

THE SATURDAY ESSAY

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# The Education Manifesto

*Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty on what they learned while pushing to reform D.C.'s failing public schools.*

By MICHELLE RHEE and ADRIAN FENTY



Getty Images

Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty tour an elementary school in June 2007.

Our time in office and in charge of the school system of Washington, D.C., is quickly drawing to an end. Monday is Michelle's last day as schools chancellor, and Mayor Fenty failed to win the Democratic primary last month. A new mayor will be elected next week.

During our nearly four years in office we pressed forward an aggressive educational reform agenda. We were determined to turn around D.C.'s public schools and to put children above the political fray, no matter what the ramifications might be for ourselves or other public officials. As both of us embark on the next stages of our careers, we believe it is important to explain what we did in Washington, to share the lessons of our experience, and to offer some thoughts on what the rest of the country might learn from our successes and our mistakes.

## The D.C. Timeline

**JUNE 2007:** Mayor Adrian Fenty appoints Michelle Rhee schools chancellor. Over the next year, she closes a number of schools, fires principals and central office employees, and offers buyouts to low-performing teachers.

**JULY 2008:** D.C. test scores on reading and math rise across the board.

**JUNE 2010:** After nearly three years of negotiation, the D.C. teachers union accepts a groundbreaking contract that institutes pay for performance and ends tenure.

**JULY 2010:** Ms. Rhee fires 241 teachers and puts 737 on notice for being rated "minimally effective."

**SEPT. 2010:** Mr. Fenty, who campaigned on a record of education reform, loses the Democratic primary.

**OCT. 2010:** Ms. Rhee resigns.



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Susana Raab

Students at AIM Academy, a Washington, D.C., charter school.

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necessary. Once that new structure of governance was in place (D.C. instituted mayoral control of the public schools in 2007), we were able to chart a new course: to make all of the politically unpopular choices that had been put off for decades. With student achievement almost as low as it could go and enrollment dropping every year, our students had no time for us to tread softly. So we moved ahead with all the urgency that the problem deserved.

The great tragedy of the education debate in America is that most people know at least the basics of how to turn around our urban school systems. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that underperforming teachers will not produce a new generation of rocket scientists. Or that you're not setting up hard-working teachers for success when you don't pay them on time or give the kids a functioning air conditioner when it's 100 degrees inside and they are expected to focus on physics. It's also no secret that some principals perform brilliantly while others lack the skills to make a school succeed.

Nonetheless, year after year, our schools have been run for the benefit of the adults in the system, not for the benefit of the kids.

In September 2009, for example, we faced a significant challenge after a budget cut. To deal with the shortfall, the City Council had recommended that we cancel our summer school program. We knew, however, that getting rid of summer school would mean lower graduation rates and fewer students being on track academically. We looked at the numbers, and the school district was overstaffed for the number of students we served, with a teacher to student ratio of about 16-to-1. It is never easy when people lose their jobs, of course, but for us, the choice was clear: By cutting some staff, we could keep intact a critical program for our students. So we decided to conduct layoffs.

School districts traditionally lay off teachers using what's called the "last in, first out" principle, with the newer teachers let go first. But this is a classic example of putting the interests of adults above those of children. There were heroic veteran and new teachers alike doing great things for kids every day in their classrooms. In any industry or organization, keeping

Public education in America, particularly in our most troubled urban neighborhoods, has been broken for a long time, and nowhere more so than in our nation's capital. When we took control of the public schools in 2007, the D.C. system was widely considered the lowest-performing and most dysfunctional in the country. Schools regularly failed to open on time for the new school year, due to leaking roofs and broken plumbing. Textbooks and supplies arrived months after classes began—if at all. In the 10 years before we came into office, the district had gone through six schools chiefs.

At Sousa Middle School, in one of the most impoverished wards of the city, fewer than 16% of the students could read and do math at grade level. The lights were broken, and graffiti covered the walls. Kids ran through the hallways and skipped classes with impunity. The federal government had flagged it as a failing school in the highest state of alert under No Child Left Behind, in need of a complete overhaul.

