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The Proving Grounds: School "Reform" in Washington, D.C.

by Leigh Dingerson

Washington, D.C., is leading the transformation of urban public education across the country—at least according to Time magazine, which featured D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee on its cover, wearing black and holding a broom. Or perhaps you read it in Newsweek or heard it from Oprah, who named Rhee to her "power list" of "remarkable visionaries."

The model of school reform that's being implemented here is popping up around the country, heavily promoted by the same network of conservative think tanks and philanthropists like Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton Family Foundation that has been driving the school reform debate for the past decade. It is reform based on the corporate practices of Wall Street, not on education research or theory. (photo by Flickr user Avolore)

But there's nothing remarkably visionary going on in Washington. The model of school reform that's being implemented here is popping up around the country, heavily promoted by the same network of conservative think tanks and philanthropists like Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton Family Foundation that has been driving the school reform debate for the past decade. It is reform based on the corporate practices of Wall Street, not on education research or theory. Indications so far are that, on top of the upheaval and distress Rhee leaves in her wake, the persistent racial gaps that plague D.C. student outcomes are only increasing.

Chancellor Rhee helicoptered into Washington in 2007 promising to change the culture of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Everyone cheered. But we weren't counting on the new culture coming straight out of Goldman Sachs. Suddenly, decisions were being made at the top and carried out with atomic force. Parents have been treated like consumers—informed about options and outcomes but denied a seat at the table. The district's teachers have been insulted in the national media, fired or laid off in record numbers, and replaced by less credentialed and less experienced newcomers. The model views teachers as a delivery system, not as professionals. High turnover is not just the result—it's the goal. Principals, too, are isolated and expendable. The district lauds the educational mavericks—principals whose "crusades" are described as "relentless" and "methodical"—those who see themselves as an army of one. We are becoming a district where the frontline workers are demoralized, people are looking out for themselves, and trust is all but gone.

Chancellor Rhee is the army of one at the top of the district's lurching reform. An articulate and supremely confident 39-year-old, Rhee is, for now, the movement's national poster child. Pundits debate her occasionally tactless comments in the media, but there has been little analysis of the reform model itself and how its "my way or the highway" culture affects students, parents,

and teachers. Adopting the rhetoric for just one moment, in a cost-benefit analysis, are D.C. students gaining the benefits, or are we all paying the price?

The Proving Grounds

DCPS has a reputation as one of the worst school systems in the nation. But it has not always been so troubled.

Washington, with its gleaming white facades and manicured parks, is home to a complicated mix of people and politics. Long a majority African American city, D.C. has only been self-governing since 1973, when a 100-year-long fight for home rule forced Congress to hold elections for the city's mayor and city council. Congress still reviews all legislation passed by the council before it becomes law and retains authority over the District budget.

The vast public sector employment created by the federal government helped establish a significant black middle class that supported its public schools. Many African American parents and grandparents remember *their* schools as neighborhood institutions and gateways to success. But many of D.C.'s middle-class blacks have left for suburban counties in Maryland and Virginia. What remains is a city with stark divisions—some of the most affluent neighborhoods in the nation, and some of the poorest.

Most of D.C.'s public schools are intensely segregated—like the city's neighborhoods. Though DCPS uses a traditional neighborhood boundary system, students from anywhere in the city may enter a lottery for available seats in any school after neighborhood enrollment is complete. At the elementary level, most schools reflect the demographics of their communities. But in the city's more affluent western wards, white parents begin pulling their children out of DCPS before middle school, sending them to one of the city's boutique charters or elite private schools. The availability of "out-of-boundary" slots increases, making middle and high schools in these neighborhoods the most integrated in the city. Every D.C. high school is majority students of color.

Many of the District's African American and Latino children are from economically isolated and badly neglected communities. For decades, there have been too few resources and too much infighting to support those communities and help their children succeed. Rather than digging deep to address the social, economic, and educational issues involved, however, District leadership has focused on attracting young white professionals back to the urban core. In the late '90s and early 2000s, construction cranes towered over the skyline as block after city block became home to yet another luxury condominium complex. These "urban pioneers"—mostly young, white professionals—have begun to staunch the city's declining population numbers. As they've settled in, they've also become players in school politics.

The current wave of education reform began with Adrian Fenty, a young and energetic city council member, born and raised in D.C. Elected in 2000 at the age of 30, Fenty proved to be a charismatic and effective politician, and was reelected without opposition in 2004. In September 2006 he easily won the Democratic primary for mayor. In hugely Democratic D.C., the primary

is, for all intents and purposes, the general election. It was only *after* his September victory that Fenty announced his plan to take over the District's schools.

Day One:
Teachers Feel the Heat

The day after he took office in January 2007, Fenty introduced legislation to eliminate the city's elected school board and consolidate control of the schools in the mayor's office. The council passed the bill in April, and submitted it for congressional approval. Both the House and Senate approved the bill in May, and it was signed into law by then-President Bush on June 1. Twelve days later, Fenty held a press conference to introduce his new chancellor, Michelle Rhee.

Rhee had just three years of teaching experience, through Teach for America, and no experience running a school, let alone a school system. After dipping her toes in teaching, Rhee had gone on to found and lead the New Teacher Project, an organization that collaborates with school districts to recruit, train, and develop teachers for high-needs schools.

