Michelle Rhee’s DC Record Survives Scrutiny

The case against Rhee evaporates in fact-checking analysis of two critiques of her record

CAMBRIDGE, MA – A new analysis of two recent reports, one by a committee of the National Academy of Science’s National Research Council (NRC), the other by Alan Ginsburg, a former director of Policy and Program Studies in the U. S. Department of Education, finds that both reports made factual and analytical errors in their examination of the record of Michelle Rhee as Chancellor of Schools for the District of Columbia from 2007-2010.

The analysis of these studies has been prepared by Paul E. Peterson, director of Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance. His review will appear in the Summer 2011 issue of Education Next and is currently available at educationnext.org (http://educationnext.org/the-case-against-michelle-rhee/). Peterson says that Rhee was in office for too short a period to draw firm conclusions one way or another as to her impact on student performance, but there is no doubt that the reports critical of her tenure have made erroneous claims.

The report by the NRC committee claims that gains in test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 2007 and 2009 were no better than in the ten other school districts for which comparable data is available. Peterson shows, however, that in both reading and math in 4th grade and, again, in 8th grade math, gains by D.C. students far outpaced the average gains in the other districts. At the 4th grade level in math and reading, D.C. students gained 6 scale score points between 2007 and 2009, while the average gain in the other districts was only 1 point and 2.2 points, respectively. In 8th grade math, he finds that the D.C. gains were 7 points, as compared to an average of 2.9 points for the other cities. 8th grade reading scores did not differ significantly between D.C. and the other districts, however.

Alan Ginsburg claims that improvements in NAEP scores under Rhee were no better than the gains made under her two predecessors between 2000 and 2007. In making that claim he fails to use appropriate NAEP data for 2007 in 8th grade math, and fails to adjust for national trends in student achievement during this period. When those corrections and adjustments are made, Peterson shows that students under Rhee made much larger strides toward closing the district-national achievement gap than they did under her predecessors. For example, “during the Rhee years, 4th grade students, in both reading and math, gained an average of 3 points each year relative to the scores earned by students nationwide, a gain twice that of her predecessors.”

“These numbers may seem small but over time they add up,” Peterson says. “Had students gained as much every year between 2000 – 2009 as they did during the Rhee era, the gap between D.C. 4th graders and the nation in math would have decreased from 34 points to just 7 points in 2009. Similarly, in 8th grade math,” he writes, “had Rhee-like progress been made each year beginning in 2000, the gap would in 2009 have been just 14 points, with near closure in 2012.”
The NRC report suggests that demographic changes might account for gains in DC test score performance. But Peterson explores this possibility and shows that no demographic changes that occurred between 2007 and 2009 are likely to have reduced the educational challenges the district faced.

Peterson says that the NRC report also fails to call for the kind of experimental research that would be required if causal connections are to be identified. For example, the NRC committee acknowledges that 8th grade teacher absenteeism declined significantly between 2007 and 2009. The days on which 98 percent or more of the teachers were at school climbed from about 68 percent to approximately 85 percent of school days. The committee says there is no scientific evidence that proves Rhee’s policies caused that absenteeism to decline. Peterson points out, however, that the committee does not explore the available evidence to see whether a causal connection is probable or propose an experimental research design that could demonstrate whether such a connection exists.

The two reports reviewed are:


About the Author
Paul E. Peterson is the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor Government at Harvard University, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and editor-in-chief of Education Next.

About Education Next
Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, part of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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