

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE
Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC
Episode 5: Teachers Struggle to Adapt to School Reforms
Airdate: June 18, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: Just six weeks before summer vacation, tension was mounting at Hart Middle School in Washington, D.C.

WILLIE BENNETT, principal, Hart Middle School: A majority of the staff really are going through some anxiety right now, because they don't know whether or not they're going to be here next school year.

TIFFANY ADAMS, Hart Middle School: The teachers that's already here, they're good teachers, so why are you trying to get rid of them?

YVETTE GASTON, Hart Middle School: In all honesty, test scores are -- those are the only things that you gauge a school by?

JOHN MERROW: Test scores at Hart Middle School are low, so low that the federal law known as No Child Left Behind says that the school must undergo drastic changes by this coming fall. What those drastic changes will be is up to this woman, D.C.'s school chancellor Michelle Rhee.

MICHELLE RHEE, chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: There is a likelihood that some or all of the staff members will not be working at the school next year.

JARVIS MASSENBURG, Hart Middle School: People are anxious or have some level of anxiety because you're working with the unknown. And that's unsettling for people with families and homes and things of that nature.

WILLIE BENNETT: I've been principal for five years. I don't know if there's going to be a number six.

Rhee plans vast restructuring

JOHN MERROW: Multiply the turmoil and anxiety at Hart Middle School by 27, because that's how many schools Michelle Rhee must overhaul by this coming August in a process the federal government calls "restructuring."

Hart expected to know its fate in March. But two weeks into the month of May, Michelle Rhee had not told any of the 27 schools -- including Hart -- what was going to happen.

MICHELLE RHEE: I came into the game a little late. I didn't, you know, take office until June.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee spent the first months of the school year tackling dysfunction in the district's central office and making plans to close 23 schools.

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In January, she turned her attention to the 27 schools in restructuring, dispatching small teams of experts to observe each school for one or two days. The report from Hart was dismal.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that we have some issues that we need to deal with in overall management and operations and leadership in the school. So across, you know, lots of different spectrums, we have a significant amount of work to do.

JOHN MERROW: But many at the school dispute the report.

YVETTE GASTON: If you were being assessed at your job, and someone came in one day and got a snapshot of one day of what you were doing, do you think that would be enough time for you?

JARVIS MASSENBURG: I teach eighth grade. I may have a kid that's reading at a second-grade level. Now, tell me, how did this kid get into eighth grade? This has nothing to do with Hart.

WILLIE BENNETT: I would consider Hart Middle School as a success.

JOHN MERROW: Willie Bennett has worked at Hart for 10 years, the last five as principal.

WILLIE BENNETT: We're not a perfect school. We do have some problems, but we have changed the culture of the school the past couple of years, where we've made it a really safe learning environment.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that Hart has failed to provide those kids with the education they deserve.

JOHN MERROW: For the last five years, Hart has fallen short of benchmarks set by No Child Left Behind. Last year, less than 16 percent of Hart students hit the mark in reading.

MICHELLE RHEE: The federal law sets out five options for what can happen to a school in restructuring status.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee's options include handing the school over to a private management company or replacing the entire staff.

How much do you know about Hart Middle School?

MICHELLE RHEE: I know enough about Hart Middle School to be able to make the decision about which option I believe is the right option for the school.

Critics argue Rhee out of touch

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JOHN MERROW: But according to Principal Bennett, Rhee has been out of touch with the realities at Hart from the beginning.

WILLIE BENNETT: I really don't think she understands what's really happening in the surrounding communities around the school. I really don't think she even have an idea.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee has already announced plans to close neighboring P.R. Harris Middle School at the end of this school year. Many Harris students have been re-assigned to Hart for the coming fall, alarming teachers and parents. The Hart and Harris neighborhoods are bitter rivals.

WILLIE BENNETT: It's almost like the Hatfields and McCoys. It's been going on for a long period of time. And until we deal with what's happening in the community, it's probably going to spill over into the schools.

TIFFANY ADAMS: For you to just come out the blue and just say you're putting P.R. Harris in Hart, you know there's going to be a lot of fights and a lot of suspensions.

