

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE
Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC
Episode 7: Targeting Teachers, Angering Union
Airdate: September 18, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

MICHELLE RHEE, chancellor, Washington, D.C., Public School System: OK. People all the time say to me, "Oh, my gosh, you have the hardest job in the city." And I say, "No I don't. The hardest job that I ever had and the hardest job in my mind that exists is being a teacher in the classroom every single day."

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour correspondent: In August, three days before schools opened in Washington, D.C., Chancellor Michelle Rhee addressed the city's 4,000 teachers and principals.

MICHELLE RHEE: We are going to change the face of public education in this country.

JOHN MERROW: It had been only 14 months since the rookie superintendent accepted the job of turning around one of the worst public school districts in the country.

And in her whirlwind first year, she closed 23 schools, replaced 58 principals and assistant principals, fired nearly 17 percent of her central office, and began a process known as restructuring in 27 schools that had failed to make sufficient academic progress.

Michelle Rhee's next target? Teachers.

Removing ineffective teachers

MICHELLE RHEE: If we have ineffective teachers in the classroom, the goal is to not have them in the classroom any longer.

JOHN MERROW: Just 12 percent of Washington's eighth-graders are proficient in reading.

Last year, Principal Nelson Burton of Coolidge High School told us how unhappy he was with his teachers.

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 into what we're doing here, and I daresay many of them won't fit into any program where they're trying to raise student achievement.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee granted Burton's wish and more. As part of her restructuring effort, she forced all teachers at Coolidge to re-apply for their job. Out of 53, Burton re-hired just 17.

But what's good for Coolidge isn't necessarily good for everyone else, because when teachers leave one school, they don't automatically leave the system.

You know the phrase "The Dance of the Lemons" and so on...

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

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JOHN MERROW: ... the moving an ineffective teacher...

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: ... from one school to another.

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: Are you doing any of that? If you have teachers that nobody wants...

MICHELLE RHEE: Does that still go on in this district? Yes.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee is staking her success on her ability to change that. So far, she's been able to push through her reforms because of the backing of Washington's powerful mayor, Adrian Fenty, who controls the school system.

Has he ever said no to you?

MICHELLE RHEE: No.

JOHN MERROW: Never?

MICHELLE RHEE: Nope.

Rhee's plan in jeopardy

JOHN MERROW: But the mayor can't help Rhee now. To change how teachers are hired, fired, and paid, Rhee needs support from the teachers themselves.

GEORGE PARKER, president, Washington Teachers' Union: I think there's an atmosphere of mistrust.

JOHN MERROW: George Parker, a former math teacher, is president of the Washington Teachers Union.

GEORGE PARKER: There's a belief that fuels the fear that the chancellor's solution to improving education is firing people.

JOHN MERROW: Now, for the first time since taking office, Rhee's plans may be in jeopardy. Although Rhee and the union have been negotiating since December, they have not been able to reach agreement on a contract.

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She's offering the teachers a carrot: the chance to earn six-figure salaries if their students do well. But there's also a big stick: tenured teachers have to give up job security for a year. Then, if their students do well, they get the money and they get their tenure back. But if not, they could lose their jobs.

The way it works now in Washington -- and just about everywhere else -- is that teachers earn money based on how long they've been in the system. Right now, a 10-year veteran with a master's degree earns just over \$64,000. Under Rhee's two-tiered proposal, teachers could stick with that approach, putting that same teacher at \$82,000 next year.

But if teachers choose what's known as a "pay for performance" model and their students perform well, that 10-year veteran could earn as much as \$122,000 in salary and bonuses.

Initially, the money for the higher salaries was coming from foundations. Down the road, Rhee says she will find the money by cutting costs elsewhere. Should Rhee's proposal be accepted, D.C.'s teachers would rank among the highest paid in the country.

Trading job security for higher pay

MICHELLE RHEE: We could create a system that provided huge incentives, and rewarded teachers, and gave everybody a bump in base pay, and basing compensation heavily on whether or not you're producing results for kids.

JOHN MERROW: But some fear that exchanging job security for higher pay could open teachers to unfair firings. Rhee is already being sued by over 70 teachers claiming wrongful termination.

GEORGE PARKER: Clearly, we are willing to move into flexibility that is needed in order to improve student achievement. What we're not willing to do is to move into unnecessary flexibility that is more geared toward union-busting than it is student achievement.

And so what I want you to do right now is to help give me some guidance.

JOHN MERROW: When the teachers got together in August, George Parker seized the opportunity to gauge his members' support for Rhee's support.

GEORGE PARKER: How many of you would like a contract that you can vote on with the two-tier system? Raise your hands.

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I think that, with the vote that I took, I think it was probably 2-to-1 in opposition of what they have seen thus far. The younger teachers are much more in favor than the veteran teachers, who have acquired seniority and acquired tenure and are less trusting.

Negotiating with the union

MICHELLE RHEE: Well, my reaction was, "That was a really dumb move."

JOHN MERROW: Why?

MICHELLE RHEE: When you have a situation like that, what those people need is leadership. They need their union president to come out and say either, "This is the worst thing that we've ever heard, and we all have to rally against it, no," or, "This is the right thing to do, and here are the reasons why."

GEORGE PARKER: Well, first of all, the chancellor has the authority to make a decision, and she only reports to the mayor. I report to 4,000 members, and ultimately they get to vote on the agreement. So it makes sense for me to say, "What do you think? And what do you want?"

JOHN MERROW: Parker is in the hot seat. Teacher unions everywhere are watching to see what happens. Even some of his own members, including the union vice president, have attacked him publicly.

GEORGE PARKER: It's a tough position. I get calls internally from teachers who strongly support the concept of the two-tier system. I get calls from teachers who are strongly opposed.

JOHN MERROW: Do you have any empathy for George Parker?

MICHELLE RHEE: Oh, gosh. I absolutely feel for him, because he's in a very difficult situation. He's got a lot of pressure on him.

JOHN MERROW: Nonetheless, Rhee is keeping up the pressure from her side.

MICHELLE RHEE: And the bottom line is that the union is going to have to decide whether they're going to accept my final offer and we're going to roll this out in a tentative agreement or not.

GEORGE PARKER: We will move forward with the public negotiation process. And at the point that if the chancellor feels like this is the end for me, then she will state that, and we'll decide what to do following that.

JOHN MERROW: She's already said that, said, "Take it or leave it."

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GEORGE PARKER: She said that to you?

JOHN MERROW: So this is it?

GEORGE PARKER: We'll see.

JOHN MERROW: They're still negotiating. The union expects to vote this fall, but Rhee says that, whether her plan passes or not, she'll find new ways to remove ineffective teachers.