

Can Michelle Rhee Save D.C.'s Schools?

By [Evan Thomas](#) On 8/22/08 at 8:00 PM

Not long after Michelle Rhee took over as head of the Washington, D.C., public schools a year ago, she announced a plan to shut down almost two dozen schools in D.C.'s decrepit, shrinking, public-education system. At a meeting at one school, parents began screaming at Rhee and throwing things. As it happened, Rhee's own parents were in Washington, visiting from Denver, and they saw the confrontation on TV. "So I come home at 11 o'clock at night," Rhee recalled in a recent interview with NEWSWEEK. "I am making myself a peanut-butter sandwich. My mother is, like, 'Are you OK?' I said, 'Yeah, I'm fine.' She said, 'You know, when you were young, you never used to care what people thought about you, and I always thought that you were going to be antisocial, but now I see this serving you well.' I was, like, 'Yeah'."

Rhee says she doesn't mind getting yelled at. "I don't take things personally," she says. Indeed, she seems unflappable, a slender, pretty young woman with a straightforward, though not humorless, manner. A tireless single mother of two young girls, she taps away at two BlackBerrys (one for her close friends and staff, the other for the city and the public at large) from early morning until after midnight, answering every e-mail personally. Her candor can be disarming, though risky in her position. "She is without guile," says her mentor, Joel Klein, the head of the New York City public schools, who adds, a little wistfully, "so rare in public life."

That is not to say that Rhee is relaxed. She says she wakes up every morning with a "knot in my stomach," and that she is "angry," though "angry in a good way." She is angry at a system of education that puts "the interests of adults" over the "interests of children," i.e., a system that values job protection for teachers over their effectiveness in the classroom. Rhee is trying to change that system. In a way that few realistic observers thought was possible, she has a chance to succeed, not just in Washington, but also around the country. She is entering into a struggle with the local teachers union that will test whether an

urban school district can weed out its weak teachers—a profound threat to politically powerful teachers unions nationwide. "If she can pull it off, it's *big*," says Klein, who has battled, with mixed success, to tame the teachers union in New York City. Rhee's own story is a flicker, potentially a flame, of hope in the relentlessly depressing story of inner-city education.

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For many years, high-achieving students chose not to be teachers (the average SAT of would-be elementary-school teachers taking a popular licensing exam is significantly below the national average for all college grads). The daughter of a doctor, Rhee, who was raised in Toledo, Ohio, describes herself as "a relatively high-achieving kid all through high school and college. So nobody tells you to go into education," she says, in her matter-of-fact way, not trying to be ironic. "You know, people are telling you to go be a doctor or a lawyer or a stockbroker. They are not telling you to be a teacher." Not sure what she wanted to do with her life as she graduated from Cornell in 1992, Rhee joined Teach For America, a then brand-new organization, created by a Princeton student, to get Ivy Leaguers to work in poor inner-city schools for a couple of years. The experience, she says, "has shaped every single day of my life since then."

Rhee was placed in one of the lowest-performing schools in Baltimore as a second-grade teacher. "It was a total culture shock for me," she recalls. While she was talking to her students as they lined up for lunch, one of the students fell down on the floor. "Each kid, as they were walking by, kicked the kid that was down," Rhee says. "I was, like, 'What are they doing?' But it was like second nature to them. The kid is down. Kick him."

Rhee was unable to stop the kids, or control them in the classroom for most of her first year. At Christmas, she went home scratching at huge welts on her arm. A doctor diagnosed stress. Her mother said, "You can apply for law school second semester." Her father, a strong believer in the work ethic and rooting for the underdog, said, "Suck it up and get back in there."

Rhee "sort of became obsessed," she says. "I was not going to let 8-year-olds run me out of town." Over the next two years, working with another teacher, she

took a group of 70 kids who had been scoring "at almost rock bottom on standardized tests" to "absolutely at the top," she says. (Baltimore does not keep records by classroom, so NEWSWEEK was unable to confirm this assertion.) The key to success was, in her word, "sweat," on the part of the teacher and the students. "I wouldn't say I was a great teacher. I've seen great. I worked hard," says Rhee.

