

Well, it *sounds* simple: Making Education about Children, Teachers, and Choice

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By Gary T. Smith

“I was a 37-year old Korean girl from Toledo, Ohio, who had never run a school, much less a school district. The good news was, when you are lying on the floor, there’s nowhere to fall.”

Michelle Rhee was also the brand-new chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public schools. From her position on the floor, she saw:

- “The D.C. public schools in 2006 were known as the lowest performing and most dysfunctional in the country.”
- “On the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) examination, which is the national gold standard test, we were dead last among all urban districts.”
- “When children came in to D.C. public schools as kindergartners they were about on par with other children who looked like them...from Cleveland, or Memphis, or Detroit. The problem was, the longer they stayed in our school district, the worse off they became.”
- “Only 8% of the eighth graders in the city’s schools were on grade level in mathematics – which meant 92% of our young people did not have the skills and knowledge to be productive members of society.”
- “If you were a ninth grader entering high school in our system, the likelihood you would graduate within four years and go to college was about 9%.”
- And to achieve all that...“We were spending more money per child than almost any other urban jurisdiction in the nation -- \$19,000 a year per child.”
- “Of the \$1 billion we had for education, I quickly realized that only \$403 million was actually going down to the school level.”
- “The district’s three distribution centers were filled with books, computers, and classroom supplies that for years had been ordered and not delivered to classrooms. There was no plan to deliver it and no accountability. That is when we realized we had a problem.”

With those realizations as her starting point, Rhee rejected the status quo, and fast. “We were able to change the culture to focus on students, to ensure there was accountability for what we were delivering. After just two years, D.C. went from being the lowest performing



school district on the NAEP to being the fastest growing district on nationally recognized standardized tests, and it (has) remained that way for the last eight years.”

Three key lessons

Rhee told the Rotarians the three biggest lessons she learned were:

1. “We have to respect teachers for the incredibly difficult job they do. Effective teachers can make all the difference in children’s lives, even when children come to school with significant challenges. But the bottom line is we are not creating an environment in which great teachers want to stay. Unless and until we change the dynamic around the teaching profession, we will not be successful.”
2. “We have to have choice for families and competition in the school system. For four decades, student enrollment had been declining. When we embraced choice and empowered parents, and we also used that as leverage to improve our own program, enrollment started going up and since that time has continued to go up.”
3. “We need to stop having (partisan) conversations and start making policies for our children. We have school board members, state legislators, and so on who want to make policies for other people’s children they would never accept for their own.”



In the Q & A, Rhee was asked “When can you come to Seattle?” She replied, “There are lots of educators who I think would be very interested in coming to a place like Seattle. I will say this though – **when you have a dysfunctional school board that cannot agree on the vision and how we’re going to get there, you are going to count out a whole lot of people** who would rather go to a smaller district with less politics (where they can) concentrate more on the work and less on managing the board. So, that’s one of the things you’ve got to do first and foremost.”

Political Courage

Rhee said her experience shows “it absolutely is possible to effect really dramatic and systemic change in a short period of time. What it takes is committed leadership, political courage, and people like you who are willing to have reasonable, respectful conversations to put kids’ interests first. I am telling you there is no end to what can be accomplished.”

In other Valentine’s Day program activities, **Tom Mesaros** delivered the invocation and **Jimmy Collins**, accompanied by **Marli Iverson**, led the club in “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” President **Mark** delivered a memorial for member **Chuck Holmes**. He also let members know that member **Ken Martin** had just passed away. Finally, he advised that **Tom Jaffa** is at Harborview recovering from a stroke. **Corinne Cavanaugh** introduced prospective members. **Don Kraft** introduced speaker Michelle Rhee.