Rhee lost no time proclaiming what was wrong in D.C.: "I know what the obstacles are in these systems that are not conducive to effecting change," Rhee said at the press conference.

The implications of her pronouncement were not lost on those who had been following the national education debate. Over the past decade, research funded by conservative foundations has systematically built a case for transforming teaching as a profession. It began with research connecting "high-quality" teachers to student academic gains. Therefore, pundits began to surmise, low-performing students must just have lazy or incompetent teachers. Once teachers were to blame, it was a hop, skip, and a jump to find the culprit—teachers' unions and collectively bargained contracts that guarantee teachers due process before dismissal. The rhetorical attack on teachers has been shrill enough to stifle what the *rest* of the decade's research has shown: that teachers generally get *better* with experience and support; that meaningful parent engagement, strong school leadership, and student-centered learning climates must also be present for schools to succeed; and that no single component by itself can carry a school and its students to their full potential.

Amidst the clamor of teacher bashing, some D.C. teachers experienced Rhee's comments as a bull's-eye drawn on their backs. "We were troubled by her remarks," recalls Kerry Sylvia, a veteran teacher at the city's Cardozo High School. It seemed clear that the "obstacles" that Rhee was referring to were district teachers.

Sweeping Change

In her first months, Rhee demonstrated the frenetic pace of activity that has become her trademark. In the southern heat and humidity of a D.C summer, Rhee crisscrossed the city, meeting with principals and cutting through the district's legendary red tape. Warehouses full of textbooks were emancipated, classrooms stocked. Checks were cut, paint was slapped on, and creaky gears started turning. Many—including principals and parents—were impressed. By the time school started, there was a palpable feeling of forward motion.

At the same time, Rhee was meeting privately with officials from the Gates and Broad foundations, the California-based NewSchools Venture Fund, the American Enterprise Institute, and other key players in the school reform movement. Adrian Fenty and Chancellor Rhee were their new darlings.

That spring, Rhee began firing principals. Sixty-one principals and assistant principals were fired at the end of the school year. Next came the teachers. By July of 2008, according to some reports (neither DCPS nor the Washington Teachers' Union will release actual numbers), Rhee had fired 250 teachers and 500 teachers aides, avoiding union due-process rules by utilizing the "highly qualified" certification requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

In October, stymied by her inability to negotiate a contract with the union (she wanted, among other things, new provisions in the contract to make it easier for her to fire teachers), Rhee announced that she would implement a little-used procedure allowing principals to place teachers on a 90-day "improvement plan," with the ability to fire them immediately after that.

All the Blame, Not Enough Support

It is worth noting that, as a so-called "education reformer," Rhee has not focused on content or pedagogy. There have been no initiatives to improve teacher induction or strengthen instructional practice. The focus has remained on management and staffing, and the tone has been judgmental rather than supportive.

One of Rhee's early priorities was to establish a new teacher evaluation system that would, in part, make it easier to fire teachers based on their students' performance on standardized tests. It's the latest Wall Street concept embraced by the reformers. Indeed, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has proposed that federal funding be contingent upon states developing teacher evaluations directly linked to student test scores. Rhee hoped to set the standard.

Her "director of human capital strategy" took the lead in designing the new system, called IMPACT. It was launched in the 2009–10 school year and again put Rhee into the national spotlight.

IMPACT is a complicated web of more than 20 separate evaluation processes. For teachers unlucky enough to teach subjects and grade levels with test data, 50 percent of their evaluation is based on a patently preposterous calculation of their effect on student scores. Teachers also undergo five short observations by their principal or a "master teacher," based on an extensive "teaching and learning framework" with dozens of indicators. One of the biggest concerns has been that IMPACT will snare some of the district's best teachers in its web—those who refuse to teach to the tests or conform to a checklist of specific practices. The Washington Teachers' Union was worried enough to demand a working group to monitor IMPACT's implementation and results.

Meanwhile, after three years of contentious negotiation, the union and the chancellor announced agreement on a new contract in the spring of 2010. The contract attached bonus money to teacher evaluations and included a significant increase in salaries (ratification of the new contract was

stalled briefly when it was revealed that the salary increases were being funded with $64.5 million in one-time grants from the Broad and Walton foundations, among others, and that the grants were predicated on Rhee continuing as chancellor).

Throughout contract negotiations and the roll out of the IMPACT system, Rhee continued to target career teachers, in action and words. In the spring and summer of 2009 the district hired more than 900 new teachers—three times the usual number of summer hires. Then, in October, Rhee announced that a newly discovered budget shortfall required that 266 teachers be laid off. Because the layoffs were budget related, principals were free to ignore the "last hired-first fired" rules in the union contract. According to the union, a substantial number of the laid-off teachers were older, more senior teachers, rather than those who had been hired the previous spring and summer. Students and parents protested as beloved teachers and counselors were yanked out of buildings.

The layoffs created a firestorm of protest as classes were disrupted just weeks into the school year. The crisis got hotter when Rhee's budget shortfall could not be verified and to some appeared contrived. But the final straw for many teachers was when the chancellor, in an interview with *Fast Company* magazine, justified the layoffs by saying, "I got rid of teachers who had hit children, who had had sex with children, who had missed 78 days of school." Rhee was excoriated for the remark, which proved to be a gross overstatement, but the ousted teachers remained on the curb.

