

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC

Episode 1: Setting Her Sights on Change

Airdate: October 1, 2007

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: In August, 5,000 teachers and principals from Washington, D.C.'s, troubled school system met their new superintendent, the seventh in ten years.

MICHELLE RHEE, Chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: I am Michelle Rhee. I'm the new chancellor of the D.C. public schools. And just in case there was any confusion, I am, in fact, Korean. I am 37 years old. And, no, I have never run a school district before.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee's selection attracted national attention.

MICHELLE RHEE: All the eyes of the country are now on D.C. I believe that what we are embarking upon is a fight for the lives of children.

JOHN MERROW: Just months ago, Michelle Rhee, a former teacher, was living in Denver and running the New Teacher Project, a non-profit organization she started to train and place teachers. Now she's in charge of 55,000 students and nearly \$800 million.

Washington, D.C., spends more per student, about \$13,000, than just about every other large public school district. But so far, it isn't helping. Test scores are abysmal: 88 percent of eighth-graders scored below proficient in reading on the most recent national report card. They did worse in math: 93 percent below proficient.

Last year, Adrian Fenty campaigned on the promise to fix the schools. His first act as mayor was to take total control of the school system.

MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY, Washington, D.C.: This is the nation's capital of the United States of America. We shouldn't have the worst school system; we should have the best.

Choosing a new superintendent

JOHN MERROW: For help in choosing a new superintendent, Fenty turned to New York City schools' chancellor Joel Klein.

JOEL KLEIN, Chancellor, New York City Public Schools: There's a culture of mediocrity, typically, in a lot of school systems. A lot of school systems make excuses for nonperformance. And someone like Michelle, I think, can come in and, with her vision and her commitment, lead them in a different direction.

MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY: What this city needed right now was a change agent, a fresh face, someone who knew the city and knew urban school systems, but someone who wasn't either tied to the past or who thought that things could never be excellent.

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JOEL KLEIN: I think Michelle gets what needs to be done. If you don't understand that, I don't think you can get the work done. And I called him, and I recommended Michelle.

JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee was not job hunting, but she agreed to talk with the mayor.

MICHELLE RHEE: I told him, I said, "You don't want me for this job. You are a politician. Your job is to keep the noise minimums to a level and to keep your constituents happy." I said, "I am a change agent, and change doesn't come without significant pushback and opposition, which is absolutely counter to what you want." And he looked at me...

JOHN MERROW: In the end, it came down to one key question.

MICHELLE RHEE: I said, "What would you risk just at the chance to turn this school district around, to truly transform it?"

MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY: I said "everything," that one word. And it's true.

JOHN MERROW: On the same day that he officially assumed control of the schools, June 12th, Mayor Fenty announced Rhee as his choice for chancellor.

MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY: Within the last hour, I signed a mayoral order to appoint Michelle Rhee as acting chancellor of the District of Columbia of public schools.

Tough road for past school leaders

JOHN MERROW: Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, knows what Rhee is up against.

MICHAEL CASSERLY, Council of the Great City School: She's got to raise the academic performance of the kids in the school system. She's got to overhaul the personnel and human resource system of the school district. And she's got to help recapture and regain the public's confidence in the public schools. So, other than that, it ought to be a cakewalk.

MICHELLE RHEE: I'd say that I have a tremendous will. Some people would call that being very willful, or stubborn, but when I know what needs to get done, very, very little, if anything, can stand in my way.

JOHN MERROW: Tough words, but Washington has heard them before.

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LT. GEN. JULIUS BECTON (Ret.), Former CEO, District of Columbia Public Schools: I promise you this: We'll be diligent in our effort to create an optimal learning environment that is stimulating and challenging to students and teachers alike.

JOHN MERROW: In 1996, Washington turned to retired three-star General Julius Becton. Like Michelle Rhee, General Becton had never led an urban school district. Like Rhee, his motto was, "Children first."

LT. GEN. JULIUS BECTON: Our goal is to build an environment that fosters success. Remember, children first. Failure is not an option.

JOHN MERROW: But just 16 months later, after failing to gain an accurate count of students or open schools on time, General Becton resigned. Becton, who had survived three wars, said he'd never come across a more difficult task than reforming the public schools in Washington.

Well-aware of the challenges, Rhee hit the ground running.

MICHELLE RHEE: I am going to run this district in a way that is constantly looking out for the best interests of the children and of the schools.

JOHN MERROW: At community meetings like this one, Rhee heard the concerns of parents and students.

WASHINGTON D.C. STUDENT: One of the main points that we got to in our group discussion was that we should have more caring and understanding teachers so that it is important that they know what we go through in our community.

