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## Why Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty Lost

By [Diane Ravitch](#) on September 21, 2010 8:40 AM | [20 Comments](#) | [Recommend](#)

Dear Deborah,

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On the afternoon of Sept. 14, I attended a private screening of "[Waiting for Superman](#)," the film in which Michelle Rhee is portrayed as one of the true heroes of today's school reform movement. That evening, Washington D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty who appointed Rhee and gave her free rein over the city's long-troubled public schools [lost his bid for re-election](#). The election was widely viewed as a [referendum on Rhee](#), who attained a national reputation in her role as schools' chancellor. Her allies considered her bold and combative; her opponents considered her divisive and mean-spirited. In the closing days of the Fenty campaign, she went to the districts where Fenty had his strongest support the largely white districts in the city's Northwest section to rally voters.

When the results came in, Fenty was trounced in largely black districts. In Wards 7 and 8, his opponent, Vincent Gray, won 82 percent of the vote. In Northwest Washington, where white voters predominate, Fenty won 76 percent of the vote. Fenty decisively lost the black vote and decisively won the white vote. D.C. public schools are about 5 percent white, so it is a reasonable supposition that the anti-Fenty vote was fueled to a large degree by parents of children in the public schools. Gray won handily, 53 percent to 46 percent.

Journalists attributed Fenty's loss to the power of the teachers' union, but such an explanation implies that black voters, even in the privacy of the voting booth, lack the capacity to make an informed choice. When the Tea Party wins a race, journalists don't write about who controlled their vote, but about a voter revolt; they acknowledge that those who turned out to vote had made a conscious decision. Yet when black voters, by large margins, chose Vincent Gray over Adrian Fenty, journalists found it difficult to accept that the voters were acting on their own, not as puppets of the teachers' union.

In the post-election analyses, the most common complaint about Fenty was that he was arrogant and out-of-touch with black voters. Rhee spoke about her failure to communicate, though it is hard to think of any figure in the world of American education who had as much media attention as she has had over the past three years. Certainly, she did not lack for opportunities to communicate. Her critics say that her fundamental flaw was arrogance and an indifference to the views of parents and teachers.

Rhee believed that mayoral control gave her the power to work her will and to ignore dissenters or brush them off as defenders of the status quo. Mayoral control bred arrogance and indifference to dialogue. She didn't need to listen to anyone because she had the mayor's unquestioning support. Mayoral control made democratic engagement with parents and teachers unnecessary. It became easy for her to disparage them and for the media to treat them as self-interested troublemakers.

Mayoral control of schools short-circuits democratic processes by concentrating all decision-making in the hands of one elected official, who need not consult with anyone else. If D.C. had had an independent school board, Rhee would have had to explain her ideas, defend them, and practice the democratic arts of persuasion, conciliation, and consensus-building. We now have an "education reform" movement which believes that democracy is too slow and too often wrong, and their reforms are so important, so self-evident that they cannot be delayed by discussion and debate. So self-assured are the so-called reformers that they can't be bothered to review the research and evidence on merit pay or evaluating teachers by test scores or the effects of high-stakes testing. If they can find one study or even a report by a friendly think tank, that's evidence enough for them. Mayoral control gives them the mechanism they need to push ahead, without regard to other views or collateral damage.

The trouble with this anti-democratic approach to school reform is that it alienates the very people whose votes are needed by the mayor to continue what he started. Although one can find exceptions, it is usually the case that voters don't like autocracy. They expect to be treated with respect, not condescension. They expect democratic institutions to operate with democratic processes. They expect their leaders to explain and discuss their decisions before they are final and to change course when they are wrong. The very behaviors that schools are supposed to teach how to think, how to participate, how to reason with others, how to find common ground are the same behaviors that we expect to encounter in public life.

In other contests, the pro-charter lobby took a beating in Democratic primaries in New York City. There, the pro-charter group Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) targeted three African-American state legislators for defeat because they questioned the expansion of charters in their communities. DFER raised huge sums for the challengers (Google "DFER Watch"). The highest-profile race was in Harlem, which has more charters than any other neighborhood in the city. Hedge-fund managers and other friends of DFER poured more than \$100,000 into the campaign to defeat Bill Perkins, who gained their enmity by seeking public audits of charters. *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, and the *New York Daily News* ran numerous articles and editorials vilifying Perkins and endorsing his opponent, Basil Smikle. Smikle was supported by New York Gov. David Paterson and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. On Sept. 14, the three state senators opposed by DFER were re-elected by large margins. DFER's main enemy, Bill Perkins, collected 76 percent of the vote. The media referred to the re-election of these state senators as victories for the teachers' union, denying the possibility that black voters exercise personal agency when they cast their ballots.

These electoral losses and the recent [Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll](#) suggest that the "reform" movement led by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, DFER, hedge-fund managers, and the Obama administration lacks a base of popular support. But now begins the next phase of the movement, as its public relations campaign goes into high gear with the release this week of "Waiting for Superman." Now, the public will be immersed in the "reform" narrative: Our public schools are rotten; low test scores are caused by bad teachers; high-stakes testing works; merit pay works; charters work; the unions that represent teachers are the main obstacle to "reform."

Diane

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