Michelle Rhee’s senior staff meeting has all the ceremony of lunchtime in the teachers’ lounge. News is exchanged. Ideas tumble around. Rhee sits at the head of the table but doesn’t run the meeting or even take the conversational lead. Staffers talk over her as often as she talks over them. If consensus is the goal, the ball is far upfield.

But then, Rhee wades in with, “Here’s what I think,” or “What I don’t want,” or “This is crap,” or “I want someone to figure this out,” or “I’m gonna tell you what we’re gonna do; we can talk about how we’re gonna do it.” And that is that. Next order of business, please.

Can Michelle Rhee wrest control of the D.C. school system from decades of failure?

Rhee’s style—as steely as the sound of her peekaboo high heels on a linoleum-tile hallway—has angered much of Washington, D.C., and baffled the rest since she arrived as schools chancellor in June 2007. But it is also helping her gain control of a school system that has defied management for decades: that hasn’t kept records, patched windows, met budgets, delivered books, returned phone calls, followed court orders, checked teachers’ credentials, or, for years on end, opened school on schedule in the fall.

When I asked Rhee to name her most significant achievement in her two years in Washington, her answer suggested that any progress is, so far, only incremental. “We have begun—begun—begun—to establish a culture of accountability,” she said, with a long pause between each
“begun.” A teacher had recently e-mailed her about a personnel matter, she went on, and was thrilled that Rhee had replied. “It’s sorta sad because the expectations are so low. The fact that you just get a response is celebrated,” she said.

Rhee tells parents and taxpayers that they should judge her on “student performance.” Are test scores rising? Are students graduating? So far, there’s some evidence that they are, although some teachers and parents say that even that evidence is suspect.

It’s not news that Washington’s schools are among the most woeful in the country, but even a cynic has to gasp. The mismanagement is legendary.

But not much learning gets done without institutional support, and for decades in Washington, not much has. When I asked Kenneth Wong, director of Brown University’s urban-education policy program, on what measures Rhee should be judged, he answered with a long list. It included how well the schools work with other city agencies (to get sidewalks plowed in the winter, for example), how many and which colleges new teachers come from (the wider the net, the better), how quickly managers return phone calls, and whether teacher absenteeism is down. Only at the end of the list did he get to student performance. “The other stuff are the necessary conditions to get to student achievement,” he said.

That’s not particularly glamorous for a national media darling who has been celebrated on magazine covers, on Capitol Hill, and by the president, but it is a start.

Rock Bottom?
It’s not news that Washington’s schools are among the most woeful in the country, but even a cynic has to gasp. The mismanagement is legendary: consider the 5 million personnel records Rhee says she found piled on a storeroom floor when she took office. Marc Borbely, a former teacher, filed a Freedom of Information Act request in 2004 to find out how many work orders were outstanding at the central maintenance office. The answer: 25,000.

Teachers complained of out-of-control students: The city’s Ballou High School was closed for a 35-day cleanup after students stole chemistry-lab thermometers and scattered the mercury around hallways. In most school districts, mercury thermometers had been replaced years earlier.

The system churned through six superintendents in 10 years, usually after brutal head butting with the city council and community activists. That made Washington the La Brea Tar Pits of strategic plans: Each one sank into oblivion as its drafters moved on. The school funding formula changed four times under as many superintendents.

Academic measures were miserable. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered before Rhee’s arrival but announced five months after her term began, found that 61 percent of the city’s 4th graders had below-basic reading skills, which means they could barely read. Just 8 percent of its 8th graders were proficient—that is, at grade level—or above in math.

Scores on the district’s own tests for the 2006–07 school year, the last before Rhee’s arrival, were higher but still dismal. Just 38 percent of elementary-school children were at grade level or above in reading, and 27 percent of high schoolers were at grade level or above in math. Districtwide, fewer than 30 percent of African American students were reading at grade level, compared to 87 percent of whites, a 57-percentage-point gap.

Rhee arrived to find that all 10 of Washington’s comprehensive high schools had failed to meet federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) adequate yearly progress goals and that 48 of its 67 elementary schools were in some level of NCLB-mandated corrective action. The high-school dropout rate hovered at about 50 percent, and just 9 percent of entering 9th graders ever graduated from college.

