

**LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 2: Facing Expectations**

**Airdate: November 19, 2007**

**TRANSCRIPT**

**JOHN MERROW:** In Washington, D.C., the new leader of the public schools is putting her house in order.

**MICHELLE RHEE,** Chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: The bottom line is I don't believe that you are going to be the leader who is going to take this school in the direction that we need it to go in and have the highest expectations for the kids.

**JOHN MERROW:** Michelle Rhee spent the first weeks of the school year meeting one-on-one with all 156 principals under her charge.

**MICHELLE RHEE:** In any other sector, employees are expected to meet certain outcomes or deliverables, and everybody knows that if you don't meet those numbers, you go. That's what we're creating.

No. I'm terminating your principalship now.

**JOHN MERROW:** Any compassion?

**MICHELLE RHEE:** Compassion? I think that when you're doing the kind of work that I'm doing in public education, where the lives and futures of children hang in the balance, you can't play with that.

**ADRIAN FENTY,** Mayor, Washington, D.C.: The wheels are in motion for action, and the time for dramatic change begins today.

**JOHN MERROW:** Rhee's campaign for reform began six months ago, with full support from Washington's new mayor, Adrian Fenty.

**ADRIAN FENTY:** There will be people along the way who don't agree with things that we're doing. But as long as we're confident that it is what's best for opportunities of young people in our system and for their education, that will trump everything else.

**JOHN MERROW:** Michelle Rhee spent the last 10 years working to improve teacher quality in low-performing schools, but she's never been a principal, let alone managed a school system.

Less than a year ago, she had just over 100 employees. Today, she's in charge of over 11,000 employees in what may be the worst public school district in the country.

**MICHELLE RHEE:** We have, in some circumstances, 70 percentage points difference between our white kids and our black kids. That makes me so angry. This is nothing but the result of the adults in this system not doing their jobs.

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What about your achievement gap in the school?

PRINCIPAL: Achievement gaps are getting a little bit better.

**Setting expectations for principals**

JOHN MERROW: In her meetings this fall with the principals, Rhee discovered what she believes is a key problem.

MICHELLE RHEE: Nobody had ever said to them, "This is my expectation. This is what success will look like at the end of the year. If you meet this or exceed this, we will be great. And if you don't meet this, then we're going to have to have a serious conversation about whether or not you can continue on in this role."

JOHN MERROW: Rhee asked each principal to set a goal for improving student achievement.

LYNNE GOBER, Principal, Anacostia High School: You don't have to run, but you've got to put some pep to your step. Let's go.

JOHN MERROW: Lynne Gober is the principal at Anacostia High School.

LYNNE GOBER: Anacostia is a tough school with tough issues. I promised her that I'm up for the challenge.

JOHN MERROW: Test scores here rank at the bottom of the district. Last year, only 7 percent of students scored proficient in math. In reading, only 6 percent were proficient. The goal this year is to double those scores.

GLORIA BALTON, Anacostia High School: There is more than one way to assess student progress.

JOHN MERROW: Gloria Balton is an administrator at Anacostia with the job of helping teachers raise performance.

GLORIA BALTON: There are tenth-grade teachers with students reading on third-grade level. I don't have any third-grade books in this building to give to them.

JOHN MERROW: But Anacostia's problems go far beyond books.

LYNNE GOBER: There are a lot of neighborhood issues that children are faced with. Several of the children take care of themselves. They take care of their brothers and sisters. Some of the

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students have to work in order to survive and to help their parents or to help the parent that they live with.

GLORIA BALTON: You need more psychologists in the school. You need more counselors in the school, because when you can address the needs of the soul, then you can get them to perform.

MICHELLE RHEE: You can address the needs of the souls of these kids in the classroom through the power that we have as educators. You can't teach in a vacuum. You've got to meet them where they are. You've got to take that into account. But you can never, ever, ever let that be an excuse for the kids not achieving at the highest levels.

#### **Improving test scores**

JOHN MERROW: To double test scores by the end of the year, Principal Gober is focusing on school spirit, parent involvement, and test preparation.

LYNNE GOBER: Very good. Write that down, s-t-r-i-v-e. What are you doing? You didn't write anything.

