

Ex-Washington, DC schools chief escalates campaign against public education

Fred Mazelis
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When Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington, DC school system since 2007, resigned abruptly last October, some suggested she had suffered a major reverse in her campaign for school “reform.” Rhee left her job soon after the lopsided primary election defeat of Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty, who had strongly backed her policies, including the firing of hundreds of teachers and principals, opposition to teacher tenure and support for privately run charter schools.

The primary election was widely seen as a referendum on Rhee’s performance, and it no doubt reflected growing dissatisfaction and anger among parents as well as teachers. It quickly became clear, however, that it will take far more than an election that substitutes one big business politician for another to defeat the attacks on public education for which Rhee has become one of the most prominent spokespersons.

The campaign to demonize the public schools and the teachers who staff them has become the consensus policy of the American ruling class and its political establishment. Rhee is simply the most public face of this new policy, part of a shift that includes historic attacks on pensions and health care. The 40-year-old education official has received enthusiastic support across the official political spectrum, from the right wing of the Republican Party, to leading Democrats in the administrations of both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. She has become a darling of the big business media and was the main focus of *Waiting for Superman*, the pseudo-documentary with an impeccable liberal Hollywood pedigree released last year to great fanfare and favorable reviews.

Thus it was not surprising that only a few weeks after her resignation, Rhee was featured in *Newsweek* magazine and on the Oprah Winfrey show to announce that she was founding and leading a new organization, StudentsFirst, to continue the crusade she had begun in the US capital.

The main conclusion drawn by Rhee and her billionaire backers from the Washington election was that a broader nationwide campaign was required to more effectively target teachers and the public schools. “The ultimate goal is to shift the power dynamic of education in this country,” said Rhee. She set a goal of \$1 billion to fund the new group, which will back legislation and candidates, both locally and for Congress. A major focus of its work will be political advertising paid for

by wealthy backers who will be able to remain anonymous under current campaign finance rules.

Within a month of the public launching of StudentsFirst, Rhee had been invited to attend New Jersey Republican Governor Chris Christie’s “State of the State” speech as an honored guest. She also visited a charter school in Florida to announce a partnership between her group and the newly elected Republican Governor Rick Scott.

Rhee’s supporters are by no means limited to newly elected Republicans. She has been praised by Obama’s Education Secretary, Arne Duncan. Ex-DC Mayor Fenty is a Democrat. Public relations for StudentsFirst is being handled by Anita Dunn, the former communications director in the Obama White House. Another prominent backer of Rhee is Andrew Rotherham, who was an education adviser under Bill Clinton.

The latest step in Rhee’s high-profile campaign is a lengthy op-ed article in a recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal*. In it, Rhee announced the publication of her new organization’s legislative agenda, “A Challenge to States and Districts: Policies that Put Students First.”

Rhee’s article was headlined “In Budget Crises, an Opening for School Reform.” She writes, of course, not as an opponent of the vicious cuts that have already devastated school systems around the country. On the contrary, to her they are an opening, an opportunity. “The budget crisis inevitably requires layoffs of school staff,” she writes approvingly.

Rhee does not propose a change in budget priorities, let alone higher taxes on the wealthy, to put a halt to or even lessen the attacks on education. Instead, she seeks to use the cutbacks to strengthen the argument that schools can no longer afford such things as teacher tenure or decent pensions and other benefits.

Rhee summarizes what she calls the three key areas of her campaign: “Treating teachers like professionals”; “Empowering parents and families with real choices and real information”; and “Ensure accountability for every dollar and every child.”

The meaning of these phrases has already been demonstrated in Washington and elsewhere, and Rhee spells it out further in her column. For teachers she demands merit pay systems tied to high-stakes testing, along with the elimination of tenure; to parents she holds out the promise of charter schools and

publicly funded vouchers to pay for private education, the function of which will be to siphon off a small layer of students from the public system while abandoning the vast majority. Finally, the demand for “accountability” is aimed against teachers’ pensions, health benefits and assistance in continuing education.

The real aims of Rhee’s lavishly-funded campaign, and why it gets free publicity in *Newsweek*, on Oprah and in Rupert Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal*, are fairly clear behind the provocative pseudo-populism about “putting students first.”

The crisis in American education is real and growing. The wholesale decay and abandonment of public schools in working class communities and especially in the impoverished inner cities inevitably reflects the broader social and economic crisis. Decay that has stretched on for decades is now poised to accelerate, alongside the draconian budget cutbacks.

The attacks on “failing schools” have absolutely nothing to do with improving education for the vast majority of the working class. The charter school movement in particular is designed to cover up the real causes of the schools crisis, while peddling the lie that privately run schools will magically solve the problems of poverty and urban decay. The aim is to hollow out the public schools, to create conditions that will be used to further justify the destruction of public education. At the same time, a tiny layer of students will be recruited, in the way that affirmative action programs have been used in the past, to meet the needs of 21st century American capitalism, while the vast majority are condemned to poverty and misery.

The demonizing of teachers and the public schools is an integral part of the attack on all public services and social programs. The push for charter schools aims to disguise this by appealing to poorer sections of workers, including minority populations—to pit them against teachers and staff, while diverting attention away from those forces actually responsible for the devastation of working class communities and their schools.

Rhee has been groomed to play a key role in this campaign. A Korean-American, she is being marketed as a “woman of color” who will stand up to the teachers and their unions. As former New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein said recently in admiring her work, Rhee has made education reform “sexy” again.

The strident campaign against public education has been virtually unopposed. The Washington, DC vote was a distorted and pale reflection of the anger and distrust of working people, but this inchoate opposition has no political voice. Rhee’s supposed critics in the teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, accept all the basic premises of the misnamed “reform” movement. Their alternative to Rhee is summed up in a recent advertisement in the *New York Times* by AFT President Randi Weingarten, titled “Collaboration Trumps Conflict.”

It is not accidental that Weingarten, a Democrat and loyal

supporter of the Obama Administration, parrots the president’s call for cooperation and bipartisanship. Her differences with Rhee are entirely tactical. Weingarten has not and cannot expose the aims behind the charter school movement, nor can she offer an alternative to merit pay systems and other attacks on teachers. She defends the capitalist status quo, and argues that the present system can best be defended by making use of the unions rather than dispensing with them.

One of the biggest lies of the school reform advocates is that charter schools represent a new frontier of the civil rights movement. Klein has hypocritically referred to his own childhood in public housing in New York, and to the Supreme Court decision in 1954 outlawing school segregation, claiming that his aim was to end a situation where “your skin color, your family’s income, your zip code, they determine the quality of a child’s education.”

Klein’s devotion to the cause of “civil rights” has most recently been demonstrated by his decision to work for Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation as the head of a new education unit. Klein’s base salary will be \$2 million annually, plus a signing bonus of \$1 million and an annual bonus target of not less than \$1.5 million. For this tidy sum he will be assigned the job of helping the ultra right wing Murdoch empire take advantage of the huge profits that are expected out of the school privatization crusade.

The obvious truth is that unequal education can only be ended through the struggle against social inequality itself. This is a political fight, not a trade union one. Teachers, students and parents must be united in a political struggle which advances education as a basic social right, and which fights for the resources for quality education for all as part of the organization and mobilization of the working class as a whole. This will require above all a break with the Democratic Party and their trade union allies, and the building of a mass movement to fight for a socialist program.



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