It was just one more in a series of what veteran teachers saw not only as personal attacks, but also as an indication that Rhee had no understanding of the challenges that they and their students face each day.

"It creates a very individualized and isolating feeling in the school," says Sylvia, whose school population includes almost 100 homeless teens. "Our kids come in with a host of real problems. . . . Teachers in the community need to be part of the process, not the object of it. . . . Feeling under attack all the time isn't conducive to collaboration."

Chris Bergfalk, a teacher at H.D. Cooke Elementary School, is convinced that the attacks on teachers spill over into the consciousness of parents as well. "You can feel it," he says. "Parents come into the classroom thinking that teachers are the enemy. . . . It takes more than one meeting, sometimes, before the parents decide that you're OK and basically competent. . . . I've never felt this level of suspicion and mistrust from my students' parents."

Crystal Sylvia, Kerry's sister and a social worker at a struggling but improving elementary school, has a different way of putting it. "We get the message: If we were here, working in the schools before the chancellor arrived, we are part of the problem."

In a fall 2009 survey of teachers conducted by DC VOICE, an education advocacy group, 80 percent of teachers, when asked whether they liked the way the school system was run, said "no." Many of those said their chief complaint was the lack of respect and the blame cast upon teachers. It is difficult to imagine any CEO who has so severely alienated her own workforce being dubbed a "remarkable visionary" in the national press.

But Rhee wasn't done. On July 23, 2010, she announced 165 additional teacher firings. Of those, 76 were dismissed as a result of poor evaluations under IMPACT. And, as feared, some of the fired teachers were among the most experienced, dynamic, and beloved educators in the system. Rhee boasted that more than 700 *additional* teachers had been judged "minimally effective" through IMPACT, and that a significant number of *them* would no doubt be fired after the next school year. The union's working group had not even met.

Even before the most recent dismissals, Rhee's transformation of the D.C. teacher workforce has been significant. Almost 40 percent of the teachers now working in DCPS entered the workforce since the chancellor arrived. In the recently completed school year, 120 of those teachers were placed through Teach for America—virtually guaranteeing continued high teacher turnover in district classrooms.

The Living Room Approach to Community Engagement

Chancellor Rhee's approach to parents and communities has been nearly as tone deaf as her dealings with teachers. "She creates lots of opportunities for people to learn what's going on," reflects Jill Weiler, a DCPS parent and community organizer. "I think she really does listen. But it doesn't seem to influence her." For example, in December 2007, Rhee announced the closing or consolidation of two dozen schools. Parents, teachers, and students were frustrated at Rhee's failure to *inform*, much less involve the impacted communities before the announcement. As required by district rules, Rhee subsequently held a series of community hearings at the affected schools, but made few changes to the plan.

Then, in April 2008, Rhee announced that as many as 10 high schools would undergo federally mandated "restructuring," and that several would be placed under external management. Rhee promised school communities a voice in selecting from among six "partner" organizations she had chosen. But at Anacostia High School, the parents' choice of outside partner was rejected. Instead, Rhee chose Friendship Public Charter School—a charter management organization with five D.C. charter schools—to take over operations at Anacostia. Marvin Tucker, a DCPS parent and assistant football coach at Anacostia, was frustrated by the process: "DCPS doesn't want parent participation. Neither does Friendship." The new management group fired 85 percent of Anacostia's teachers and disbanded the school's Local School Restructuring Team (LSRT)—a DCPS advisory council of teachers and parents at each school.

Rhee isn't deaf to all voices. Her inconsistency exploded into the media in December 2009 when she announced the replacement of the principal at Hardy Middle School—one of the top performing schools in the city, and also one of the most racially mixed. Hardy's art-centered curriculum draws students from across the city to fill seats not taken by students from the surrounding affluent Georgetown community. When a $48 million renovation at the school was completed in 2009, it became at least a more physically attractive option for neighborhood parents. But apparently there was still concern. After the chancellor abruptly announced that she was removing the popular (and by all measures, successful) principal, it was revealed that she had met in a private living room with a dozen Georgetown parents. The group had complained that they didn't feel "welcome" at Hardy.

The announcement set off a firestorm at Hardy, where teachers and parents—even the school's LSRT—had not been consulted or informed of the chancellor's decision. At a subsequent community meeting at the school, emotions were raw. The racial implications of the move were unavoidable, as Rhee tried to explain why she had met privately with a small group of white parents but failed to discuss the move with the school's mostly African American parent leadership. Jeffrey Watson, a parent of two Hardy students, charged that Georgetown neighborhood parents stayed away because they were not comfortable with the racial composition of the school, reported the *Washington Post*. "Don't play games with people in here. We're not stupid," Watson said at the school hearing. "Rather than having private meetings with them, tell them to walk on over." Despite impassioned pleas from teachers, parents, and students to reinstate the principal, Rhee refused to budge.

Her decisions at Hardy and elsewhere are clear nods to the District's changing demographics. Since 2000—with the proliferation of luxury condominiums and the boom in the housing market—the District has gained 16,000 residents. The city's white population has increased from 30 percent to 40 percent of the total, and the African American population has decreased from 60 percent to 54 percent. Per capita income (adjusted for inflation) has increased from $28,659 to more than $41,000.

The effort to bring middle-class whites back to the city's public schools may be a laudable one, Rhee's process notwithstanding. But for the district's high-profile reform efforts, there is another advantage, whether the chancellor intends it or not.

