

PSAKI: Well, first I would — I would say that we have already implemented and the money has out the door — it continues to go out the door for our restaurant re-stabilization program. Something that was a part of the American Rescue Plan and helped many, many hundreds of restaurants across the country stay open, reopen. And that was assistance that came from the American Rescue Plan that the President signed into law. I think what the President was noting is that, at this point in time, it's also a workers' market. And, in some places, it may be that you have to pay more wages in order to attract workers. We don't have all the details, of course, about his individual circumstance, but we implemented a major program that helped restaurants stay open, something we strongly supported. We advocated for as a part of the package.

PORTNOY: If I can ask a follow-up to the question about the President's son and the art gallery events —

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

PORTNOY: — you said that Hunter Biden is not going to discuss anything related to the sale of his art. Is that a promise that has been made in writing? And if so, is that an agreement that could be made available to the public?

PSAKI: I'm making that clear to all of you now that that is an agreement that has been made as a part of this — as a part of these events.

PORTNOY: Is it in writing?

PSAKI: I can check and see if there's more detail.

PORTNOY: Thanks.

PSAKI: But I think it's pretty clear what the agreement is. So I'm not sure it's more complicated than that, but I will see if there's more to provide.

(...)

1:28:19 p.m.

2 minutes

KAREN TRAVERS: Florida Governor DeSantis was talking about mask mandates for kids earlier this morning. And he said: "We're not doing that in Florida. We need our kids to breathe. We need our kids to be able to be kids." He said, "It's terribly uncomfortable for them to do it." That obviously goes against the CDC guidance for kids under 12 who aren't vaccinated and what the President said last night. Is that putting kids in Florida at risk?

PSAKI: Well, as a parent myself, and I know you are one, if I were a parent in Florida, that would be greatly concerning to me, because kids under the age of 12 are not vaccinated. They're not eligible yet. As the President said last night, obviously it's going to be led by the FDA, but certainly we hope that will be soon. But that puts kids at risk. It's not aligned with public health guidelines. We know masks are not the most comfortable thing. I will say, my kids are quite adjusted to them, as I know many kids are. So, certainly, we would have concern about any step that doesn't abide by public health guidelines and we think it puts people at greater risk.

TRAVERS: Is the President frustrated that in the fall, when kids go back to school across the country, that there could be very different standards for kids under 12? And is there something that he can do about that?

PSAKI: Well, the President can speak out, as he did last night, about the risks of the Delta variant that is more transmissible than any variant we've seen to date, about the risk to young people of the spread of COVID, and about the fact that the CDC has put out clear guidelines, clear mitigation steps that can be taken to keep families safe, kids safe, safe — individuals safe. And there are a range of steps that people can take. I think what's notable about the CDC education guidelines is that it made very clear it's important for kids to be back in school and that that's important for their mental health. It's important for kids to be learning. We don't want to put kids — there are recommendations by the public health experts for a reason. He'll continue to elevate them, but ultimately, those decisions will be made by local school districts.

(...)

1:31:14 p.m.

1 minute and 1 second

KAITLAN COLLINS: And is the White House concerned about the messaging aspect of this, given not having to wear a mask is often a perk of being vaccinated that the White House and

other top health officials have touted? So, are you concerned that if there is a change to the mask guidance for vaccinated individuals when they're indoors, it would be harder to sell vaccinations, essentially?

PSAKI: Well, there hasn't been a change, and it's pretty clear now that if you're vaccinated, you don't need to wear a mask. If you're not vaccinated — vaccinated — I know it's a hard word, you do — you should wear a mask, according to the public health guidelines. That's not a prediction that the CDC director made this morning. We certainly know that it is important. Even as parents, as Karen was asking about before, when you have kids, you're not wearing a mask, I'm not wearing a mask at the playground, or I'm not wearing a mask, you know, indoors, my kids are still wearing masks. That's not terribly confusing to people. So, you know, we'll continue to communicate, convey what the accurate public health guidelines is. Nothing has changed about that and of course, we have ongoing discussions about how to keep the American people safe.