

Maverick educator wants to put students first

By Michelle Rhee, Newsweek

After my boss, Washington, D.C., mayor Adrian Fenty, lost his primary in September, I was stunned. I had never imagined he wouldn't win the contest, given the progress that was visible throughout the city—the new recreation centers, the turnaround of once struggling neighborhoods, and, yes, the improvements in the schools. Three and a half years ago, when I first met with Fenty about becoming chancellor of the D.C. public-school system, I had warned him that he wouldn't want to hire me. If we did the job right for the city's children, I told him, it would upset the status quo—I was sure I would be a political problem. But Fenty was adamant. He said he would back me—and my changes—100 percent. He never wavered, and I convinced myself the public would see the progress and want it to continue. But now I have no doubt this cost him the election.



Michelle Rhee

The timing couldn't have been more ironic. The new movie "Waiting for Superman" – which aimed to generate public passion for school reform the way "An Inconvenient Truth" had for climate change – premiered in Washington the night after the election. The film championed the progress Fenty and I had been making in the District, and lamented the roadblocks we'd faced from the teachers' union. In the pro-reform crowd, you

could feel the shock that voters had just rejected this mayor and, to some extent, the reforms in their schools.

When I started as chancellor in 2007, I never had any illusions about how tough it would be to turn around a failing system like D.C.'s; the city had gone through seven chancellors in the 10 years before me. While I had to make many structural changes—overhauling the system for evaluating teachers and principals, adopting new reading and math programs, making sure textbooks got delivered on time—I believed the hardest thing would be changing the culture. We had to raise the expectations that people had about what was possible for our kids.

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