

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE
Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC
Episode 8:
Finding Good Principals Proves Critical to D.C. Schools Reform
Airdate: January 13, 2009

TRANSCRIPT

MAN: Wait for me on the field, and let's walk.

JOHN MERROW: At Ron Brown Middle School in Washington, D.C., principal Darrin Slade is on alert.

DARRIN SLADE, Principal, Ronald H. Brown Middle School: If a child doesn't see you, a child will act up. A child may fight. If I didn't go outside, there would be -- we would have fights outside every other day.

JOHN MERROW: Principal Slade has his hands full. This year, his school received students from two neighboring schools that were closed, more than doubling his student body.

He's not alone. To cut costs, chancellor Michelle Rhee has asked principals across the district to adapt to dramatic changes and make big academic gains.

Do you feel there's been a kind of cultural shift in the public school system here?

DARRIN SLADE: Last two years, there has been a 100 percent cultural shift, 100 percent.

JOHN MERROW: Washington schools look very different since Rhee took office in June 2007. Rhee is making drastic changes to 27 schools that have been failing for years under the federal law known as No Child Left Behind. And, this summer, she closed 23 under-enrolled schools for good, relocating about 3,000 students and 400 teachers.

Michelle Rhee has been warned that trying to do too much too fast could actually damage an already failing system. But the chancellor seems to have only one gear, forward, and one speed, all-out.

She's often asked what she counts on to ensure success. Her answer never varies: people.

MICHELLE RHEE, Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools: Human capital, absolutely, no ifs, ands or buts. If you have great people, they can overcome, You know, continuing challenges with the system as well.

People who know me from my New Teacher Project days always used to joke that I would do the seven-minute interview. That was, in seven minutes, I would make my decision about what I thought about someone.

Rhee emphasizes personnel

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JOHN MERROW: It's not a surprising strategy, considering Rhee's background. The first-time superintendent made her name when she started the New Teacher Project, which recruits successful mid-career professionals into teaching in urban districts.

MICHELLE RHEE: People who know me from my New Teacher Project days always used to joke that I would do the seven-minute interview. That was, in seven minutes, I would make my decision about what I thought about someone.

JOHN MERROW: But matching the right person to the right job isn't always easy, even for a seasoned professional.

Case in point, Hart Middle School, which has also received additional students from a school Rhee closed. For years, Hart has failed to meet academic targets. Just 17 percent of students are proficient in reading.

To turn things around, Rhee decided the school needed a new leader. In June, she fired Hart's principal, one of 40 she replaced over the summer.

MICHELLE RHEE: People now are beginning to cast me as the heartless, you know, get -- fire everybody, get rid of everybody. That is not, in and of itself, the answer, in isolation. But it's a good start.

Day one, when the students came in, we addressed them as one group. We laid down the law. We let them know that our whole focus was order and instruction, and we're not going to tolerate anything else.

Controversial staffing decisions

JOHN MERROW: But, just weeks into the school year, Hart was already in trouble. Three teachers reported being assaulted. Two months later, dozens of students were suspended in a single day.

MICHELLE RHEE: Kids, especially middle-schoolers, they're going to push the limits. And I think they have pushed and -- and kept on pushing, and found that they, you know, could eventually sort of gain control.

JOHN MERROW: That's scary.

MICHELLE RHEE: No, you can't blame -- they're 12.

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JOHN MERROW: The day after The Washington Post published an article detailing chaos and violence at Hart, Rhee fired the new principal.

MICHELLE RHEE: Can't talk too much in detail about the personnel decision, but what I can say is that I knew that, for the best interests of the school, we needed to have -- we needed to have new leadership.

JOHN MERROW: You just picked the wrong person?

MICHELLE RHEE: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: Are you saying, "I made a mistake"?

MICHELLE RHEE: Absolutely. I made a mistake.

JOHN MERROW: She's hoping she made a better decision with principal Slade at Ron Brown Middle School. He's grappling with similar challenges, rock-bottom test scores, an influx of new students, and ongoing changes mandated by No Child Left Behind.

When Rhee met with Darrin Slade, who had been the principal at Ron Brown for two years, she wasn't sure whether she would keep him on.