She had an epiphany of sorts. In the demoralized world of inner-city schools, it is easy to become resigned to poor results—and to blame the environment, not the schools themselves. Broken families, crime, drugs, all conspire against academic achievement. But Rhee discovered that teachers could make the critical difference. "It drives me nuts when people say that two thirds of a kid's academic achievement is based on their environment. That is B.S.," says Rhee. She points to her second graders in Baltimore whose scores rose from worst to best. "Those kids, where they lived didn't change. Their parents didn't change. Their diets didn't change. The violence in the community didn't change. The only thing that changed for those 70 kids was the adults who were in front of them every single day teaching them."

Rhee (with parental consent) made the kids go to school on Saturdays and gave them two hours of homework a night, so they would "not watch TV or sit on the stoop or play Nintendo." She slowly won the respect of parents. "My first year of teaching, they were, like, 'We do not want the crazy Korean lady,' and by the time I left, they were, 'Where are you going? You can't leave'."

Rhee stayed in education, starting an organization, The New Teacher Project, devoted to recruiting better teachers for hard-to-staff inner-city schools. She caught the attention of Joel Klein, who was trying to reform the New York City school system under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Klein, in late 2006, recommended Rhee to Adrian Fenty, the newly elected mayor of Washington, D.C., who staked his reputation on fixing D.C.'s chronically poor schools.

At first Rhee said she was not interested. "It's not a job you would want," she says. "You have your hands tied. You have to deal with school boards. It's all about politics. You can't get anything done. It's an impossible job." But Fenty

managed to convince Rhee that he was serious. Skeptical (she says she was "not wowed" by the mayor at first), she asked him, "What would you be willing to risk at the chance of being able to transform the schools?" According to Rhee, he "didn't hesitate. He said, 'Everything'." Rhee warned him that she was not politically correct and was sure to cause him political pain. (Last week Fenty told NEWSWEEK, "I don't want to look back on our time and say we were careful, we did the politically correct thing.") Fenty has kept his word to Rhee. His first act was to take away power from the D.C. school board, which had been for many years an obstacle to real reform. He showed a willingness to open up the city's checkbook. At one meeting not long ago, he asked Rhee how much more money she might need. "It would be about \$40 million," she answered. (The D.C. school's annual budget is just under \$800 million.) The stunned city administrator, Dan Tangherlini, spluttered, "We don't have an extra \$40 million." Fenty ordered the administrator to start figuring out a way to get the money, even if it meant citywide reductions in force. (Fenty and Rhee communicate several times a day by e-mail and cell phone.)

Even measured by the low standard of inner-city schools, Washington's have long been among the worst. The math and reading skills of its students lag two or three years behind national norms, despite per-student expenditures greater than in any major city outside of New York. The school bureaucracy had a reputation for bloat and incompetence, and an almost Stalinist resistance to reform. (When she arrived, no one could tell her how many textbooks the schools owned.) The former president of the teachers union, Barbara Bullock, is now serving a six-and-a-half-year prison sentence for embezzling \$4.6 million. She admitted using union funds to buy 13 furs, 37 designer handbags and a 288-piece antique Tiffany silver set (she told the judge she is now mentoring young inmates, who call her "Grandma").

Rhee is the seventh person to run the D.C. schools in the past 10 years. Most of her predecessors were, according to Rhee, "smart and worked hard and wanted to do the right thing for kids," but "they didn't get a whole lot done." The reason, she says, is that they "caved in" to the city's educational establishment, whose talk of reform was just that.

Rhee showed she was serious by firing more than a hundred non-union central office workers, including administrators, and 36 principals (one out of four). She even fired the principal of the school where she chose to enroll her own daughters, Starr, 9, and Olivia, 6. "I can't talk about the details, but let's just say I was in that school three days a week. I know what was going on there." The "sad thing," she said, "was when a parent e-mailed me to say that she [Marta Guzman, the fired principal] couldn't possibly have been one of the worst principals in the system. My answer was, is that our standard? Have our expectations been so lowered?" One co-chairman of the school's PTA, Eduardo Barada, accused Rhee of racism for ousting a Hispanic principal. (Guzman told NEWSWEEK that she did not know why she had been fired, a characterization Rhee disputes.) But the other PTA co-chair, Claire Taylor, told NEWSWEEK, "Rhee's making decisions that should have been made years ago, and she's accountable for those decisions. And that is what is so disarming to parents who have been traumatized by this school system." Taylor was impressed by Rhee's cool at raucous parents' meetings. "She clearly is a brave person. I have been in rooms where parents are hysterically upset and she walks in so quietly respectful, telegraphing accountability, and says, 'I'm gonna do something you may not like, but it's for the good of the children, and I'm doing it, it's all me'."