D.C.'s Education Miracle a Chimera?

Despite glowing reports from the adoring media, D.C.'s education miracle is a chimera at best. There have been dramatic drops in standardized assessment scores, and, on closer analysis, the highly touted increases in D.C. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores are a reflection of the changing demographics of the schools, not the result of any real improvement in the quality of education provided to D.C.'s poorest and neediest students.

Bergfalk has taught in the district for seven years, and was a finalist for D.C. Teacher of the Year in 2010. As a teacher, he is focused and energetic.He is also deeply skeptical. In March 2009, the district announced that the new NAEP scores showed dramatic student increases and progress in closing D.C.'s persistent achievement gap. Bergfalk decided to check it out for himself. Using NAEP's own interactive website, Bergfalk deconstructed the data.

"These test scores are not the result of an increase in student achievement. Instead, they are a result of a change in who was tested," says Bergfalk. He found that for the 4th-grade test, the percentage of African American kids in DCPS (the lowest scoring racial/ethnic group in D.C.) taking the test dropped from 67 percent of test takers to 53 percent of test takers between 2007 and 2009, while the percentage of Hispanic students (with average test scores 12 points higher) rose from 6 percent to 9 percent of test takers, and white students rose from 6 percent to 7 percent of test takers. Where aggregate scores appear to show improvement among DCPS students, the disaggregated data tell a different story. The district continues to have one of the highest achievement gaps among major U.S. cities.

Bergfalk found the same pattern on the 8th-grade NAEP reading test. The percentage of African American kids in DCPS taking the test dropped from 59 percent of test takers to 43 percent of test takers, which is why there was a statistically significant four-point increase overall from 2007 to 2009, but no statistically significant increase for any racial/ethnic subgroup. The overall increase, like that on the 4th-grade test, was again the result of a change in demographics rather than an increase in student achievement.

When DCPS released the results of local assessments in July 2010, the district touted what it called "unparalleled progress" in secondary school results. But at the elementary level, scores took a hit—in some schools dropping by more than 30 percent the past two years. Students in half of all D.C. public schools performed worse in the 2010 assessments than they did in 2009.

The Price of Autocratic Reform

In a Feb. 1, 2010, article, the *Washington Post* reported that approval ratings for Mayor Fenty and his schools chief had dropped precipitously. The poll showed Chancellor Rhee's approval rating had sunk from 59 percent of residents in January 2008 to 43 percent in early 2010.

The numbers are crucial for Fenty: The mayor is up for reelection this fall, and the race is being cast as hinging on public support for his school reform agenda. Fenty's challenger, Vincent Gray, the current chair of the city council, has been a critic of Rhee's leadership: "We need a mayor who understands that the best way to achieve real and lasting school reform is to involve the community. The best way to help every community in the district is to engage teachers, engage parents, engage principals, and engage students in the decision-making."

Mary Filardo, director of the 21st Century School Fund, agrees. "School change should be about students, families, and communities taking ownership of their schools. "Although there is the *illusion* that parents may have more access—that Michelle Rhee will answer their emails—there is meager civic life around the public schools."

Cathy Reilly, who leads the Senior High School Alliance of Parents, Principals, and Educators, notes: "It's not an empowering model. . . . The players in the system—parents, teachers, and principals—are supposed to understand that things are being 'fixed' and to get with the program, or get out."

For many parents and teachers, the problem with Rhee's approach was best summed up by Diane Ravitch, former undersecretary at the Department of Education under President George H.W. Bush. Ravitch, speaking at a reception in D.C. last spring, was asked what she thought of D.C. school reform. Ravitch responded with the timeless adage, "It's difficult to win a war when you're firing on your own troops."

Michelle Rhee on D.C. Kids' 'Crappy Education'

Firebrand Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, the National Face for Education Reform, Could Lose Her Job

By Z. BYRON WOLF and LEE FERRAN

Sept. 16, 2010

"They are getting a crappy education," Rhee said while discussing the district's schoolchildren in an interview with ABC News. "I mean, you could try to sugar coat it all you want. Subpar, or whatever. But what it is in terms that everyone can understand -- they are getting a crappy education."

It could be comments like that, not to mention aggressive and controversial education policies, landed Rhee in the spotlight of a new documentary "Waiting for Superman," and could also cost her her job.

Rhee, who has become the national face of education reform, could end up jobless after D.C. voters ousted Mayor Adrian Fenty.

Under Rhee's three-year watch, more than 200 teachers have been fired, nearly 20 schools closed and pay has been tied to merit evaluations. But test scores have shot up for elementary and secondary school students, and teachers' salaries were raised.

"The situation we inherited three years ago in Washington, D.C., was absolutely deplorable," Rhee said. "People need to understand that and if that makes people uncomfortable, then so be it."

The victor in Tuesday's Democratic primary -- and therefore almost a sure winner come November in this overwhelmingly Democratic city -- is City Council Chairman Vincent Gray, a chief Rhee antagonist at oversight hearings.

Gray has not said he would fire Rhee, but he hasn't said he would keep her on either.

"I have said on many occasions that after this election is over, I'd like to sit down with Michelle Rhee and let us walk and talk through it, you know, how we might work together," Gray said on CNN Tuesday.

Rhee had campaigned for Fenty. The Washington Teacher's Union campaigned for Gray.

