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Eager for Spotlight, but Not if It Is on a Testing Scandal

By **MICHAEL WINERIP**

WASHINGTON — Why won't [Michelle Rhee](#) talk to USA Today?

Ms. Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington public schools from 2007 to 2010, is the national symbol of the data-driven, take-no-prisoners education reform movement.

It's hard to find a media outlet, big or small, that she hasn't talked to. She's been interviewed by Katie Couric, Tom Brokaw and Oprah Winfrey. She's been featured on a [Time magazine cover](#) holding a broom (to sweep away bad teachers). She was one of the stars of the documentary "[Waiting for Superman](#)."

These days, as director of an advocacy group she founded, [StudentsFirst](#), she crisscrosses the country pushing her education politics: she's for vouchers and [charter schools](#), against tenure, for teachers, but against their unions.

Always, she preens for the cameras. Early in her chancellorship, she was trailed for a story by the education correspondent of "PBS NewsHour," John Merrow.

At one point, Ms. Rhee asked if his crew wanted to watch her fire a principal. "We were totally stunned," Mr. Merrow said.

She let them set up the camera behind the principal and videotape the entire firing. "The principal seemed dazed," said Mr. Merrow. "I've been reporting 35 years and never seen anything like it."

And yet, as voracious as she is for the media spotlight, Ms. Rhee will not talk to USA Today.

At the end of March, three of the paper's reporters — Marisol Bello, Jack Gillum and Greg Toppo — broke a [story about the high rate of erasures](#) and suspiciously high test-score gains at 41 Washington schools while Ms. Rhee was chancellor.

At some schools, they found the odds that so many answers had been changed from wrong to right randomly were 1 in 100 billion. In a fourth-grade class at Stanton Elementary, 97 percent of the erasures were from wrong to right. Districtwide, the average number of erasures for seventh graders was fewer than one per child, but for a seventh-grade class at Noyes Elementary, it was 12.7 per student. At Noyes Elementary in 2008, 84 percent of fourth graders were proficient in math, up from 22 percent in 2007.

Ms. Rhee's reputation has rested on her schools' test scores. Suddenly, a USA Today headline was asking, "were the gains real?" In this era of high-pressure testing, Washington has become another in a growing list of cheating scandals that has included Atlanta, Indiana, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Texas.

It took the USA Today reporters a year to finish their three-part series. So many people were afraid to speak that Ms. Bello had to interview dozens to find one willing to be quoted. She knocked on teachers' doors at 9:30 at night and hunted parents at PTA meetings. She met people in coffee shops where they would not be recognized, and never called or e-mailed sources at their schools.

Hari Sevugan, a spokesman for Ms. Rhee, said the reporters were "provided unprecedented time and access to report out their story," including many meetings with senior staff members and the chief of data accountability. By last fall, Mr. Sevugan said, district officials' patience was wearing thin. The deputy press secretary, Satiya Simmons, complained in an e-mail to a colleague, "Jack Gillum isn't going away quietly, Ughh."

"Just stop answering his e-mails," advised Anita Dunn, a consultant who had been the communications director for President Obama.

The reporters made a dozen attempts to interview Ms. Rhee, directly and through her public relations representatives. Ms. Bello called Ms. Rhee's cellphone daily, and finally got her on a Sunday.

"She said she wasn't going to talk with us," Ms. Bello recalled. "Her understanding was we were writing about" district schools "and she is no longer chancellor."

On March 29, the day after the story came out, [Ms. Rhee appeared](#) on the PBS program "Tavis Smiley" and attacked USA Today.

"Are you suggesting this story is much ado about nothing, that this is lacking integrity, this story in USA Today?" Mr. Smiley asked.

"Absolutely," Ms. Rhee said. "It absolutely lacks credibility."

Mr. Smiley asked if she was concerned that she had put too much pressure on teachers and principals to raise scores. “We want educators to feel that pressure,” she answered.

Ms. Rhee emphasized that the district had hired a top security company, Caveon, to investigate in 2009, and was given a clean bill of health. The district released a statement from John Fremer, Caveon’s owner, saying, “The company did not find evidence of cheating at any of the schools.”

However, in subsequent interviews with USA Today and this reporter, Mr. Fremer made it clear that the scope of his inquiry was limited, and that the district had not requested that he do more. Indeed, Caveon’s report, posted on USA Today’s Web site, was full of sentences like, “Redacted was interviewed at redacted.”

Teachers described security as “excellent” and “very vigilant,” and investigators, for the most part, took their comments at face value.

It did not take Ms. Rhee long to realize she had miscalculated. Three days later, she told Bloomberg Radio she was “100 percent supportive” of a broader inquiry.

Still, she would not talk to USA Today. Mr. Sevugan gave no explanation, but pointed out that she had spoken with several other news outlets.

The reporters did not give up. On April 26, Emily Lenzner, a spokeswoman, wrote Mr. Gillum, “Michelle is willing to do an interview, but we’d like to do this in person.” She asked if they could hold their story, and arranged for a meeting on May 3 at the StudentsFirst office in Washington.

On May 2, another Rhee spokeswoman e-mailed to say the reporters were too interested in cheating and not enough in StudentsFirst. She said they could submit a list of questions.

There were 21 questions; Ms. Rhee did not answer 10 of the 11 about cheating.

Mr. Gillum, who recently took a job at The Associated Press, said he was surprised by how unresponsive Ms. Rhee has been. “She talks about how important data is, and our story is data driven,” he said.

So that people could make their own judgments, Linda Mathews, the project editor, [posted the relevant public documents](#) on the USA Today Web site.

Shortly after the [follow-up story](#) appeared, the district’s inspector general began what was supposed to be an inquiry, but in July The Washington Post reported that just one

investigator had been assigned. “Basically it was one guy in a room who made 10 phone calls,” Mr. Toppo said.

Officials with the federal Department of Education have indicated that they are [assisting with the investigation](#).

In Washington, two investigators spent five days at eight schools. In Atlanta, the state deployed 60 investigators who worked for 10 months at 56 schools. They produced a report that named all 178 people found cheating, including 82 who confessed. There was not a single case of “redacted and redacted doctoring redacted grade answer sheets at redacted.”

People in Atlanta could go to prison. Last week, a grand jury issued subpoenas seeking the names of school employees who had received bonuses for test scores. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that there were subpoenas for “signed copies” of “any and all oaths of office” taken by Beverly Hall, the former superintendent.

The three reporters still hope to interview Ms. Rhee. “Absolutely,” said Mr. Toppo.

Which brings things full circle: Why won't Ms. Rhee talk to USA Today?

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