On the SAT—a test presumably only the most ambitious students take—43 percent of district students who took the exam in 2009 scored 390 or below on the 800-point math test, which awards 200 points just for showing up. African Americans citywide averaged 773 on the 1600-point reading and math tests combined, or about 400 points less than
Community pressure to “do something” about the schools’ performance had never materialized, though. Political leaders had seen no upside to taking on a school system that employs thousands of African Americans in a city where African Americans account for a majority of the population, the voter rolls, the city council, local-government posts, and union leadership. And in the weary way that people get used to dysfunction, no one else complained. Rhee says she marvels that her decision to shut down 23 failing schools in her first year drew howls of protest, while keeping failing schools open doesn’t excite anyone.

The Money Question
Washington’s business community has fussed for years about the schools because they turn out so few employable graduates and at a huge cost. The Chamber of Commerce says that only one in four jobs in the city is held by a D.C. resident now, and that 44 percent of Washingtonians don’t have even a high-school diploma.

Education expenditures can swing wildly depending on how students are counted and what spending is included in the calculation. But the U.S. Census Bureau, in a survey of education finances released in July 2009, says Washington spent $14,324 per public-school student in the 2006–07 school year, or about $6,300 more than the national average. The only states to spend more were New Jersey and New York, which have vastly larger corporate tax bases and far more upper-income taxpayers. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the federal government pays 12 percent of Washington’s education budget, a percentage largely determined by the city’s high poverty rate. That puts it well below Louisiana and Mississippi, but well above the 9 percent national average for federal support.

A simpler way of looking at it: Washington has budgeted $760 million for its traditional public schools in the fiscal year beginning October 2010. Using Rhee’s enrollment estimate of 45,000, that works out to $16,800 per student. Using the city council’s estimate of 41,500 students, it’s $18,300.

As costs have risen, enrollment has plummeted (see Figure 1). Affluent or activist parents enroll their youngsters in three or four largely autonomous elementary schools in white neighborhoods, or move to private schools, charter schools, or the suburbs. Between 2004 and 2008, Washington’s traditional public schools lost 13,500 students, while its charters gained 10,200.

What may be Washington’s last hope of stopping the slide from dismal to disastrous rests on the reform course chosen by its mayor, Adrian Fenty, an African American Democrat who has staked his political career and considerable ego on his pledge to improve the schools. After his January 2007 inauguration, Fenty courted and then summoned Rhee to Washington through her mentor, New York schools chancellor Joel Klein, even though Rhee says she initially “was not blown away” by the mayor or the job. Fenty quickly pushed through legislation that abolished the disputatious school board, won Rhee the authority to fire hundreds of central-office workers, and “has not flinched once through any of this, never,” she says.

Rhee’s Roots
Rhee speaks often about her Teach For America (TFA) tour in a Baltimore classroom between 1992 and 1995: how she...
struggled the first year until pairing with another teacher to team-teach a class of 2nd and 3rd graders. But Rhee’s experience a few years later with The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a better window on how she’s doing her job in Washington.

As Ariela Rozman, TNTP’s current CEO, tells it, superintendents had begun asking TFA founder Wendy Kopp for help attracting and training teachers like those Kopp was sending them. Rhee was finishing a graduate program at Harvard and had never had a management role at TFA, but Kopp tapped Rhee to head the teacher project as a spin-off in 1997. “The idea came from TFA clients, but Michelle brought the vision,” Rozman told me.

Rhee was a no-nonsense manager. She was so determined to fund The New Teacher Project out of the revenues it was generating through its training contracts with schools that she sorely underpaid her staff. For years, she resisted pressure even from Kopp to take foundation funding, said Kati Haycock, who is chair of the project’s board and president of the Education Trust. Even so, the project attracted a talented staff with high morale, little turnover, and fierce loyalty to Rhee. Richard Nyankori, who moved with Rhee to Washington from TNTP and now heads special education for the district, says Rhee teases him that he would throw himself under a bus for her, “and she’s right. I probably would.”

Rhee’s greatest success at The New Teacher Project may be how she left it. Start-ups frequently struggle when a strong-willed manager leaves: Staffers move on, backers temporize, and contracts slow as the new leader finds her footing. But Ariela Rozman says The New Teacher Project has grown since Rhee left, from 140 people and a $20 million budget to this year’s staff of 210 and budget of $32 million.

Kaya Henderson, who also moved to Washington with Rhee as her deputy chancellor, says The New Teacher Project’s management style moved with them. Policy differences are hashed out at the weekly senior staff meetings and at biweekly meetings of a strategy committee, which considers major initiatives. “We’re not going to leave the meeting until one group has convinced the other group. We all have to be good with the decision,” Henderson told me. Still, “part of being a good leader is knowing when to say ‘this is a good thing to do,’” a prerogative Rhee doesn’t shy from, Henderson added.

