



Inquiry sought into D.C. test scores

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By [Marisol Bello](#) and [Jack Gillum](#), USA TODAY

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Schools chancellor [Michelle Rhee](#) is criss-crossing the country, establishing her profile as a national education leader.



By [Charlie Nye](#), The Indianapolis Star
Michelle Rhee, founder and CEO of StudentsFirst and former chancellor of the D.C. Public Schools, says she

supports a broader probe into test erasures. [Enlarge](#)

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Michelle Rhee, founder and CEO of StudentsFirst and former chancellor of the D.C. Public Schools, says she supports a broader probe into test erasures.

She is headlining education rallies with

parents and chatting about teacher evaluations with governors.

Yet as she pushes efforts to assess teachers based partly on their students' test scores, parents and teachers in the nation's capital are calling for a federal investigation of high scores during Rhee's tenure.

More than 3,700 teachers and parents are petitioning the U.S. Department of Education and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate.

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The petition follows a USA TODAY investigation that found 103 schools — more than half of D.C.'s public schools — with unusually high rates of wrong answers erased and changed to right ones on student tests from 2008 through 2010, while Rhee was schools chief.

The petitioners, led by a group of teachers and parents who opposed Rhee during her time in D.C., want an in-depth data analysis

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of the test scores.

They also want investigators to compel Rhee and others to answer questions under oath about possible test tampering.

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These documents, obtained under open-records laws, show incidents in which educators were accused of -- or later disciplined for -- cheating on standardized tests.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan says he, too, wants to know more. "I think you need to have a thorough and thoughtful, unbiased investigation," he said. D.C. must investigate before the department decides if it will step in. The GAO says that a request must come from a member of Congress and that it has not received one.

Acting schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson has asked D.C. Inspector General Charles Willoughby to review a 2009 investigation into scores at eight schools. He did not return calls.

Issue not affecting work

At stake for Rhee is her national reputation as an education reformer, based in part on improvements in D.C. students' scores.

Through an organization she started called StudentsFirst, she is working in 11 states to

push legislation that would end teacher job guarantees based on seniority, conduct teacher evaluations based partly on test scores and help more students attend private schools with government money.

"If she hadn't set up the expectation that these measures show her strategy worked, I don't think this would be quite as devastating," says Mark Simon, a union activist and former teacher whose daughter Ruby is an 11th-grader in a D.C. public high school.

Rhee, who has not spoken with USA TODAY about D.C.'s test scores, agreed to an in-person interview this week. However, spokeswoman Mafara Hobson raised concerns that the questions would emphasize the test erasures, not her current efforts. Rhee decided to answer only by e-mail.

In her response, she said the issue of D.C. test scores has not affected her work. "The basic ideas we advanced in D.C. have been at the center of reforms recently passed in Florida, Indiana, and Tennessee," she said.

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Citing the D.C. inspector general's review, she said she could not answer questions about the erasures.

After USA TODAY's report, Rhee initially said it lacked credibility. She said the school district had previously hired an outside firm that found no evidence of cheating. She issued a statement that said, "It isn't surprising that the enemies of school reform once again are trying to argue that the earth is flat and that there is no way test scores could have improved for DCPS students unless someone cheated. ... This story is an insult to the dedicated teachers and schoolchildren who worked hard."

She has since said she supports a broader probe and there may have been isolated cases of cheating.

Support not waning

USA TODAY's analysis found that since 2008, more than 40 public schools showed remarkable gains in test scores at the same time they had high rates of corrected answers. Testing experts have said the combination of high erasures and big gains in test scores merit thorough investigation.

Rhee's comments have shifted because she is trying to protect her national reputation, says [Mike Paul](#), a crisis management consultant.

According to Rick Hess, an education researcher at the [American Enterprise Institute](#), a conservative think tank in Washington, activists such as Rhee say they have all the answers and when one flaw is found in their approach, it can call into question their entire program.

"Your critics have good reason to try to re-examine your evidence — and if they find problems with it, then your case is dramatically weakened," Hess says.

StudentsFirst Chief Operating Officer Dmitri Mehlhorn says there is no evidence Rhee's efforts to evaluate teachers based on test scores made cheating worse than in other districts. He says D.C. scores showed gains during her tenure through the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), tests given to a sample of students nationwide.

StudentsFirst has been raising money to hire lobbyists, craft legislation and back political candidates. Mehlhorn says the group has a staff of 21 and more than 220,000 members.

It is backed by at least one influential donor, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, which funds reform efforts in urban school districts. Mehlhorn says it has raised \$1.3 million from small donors giving less than \$100.

Those who support Rhee say the controversy doesn't take away from her

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overall message that children need good teachers.

Georgia, where officials are investigating possible cheating by educators on standardized tests, is considering legislation presented by Rhee's group that would end tenure and evaluate teachers based in part on their students' test scores.

"Good policy is good policy," says Republican state Sen. Tommie Williams. "It doesn't matter who brings it. ... What we do want to know is if it works."

Contributing: Greg Toppo in New York City

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