

**PAF 311: DC School Analysis**

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PAF 311: Leadership and Change

Michelle Rhee, an important figure in the reformation of American education, is well known for the controversial work she completed as Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools from 2007 to 2010. Appointed by then-Mayor Adrian Fenty, Rhee quickly became a national symbol of the push to enact change in the failing public school systems. Although she had never managed a school district herself, her style of leadership and the fearless change she sought to achieve brought her praise and criticism alike.

Among the most major reforms Rhee attempted to bring about was the restructuring of teacher appraisals. She believed effective teaching was the single most important factor in student success and thus introduced a new system called IMPACT (Mead, 2017). Through this program, teachers who repeatedly scored at the lowest level would be fired, and highly-rated teachers would gain substantial bonuses. Rhee's initiative changed teacher tenure, the tradition that made firing teachers nearly impossible regardless of their effectiveness. Her argument was that it protected mediocre educators at the expense of student learning, but merit-based evaluations would ensure higher-quality teaching and, thus, higher student outcomes.

Another major reform she pursued was the closure of underperforming schools. Since Rhee believed that children in low-performing schools were set to fail in schools that had little or no chance of success, she shut down a series of schools that were continuously failing based on standardized test scores and other measures of performance. Although she meant this as a means for the system to distribute resources towards better-performing schools, it upset parents and teachers since it also meant the displacement of a number of students and employees.

However, she had the support of politicians who were focused on reforming education. These included Mayor Adrian Fenty who provided her with authority over schools in the district, and allowed Rhee to avoid much of the paperwork that tied the hands of most major education

policy reforms. With that form of centralized power, she was able to take rapid steps to reform school systems.

Despite this support and power, Rhee had strong opposition from teachers' unions, who felt threatened by her bold moves and new ideas. The Washington Teacher's Union (WTU), in particular, became a lead opponent of her push for IMPACT, arguing that test scores were an unfair and incomplete measure of teacher performance (Vail, 2016). They also criticized mass dismissals of teachers under the new assessment system, indicating that system made the district's schools a climate of fear instead of collaboration. Parents and community groups also resisted her school closures, and many argued Rhee's reforms negatively impacted minority neighborhoods that often had under-resourced schools. The closures often forced students to travel to new schools, disrupting their education and community ties (Joseloff, 2015).

In all, Michelle Rhee's chancellorship was inspired by a confident vision to reform existing systems. Although she found support from political allies, her efforts were met with strong resistance from teachers' unions and parents who viewed her methods as disrupting the status quo. Even though Rhee's legacy on education reform is controversial, the work she completed raises fundamental questions about placing accountability on the necessary individuals, addressing community needs, and facing the complexity in reforming public education.

### Works Cited

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