

## **LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy**

**Airdate: July 23, 2008**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

JOHN MERROW: For these teachers in Washington, D.C., the end of the year was bittersweet.

TEACHER: Transition time for us.

JOHN MERROW: Their school, P.R. Harris, was closing for good. Principal Jeffrey Grant decided to treat the staff to an afternoon cruise on the Potomac.

JEFFREY GRANT, Principal, P.R. Harris Educational Center: Let's go out here and celebrate each other and find ways to come together, celebrate our successes.

JOHN MERROW: It was a welcome break from what had been a stressful year for many.

TEACHER: Oh, today is a sad day for me, a very sad day. I've been in this building for 24 years.

JOHN MERROW: P.R. Harris is just one of the 23 under-enrolled schools that Chancellor Michelle Rhee ordered closed during her first year in office.

MICHELLE RHEE, Chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: We've made some really tough calls, and we've followed through on those calls, and that, in some ways, has been unlike anything that people have seen before.

JOHN MERROW: Many were surprised when Washington's new mayor, Adrian Fenty, hired Michelle Rhee to fix the city's ailing school system, which serves almost 50,000 students.

Rhee had never led a school district before, never even been a school principal. But over the course of her first year in office, the former teacher and nonprofit CEO moved at a break-neck pace, trying to make good on the mayor's charge to turn the schools around, whatever the cost.

ADRIAN FENTY, Mayor, Washington, D.C.: The time for dramatic change begins today.

I'm like the rest of the average Joe's out there. I'm tired of people talking about how bad the schools are, and I want someone to fix the schools so that they're the best school system in the country.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee kicked off the school year by meeting with each of the district's 156 principals. Most were asked to improve; a few were asked to leave.

MICHELLE RHEE: No, I'm terminating your principalship now.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee's next target was her own central office, notorious for bureaucratic blunders and financial mismanagement. She fired more than 15 percent of her employees, angering union leaders.

**Learning Matters, Inc.**

6 e. 32<sup>nd</sup> St. 8<sup>th</sup> Floor / New York, NY / 10016

212.725.7000 / [news@merrow.org](mailto:news@merrow.org) / [www.pbs.org/merrow](http://www.pbs.org/merrow)

## LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC

Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy

Airdate: July 23, 2008

### TRANSCRIPT

RALLY SPEAKER: It is not reform. It is dictatorship.

MICHELLE RHEE: Sir? Can I just...

I'm proud of the fact that we have made some very difficult decisions that there was very vocal opposition to, that we stuck to our guns.

### Chief's controversial moves

JOHN MERROW: But Rhee's most controversial move came just before the winter break...

MEETING ATTENDEE: I'm just making sure I understand what you're saying.

JOHN MERROW: ... when she announced she would close the 23 chronically under-enrolled schools. Ongoing protests did not slow Rhee down. By the end of the school year, she had removed 36 principals, 22 assistant principals, and 121 employees in her central office.

She also revealed plans to overhaul 27 additional schools that had failed to meet federal standards for academic improvement.

MICHELLE RHEE: I'm proud of the fact that we have made some very difficult decisions that there was very vocal opposition to, that we stuck to our guns.

ADRIAN FENTY: We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make this school system excellent. And to the extent we can allow her to do that, as free from outside obstacles as humanly possible, the faster she will move.

JOHN MERROW: Last year, D.C. voted to dissolve the elected school board. Unlike her predecessors, Rhee reports to one person alone: the mayor.

Has he ever said no to you?

MICHELLE RHEE: No.

JOHN MERROW: Never?

MICHELLE RHEE: Nope.

MICHAEL CASSERLY, Exec. Director, Council of the Great City Schools: She has a lot of power that a lot of other superintendents don't have.

## **LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy**

**Airdate: July 23, 2008**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

JOHN MERROW: Michael Casserly has been studying urban school systems for over 30 years.

MICHAEL CASSERLY: I think Michelle Rhee has had an awfully good first year. A first year for any superintendent is always a tough one.

JOHN MERROW: What grade would you give Michelle Rhee?

MICHAEL CASSERLY: I'd give her an A-minus.

JOHN MERROW: Mayor Fenty would not give Rhee a grade, but he made it clear that he and the voters support her.

ADRIAN FENTY: There's nowhere I can go in this city where people don't say, "Fenty, we love what you're doing about the schools. We love your schools' chancellor. You make sure you keep supporting her." That's what they say.

IRIS TOYER, Parent: People are not happy, and it is because of this iron-fisted approach.

JOHN MERROW: It wasn't hard to find a group of D.C. residents who are unhappy with Michelle Rhee. These parents, lawyers and activists, including parent Iris Toyer, feel that Rhee isn't paying enough attention to the community.

IRIS TOYER: She has been given the message that she answers to the mayor, and so she doesn't have to necessarily worry about what parents say.

JOHN MERROW: Last November, parent Gabriella Savio testified in support of the new chancellor.