Other parents call her a "dictator" and predict she will flee or be driven into exile. "She gives you this stare as if she's looking right through you. 'I'm listening but I'm not hearing you'," says Clarence Cherry, another local PTA head. "Rhee and her people are not from D.C. They don't understand us. They are here for the money. She'll be here two years, tops." As a Korean-American, Rhee was regarded with suspicion by some in D.C., where 85 percent of public-school students are black, and where racial identity can still matter. But her directness and purposefulness have won over some early critics, like Ray Behbehani, a parent who was initially angered by Guzman's dismissal. "She may not be the warmest person, or maybe it's just me, I don't read Asian faces and people well, but she's got it totally together," he told NEWSWEEK.

Rhee's toughest fight, by far, is coming up. She has proposed a new contract for the union that would undermine tenure, the teachers union holy of holies. The

carrot is money. By tapping Mayor Fenty and private philanthropists, she is hoping to make D.C. teachers the best-paid in the country. Current teachers would actually have a choice. If they are willing to go on "probation" for a year—giving up their job security—and can successfully prove their talent, they can earn more than \$100,000 a year and as much as \$130,000, a huge salary for a teacher, after five years. If not, they still get a generous 28 percent raise over five years and keep their tenure. (All new teachers must sign up for the first option and go on probation for four years.) Rhee predicts that about half the teachers will choose to take their chances on accountability for higher pay, and that within five years the rest will follow, giving up tenure for the shot at merit pay hikes.

She may be overly optimistic about getting the union to accept her terms. The union president, George Parker, has been willing to work with Rhee, but he has taken heat from some union members who accuse him of cozying up to the school chief. Privately, Rhee and Parker have had some shouting matches. Rhee said she would refuse to sign a contract that had provisions that are "bad for kids," and Parker is balking at the probationary period for teachers. (Some of his experienced teachers say they are "insulted" by the probation requirement, but Rhee told NEWSWEEK that probation is "non-negotiable" because it goes to the heart of the matter, the ability to remove teachers who are not performing well.) In one meeting, according to Rhee's own account, she said to Parker: "Either we do this with you or we do this to you." And then she challenged him by saying, "You don't have what it takes to pull this off."

Parker is caught in the middle. At the end of a week of meeting with suspicious and hostile teachers groups in early August, he appeared tired and beaten-down. (Rhee, who had sat in on many of the same meetings, seemed cool and relaxed.) The union's vice president, Nathan Saunders, has sued Parker to open up the negotiations to a wider group of union officials. "George was negotiating as if this was a private contract, one on one," says Saunders. "My reaction was, oh, hell no! The best unions have large negotiating teams. We had two folks dating." Saunders is whipping up opposition in the union. "I consider this proposal to be an IQ test as to whether teachers are willing to slit their own throats," says Saunders. A black inner-city kid who made a fortune on real

estate, Saunders is a smart dresser who sports bow ties and talks a lot about "due process." Indeed, a critical and so far unresolved question is how teachers will be judged. Rhee will insist on hard data—test scores—showing effectiveness in the classroom, but union members warn about arbitrary firings.

The union can play hard. When Rhee moved to reclassify some central-administration workers so they could be terminated without cause, the union began running 60-second radio ads attacking Rhee, playing "Back Stabbers" by the O'Jays as background music. But Rhee has some sticks to wave as well as carrots. Although she will not go into detail, it is a good bet that she will find other legal tools to hold teachers accountable even if the teachers refuse to sign a contract. "I believe this contract is going to pass," she told NEWSWEEK. "And I believe it is going to have a huge impact." But, she added, "even if it didn't, it would not stop me."

