

The Courage to Act

Former D.C. chancellor battles on

Radical: Fighting to Put Students First

by Michelle Rhee

HarperCollins, 2013, \$27.99; 286 pages.

Reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Memoirs should be written only by extraordinary people, and as we read *Radical*, Michelle Rhee's chronicle of her Korean American upbringing, college years, Teach For America experience, tenure as D.C. schools chancellor and now as head of a national advocacy group, we should keep in mind what makes her noteworthy in the education world.

It isn't because of her ideas about curriculum. Rhee emphasizes student learning again and again, but nowhere in the book does she discuss what students should learn. She says nothing about which books they should read, the right use of standards, the acquisition of 21st-century skills, and other current topics. Instead, she repeats reasonable but banal slogans such as, "When we give children the chance to succeed, they can" and "I do believe that schools and teachers can make a tremendous difference in the lives of [poor] kids who face these challenges every day." Who would disagree?

It isn't because of her ideas about classroom practice, either. Rhee mentions pedagogy only in her reminiscence of a few techniques she implemented during her stint as a school teacher in Baltimore. Those, too, are sensible but routine ones, such as a "simple rewards system," visiting students' homes, and recognizing that while students need "love and compassion," they crave "rigid structure, certainty, and stability, as well."

She also has no distinctive civic vision for public schooling. *Radical* contains no material on the distant or recent history of public education, and the right relationship of K-12 schools to outside entities such as specific industries and higher education goes unmentioned. Rhee announces no purpose for schools other than the complete education of *all* children.

Nor is Rhee remarkable for her oratory and analysis, as the prose of *Radical* amply shows. Her accounts of D.C. school visits; negotiations with Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers; and other tense occasions come

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and go in clipped phrases, as if Rhee simply hasn't the time to probe the dynamics behind them. Her idiom often slips into that of adolescence, for instance, the modifiers "amazingly," "incredibly," and "definitely" popping up repeatedly. Of her first encounter with Joel Klein, then chancellor of the New York City schools, she writes, "This guy was no joke. He totally won me over." Of one young hire who in an interview "knocked my socks off," Rhee gushes, "He was incredibly impressive, and I thought he had the presence that one would need to wow the clients."

So what makes Rhee noteworthy? Very simple: she fired people and closed schools. When Rhee assumed the chancellorship of the D.C. schools, she reviewed the system and drew obvious conclusions. Incompetence, mismanagement, corruption, and cynicism reigned—as everybody knew—but Rhee did what nobody had before. In early 2008, she fired 98 workers in the central office and proceeded to terminate 36 principals and 22 assistant principals. In year one, she closed 23 schools. She instituted procedures to identify and expel bad teachers, too, drafting a list of 266 for termination. And she shocked fellow Democrats by coming out in favor of vouchers ("People went nuts").

The unions, city council members (including former D.C. mayor Marion Barry), and journalists threatened, denounced, and cajoled her, but she stood firm. They protested on Pennsylvania Avenue, brandishing placards declaring, "This is not Rheeistan," she recalls, "But the rallies didn't affect me." Charges of racism, union busting, and shilling for Republicans followed, but they didn't overcome her disgust with malfeasance and her courage to act. Joel Klein summed it up when he whispered to her at a Teach For America event, "No one has your kind of guts."

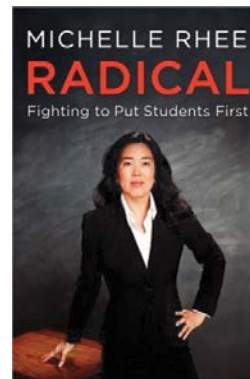
That's the key. At the first meeting of the central office in D.C., representatives of all the departments presented rosy portraits in glowing PowerPoint, everyone earnest and enthusiastic about the coming school year. How easy it would have been for Rhee to forget D.C. proficiency rates and embrace the mood. A new, young, and inexperienced official would naturally wish to make friends, win loyalty, and spread confidence. Instead, she judged it "a dog-and-pony show with graphs and

charts” and vowed never to allow a meeting like that to happen again.

After Adrian Fenty lost the D.C. mayoral election in 2010 and Rhee left her post, she made a flat calculation. She had been able to institute changes in teacher hiring and evaluation, for instance, scrapping the “last-in-first-out” rule, but what guaranteed their survival in the coming administration? The unions despised her policies, and they wielded political clout that few politicians could resist, “millions of members and millions of dollars,” as the saying goes. You might win the war of ideas and corral all the facts and common sense, but unless a legislator and a council member heard from as many

disappointed parents as they did from angry union leaders, unless as many of the former showed up for hearings as did the latter, politicians would favor the unions every time.

So Rhee started StudentsFirst. “I’m tired of us reformers getting our butts handed to us time and again,” she told the head of education at the Walton Family Foundation, which eventually gave \$50 million. Other donors lined up as Rhee announced the formation of the group on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It has a well-defined mission to “balance the union’s clout,” to give politicians “air cover” when they cross the unions. When a legislative bill comes



to the floor, StudentsFirst urges members to send e-mails, make phone calls, and write letters to newspapers. Before unions can

smear an uncooperative politician who supports charter schools as hating teachers and betraying kids, StudentsFirst pays for billboards and advertising spots praising that legislator’s courage and concern.

It’s the right place for Rhee, a political battle zone in which intelligence, moral clarity, field knowledge, and civic virtue are ineffectual without fortitude.

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