For years, elected officials had promised parents and students that they would "fix the schools." But they failed to deliver, and the families of D.C. were left with finger-pointing and unkept promises. It wasn't that our predecessors were incompetent, or that we were the smart ones who had all the answers. Far from it.

But the political structure wasn't set up for a mayor and a schools chancellor even to make the kinds of decisions that were

employees based only on their years of service, regardless of their contribution to success, is simply not good policy. So we decided to allow principals to make the layoffs based on the quality, value and performance of their staffs.

This did not sit well with many in the city, to put it mildly. In particular, it outraged the unions—and not just the teachers union. At a rally in D.C.'s Freedom Plaza—fully outfitted for the occasion with a stage, lighting and port-a-johns—the leaders of the Washington Teachers Union and the American Federation of Teachers were joined by Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO. They denounced us for making children victims and guinea pigs. A few thousand demonstrators showed up, some of them holding signs with statements like "This is not Rhee-istan," accusing us of tyranny and union busting. Hundreds of school districts across the country were laying off teachers at the time, but the union establishment protested en masse only in D.C., where for the first time someone dared to question an entrenched practice that had only served the interests of adults.



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Susana Raab for The Wall Street Journal

Washington schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee and Mayor Adrian Fenty on Oct. 26.

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## School by the Numbers

### 7,000

...students drop out of high school every school day, for a total of about 1.3 million students a year.

### 12%

...of U.S. public high schools (about 2,000 schools) produce nearly half of the nation's dropouts and 58% of African-American dropouts.

### 50%

...of incoming ninth graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three or more years below grade level.

### 39%

...of high school students reported spending one hour or less a week reading or studying for class in 2009.

### 23%

...of new American teachers come from the top third of their graduating class.

### 14%

...of new American teachers in high-poverty schools come from the top third of their college class.

### 100%

...of teachers in Singapore, South Korea and Finland come from the top third of their college class.

*Sources: Alliance for Excellent Education, High School Survey of Student Engagement, McKinsey & Co.*

were only backing a marginal improvement. The contract had to set a new precedent.

That D.C.'s teachers finally endorsed this revolutionary new contract shows that they, too, are ready for change. When we were negotiating with the union, we heard one thing over and over again from the leadership: "Our members are never going to accept this." In truth, when the union finally allowed them to vote, the teachers passed it overwhelmingly, by 80% to 20%. Given the chance to be treated as professionals and to be rewarded for their achievements,

But the longest and most difficult of our fights was the effort to reshape the district's teachers' contract. As in many other cities, D.C.'s contract tied the hands of principals, administrators and, yes, even teachers. Staff reductions at the school level had to occur exclusively by seniority. In practice, tenure often meant a job for life, regardless of performance. Teachers could be placed at schools without the consent of principals. Pay scales were more or less locked in place, determined by years of service and credits in professional enrichment courses—completely delinked from the impact teachers were having on their students' learning.

We bargained with the teachers' union for 2½ years and won significant concessions. How did we do it? By striking the sort of grand bargain that could serve as a model for other troubled school districts. The formula is really quite simple: more money and resources, in exchange for more accountability from teachers.

The union took some time to accept this trade-off. In 2008, we put a proposal on the table that we considered rather bold. In exchange for giving up tenure and linking pay to performance, teachers would be able to earn up to \$130,000 a year. At first, union leadership was dead-set against it and simply refused to allow their members to vote.

We did not give up that easily. D.C. went for more than two years without a new teachers' contract, but we kept at it. Since the city did not have the money for a significant raise, we implored several foundations to consider providing the resources to enact a groundbreaking contract. The funders, including the Broad Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, were clear that they would put up the money, but not if they

they grabbed it.