The fact is that D.C.'s school system is shrinking. About a third of D.C. parents now opt to send their kids to charter schools, which are public schools—but where the teachers are non-union. The union has lost more than a thousand of its more than 5,000 teaching slots during the past decade. Rhee, it appears to many, is not interested in protecting turf. If she can open more charter schools that are better than the regular city schools, she seems willing to let the old system wither away. At first charter schools were often no better or even worse than schools in the system, but lately some—particularly the KIPP schools—have been scoring higher on tests. If the union doesn't accept reform, it may not have many jobs left to protect.

Rhee doesn't quite come out and say it, but she and her fellow reformers are trying to change the teaching profession, at least in the inner city, from an 8 a.m.-to-3 p.m. job with summers off, to something that bears more resemblance to joining the Green Berets. Rhee succeeded in Baltimore because she worked like a demon. The KIPP schools score well because teachers work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and on Saturday, and carry cell phones so their students can reach them any time. Summer vacation lasts only about a month. There are teachers who can maintain this pace for decades (just as there are some older Special Forces

operatives in the military), but in Rhee's world many teachers may find themselves working hard, burning out and moving on. "There are some absolutely fabulous teachers who have taught in very tough settings for 20 years and have consistently produced stunning growth, and have somehow found the stamina to do it, while some energetic 24-year-olds aren't up to it," says Kati Haycock, president of Education Trust, a longtime reform expert (and former D.C. school parent). "But what we need to do is change the idea that education is the only career that needs to be done for life. There are a lot of smart people who change careers every six or seven years, while education ends up with a bunch of people on the low end of the pile who don't want to compete in the job market."

Naturally, this sentiment seems patronizing, if not downright threatening, to many career teachers with a union card. They resent the young Ivy Leaguers who come in from Teach For America for a couple of years, acting superior, and then go off to become investment bankers or lawyers. (TFA stands for "Teach for Awhile," they joke.)

It is hard to know how Rhee sustains her own pace. Three days a week she picks up her kids at 5:30 (they are in after-school programs) and stays with them until bedtime—then it's back to work until 1 or 2 a.m. When their father, a TFA executive named Kevin Huffman, has the kids, she basically works 18-hour days. Having a mom as school chancellor is "hard on the kids," she says. She recalls that when she refused to cancel school on a not-very-snowy day, her older daughter, Starr, came home complaining, "Other kids are saying that by not canceling school because of the snow that you are putting all of our lives in danger." Rhee explained that some poor kids don't eat unless they can get a school meal. A couple of weeks later, Starr reported, "Now there's a rumor that you are going to lengthen the schoolyear and make us go to school longer." Rhee replied, "Well, you know, time on task is very important." Starr, who apparently takes after her mother, answered, "I backed you on the snow thing. I am not backing you on more school, though."

Rhee's bluntness and unwillingness to compromise are admirable, but they may also be her undoing. Rhee has Mayor Fenty's complete support, but she has

irked some city council members, in one case because her aides supposedly blocked a council member from going onstage with her at a summer-school graduation. Rhee does not seem interested in the rituals of political nicety, and, while she says she's a Democrat, she can be very scornful of her own party. "It's embarrassing to be a Democrat when you hear Democrats talk about education," she says. "The Democratic Party is supposed to be the party that looks out for poor black kids, yet the kind of rhetoric they spew about ... [how the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law is] 'sucking the life out of our teachers'—come on. Get real. I believe that until the Democratic Party breaks ties with the teachers unions, we are not going to see the true reform in this country that we need."

As she spoke, late in the day (but only in the middle of her workday), she was becoming uncharacteristically wound up. "We do not have a nation right now where every child has an equal chance in life, because poor black kids don't have an equal shot in life, because they go to crappy schools, and the Democratic Party is not tackling this issue, which I think is one of the biggest problems that exist."

The interview was drawing to an end. A NEWSWEEK reporter asked her if she still got welts from stress. "Uh, yeah," she said, seeming slightly knocked off-balance for the first and only time. The moment passed; she excused herself to go back to work.