Rhee has pledged to stay to the end of a second Fenty term—January 2015, if he is reelected—and Henderson says “the rest of us are probably in it for the same.”

**Bumpy Ride**

Six weeks into the job, Rhee called her staff together with the message that “We are not here to do the bureaucracy better,” Nyankori says. Rhee told them that “that’s what all of our friends are doing in reform all around the country: They’re trying to make the trains stay on the track and go faster. We are here to derail those trains.”

If upheaval was the goal, Rhee has succeeded. Teachers say she has set black teachers against whites and young teachers
against veterans with her controversial 2008 contract offer. Congressional Democrats worry that she has put them between a policy goal, school improvement, and their teachers-union allies. Education reformers are nervous that her outta-my-way approach will wound their movement if it backfires.

Almost everyone has a Rhee story. As when the chancellor closed those 23 schools and scheduled a community meeting at each one but on the same evening, so she couldn’t attend most of them. Or suggested the elected city council was irrelevant. Businesses, foundations, and civic groups that funded and ran after-school and enrichment programs were similarly dismissed. A Chamber of Commerce project that taught jobs skills to high schoolers was dropped. The World Bank had outfitted and staffed college-prep resource centers at some of the city’s toughest high schools. When Rhee put the outside groups on hold, the bank diverted its $1 million a year in youth programming to local nonprofits.

Parent groups that used to be solicited—even begged—to help make decisions about dress codes, building budgets and staffing, renovations and construction, and principal selection now find themselves shut out. “Parents feel pushed aside,” says Cathy Reilly, who started a parents’ group to exchange news about their kids’ high schools.

Rhee urges parents to e-mail her with questions, and she answers late into the night (she says she answered 99,000 e-mails her first year). But at the public meetings I attended last spring, Rhee sat alone at the front of the room, talked over parents, moved about with an ever-present photographer, and left immediately afterward in a chauffeured Chevy Tahoe.

Rhee and her loyalists say with jaw-dropping insouciance that none of that matters because, as she told me, she’s “doing what’s right for kids.” “The conventional rules and the people who play by them don’t get much change,” says the Education Trust’s Haycock. “Hordes” of people come to their table when she and Rhee dine out together, Haycock adds, and “I have never heard anyone say anything except ‘keep on keeping on.’”

Rhee and her senior staff believe that the ed-reform stars are aligned as they never have been in Washington, and that they have the brains, focus, and work ethic to leap at the opportunity. In all of that, they’re probably right.

Rhee and her top aides don’t talk much about curriculum change; their focus is people. “Strong principals, strong teachers—that’s what turns schools around. That’s why we feel so strongly about this union contract.”

and resisted its invitations to testify. Or arrived for a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce board with—surprise!—a television news crew in tow. Chamber president Barbara Lang says Rhee never thanked the chamber for testifying in favor of Mayor Fenty’s takeover of the schools, legislation that will be pivotal to Rhee’s success.

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Rhee and her top aides don’t talk much about curriculum change; their focus is people. “Strong principals, strong teachers—that’s what turns schools around,” says Nyankori. “That’s why we feel so strongly about this union contract.”

The Washington Teachers Union and its parent American Federation of Teachers (AFT) feel just as strongly, of course, about a contract that undercuts such union cornerstones as tenure, seniority, and worker solidarity, and that would set a national precedent. Rhee’s proposal to pay six-figure salaries to teachers who agreed to link their paychecks to classroom outcomes: that’s the “green” option. Teachers who choose the “red” option (green, go; red, stop—get it?) would collect far-smaller pay increases, but would retain job security.

Rhee didn’t say how she would pay for the salary boosts, although she implied that foundations would pick up much of the tab. Meanwhile, foundation endowments have plunged and local tax revenues have shrunk since Rhee offered the plan in summer 2008.

AFT president Randi Weingarten, who has largely taken over the negotiations from the local union, insists that the teachers and Rhee “share the same goals, the issue in contract negotiations is how to get there.” She proposes rewarding teachers equally with school-based bonuses, a nonstarter with Rhee, who is zealous about getting rid of those she calls “bad teachers.” Stakes are so high for both sides that they appear to be working on a compromise that gives Rhee some, but by no means all of the staffing and firing flexibility she is after.
Still, Rhee has some tools that other school heads don’t have. Congress gave her the power to impose a teacher-evaluation system without negotiating its terms with the union. The new evaluations, set to begin in the 2009–10 school year, will include student test scores and five classroom observations of each teacher each year. Henderson, the deputy chancellor, has let the union know that the district will likely begin observing teachers by video, too.

