

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC

Episode 4: Facing Tough Choices

Airdate: April 2, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: When the new chancellor of Washington, D.C.'s, public schools first met her teaching staff in August 2007, she gave them a vote of confidence.

MICHELLE RHEE, Chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: I believe that if we see this as a battle for our children's lives and futures, there is no one that I would rather have on my team leading this as the people in this room.

JOHN MERROW: But six months later, Michelle Rhee had this to say.

MICHELLE RHEE: There will be some schools where a significant amount of the teaching force will turn over. I think that we are going to need a different breed of educators.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee means what she says. She just fired 98 employees in her central office, over 10 percent of the staff.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that people thought that that was going to be sort of the big shake-up for the year, but there will be rapid-fire succession from here on out for as long as I am the chancellor here.

JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee has already announced plans to close 23 schools. Now she has the power to re-staff an additional 27 schools that are considered failures under the federal law known as No Child Left Behind. All in all, that's about 1,000 teachers who could have a different job or no job at all come September.

Officials lament teacher quality

Some principals, like Nelson Burton, are eager to shake up their staff. Burton leads Coolidge High School. Low test scores show that his school has been failing for years.

L. NELSON BURTON, Principal, Coolidge Senior High School: It's a terrible thing to say, but half of the staff here ought not be. They just don't fit in to what we're doing here. And I dare say many of them won't fit into any program where they're trying to raise student achievement.

JOHN MERROW: Does that surprise you, a principal says, "I wish I could fire half my teachers, they're not on board, they're not effective"?

MICHELLE RHEE: Does it surprise me? No. I've heard things like that from lots of principals.

JOHN MERROW: But Rhee says that's no excuse for low expectations. She's made each principal set a goal for improving test scores.

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L. NELSON BURTON: I went in with the idea that I would lowball her and set a mark that was kind of low, that was easy to achieve. But little did I know she was familiar with the data.

MICHELLE RHEE: I came into those meetings with 10 years of historical test data for every single school. And for those who were sort of flat-lining it, I said, "This is not going to cut it long term."

L. NELSON BURTON: To go into her notes like, "No, no, no, that's too low. No, no, you all can do better than that."

JOHN MERROW: Burton promised to raise scores by 33 percent by year's end on D.C.'s standardized math and reading exams. To meet his goal, he asked his staff to dig deeper into test results to learn where students need the most help.

CHRIS KROOK-MAGNUSON, Coolidge Senior High School: If you give an assessment and that's just the end of it, then basically it's a waste of time. You want to use that data to see how to move students even further.

Consistently, they pick the wrong answer, so I wanted to look at those.

JOHN MERROW: Chris Krook-Magnuson chairs the math department at Coolidge. He asked teachers who were teaching the same class to give identical tests. That way, he can compare students' results across classes.

CHRIS KROOK-MAGNUSON: I can pull up their data and see how they're doing. I can see their weaknesses; I can see their strengths; and I can use that to talk to a teacher about what they might want to work on.

TEACHER: They don't know when it is appropriate to round even if they do know how to round correctly.

MICHELLE RHEE: When teachers have the opportunity to look at data in that stark a manner, they often will themselves say, "OK, what's going on? And what are you doing that's producing those kinds of results?"

Firing difficult due to union rules

JOHN MERROW: And Rhee sees another advantage. Analyzing data this way also shows which teachers are not performing.

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Test scores reveal that students in Ande Vohan Burhe's math class are not learning what they're supposed to. He's one of the teachers Principal Burton would like to replace, but as a member of the teachers union he feels his job is safe.

TEACHER: Whatever action that they want to take, I mean, I'm a member of the union. There are steps to be done.

JOHN MERROW: In Washington, D.C., a principal cannot simply fire a teacher for being ineffective. He must first implement what's called the "90-day plan," in which teachers are offered help and 90 days to show improvement. If that doesn't work, the teacher can be fired.

GEORGE PARKER, President, Washington Teachers Union: The 90-day plan is a point where you're really putting in that last-ditch support to say, "OK, can this teacher make it?"