Our students can do whatever anyone else can do, because they have the heart. They just need the opportunities. I mean, we're not a perfect school, but we're striving to be.

MICHELLE RHEE: The principal, she's struggling. I think she's in an incredibly difficult situation. And she wants to do well. She's working hard; she's trying. But I can't confuse that at all with producing results.

JOHN MERROW: Success for D.C.'s principals depends in part on support from the district's central office. That agency recently came under fire when thousands of books and supplies it had ordered were found in a warehouse while students went without.

THELMA MONK, District of Columbia Public Schools: That office, if you take something there, it's going to get lost. So don't take it there.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee hired Thelma Monk to head the human resources department.

THELMA MONK: The general perception is that you're not going to get any help. The phones are -- not that the phones are busy, but the mailboxes are always full.

JOHN MERROW: Under the current contract, terminating a central office employee can take months.

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MICHELLE RHEE: As you know, every effective organization out there has the ability to hold its employees accountable.

JOHN MERROW: To bring the same bottom-line accountability to the central office that she's already put in place for principals, Rhee asked the city council in October for power to fire central office employees at will.

MICHELLE RHEE: I need this authority for the long term to make sure that, anytime there's any employee who's not producing results and who's not doing the right thing for kids, that we're able to move them out of the system.

GEORGE PARKER, Washington Teachers Union President: She has some views that may present some problems for teachers, in terms of trust.

#### **Working with the teacher's union**

JOHN MERROW: Teachers union president George Parker is watching Rhee closely.

GEORGE PARKER: We have to move the discussion away from hiring and firing of ineffective employees and begin to move the discussion to what kind of supports are we going to put in place in our district to support teachers and children.

JOHN MERROW: While Rhee was seeking greater control over her central office, the contract with the teachers expired.

JOURNALIST: Chancellor Rhee, could you tell us, are you seeking the similar type of authority to allow you to fire teachers in the future?

MICHELLE RHEE: Absolutely. We have to ensure, in whatever contract that we have, that we are able to remove ineffective teachers from their positions.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee will have to negotiate a new contract with the teachers union in the coming months. Many expect her to focus on hiring and firing.

GEORGE PARKER: The chancellor already has more than enough authority to remove from the system any teachers that are deemed ineffective or incompetent. I cannot at this point imagine what additional authority the chancellor would need in order to remove ineffective teachers.

ARLENE ACKERMAN, Former D.C. Public Schools Superintendent: I think we make often an assumption, in a very naive way, that when you enter a broken school system that the people are broken who work there.

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**A national impact?**

JOHN MERROW: Rhee's critics include Arlene Ackerman, former head of the D.C. schools.

ARLENE ACKERMAN: I would say take a look at the systems that are in place; make sure you've done everything to fix those. It's easier to focus on people than to actually fix a broken school system.

MICHELLE RHEE: For me, this is not about firing people and that's going to solve the problem. What's going to solve the problem is creating a culture of accountability in the central office first, and then eventually everywhere in the school district.

JOHN MERROW: Does this legislation have any national significance?

MICHELLE RHEE: I hope so. I hope so. I hope that everything that we do in some ways will have reverberations across the country.

JOHN MERROW: Pushback against Rhee's plan has begun. At a recent 10-hour public hearing, some of the strongest criticism came from the teachers union.

GEORGE PARKER: We feel that this legislation removes due process for workers. And we're not of the mindset that removing due process for workers is in any way going to improve student achievement.

JOHN MERROW: Among Rhee's supporters was parent Mary Siddall.

MARY SIDDALL, Parent: We are shackled by the bureaucracy of the central administration of DCPS. I am amazed at the amount of money that gets sucked out of our school by the central administration.

MICHELLE RHEE: I believe that the public is behind me in an unbelievable way, I mean, to the level that, you know, on the weekends I'm in the grocery store. I am like in my flip-flops, and people come up to me, and they say, "Thank goodness you're doing this. You can't do it quick enough. Don't give up."

JOHN MERROW: For now, Michelle Rhee's plans are on hold. The city council expects to vote soon on her request for greater control. Next up? Negotiations with the teachers union.