Our contract with the teachers achieved a number of breakthroughs:

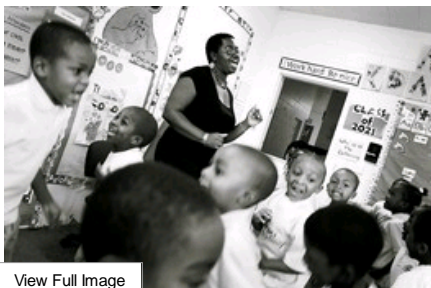
- It rewards great teachers who accept a higher level of accountability with some of the highest teacher pay in the nation—up to twice as much as they were previously making.
- No longer do educators have a job guarantee for life. Ineffective teachers are immediately dismissed from the system. Minimally effective teachers do not receive a pay step increase and have one year to improve their performance. If that doesn't happen, they are subject to termination.
- If layoffs are necessary, the decisions about whom to dismiss are based on quality and performance instead of seniority.
- We also instituted a comprehensive system for evaluating teachers, including growth in student achievement as measured by standardized tests (so that teachers who take on the toughest students aren't unfairly penalized), observation of their classroom practices and assessment of their contributions to the school community.

Though it's obviously too early to judge the results of this new contract, we can take pride in some of the other results from our four years in office. Washington went from being the worst performing school district in the country to leading the nation in gains on the national gold-standard test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It was the only jurisdiction in which every student subgroup raised its performance. Graduation rates have increased, and this fall the D.C. public school system saw its first jump in enrollment in 41 years.

The improved achievement of our secondary students was unprecedented in D.C.'s history and unparalleled anywhere in the country, with an uptick of 14 points in reading and 17 points in math in three short years. SAT scores of District students are also rising: up 27 points this year, on average, with a 40-point jump for African-American students and a 54-point jump for male students.

At Sousa Middle School, which was failing when we took office, there is now a dynamic new leader, who is disproving the myth that kids in poor neighborhoods are doomed to fail because of race or poverty. Within months after Dwan Jordon took over, we started to hear from parents that something was different, and in just one year, Sousa gained 17 percentage points in reading proficiency and 25 in math, meeting federal benchmarks for progress for the first time in the school's history. This means that Sousa more than doubled its student proficiency rate in math, and increased its proficiency rate in reading by 70%.

On a recent visit to the school, it was clear why. Before, the students had not been engaged, and walked around with iPods blocking out the dismal environment. A year later, they were in uniforms, and they swarmed excitedly around visitors to talk about the school, their work and their goals. The school had been renovated, and the staff had motivated students to take pride in the new environment, keeping it a clean and positive place for learning. When we told teachers at Sousa that we didn't expect such huge gains every year, they replied that "the horse is out of the barn now."



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Susana Raab

A teacher and students at an early-childhood school in Washington, in 2009.

We are very proud of this progress. But it's clear now that a failure of politics—if not of policy—has cut short what otherwise could have been an even more sustained campaign for reform in the District. We pushed for and achieved significant change, but we understand why many in the community felt that we did not communicate with them effectively. We did not explain why we were doing what we were doing well enough. We did not do enough to engage the local leaders and neighborhood activists who needed to be at the forefront of the fight.

We believe that the people in D.C. who want change were, and still are, the majority. But they face special interests—unions, administrators and opportunistic politicians—who are vocal and committed. These organized interests have a significant advantage over the public officials who are willing to do what is unpopular but right for the students. We see this not only in the District, of course, but nationwide. We need reform groups of our own, as powerful as these

others but representing only the interests of schoolchildren and ready to take political action.

If we are to serve our most disadvantaged students well, politicians need to stand up. On the campaign trail, candidate Barack Obama was booed by teachers unions for supporting merit pay. In office, he has largely stood his ground, offering financial incentives for states to expand charter schools and tie pay to performance. But too often the president has been a lone voice on education issues. Too many politicians remain tied to the past—and to the money and political muscle of the teachers unions.

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Not everything we did in D.C. can be replicated nationally, but much of it can be. We closed dozens of low-performing schools, streamlined the bloated central office bureaucracy, and replaced two-thirds of our principals. None of this will be easy to do politically. But we see little choice. Our failing schools are not just an injustice; they threaten the nation's competitiveness, its future and its very integrity.

Four years ago, we both found a cause that inspired us to work hard every day. Reformers nationwide need to take up that mantle. Now is not the time to go soft on tough decisions. Fixing our schools will require courage and persistence, but young lives are at stake. What could be more worth the risks?

—Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty have served as Washington, D.C., schools chancellor and mayor, respectively, since 2007.

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