

Mismatch

Culture clash a recurring theme in Rhee story

The Bee Eater: Michelle Rhee Takes on the Nation's Worst School District

By Richard Whitmire

Jossey-Bass, 2011, \$24.95; 270 pages.

As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Soon after her widely publicized appointment as chancellor of the Washington, D.C., schools, Michelle Rhee devoted a day to school visits, some of them unannounced. At one, an odd thing happened. When Rhee and her party rang the bell at the entrance, the principal herself opened the gate and gazed at them questioningly. She had no idea who Rhee was.

That's the first of many anecdotes in Richard Whitmire's fast-moving chronicle of Rhee's life and career that impart the strange, dismaying world of public schools in the nation's capital. He focuses on her tense three-and-a-half-year tenure, the battle lines remembered by everyone—Rhee vs. the city council, Rhee vs. the teachers unions, vs. the *Washington Post*, vs. black parents. What isn't as familiar, and sometimes downright perverse, are the many bizarre yet customary conditions under which Rhee operated, which Whitmire portrays in illuminating (and infuriating) detail.

The opening chapters chronicle Rhee's pre-D.C. life. We learn of a pleasant childhood in Toledo, Ohio, college days at Cornell, training with Teach For America, three grueling but successful years in a Baltimore elementary school, leadership of The New Teacher Project, and testimony at an arbitration hearing where the New York Department of Education squared off against Randi

Weingarten and the United Federation of Teachers ("She was dazzling," former New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein tells Whitmire). The aim is to humanize the portrait of Rhee against the prevailing caricature of an imperious, rude Asian woman, insensitive to poor blacks.

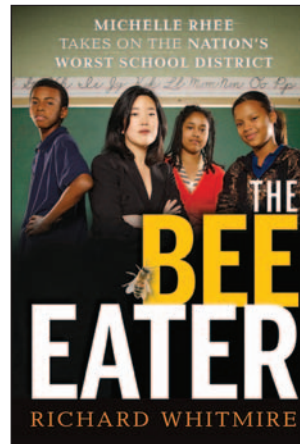
Several facts are striking or amusing in light of her later fame. When her little brother fared poorly in school, *she* was grounded. Her mother sent her away to college not to get a degree but to find a husband. At Teach For America, she proudly donned an "anti-Bush" button. In her first year of teaching, evaluators advised her, "We believe your classroom is a dangerous place for children and we think you should reconsider this career."

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For a time at Cornell, a friend recalls, Rhee didn't want to date any white men.

When Rhee enters the chancellor's position, though, the narrative switches to a different reality:

- In spite of terrible test scores, in the year before Rhee's arrival not one teacher was let go for ineffectiveness.



- One school Rhee visited was built for 600 students but had only 83.
- Twenty-seven D.C. schools faced restructuring for failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress, but when Rhee investigated, she says, "Most of the people I talked to were like, 'What

is restructuring? What is AYP?'"

- When Rhee closed 23 (!) dreadful schools, some of the loudest protesters were those with the most to gain: parents of students.
- When Rhee was blocked from firing staff, she found them so incompetent that she told them to stay home.
- Her fierce efforts to improve schools with high black enrollment often earned her credit for a "white agenda."

Rhee's outsider status helped her enact reforms against these nonsensical circumstances and brave the repugnance of the Washington Teachers' Union, *Washington Post* columnists, and city council members. Unfortunately, it also kept her from recognizing the full import of her decisions.

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At one point, as she waits for tardy D.C. city council member Marion Barry outside a failing elementary school, she drifts across the street to chat with residents. They tell her, “We don’t need another boarded-up building in this neighborhood.” When she puts bad and weak teachers on notice, she doesn’t realize that she’s targeting a historic avenue of middle-class employment for African Americans in the city.

The mismatch between Rhee’s vision and local culture pops up again and again. She insisted that the most important factor in a classroom is the quality of the teacher, but Nathan Saunders, then vice president of the teachers union, tells Whitmire, “That doesn’t work in our community.” Religion and extended family play that role, the teacher belonging to a “system” in which “you were apt to lose your children, where harm could come to the child or the family unit.” She spoke with black parents frequently, holding more “living room” sessions in the all-black Ward 8 than anywhere else, Whitmire notes, but she underestimated the “respect” factor in the black community. At town hall meetings, parents rose up to chide her not so much for decisions she made, but for giving them no voice in the process. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote that “concerns raised by parents about Ms. Rhee’s take-no-prisoners approach were ignored. It was disrespectful.” Herbert said nothing about the nature of Rhee’s actual policies.

It is hard to weigh policies when roiling psycho-political attitudes unbalance the scales. In Whitmire’s telling, Rhee’s

saga reveals that vested interests aren’t the only impediment to reform. True, the school system often functions as a jobs program for adults, but jobs and money aren’t the reason the mother of a second grader who has a derelict teacher regards someone pledging to fire the teacher as a demon. They don’t explain why administrators in an out-of-control school allow athletic coaches total control over their players. They don’t explain why high school counselors aren’t aware of their own school’s graduation requirements.

This is more than incompetence and guaranteed paychecks: It’s dysfunction,

a creeping neurosis. Rhee came in and shocked the system. Her example has inspired others, Whitmire concludes, the strategy among reform-minded school leaders in 2011 being “Michelle Rhee without the drama.” One wonders, though, whether it wasn’t Rhee’s confrontational style that produced the advances in D.C. Keep the same policies but advocate them with “Michelle Lite” (Whitmire’s term) and the dysfunction might smoothly absorb them. Perhaps change can come only through conflict.

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“Just think of it as if you’re reading a long text-message.”