JOHN MERROW: When teachers complained about not receiving textbooks on time, she paid a visit to the central warehouse.

MICHELLE RHEE: By the time I got onto the second floor, I thought I was going to throw up. I actually felt nauseous because of what I was seeing. It was boxes and boxes of glue and scissors and composition books, binders, boxes of unopened trade books, class sets of novels, things that teachers not only are dying for but spend their own money on.

Weeding out ineffective teachers

JOHN MERROW: She quickly figured out how to get the supplies into the classrooms, but can she get ineffective teachers out?

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MICHELLE RHEE: I cannot risk children's education for very long while they are sitting, languishing in an ineffective teacher's classroom.

GEORGE PARKER, Washington Teachers Union: There are many who feel that they can transform education by simply focusing on children and supporting children. You have to support those who interact daily with children, our teachers, if you're going to get the results.

JOHN MERROW: George Parker represents teachers. He's the president of the union, whose contract Rhee will have to renegotiate.

MICHELLE RHEE: This is my preference, is that I don't want to bring 25 people in from each side with the lawyers, you know, banging on the table and making a big show. I want this to be one on one.

JOHN MERROW: Just the two of you?

MICHELLE RHEE: Just the two of us.

GEORGE PARKER: We have a process within our organization of how we deal with contract negotiations, and we will follow that process.

JOHN MERROW: Are you a rule-breaker?

MICHELLE RHEE: I think what I am is somebody who is focused on the end result that I think needs to happen. So if the rule's standing in the way of that, I will question those rules. I will bend those rules.

JOHN MERROW: Do you anticipate a peaceful negotiation?

GEORGE PARKER: Peaceful? I'm not sure "peaceful" is an adequate word.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee has another target in her sights: the district's central office.

MICHELLE RHEE: You know, as I walk around, and I listen to how people operate, and I listen to the way that they answer the phone or the way they're dealing with people as they're coming to the central office, it sounds like they're very annoyed. This is not a nuisance; this is your job. So if you consider answering their questions or giving them information a nuisance, then this is not the place for you to work.

JOHN MERROW: According to Joel Klein, there's only one path to follow.

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JOEL KLEIN: You have to get rid of people. I mean, the real fact is -- she knows it, anybody who studies it knows it -- there are people who are put there for patronage and other reasons and who don't really have a vital role to play. And we don't have dollars to spend on people who don't have a vital role to play.

JOHN MERROW: Can you fire people?

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes. I can fire people. I think anybody working anywhere, if you run an organization, can fire people.

JOHN MERROW: But not easily. Personnel laws prevent her from firing at will. It can take up to a year to move an unsatisfactory employee out of the system. For now, Rhee has put a freeze on hiring unless she herself approves.

MICHELLE RHEE: What I have been doing is basically putting people on notice.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee and Mayor Fenty plan to introduce legislation to make it easier to get rid of what she perceives to be deadwood.

MICHELLE RHEE: I want people who can very clearly articulate what they do and what results they're going to guarantee.

Skepticism surrounding changes

JOHN MERROW: As the first day of school approached, Rhee's immediate concerns were making sure supplies were delivered and repairs were made. D.C.'s teachers were watching closely.

DARCY HAMPTON, Teacher: I'm skeptical, because, like I said, I've seen the changes and the transitions, but I'm positive about it because of what I've seen so far. I did go with a lot of skepticism into, you know, looking, "Oh, here's another leader. It's going to be the same thing, they talk, but they don't deliver."

PATRICIA MCCULLOUGH, Teacher: I haven't really seen a drastic change.

JOHN MERROW: Is it possible that expectations are too high?

MICHAEL CASSERLY: I always worry about people being set up as saviors and then later on being crucified when they fall from grace.

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GEORGE PARKER: We have a general attitude sometimes -- and I think an unrealistic attitude -- that we can create microwave success in education, and it just does not happen.

MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY: Are you all excited? All right, well, listen, we're here to say one thing, and that's we are going to support you. Education is our number-one priority. And the only thing that matters...

JOHN MERROW: On the first day of school, energy was high, and everyone was watching. All 146 schools in the district opened on time. Nearly all of them had the books they needed.

JENISE PATTERSON, Parent: What I've seen different this time, compared to last year, the schools are pretty clean. I'm seeing, at least the schools that I have gone to, they are clean.

JOHN MERROW: But for some, skepticism remains.

LAWANDA MANOR, Librarian: I have hope. She says change is going to come, and I'm going to believe her. You know, I'll believe her until I see that it's not going to come. So I'm hoping it does.

JOHN MERROW: The city council will soon decide whether to make it easier for Rhee to fire people. The teachers union contract expired at the end of September.