JOHN MERROW: So you know about the feud, as it were, between the Harris neighborhood and the Hart neighborhood?

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: Does that concern you?

MICHELLE RHEE: I absolutely think that it's going to be a significant challenge to make sure that we don't put our young people in a position where their safety is compromised.

JOHN MERROW: But Rhee's history worries some D.C. politicians. She's a newcomer to Washington and has never before led a school district.

WILLIAM LOCKRIDGE, D.C. State Board of Education: I think her heart may be in the right place, but I don't think that she's really, really taking a thorough analysis of this school district.

JOHN MERROW: William Lockridge served on D.C.'s elected school board for 10 years before Michelle Rhee took office.

WILLIAM LOCKRIDGE: It takes more than one year for you to come into a school district, and look at the problems, and assess the problems, and to begin to make a change.

Stiff competition from charters

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MICHELLE RHEE: A lot of people, I think, over the last few months have said, you know, "It's too much," or, "It's too fast," or both. But this is the kind of change that's necessary, the scope, the pace.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee has a powerful incentive to move quickly: competition. Last year, thousands of students chose to attend charter schools instead of district schools, decreasing Rhee's budget by tens of millions of dollars.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think it's a sign that people have lost faith in the district. I think it's a sign that people believe that there are better options for their kids.

JOHN MERROW: Increasingly, D.C. parents are turning to public charter schools, like this one, which Michelle Rhee does not control. Charter schools, like KIPP D.C., now enroll 27 percent of D.C.'s school-age children.

SUSAN SCHAEFFLER, executive director, KIPP D.C.: KIPP D.C. kids are outperforming the neighboring schools.

JOHN MERROW: Susan Schaeffler oversees KIPP charter schools in the district.

SUSAN SCHAEFFLER: We are in school over 40 percent more time than the traditional school system. So that's more math. That's more reading, more science, more social studies.

JOHN MERROW: One of Schaeffler's middle schools is just a few blocks away from Hart, and test scores there are significantly higher. Last year, 60 percent of KIPP AIM Academy students scored proficient in math, compared to just 11 percent at Hart.

And KIPP D.C. is expanding. Unlike Michelle Rhee, who is closing schools, Susan Schaeffler will open a new campus this fall.

SUSAN SCHAEFFLER: All the fifth-graders will be -- and the kindergarteners are going to be down this hall.

JOHN MERROW: What is your relationship with these charter schools, with these KIPP schools? Are they your competition?

MICHELLE RHEE: Well, I mean, I certainly think that, in some ways, you know, they are, but we have 100,000 school-age kids in Washington, D.C. I want every single one of those kids in an excellent school.

JOHN MERROW: But you are losing students. You've 100,000 school-age kids, but you're now at around 50,000.

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MICHELLE RHEE: Correct.

JOHN MERROW: You're hemorrhaging students. Is that a concern?

MICHELLE RHEE: I believe that, when we begin to, on a consistent basis, have schools that have compelling, and engaging, and rigorous programs for kids, will we begin to attract back and see our numbers start to go in the other direction? I absolutely think so.

Rhee pushes ahead with plan

JOHN MERROW: Between school closings and restructuring, Rhee is planning massive changes to about 50 schools in the space of one summer.

WILLIAM LOCKRIDGE: This is a big task. It's a daunting task for the superintendent and also the facilities division. And I'm not sure if we're going to have the capacity to be able to do that in three months.

JOHN MERROW: Is there enough time?

MICHELLE RHEE: I think it's going to be challenging, but we will make sure that the schools are set up for success by the time we open on day one. Now, does that mean that every single thing that will be in place will be in place? No.

JOHN MERROW: Back at Hart Middle School, Principal Bennett was taking things one day at a time.

WILLIE BENNETT: We don't know what Chancellor Rhee has chosen for us, so we're just waiting patiently. We're going to continue to work with our students as hard as we can.

JOHN MERROW: The wait is over. On May 15th, Michelle Rhee announced her restructuring decisions for all 27 schools. Hart's administrative staff will be replaced, and a private management company will be brought in to run the school.

Rhee dismissed Principal Willie Bennett. He's one of 24 district principals who will not return in the fall.