And then there are some test-score gains, which Rhee is counting on to build public support for her plans and ease the doubts about her style. Two years after Rhee’s arrival, scores on district-administered tests are up: 49 percent of elementary school students were reading at grade level, a 21-percentage-point jump in two years, according to test results released in July 2009. Among secondary-school students, 40 percent were at grade level in math, up 13 points. Rising proficiency levels should win Rhee new clout in the city’s political circles, new respect among parents and civil groups, and more leverage to turn the troubled system around.

Taking Stock
Rhee’s other successes aren’t exactly the stuff of headlines. Erich Martel, who has taught social studies in the D.C. schools for 40 years, says teachers are doing more lesson prep and trying to make their classes more interesting. “There are teachers who need someone looking over their shoulder and they’re getting it,” he says.

Long-neglected school buildings are being renovated or rebuilt, which could make them more competitive with some better-housed charters. Spending on professional development has quadrupled. There are art and music classes in every school, the district says.

Rhee’s most important achievement might be in the management fixes most people can’t see. High-school transcripts, which the schools used to hold on to and sometimes alter to boost graduation rates, are being centralized and scrubbed (the audit found that one-third of students weren’t taking the classes they need to graduate). Nyankori says he has lured back 155 of the district’s 2,400 special-ed youngsters who are in private schools, at a yearly cost of $141 million, with more programs and better case management, and has set a target return date for each of the others. Quarterly diagnostic tests have been aligned with year-end assessments: Unbelievably, the two were designed by different consultants, and didn’t predict or reflect the outcome of the other.

That isn’t to say that Rhee is anywhere near achieving her often-stated goal of making Washington the best urban district in the country. Even she attributes much of the test-score gains in her two years to the district’s ability to pick what she calls “low-hanging fruit.” Saturday test-prep classes have helped borderline kids pass their year-end tests, even while thousands of other children remain far behind because of weak basic skills. Accounting changes helped boost results, too: Children who were absent on test day now are counted as no-shows; before, they were counted among those with failing scores.

The graduation rate—as opposed to the drop-out rate, which is calculated differently—was up a few percentage points

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in 2009 to 70 percent, the district says. But some teachers and parents attribute that to a new “credit recovery” program that lets failing students retake courses after school. Martel, the long-time social studies teacher, says credit-recovery classes ran 82 hours per quarter at his school compared to 125 hours for classes held during the school day, and that teachers were told not to give homework.

Despite the celebrity surrounding Rhee and Fenty, the traditional public schools are still bleeding students, which is perhaps the ultimate, market-driven judgment. In 2008, charters enrolled 48 percent of public-school 6th graders, up from 36 percent a year earlier. In fact, both are at stake. Washington is a natural petri dish, whether Rhee disdains the idea or not. It’s small and deeply troubled, is a foundation darling, has creative new leadership, and is pursuing the popular academic ideas of the day. Its big charter sector almost begs researchers to compare the two systems, and it sits in the spotlight of the U.S. Capitol.

I asked Rhee to name her biggest mistake in two years and she offered this: She could have done a “better job of communicating with teachers” when she presented her contract proposal and averted some of the antagonism that dogs her relationship with them. Since then, she has met with teachers a few times a week, she said, and finds the exchanges “incredibly heartening.”

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High Stakes
Rhee seems irked that policymakers see Washington as the laboratory of the education-reform agenda. “That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” she said, at the same spring meeting at which she bemoaned the lack of proper sockets. What matters is Washington’s kids, not a national agenda, she insisted.

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There are other tiny signs that Rhee may be trying to calm the waters she has roiled. With contract talks going nowhere in the spring of 2009, she wrote a Washington Post op-ed in which she insisted that “[t]hose who categorically blame teachers for the failures of our system are simply wrong.”

Around the same time, at a banquet at the Federal City Council, a premier business and civic group, Rhee thanked a consulting group for undertaking, pro bono, the school-records audit. “It was the first time I’ve heard her thank anyone for anything,” said the head of a major nonprofit. Her staff now concedes that a Time magazine cover of Rhee—standing grim-faced in an empty classroom, holding a broom—was a mistake.

That may be about it. I asked The New Teacher Project’s Ariela Rozman if Rhee ever called to cry on her shoulder. “Michelle doesn’t cry,” Rozman said. That’s probably a good thing.

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