"This has been a significant change in direction and it's going to require me sitting down with Mayor Fenty, the chairman and other people to see what's in the best interests of our kids," Rhee said Wednesday in an interview with MSNBC.

Rhee Feels Guilty About Fenty Loss

"I do feel sort of bad and guilty," she said. "This man, Adrian Fenty, is truly the best leader I've ever worked for. We need more leaders like him who are willing to stake everything to make sure our kids are getting a good education."

Obviously, D.C. voters disagree. And so do the leaders of local and national teachers unions.

An op-ed Wednesday morning by George Parker, president of the Washington Teacher's Union, and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, made no mention of Rhee. The article was titled "No Turning Back for D.C. Kids," and it suggested that the teachers would be happier and work more collaboratively with Gray.

"Public education is a marathon, not a sprint. Yes, there's urgency to fixing our schools, but we have to set ourselves on a long-term path toward constant and sustainable progress," wrote the union leaders.

President Obama stayed out of the race, but Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appeared at an event with Fenty and Rhee in the closing days of the election. It was not a campaign event, but Duncan announced the award of $75 million in new federal funding for D.C. schools. He was noticeably absent from any event with Gray.

Wednesday, Nov. 26, 2008

Rhee Tackles Classroom Challenge

By Amanda Ripley / Washington

In 11th grade, Allante Rhodes spent 50 minutes a day in a Microsoft Word class at Anacostia Senior High School in Washington. He was determined to go to college, and he figured that knowing Word was a prerequisite. But on a good day, only six of the school's 14 computers worked. He never knew which ones until he sat down and searched for a flicker of life on the screen. "It was like Russian roulette," says Rhodes, a tall young man with an older man's steady gaze. If he picked the wrong computer, the teacher would give him a handout. He would spend the rest of the period learning to use Microsoft Word with a pencil and paper.

One day last fall, tired of this absurdity, Rhodes e-mailed Michelle Rhee, the new, bold-talking chancellor running the District of Columbia Public Schools system. His teacher had given him the address, which was on the chancellor's home page. He was nervous when he hit SEND, but the words were reasonable. "Computers are slowly becoming something that we use every day," he wrote. "And learning how to use them is a major factor in our lives. So I'm just bringing this to your attention." He didn't expect to hear back. Rhee answered the same day. It was the beginning of an unusual relationship.

The U.S. spends more per pupil on elementary and high school education than most developed nations. Yet it is behind most of them in the math and science abilities of its children. Young Americans today are less likely than their parents were to finish high school. This is an issue that is warping the nation's economy and security, and the causes are not as mysterious as they seem. The biggest problem with U.S. public schools is ineffective teaching, according to decades of research. And Washington, which spends more money per pupil than the vast majority of large districts, is the problem writ extreme, a laboratory that failure made. (See pictures of a diverse group of American teens.)

Rhee took over Anacostia High and the district's 143 other schools in June 2007, when Mayor Adrian Fenty named her chancellor. Her appointment stunned the city. Rhee, then 37, had no experience running a school, let alone a district with 46,000 students that ranks last in math among 11 urban school systems. When Fenty called her, she was running a nonprofit called the New Teacher Project, which helps schools recruit good teachers. Most problematic of all, Rhee is not from Washington. She is from Ohio, and she is Korean American in a majority-African-American city. "I was," she says now, "the worst pick on the face of the earth."

But Rhee came highly recommended by another prominent school reformer: Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City's schools. And Rhee was once a teacher--in a Baltimore elementary school with Teach for America--and the experience convinced her that good teachers could alter the lives of kids like Rhodes.

Anacostia High has a 24% graduation rate, and only 21% of its students read at grade level. Rhodes is well aware of the miserable statistics, and when he first saw his new chancellor from afar, he thought she looked petite, foreign and underqualified. "I was like, She doesn't look ready for urban kids." But after they exchanged e-mails, he agreed to meet her downtown. He realized almost at once that he had underestimated her. "She actually sat

with me," he says, "and talked eye to eye, like I was one of her co-workers." They decided to meet again, this time at Anacostia High. Rhodes began to talk about Rhee to his classmates, and they started writing an agenda for the meeting, detailing all the things that were wrong with the D.C. school system. They had much to tell.

Rhee has promised to make Washington the highest-performing urban school district in the nation, a prospect that, if realized, could transform the way schools across the country are run. She is attempting to do this through a relentless focus on finding--and rewarding--strong teachers, purging incompetent ones and weakening the tenure system that keeps bad teachers in the classroom. This fall, Rhee was asked to meet with both presidential campaigns to discuss school reform. In the last debate, each candidate tried to claim her as his own, with Barack Obama calling her a "wonderful new superintendent."

Hard as it is to imagine Washington schools ranking among the best in the country, the city does have some things working in its favor. The system is relatively small, making it easier to redirect. As in New York City, the board of education was recently dissolved, which means changes can be made without waiting for the blessing of a fractious body of overseers. And now that a third of Washington's kids are in charter schools, there is intense pressure on the public system to keep the students it still has. If they keep fleeing the system at the current rate, enrollment will drop 50% every 10 years.

