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Education Reform: What Adrian Fenty and Michelle Rhee Got Wrong

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Posted: September 21, 2010 at 4:00 PM

D.C.'s outgoing mayor and his schools chancellor treated education reform as something to do *to* black people instead of with them. Reform advocates around the country should be taking notes on this local story with national implications.

For three years, D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee promoted the notion that education reform could happen only if she was totally in charge and everything was done her way. It was her way -- or her way. She justified every policy, every action, by saying that it was all about the kids, not about adults.

Nothing in her tenure so typified her approach as the ending of it. The day after the defeat of her patron, Mayor Adrian Fenty, when DCPS students could have benefited from an example of civility and graciousness in defeat, she called Fenty's loss -- and, by implication, her own departure -- "devastating" for D.C. children. In the end, it was not about the kids; it was about the adults, and one adult in particular: her.

And that, in many ways, was the problem. Rhee came to Washington with experience only as a classroom teacher -- for three years, through Teach for America -- and as head of her own nonprofit organization. She had never really worked for anybody or been institutionally accountable to anyone. She declared "*cooperation, collaboration and consensus building [to be] way overrated.*" With Fenty's support -- or at least without his ever publicly reining her in -- she stiffed the City Council and its chair, Vincent Gray, the man who defeated Fenty. She stiffed teachers and the union that represented them. And she stiffed the parents and the predominantly African-American communities they lived in. She did education reform *to* blacks, not *with* them.

It's possible to see the rise and fall of Michelle Rhee as a Washington story, a story about local politics in a city that, despite its status as the nation's capital, is still the country's 26th -largest city, just below Milwaukee and just above Las Vegas, a city all the more atypical because of its status as a sort of territory or protectorate, without full home rule or voting representation in Congress.

But that is not how the story is being seen -- or how it is being covered by the media. *The NBC Nightly News*, for example, devoted two stories to Rhee in the days after the election. A [story on The Daily Beast](#) saw the defeat of Fenty and Rhee as evidence that

"significant segments of the public -- including the urban public school parents who have the most potentially to gain -- are skeptical of the White House's school reform agenda."

D.C. voters, I believe, repudiated not the substance of education reform but its style: high-handed, disrespectful, autocratic. And it would be too bad -- and *truly* devastating, both for D.C. students and for the cause of education reform -- if the education-reform movement retreated or trimmed its sails in the wake of the D.C. elections.

Instead, D.C.'s likely mayor, Vincent Gray, should take this as an opportunity, rare in politics or policymaking, for a do-over, a chance to build on what was good about Rhee's reform agenda and move forward. Education reform is bigger than one chancellor -- or one mayor.

Gray should reach out to the friends of education who supported what Rhee was doing. He should reach into Rhee's team for credible leadership that knows the reform blueprint, can build it out and promote it collaboratively, and retain the confidence of the donor community. He should reach out to that donor community, to reform-minded foundations like Gates (a contributor to my organization, the UNCF) and Broad. And of course, he should reach out to the most pro-education-reform administration the country has had in a half-century, to the president and to Education Secretary Arne Duncan. After all, the Race to the Top grant that Duncan awarded a few weeks ago was made not to Rhee but to DCPS.

And the education-reform community, for its part, should learn the lessons of D.C.'s work-in-progress school reform and apply them across the country. Perhaps the most important of those lessons is that education reform is not about its leaders and their prerogatives. It's about communities.

It's about communities because it is communities, and all sectors of those communities, that benefit from education reform and are therefore its biggest stakeholders. It is children, of course, whose prospects improve materially and significantly with a good education -- one that starts in preschool and doesn't end until college graduation.

Neighborhoods benefit, too, from stable and effective schools that can, once again, serve as the anchors for neighborhood activities. It is the business community, which needs both the educated work force that good schools produce and the better-paid customers who are the byproduct of good schools. And cities need good schools because research has shown that well-educated citizens are more politically active and, by the way, better able to pay the taxes that support good roads, good parks and strong public schools.

Education reform must also be about communities, because in our country, education is subject to the democratic process. Whether schools are under direct mayoral control or governed by a school board or board of education, voters have the ultimate say. If they aren't persuaded that education reform is in their best interests, or if the tribunes of reform institute their changes in ways that alienate the people who vote in city elections -- even if they are the people who stand to benefit from those changes -- the reformers will find their mandate to reform abruptly terminated. That is what Fenty and Rhee discovered.

The outgoing mayor and his chancellor will be all right. They're young, intelligent and highly educated. But the prospects for children in the D.C. schools, and for the schoolchildren in other communities where education reform is being implemented, hang in the balance.

Fenty and Rhee set one kind of example. Gray can set another. He can show that education reform doesn't have to be -- indeed, cannot be -- force-fed to communities of color. They have sacrificed and struggled to earn the rights of citizenship -- a struggle still incomplete in D.C. -- and no one can take those rights, no matter how noble the aims.

We can be equal partners in ensuring what is best for our children and all children. It won't work any other way.

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