MICHELLE RHEE: In the first few minutes I thought, well, he's very mild-mannered. He wasn't sort of -- he didn't have a lot of energy. He wasn't very forceful.

JOHN MERROW: But Slade has experience. He's merged schools before. Rhee decided to grant him a third year as principal at Ron Brown.

DARRIN SLADE: Day one, when the students came in, we addressed them as one group. We laid down the law. We let them know that our whole focus was order and instruction, and we're not going to tolerate anything else.

MAN: Six, five, four, three...

You could send me to any school, and I think we will be able to improve and turn around the school as far as discipline and management, but that instructional piece has always been the biggest challenge.

New teachers face uphill battle

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JOHN MERROW: Rhee's office provided two assistant principals, two deans, and 40 additional security cameras, new this year in many schools, allowing Slade and his assistant principals to monitor every inch of the building.

DARRIN SLADE: Students want to come to a school where they feel safe. So, if a child knows everything is on camera, they're not going to assault somebody. They're not going to break into somebody's locker. That type of thing doesn't happen, because students know, if they do it, they're going to get caught.

JOHN MERROW: So far, there haven't been any major problems with discipline.

But Rhee says, it's not the cameras that make the difference.

MICHELLE RHEE: We have lots of other schools with lots more cameras. There is no order in those schools. That school is under control because Slade has it under control.

JOHN MERROW: But a safe school won't be enough to guarantee Slade a job next year. Less than 25 percent of students at Ron Brown are proficient in reading and math.

DARRIN SLADE: You could send me to any school, and I think we will be able to improve and turn around the school as far as discipline and management, but that instructional piece has always been the biggest challenge.

JOHN MERROW: Rhee has asked Slade to raise scores by 10 percent by the end of the year, which would start to move the school off the No Child Left Behind failing list.

MICHELLE RHEE: I think the biggest challenge that -- that Slade faces is how is he going to drastically improve the quality of teaching that's going on in the classrooms every day.

JOHN MERROW: To meet his target, Slade is using the same strategy he used to restore order in the hallways: a constant presence.

PATRICE BILLUPS, Ronald H. Brown Middle School: He drops in at least once a week. Like, you will see him.

REBECCA MILLNER, Ronald H. Brown Middle School: Any period, any day.

JOHN MERROW: Slade spends much of his day observing teachers, checking that lesson plans are geared toward material and skills that will be tested. Sometimes, he asks teachers to observe each other.

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PATRICE BILLUPS: We would go into the classroom and not only talk about what we didn't see, but really, really talk about what we did see and what we thought that was -- what they were doing great in that classroom.

JOHN MERROW: And Slade, a former teacher, leads by example. When we visited, we found him teaching this English class, something he does at least once a day.

DARRIN SLADE: It gives me a stronger foundation and more power and more legitimacy when I talk to teachers about instruction.

Whatever you're teaching, you need to stop, so the students understand.

JOHN MERROW: Slade regularly discusses testing data with teachers, looking for ways to improve instruction. But he doesn't think that everyone can be helped.

DARRIN SLADE: If you're a football team, and you're losing half of your games, there's something wrong with the coach. There's something that may be wrong with the players. So, you have to make adjustments.

A lot of times, it feels like people are coming in to see where you messed up or to document how you messed up. And it is really hard when you're, you know, trying everything you can to be this great teacher for the kids.

School staff feel pressure

JOHN MERROW: Like Rhee, Slade believes that success depends on hiring better people. He expects to replace at least six of his 40 teachers by next fall.

Teachers are feeling the pressure.

REBECCA MILLNER: A lot of times, it feels like people are coming in to see where you messed up or to document how you messed up. And it is really hard when you're, you know, trying everything you can to be this great teacher for the kids.

MICHELLE RHEE: Every teacher has -- at Ron Brown, has 125 kids who are counting on them. And what happens in our schools while they're here will make or break what their futures look like.

JOHN MERROW: They're not the only ones with their jobs on the line.

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DARRIN SLADE: There is no doubt, as an administrator, in my mind, that, if I don't produce, then I'm not going to make it.

MICHELLE RHEE: People feel a little stressed out. They feel a lot of pressure. But that's good. Pressure is good.

JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee will have to wait until students are tested in late April to find out if her strategy is working.