GABRIELLA SAVIO, Parent: Let the chancellor do what she needs to do, absolutely unstopably, and create the environment that all of our children absolutely deserve.

Finally we have found someone who can really come in and just shake it, this system. Everybody's going to wake up and do great things.

JOHN MERROW: And now how do you feel now?

GABRIELLA SAVIO: And now, a few months down the line, I am so -- become totally disillusioned.

JOHN MERROW: Now, Savio says that Rhee is misusing her power, making decisions behind closed doors and disregarding community input.

**LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy**

**Airdate: July 23, 2008**

**TRANSCRIPT**

GABRIELLA SAVIO: She comes, she listens, but she doesn't change her mind.

You can have a person with a great deal of power and fully benevolent intentions who make some serious mistakes that set the system back.

**Rhee as 'benevolent dictator'**

MICHELLE RHEE: I'm not running this district by consensus or by committee.

JOHN MERROW: So it's not a democracy?

MICHELLE RHEE: No, it's not a democracy. We're not going to make every decision within this district by taking a hand count.

JOHN MERROW: Are you a benevolent dictator?

MICHELLE RHEE: Benevolent dictator? Maybe.

JOHN MERROW: "Dictator" is OK?

MICHELLE RHEE: If by dictator, you mean somebody who, at the end of the day, is fully comfortable being held accountable for, you know, the results and is going to be incredibly decisive about the direction that we're heading in, then yes.

MARY LEVY, Washington Lawyers' Committee: You can have a person with a great deal of power and fully benevolent intentions who make some serious mistakes that set the system back.

JOHN MERROW: Mary Levy, an attorney, thinks that Rhee is focusing too much on personnel.

MARY LEVY: The major accomplishment of this year is to get rid of lots and lots of people in the system. I've seen this before.

JOHN MERROW: In 2002, then-Superintendent Paul Vance removed 1,100 central office employees. Many say that the replacements he hired were no better.

IRIS TOYER: There's no legion of highly skilled, experienced people standing at the door, ready to take all of these positions.

JOHN MERROW: But Rhee is confident that she will find the people she needs.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that human capital is the answer.

## **LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy**

**Airdate: July 23, 2008**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

JOHN MERROW: Do you anticipate next year that you'll be letting a lot of people go?

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that there's a potential that that would happen, yes.

GEORGE PARKER, President, Washington Teachers' Union: I do not believe that the success of a school district depends upon an attack upon the workforce.

Public school enrollment is decreasing. We are now a competitive school district where student achievement may very well determine our existence.

### **Talks with the Teachers' Union**

JOHN MERROW: For the past six months, Teachers' Union President George Parker has been negotiating a new contract with Rhee.

MICHELLE RHEE: We're really at the end. And it's just a matter right now of whether we can get everybody's gumption up to roll this tentative agreement out.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee is hoping to tie teacher pay to student achievement. Because teacher union membership is declining, Rhee may have an edge in negotiations.

GEORGE PARKER: The charter school enrollment is increasing. Public school enrollment is decreasing. We are now a competitive school district where student achievement may very well determine our existence.

JOHN MERROW: More than a quarter of D.C.'s school-age children now attend public charter schools, where teachers do not have to belong to the union.

GEORGE PARKER: Normally, unions have not had to contend with any sense of accountability or responsibility for student achievement, and our existence and survival has not depended upon that.

JOHN MERROW: Why hasn't student achievement been a bread-and-butter issue for teacher unions all along?

GEORGE PARKER: I think that there has been a union paradigm of union and management of, "This is your turf. This is our turf."

MICHELLE RHEE: I think that George is in a really difficult position right now, because there are some folks in the union who don't want to see this kind of change.

## **LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC**

**Episode 6: Tough Changes and Controversy**

**Airdate: July 23, 2008**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

I can't say that this year the vast majority of our students met their potential or are -- you know, their proficiency levels are great or anything like that.

#### **Challenges still lie ahead**

JOHN MERROW: But Michael Casserly says no matter how much change Rhee may have made this school year, the real work lies ahead.

MICHAEL CASSERLY: So far, nobody has reached the promised land yet, when it comes to bringing all kids in an urban school system up to the highest academic standards.

JOHN MERROW: Preliminary scores on D.C.'s standardized tests do show improvement, with middle school students making impressive 9-point gains in reading and math. But well over half of those students remain at basic or below-basic levels.

Rhee isn't celebrating just yet.

MICHELLE RHEE: I cannot say that the 12th-graders that we graduated this year are prepared for college or for life. No. I can't say that this year the vast majority of our students met their potential or are -- you know, their proficiency levels are great or anything like that.

JOHN MERROW: So, you're giving yourself an F?

MICHELLE RHEE: For overall student achievement outcomes, yes.

JOHN MERROW: For Rhee, who wants Washington to have the highest performing urban school district in the country by 2015, there's still a long way to go.