



Rhee

Steve Johnson

# Lesson Plans

**IN LATE OCTOBER 2008, MICHELLE RHEE, CHANCELLOR OF DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS, DISCUSSED WHY TEACHERS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ANY CLASSROOM.**

Michelle Rhee is a lightning rod for the teachers' unions, lauded by parents, and trusted by the mayor. The outspoken DC public schools chancellor was the featured guest at a Washington Leadership Series roundtable discussion at the Institute's DC, headquarters last fall to discuss everything from teachers' salaries to No Child Left Behind. The series is supported by donors Liz Dubin and Michelle Smith.

## On What Teaching Taught Her:

I was a Teach for America corps member placed in inner-city Baltimore, in one of the lowest-performing schools and had a life-altering experience through being a corps member. I team-taught with another teacher. We brought 70 kids together in one classroom, and saw a group of kids move from, on average, the 13th percentile on nationally recognized standardized tests to—at the end of the second year—the 90th percentile and above. And, through that experience, I realized that this is all about the teachers. For those 70 kids, the neighborhood that they lived in didn't change, their home lives didn't change, who their parents were, their diets, the violence in the community, all of the things that people say are the reasons why poor minority kids can't achieve at the highest levels—none of those things changed.

What changed was the adults who were in front of them every single day in the classroom. And so I became obsessed with this idea that, if we are going to really change the quality of public education in this country, it's going to be about high-quality teachers. So ... I started the New Teacher Project, [which places high-performing teachers in low-performing schools]. And, through that experience, I not only grew a national nonprofit organization, but I saw firsthand how public school districts operate in such a way on a day-to-day basis that they actually discourage the best teaching candidates from wanting to come in and teach in their districts and be placed in the highest-need schools.

## On Paying for Performance:

I do think that we stand at the crux of a situation that will be a defining moment in public education. The biggest complaint about being a teacher in this country—and particularly in an urban district—is: Teachers don't get paid enough. And we will [soon] have a proposal on the table that will essentially double people's salaries.

[Unfortunately,] that has the potential of not being even taken for a vote. Or, potentially, if it's taken for a vote, voted down, because of the fundamental culture that is based on the refusal of people to be held accountable for the jobs that they're doing every day, and the fear that surrounds the idea that we would measure your effectiveness in the classroom by the student-achievement results of your kids. [We want to] remove poor-performing [teachers] from the classroom and significantly incent and reward the highest-performing teachers. But all of the fears and the issues that this plan brings to the fore—about differentiation amongst the teacher force,



Trustee Ann B. Friedman at the roundtable discussion with Rhee.

Steve Johnson

**“We’re going to identify ineffective teachers, and we’re going to quickly remove them from the system. Who wants to argue with me about that?”**

identifying low performers for removal, and the idea of tenure—[it may be] that the teachers just aren't willing to give those things up, even if given the most attractive pay package that you could possibly imagine.

#### On the Definition of an Effective Teacher:

One of the questions that I ask every principal is: How many ineffective teachers do you have in your school? I asked this one particular principal, and she said, “None.” And I said, “OK, so only 20 percent of your children are operating on grade level, but all of your teachers are effective? That doesn't make any sense to me. ... You must be saying that it's the kids' fault, if the teachers are all doing a crackerjack job.” And she said, “I have a lot of teachers who, when they want to teach a good lesson, they can do that.” And I said, “That is not the definition of an effective teacher. Someone who can put on the dog-and-pony show

when the structured observation is happening is not a good teacher. What an effective teacher is, is someone who you can see measurable progress, the data actually aligns to what your evaluation is of that person.” And it was a completely foreign concept to her, that we would be assessing the effectiveness of the teacher in that way.

Another principal and I had the same conversation, and he gave the same answer, “None.” ... I said, “Let me just ask you a question: Would you put your granddaughter in that person's classroom?” And he said, “Well, if that's the standard, then I don't have any effective teachers in my school.” And I said, “That is the standard, because we cannot expect less of any of the teachers in your school than what you would want for your granddaughter. That is the standard that we have to have for every single child in this system.”

I don't understand what all the hulloaloo is about removing ineffective

teachers. I'm not saying that we're going to pull names out of a hat and fire people. I'm saying that we're going to identify poor performers, ineffective teachers, and we're going to quickly and efficiently remove them from the system. Who wants to argue with me about that?

#### On No Child Left Behind:

I'm a big fan of No Child Left Behind. I met with some of Senator Kennedy's staff the other day and said, “Please just don't gut the law.” I've been hearing a lot from Dems on the Hill, who say that they want to roll back those sanctions and that sort of thing. And I'll tell you, as a leader of an urban school district, No Child Left Behind is one of the most powerful tools that we have in this district to drive education reform—serious education reform.

#### On Charter Schools:

We need to identify the schools that are working and proliferate those, and we need to close down the schools that are not working, whether they be charter schools or DCPS schools or private schools. We want to increase the number of effective schools that we have in this city. ♦