Each week, Rhee gets e-mails from superintendents in other cities. They understand that if she succeeds, Rhee could do something no one has done before: she could prove that low-income urban kids can catch up with kids in the suburbs. The radicalism of this idea cannot be overstated. Now, without proof that cities can revolutionize their worst schools, there is always a fine excuse. Superintendents, parents and teachers in urban school districts lament systemic problems they cannot control: poverty, hunger, violence and negligent parents. They bicker over small improvements such as class size and curriculum, like diplomats touring a refugee camp and talking about the need for nicer curtains. To the extent they intervene at all, politicians respond by either throwing more money at the problem (if they're on the left) or making it easier for some parents to send their kids to private schools (if they're on the right).

Meanwhile, millions of students left behind in confused classrooms spend another day learning nothing.

See pictures of eighth-graders being recruited for college basketball.

See TIME's special report on paying for college.

A Teacher from Toledo

ONE DAY IN AUGUST, I SPENT THE MORNING with Rhee as she made surprise visits to Washington public schools. She emerged from her chauffeured black SUV with two BlackBerrys and a cell phone and began walking--fast--toward the front door of the first school. She wore a black pencil skirt, a delicate cream blouse and strappy high heels. When we got inside, she walked into the first classroom she could find and stood to the side, frowning like a specter. When a teacher stopped lecturing to greet her, she motioned for the teacher to continue. Rhee smiled only when students smiled at her first. Within two minutes, she had seen enough, and she stalked out to the next classroom.

In the hallway, she muttered about teachers who spend too much time cutting out elaborate bulletin-board decorations or chitchatting at "morning meetings" with their third-graders before the real work begins. "We're in Washington, D.C., in the nation's capital," she said later. "And yet the children of this city receive an education that every single citizen in this country should be embarrassed by." (See pictures of teens and how they would vote.)

In the year and a half she's been on the job, Rhee has made more changes than most school leaders--even reform-minded ones--make in five years. She has shut 21 schools--15% of the city's total--and fired more than 100 workers from the district's famously bloated 900-person central bureaucracy. She has dismissed 270 teachers. And last spring she removed 36 principals, including the head of the elementary school her two daughters attend in an affluent northwest-D.C. neighborhood.

Rhee is convinced that the answer to the U.S.'s education catastrophe is talent, in the form of outstanding teachers and principals. She wants to make Washington teachers the highest paid in the country, and in exchange she wants to get rid of the weakest teachers. Where she and the teachers' union disagree most is on her ability to measure the quality of teachers. Like about half the states, Washington is now tracking whether students' test scores improve over time under a given teacher. Rhee wants to use that data to decide who gets paid more--and, in combination with classroom evaluation, who keeps the job. But many teachers do not trust her to do this fairly, and the union bristles at the idea of giving up tenure, the exceptional job security that teachers enjoy.

Rhee grew up in a nice neighborhood in Toledo, Ohio, a middle child, between two brothers. Her parents immigrated from South Korea several years before she was born so that her father could study medicine at the University of Michigan. He became a specialist in rehabilitation and pain medicine, and her mother owned a women's clothing store. Education was highly valued in the family, as was independence. After Rhee finished sixth grade, her parents sent her to South Korea to live with an aunt and attend a Korean school, a harrowing experience for a child in a strange land with limited skills in its language. When she returned a year later, her parents sent her to a private school because they found the public schools lacking.

After Rhee graduated from Cornell University in 1992, she joined Teach for America. She spent three years teaching at Harlem Park Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in Baltimore. Her parents visited and were stunned by the conditions of the neighborhood. "The area where the kids lived reminded me of a scene after the Korean War," says her father Shang Rhee.

Rhee suffered during that first year, and so did her students. She could not control the class. Her father remembers her returning home to visit and telling him she didn't want to go back. She had hives on her face from the stress.

The second year, Rhee got better. She and another teacher started out with second-graders who were scoring in the bottom percentile on standardized tests. They held on to those kids for two years, and by the end of third grade, the majority were at or above grade level, she says. (Baltimore does not have good test data going back that far, a problem that plagues many districts, so this assertion cannot be checked. But Rhee's principal at the time has confirmed the claim.) The experience gave Rhee faith in the power of good teaching. Yet what happened afterward broke her heart. "What was most disappointing was to watch these kids go off into the fourth grade and just lose everything," Rhee says, "because they were in classrooms with teachers who weren't engaging them."

The summer after her second year of teaching, Rhee met Kevin Huffman, a fellow Teach for America member. They married two years later and had two daughters, Starr and Olivia, now 9 and 6. They moved to Colorado to be closer to Rhee's parents, but the marriage faltered. Huffman and Rhee separated, agreeing to joint custody of the kids. And then Rhee got the offer to run Washington's schools. Huffman, now head of public affairs for Teach for America, had no illusions about the challenges Rhee would face. But when he heard about

the job offer, he decided to follow her to D.C. "Even though moving didn't sound like a whole lot of fun," he says, "the reality is that I genuinely believed that she had the potential to be the best superintendent in the country. Most people think about their own longevity, about political considerations." He adds, "Very few people genuinely don't care about anything other than the end result for kids. Michelle will compromise with no one when it comes to making sure kids get what they deserve."

Scorched Earth

WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN WASHINGTON, Huffman and Rhee anted up. They enrolled Starr and Olivia in Oyster-Adams, a public elementary school. Although the school is considered among the best in the city, Rhee quickly concluded that it was inferior to the Colorado public school her daughters had been attending. Among other things, the homework was sporadic and unchallenging, she says. Rhee dismissed the principal before the school year was out, a move that sparked outrage across the city and in her own home. "That," she says, "was probably the decision I got the most grief about."