JOHN MERROW: George Parker is president of the Washington Teachers Union. The union negotiated their current 90-day plan in 1999.

GEORGE PARKER: I think the 90-day plan is a balance that gives the district a right to remove a teacher who is not working up to capacity or working up to par, but it also gives the teacher the support that is necessary.

JOHN MERROW: But principals don't seem to be using the 90-day plan very much. Last year, only 18 teachers out of more than 4,000 were placed on the plan. Only one was fired.

Is it too difficult to fire an ineffective teacher?

L. NELSON BURTON: It's difficult. It's difficult.

JOHN MERROW: Though Burton says he'd like to replace half of his staff, only three of his teachers are on the 90-day plan, and Mr. Burhe is not one of them. Burton says that excessive paperwork and difficult deadlines are the problem.

L. NELSON BURTON: Where the real difficulty comes in is when half of your staff -- when half of your staff falls into that range, how do you fire half of your staff?

Disagreement over source of problem

JOHN MERROW: But George Parker says the principal may be the problem.

GEORGE PARKER: If you're telling me half of your staff is not living up to par, the next question I want to ask you, as a leader, talk to me about what you've done to try to develop that staff.

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JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee has set aside nearly \$20 million for professional development. But Cheryl Krehbiel, who runs the program, doesn't think she can help every teacher.

CHERYL KREHBIEL, District of Columbia Public Schools: We have a number of teachers who I don't believe will ever believe that kids can learn at high levels. And those are the teachers we need to move out quickly, rapidly, at whatever cost.

JOHN MERROW: Can you quantify -- I mean, what percentage of your roughly 4,000 teachers feel this way, have this problem?

CHERYL KREHBIEL: Fifty percent don't have the right mindset. And there's the possibility that more of them don't have the content knowledge to do the job.

GEORGE PARKER: I don't know whether Cheryl has done a study in terms of teachers to see who felt that students couldn't learn or whether that's a philosophical statement.

JOHN MERROW: Parker believes the biggest problem is the lack of strong, consistent leadership. He says missing textbooks, dilapidated facilities, truancy, and discipline issues are also to blame.

GEORGE PARKER: You better look at the problems that existed in that school that had very little to do with the makeup of the staff and solve those. Otherwise, you're simply going to create a new set of problems, the same set of problems, but with a new set of people.

JOHN MERROW: But to Michelle Rhee, it's all about the people.

MICHELLE RHEE: We have to have people who are willing to take personal responsibility and to say, despite all of the obstacles that are currently in the way of our kids -- because there are tremendous obstacles -- if you're not willing to say, "But despite all those things, I'm going to make sure that my kids are going to succeed at the highest levels," then this might not be the district for you.

JOHN MERROW: And Rhee is confident she can find teachers who have this attitude.

MICHELLE RHEE: I get e-mails from people across the country who want to come and work for us. There are a lot of people who are very excited about what we're doing.

JOHN MERROW: But will Rhee have jobs for them? This year, only 58 teachers are on the 90-day plan. That's nowhere near the turnover Rhee has in mind. But with big changes in the works, many teachers may be willing to retire early.

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Buyouts key to staff replacement

GEORGE PARKER: I was at a retirement workshop today, with roughly maybe 200 teachers, and I asked a question directly: If the right type of buyout is offered to you, would you go? And I tell you, at least 90 percent of those teachers raised their hands.

MICHELLE RHEE: They want us to be very aggressive with the buyouts, because a lot of teachers are saying, "This lady is not for me. I'd like to look at a buyout and go elsewhere."

JOHN MERROW: Rhee says the buyouts could be as much as \$25,000 per teacher and that the district has the money. More change could come in the new teachers contract now being negotiated.

MICHELLE RHEE: I am not allowed to comment on the things that we're negotiating right now. I will say, in a broad or sort of more general sense, that I think that it is a priority of mine to ensure that we have only the highest quality teachers in the schools. And so anything that's standing in the way of that has to be addressed immediately.

JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee and the teachers union expect to reach a new contract agreement before the end of the school year.