

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC

Episode 3: Facing Resistance

Airdate: February 7, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

PROTESTOR LEADER: What do we want?

PROTESTOR: Our voices heard!

PROTESTOR LEADER: When do we want it?

PROTESTOR: Now!

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Correspondent: Unions in Washington, D.C., are upset with Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: What we have here is a takeover. It is not reform; it is dictatorship.

JOHN MERROW: Parents have their problems with her, too.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: You're telling these people that they've got to take your plan. Let's be realistic about your plan, Ms. Rhee.

JOHN MERROW: Even grandparents are angry.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: I'm telling you that you are not being serious about taking parent and community input into account.

JOHN MERROW: What goes through your head, when people are yelling at you like that?

MICHELLE RHEE, Chancellor, D.C. Public Schools: I don't take that personally. Those people feel passionately about their schools and about public education and, frankly, we need more of that.

JOHN MERROW: She's likely to get more in the months ahead. Michelle Rhee came into office in June promising to make Washington, D.C., a national model of urban school reform.

Now, seven months into the job, her controversial proposals -- close 15 percent of the schools and fire central office employees at will -- have stirred up a storm of protest.

That raises a question: Is Michelle Rhee trying to do too much, too fast?

ADRIAN FENTY, Mayor, District of Columbia: The time for dramatic change begins today.

JOHN MERROW: This man doesn't think so. Washington's mayor, Adrian Fenty, hired her.

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ADRIAN FENTY: The person who says that they're going to come in, shake things up, change the system, challenge the status quo, that's exactly what I want. I was willing to stake everything on us shaking things up and trying to make this system as best as it could be for the children of the District of Columbia.

Opposition from union leaders

JOHN MERROW: Rhee wasted no time getting started. Weeks before the first day of school, she discovered thousands of textbooks and supplies not in classrooms where they belonged, but gathering dust in a warehouse.

She got them delivered to schools in time for opening day and then went after the cause of the problem: the district's central office, long criticized for its inefficiency.

Rhee asked the city council to pass a law giving her the power to fire central office employees at will.

MICHELLE RHEE: It is a matter of trust.

HARRY THOMAS, JR., D.C. City Council Member: It is a matter of trust.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee met with city council members, like Harry Thomas, Jr., lobbying for votes.

MICHELLE RHEE: For a leader of an organization not to have the power to remove ineffective employees means that you are severely handcuffing that person and putting up barriers to their effectiveness.

NATHAN SAUNDERS, General Vice President, Washington Teachers Union: This legislation is devoid of an educational impact plan for children at the classroom level.

JOHN MERROW: But pushback against Rhee's proposal was immediate. At city council hearings, five labor unions spoke against the plan.

GEORGE PARKER, President, Washington Teachers Union: And I've come before you as an advocate for the more than 4,000 teachers that we have in D.C. public schools.

JOHN MERROW: Even though teachers would not be affected, teacher union president George Parker joined in.

GEORGE PARKER: We believe that all workers should have due process rights. I think the chancellor's legislation reaches a little too deep.

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JOHN MERROW: Do you think Chancellor Rhee is in any way anti-union?

GEORGE PARKER: Let me say this: Her statements in the past have not been very favorable to unions.

Tackling budget problems

JOHN MERROW: Rhee's request for the power to fire office employees at will became an ongoing battle, one that the city council wouldn't decide until January. In the meantime, Rhee tackled another complex problem: a deficit of \$100 million.

MICHELLE RHEE: We spend more per pupil than almost any other urban jurisdiction does, and that's partially because we have a lot of our resources and money going into facilities that are a quarter-full or a half-full.

JOHN MERROW: In the past 10 years, enrollment has dropped by 27 percent. For example, this school was built for 400 students. It has 83.

MICHELLE RHEE: So we're essentially running twice as many schools as we ought to be.

JOHN MERROW: Based on studies of enrollment decline and neighborhood change, Rhee's office developed a plan to close 15 percent of the schools under her control. She wanted to inform council members before going public, but someone leaked the list, and so the council read about it in the Washington Post.

What did that do to you, and to this plan, and your relations with the council?

MICHELLE RHEE: Messed everything up.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: I can't trust you, because you turned your back on us now.

JOHN MERROW: Under Rhee's proposal, City Councilmember Harry Thomas, Jr., whom Rhee had lobbied so assiduously, would lose seven schools, more than any other ward in the city.