Rhee is, as a rule, far nicer to students than to most adults. In many private encounters with officials, bureaucrats and even fundraisers--who have committed millions of dollars to help her reform the schools--she doesn't smile or nod or do any of the things most people do to put others at ease. She reads her BlackBerry when people talk to her. I have seen her walk out of small meetings held for her benefit without a word of explanation. She says things most superintendents would not. "The thing that kills me about education is that it's so touchy-feely," she tells me one afternoon in her office. Then she raises her chin and does what I come to recognize as her standard imitation of people she doesn't respect. Sometimes she uses this voice to imitate teachers; other times, politicians or parents. Never students. "People say, 'Well, you know, test scores don't take into account creativity and the love of learning,'" she says with a drippy, grating voice, lowering her eyelids halfway. Then she snaps back to herself. "I'm like, 'You know what? I don't give a crap.' Don't get me wrong. Creativity is good and whatever. But if the children don't know how to read, I don't care how creative you are. You're not doing your job."

See pictures of a diverse group of American teens.

See pictures of the college dorm's evolution.

Rhee's ferocity has alienated many people--even those who support her ideas and could be helpful to her. This summer the chair of the Washington city council called dealing with Rhee a "nightmare." There has been talk of passing legislation to rein her in. "Michelle Rhee believes in scorched earth," says Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, a national union that has become unusually involved in local matters in Washington. "I am not saying that D.C.'s school system doesn't need a lot of help. But I have been part of a lot of reforms, and the one thing I have never seen work is a hierarchical, top-down model."

Rhee is aware of the criticism, but she suggests that a certain ruthlessness is required. "Have I rubbed some people the wrong way? Definitely. If I changed my style, I might make people a little more comfortable," she says. "But I think there's real danger in acting in a way that makes adults feel better. Because where does that stop?"

The Data

ON RHEE'S TOUR OF SCHOOLS DURING the first week of classes this year, a parent stopped her to praise her accomplishments so far. Rhee listened with a small smile while systematically cracking each of her knuckles with the thumb of the same hand. Then she got back into her SUV and began furiously e-mailing. When she calls her staff, she does not say hello; she just starts talking. She answered 95,000 e-mails last year, according to her office.

She frequently sounds exasperated. "People come to me all the time and say, 'Why did you fire this person?'" she says. The whiny voice is back. "'She's a good person. She's a nice person.' I'm like, 'O.K., go tell her to work at the post office.' Just because you're a nice person and you mean well does not mean you have a right to a job in this district."

The data back up Rhee's obsession with teaching. If two average 8-year-olds are assigned to different teachers, one who is strong and one who is weak, the children's lives can diverge in just a few years, according to research pioneered by Eric Hanushek at Stanford. The child with the effective teacher, the kind who ranks among the top 15% of all teachers, will be scoring well above grade level on standardized tests by the time she is 11. The other child will be a year and a half below grade level--and by then it will take a teacher who works with the child after school and on weekends to undo the compounded damage. In other words, the child will probably never catch up.

The ability to improve test scores is clearly not the only sign of a good teacher. But it is a relatively objective measure in an industry with precious few. And in schools where kids are struggling to read and subtract, it is a prerequisite for getting anything else done. In their defense, Washington teachers and principals, like educators in many of the country's worst school districts, talk about trying to teach a seventh-grader who is eight months pregnant; about being assaulted by students; about holding meetings for parents, replete with free food, and no one showing up. Washington Teachers' Union leader George Parker worries that test-score data cannot take all this into account: "I don't think our teachers are afraid of demonstrating student growth, but you have to look at the dynamics of the children you're dealing with. If I'm teaching children who have computers at home, who have educated parents, those students can move a lot faster than kids whose parents can't read."

Rhee says she does not expect all kids to move up the charts at the same rate; the important thing is to demand that most do move up. "This is a cultural shift," says Kaya Henderson, Rhee's deputy. "For years, there were no data, and you were a good teacher because the parents or your principal told you so. And so this is a scary thing."

The most glaring example of the backward logic of schools is the way most teachers receive lifetime job security after one or two years of work. As Larry Rosenstock, CEO of eight California charter schools, noted at an education panel last spring, we don't give that kind of job security to pilots or doctors--or any others who hold our children's fate in their hands: "What is it that is so exceptional about teachers that they should have this unique right?"

Teachers got tenure rights in the early 20th century to protect them against meddling politicians and school-board members who treated their jobs as patronage pawns. But the rationale is plainly antiquated. Today dozens of federal and state laws protect teachers (and other people) from arbitrary firing. But most teachers still receive tenure almost automatically. In fact, even before they get tenure, they are rarely let go. Schools spend millions of dollars evaluating teachers, but principals have little incentive to shake up their staffs, and so most teachers end up scoring near the top. "What I'm finding is that our principals are ridiculously--like ridiculously--conflict-averse," Rhee says. "They know someone is not so good, and they want to give him a 'Meets expectations' anyway because they don't want to deal with the person coming into the office and yelling and getting the parents riled up."

Right now, schools assess teachers before they teach--filtering for candidates who are certified, who have a master's degree, who have other pieces of paper that do not predict good teaching. And we pay them the same regardless of their effectiveness.

By comparison, if we wanted to have truly great teachers in our schools, we would assess them after their second year of teaching, when we could identify very strong and very weak performers, according to years of research. Great teachers are in total control. They have clear expectations and rules, and they are consistent with rewards and punishments. Most of all, they are in a hurry. They never feel that there is enough time in the day. They quiz kids on their multiplication tables while they walk to lunch. And they don't give up on their worst students, even when any normal person would.

See pictures of teens and how they would vote.

See pictures of college mascots.

Students know this instinctively. Acquirra Carter, 14, attends Washington's Cardozo High School, where, she complains, kids walk out of classes when they get bored and certain teachers talk on their cell phones when they are supposed to be teaching. But there are exceptions, and Carter knows them when she sees them. "Some teachers find a way. Mrs. Brown, they would not dare walk out of her class. She has total control. Mrs. Lawton, nobody leaves her class. This boy whispered, and she knew it!"

Minefields in the Schoolyard

IN THE VIEW OF RHEE AND REFORMERS like her, the struggle to fix America's failing school system comes down to a simple question: How do you get the best teachers and principals to work in the worst schools? In her quest to figure this out, Rhee has already suffered a major setback. Earlier this year, she proposed a revolutionary new model to let teachers choose between two pay scales. They could make up to $130,000 in merit pay on the basis of their effectiveness--in exchange for giving up tenure for one year. Or they could keep tenure and accept a smaller raise. (Currently, the average teacher's salary in Washington is $65,902.) The proposal divided the city's teachers into raging, blogging factions. This fall, the union declined to put Rhee's proposal to a vote, and its relationship with her has become increasingly hostile.

In October, Rhee vowed to purge incompetent teachers through any means necessary. She has brought on extra staff to help principals navigate the byzantine termination process and says an unprecedented number of teachers have already been put on notice. But she cannot give teachers the huge raises she proposed unless the union agrees to a new contract. So this approach will be slower, more litigious and less inspiring. In other words, it will be all stick and no carrot. It's hard to say if anyone else would have been able to persuade the union to trade away tenure for cash bonuses, but Rhee's sometimes dismissive attitude made it harder for some teachers to trust her.

For now, Mayor Fenty says he still has full confidence in Rhee, and he claims that Washington residents share his enthusiasm. "Regular people love the fact that for once someone is making tough decisions for D.C. schools," says Fenty, who attended the district's public schools. But the disconnect between Rhee's confident, sweeping rhetoric and the tortured reality is sizable, and it is most apparent at ground level, in the schools she is trying to save.

Rhee likes to tell the story of how Rhodes got in touch with her. She recounted it on TV on The Charlie Rose Show in July: "A student sent me this e-mail and said, basically, If you really want to know what's wrong with our schools, you should come and talk to the kids because I'm afraid that by talking to the adults, you might not be getting the real story."

Rhodes has a more nuanced version of the story. After their initial meeting, they met for a second time at Anacostia High, in a room off the library. Rhodes had invited eight fellow students, and they gave Rhee their typed agenda. They talked about the need for better teachers, as Rhee emphasizes when she tells the story. But Rhodes says he also told her about the holes in the floors, the lack of supplies and the fact that most classes did not have enough books for the students to take home. Rhee listened but did not offer many specific solutions. "She was vague," Rhodes says. "I got the sense she didn't want to make promises she couldn't keep."

Then one day last May, Rhee dismissed Anacostia's principal. Rhodes was devastated. He sent Rhee a furious e-mail. "My principal is a mother, mentor and a teacher to us all," he wrote. "I refuse, NO! we refuse the students of Anacostia to let her go." Rhee wrote him back. "She told me not to worry about it," Rhodes says quietly.

One of the things that make school reform so wrenching and slow is that schools become embedded in people's hearts. This is true in rich neighborhoods and poor ones, with good

schools and bad. Rhodes talks about his school as if it were an extension of himself. He talks about "my teachers" and "my staff," and he refers to other students as "my colleagues." "I love Anacostia High School," he says. At the same time, he is dismayed by his school. He walks through his halls, pointing out the litter on the floor and the broken lockers. Rhodes is 6 ft. 8 in. (2 m) tall, so he has to look down to talk to almost everyone. He wears white tube socks under his black Nike flip-flops and carries his large frame deliberately, like a gentle overseer. "You see all these lockers? None of them work," he says. "This classroom over here is supposed to be for home economics, but it's never been fixed up."

Rhodes did not contact Rhee again. This year Anacostia has a new principal, and Rhodes admits that the school is functioning better. "All the children are wearing their uniforms," he says. "No kids are in the hallways." If you come to school without your uniform on, a security guard or an assistant principal will "snatch you up and just send you home." All the computers in his Microsoft Word classroom now work.

But on Nov. 19, Rhodes had to evacuate his school when fights broke out in the hallways and three students were stabbed. And he still doesn't use the school bathrooms, which are filthy and sometimes unsafe. He waits until he returns to his grandmother's house, where he lives.

Now that he is a senior, Rhodes spends much of his time worrying about getting into college. As we stand on the front steps of the school one autumn evening after class, I ask him what he wants to study. He answers quickly: "Public administration, with a minor in English." I ask him how he can be so sure. "Because someone told me that's what I have to do to take Chancellor Rhee's job," he says matter-of-factly, watching his drum corps practice and his baton twirlers twirl in the twilight.