HARRY THOMAS, JR.: I think someone could have had the common courtesy to tell me, with that number floating out there, that my ward was going to be the most affected ward, you know, for a lot of different reasons.

You have to get people to buy into the concepts that you're trying to present to them. You can't have people feeling like they were unfairly treated.

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MICHELLE RHEE: We're heading in the right direction. We've made tremendous progress. But there's still more to do for the kids.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: Well, why close the schools...

MICHELLE RHEE: Hang on a second. Let me finish.

Cooperating with the community

JOHN MERROW: Rhee scheduled six weeks of community meetings to give people a chance to voice their opinions of her plan, which would require transferring about 5,000 students to different schools. But many felt the meetings were too little, too late.

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: Six weeks, especially when two of them are Christmas vacation, is not enough time for a serious process of getting parental input. It is not enough time for council members even to deal with this.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee listened, but held tight to her course.

MICHELLE RHEE: If I was a council member or a citizen, and the leader of the school district went about closing schools, by saying, "What does everyone think about this? How do you think we should do it?" I would lose faith immediately in that person.

ADRIAN FENTY: By definition, if she had done that, it would no longer have been the plan to make the schools excellent. Before you even started, it would have already been compromised.

MICHELLE RHEE: Bottom line is, I'm not going to get to a point where everybody agrees on one decision. No matter what decision we make in the end, some group of people is going to be unhappy. I can guarantee you that.

JOHN MERROW: But some feel that Rhee's strategy may be working against her.

MICHAEL USDAN, Senior Fellow, Institute for Educational Leadership: I can remember from my school board days, you know, you talk about closing schools, I mean, that's pretty much a gut issue in the community.

JOHN MERROW: Michael Usdan is an education policy analyst.

MICHAEL USDAN: My sense is they have to be a little bit more careful in the future in terms of getting by some of these interests, because feelings are bruised in the community. I think there's growing resistance in the city council.

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COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: This is nonsense. These people did not have...

JOHN MERROW: The unions saw this as their opportunity. With the city council vote on Rhee's legislation to fire central office workers fast approaching, a coalition of D.C. labor unions spent \$20,000 on a radio campaign linking that issue to the school closings controversy.

RADIO AD NARRATOR: Have you heard? Reform of D.C. public schools has been hijacked.

JOHN MERROW: Union lobbyists pleaded their case with city council members, including Harry Thomas, Jr.

TEACHER UNION LOBBYIST: We don't really think that the mayor and the chancellor have thought this thing through.

JOHN MERROW: The unions succeeded in getting Thomas' support.

HARRY THOMAS, JR.: We've all been fooled once, but at the end of the day, I'm not going to get fooled twice. You know, I'm not going to have somebody...

JOHN MERROW: But not much more.

CITY COUNCIL MEMBER: Chairman Gray, the vote is 10 yes, 3 no. The motion passes.

JOHN MERROW: The city council gave Rhee the power to fire central office employees at will. Rhee and Fenty were not surprised.

ADRIAN FENTY: People say, "You're moving too fast; you're trying to push too much right now." And those people, we respect their opinions tremendously.

But when you're out in the neighborhoods of the District of Columbia talking to regular people, they're saying, you know, "Go faster. Fix things. Do more."

JOHN MERROW: You've got the city council saying, "Slow down."

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: You've got the unions saying, "Hey, slow down."

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

Rapid implementation strategy

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JOHN MERROW: You certainly have some parents -- not all, maybe -- but some parents saying, "Slow down." You have Mayor Adrian Fenty saying, "Faster, faster."

MICHELLE RHEE: Hundred miles an hour, that's what he likes to say.

JOHN MERROW: And it's the speed Rhee herself prefers.

MICHELLE RHEE: I'm living what I think education reformers and parents throughout this country have long hoped for, which is somebody who will just come in, and do the things that they felt was right, and everything else be damned.

MICHAEL USDAN: So far, so good, but there are storm clouds gathering, and they ought to be cognizant of those storm clouds and not underestimate them.

JOHN MERROW: The storm is brewing.

PROTESTORS: Recall! Recall!

JOHN MERROW: Have you done anything that you regret?

MICHELLE RHEE: You know, I'm a very unusual person in that, in my entire life, I don't have any regrets.

JOHN MERROW: Recently, Rhee announced that six of the 23 schools she had intended to close would be spared, but she added four new ones to the list.