

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH MICHELLE RHEE

SUBJECT: RHEE WILL SPEAK ABOUT NATIONAL EDUCATION REFORM AND HER DRIVE TO FIX THE DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

MODERATOR: SYLVIA SMITH, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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SYLVIA SMITH: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon. My name is Sylvia Smith. I'm the Washington editor of the Ft. Wayne *Journal Gazette* and president of the National Press Club.

We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists. And on behalf of our 3,500 members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our luncheon guests today. I'd also like to welcome those who are watching on C-Span or listening on XM Satellite Radio.

We celebrate our 100th anniversary this year, and have rededicated ourselves to a commitment to the future of journalism through informative programming, journalism education, and fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterward, I'll ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during that speech so we have as much time for questions as possible.

I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from guests and members of the general public who attend our luncheons, not necessarily from the working press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. From your right, Paul Page, editor-in-chief of *Traffic World*, who has a daughter in third grade at Murch Elementary School and a son in fifth grade at Washington Latin School, a charter school; John Hughes, a reporter at Bloomberg, and parent of two students at Capital City Public Charter School; Jeff Dufour, columnist for *The Washington Examiner*; Sarah Sparks, a reporter for *Education Daily*; Shawn Branch, executive assistant to the chancellor, and guest of the speaker; Jessica Brady, a reporter at *Roll Call*.

Skipping over myself, Angela Greiling-Keane of Bloomberg News, the chairwoman of the Speakers Committee and a parent of a D.C. public school student. We'll skip over our speaker. Joe Anselmo, senior business editor at *Aviation Week* and organizer of today's lunch (thanks, Joe) and host of an exchange student from Germany who attends Wilson High School.

Peggy O'Brien, director of communications for D.C. public schools and a guest of the speaker; Wright Bryan, a producer for NPR's website, NPR.org, and a parent of D.C. public school student at Peabody early childhood center on Capitol Hill; Sarah Holt, media director of Alliance for Excellent Education; and John Donnelly, a report for *Congressional Quarterly*, vice chairman of the Press Club's board of governors. And his daughter Sophia is a student Watkins Elementary School on Capitol Hill. Welcome to everyone. (Applause.)

When Adrian Fenty was elected Mayor of Washington, residents had good reason to be wary of his promise to take over and reform the city's troubled school system. For years, decades actually, a succession of superintendents and school boards had made similar promises and failed. Despite a budget that rivaled those in the city's well-heeled suburb, the system was plagued with low test scores, rotting buildings, low teacher morale, and a dysfunctional central office where student needs were often secondary.

A big signal that Mayor Fenty's reform campaign would be different came on June 12th, 2007. That's when he announced his unconventional choice of Michelle Rhee to run the system. Rhee had devoted her career to improving the education of inner city children, first as a teacher in Baltimore, and then as founder of the New Teacher Project, a national non-profit organization that recruits teachers for hard to staff inner city schools.

But she was young, 37, relatively unknown, and a Korean-American woman who would be managing an urban system where a majority of the 50,000

students are African-American. Granted virtually unilateral power by Fenty, Rhee has put change into motion at a breathtaking pace. She closed nearly two dozen under-enrolled schools, overhauled others that ranked low academically, and fired nearly 50 principals she considered poor performers, including the principle of the school where she enrolled her two daughters.

Meanwhile, chancellor Rhee is pressing ahead with a plan that would link teacher pay with performance. Teachers whose students posted significant learning gains would earn up to \$131,000 dollars a year, but seniority protections would be eliminated. Rhee has also proposed a pilot program that would pay middle school students up to \$100 dollars a month for attending school, turning in homework on-time, and behaving properly.

These radical reforms and her accessibility (she regularly attends community meetings and answers a lot of her own email) have won her many admirers. Her efforts have been written about by newspapers, magazines, and editorial boards around the nation, including a recent four-page profile in *Newsweek*.

But she's also drawn her share of flak. A recent *Washington Post* profile called her, "Perhaps the most polarizing figure in district government," and notes that the principals union is accusing her of racism, sexism, and ageism in her firings.

Chancellor Rhee grew up in Toledo, Ohio. She graduated from Cornell University in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in government and from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government with a masters degree in public policy. Please welcome to the National Press Club podium, chancellor Michelle Rhee. (Applause.)

MICHELLE RHEE: Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here today. Usually I travel on my own. And today, I have several staff members with me because they are absolutely terrified that I'm going to come to the National Press Club, actually do what I normally do, which is speak my mind about things. They're, like, "We know you do that in the office. Could you please not do that out in public, and in particular, in front of the press?"

But I am not going to listen to them particularly today. I'm going to be myself and talk about things from my perspective the way that I normally do. Because what I find is that 99% of the people actually really appreciate that. A few weeks ago, I was talking to a group somewhere, and I said that I had learned a lot about leadership in the last 15 months. And I said, and one of the things that I had learned was the fact that cooperation, collaboration, consensus building, and compromise were totally overrated. (Laughter.)

And when I said that, I actually got slammed a little bit in the press for it. So I thought that it was a natural thing for me to talk a little bit about why I made that comment, and explain a little bit about it.

It's been a very interesting 15 months for me in this job, probably the most fascinating 15 months a person could possibly have. But I want to talk a little bit about those sort of concepts within the context of this job in Washington, D.C. So the first is around cooperation.

So one of the first things that was brought to my attention when I started this job was the fact that we had hundreds of paraprofessionals amongst our ranks who had not been able to meet highly qualified status according to No Child Left Behind. So this was a huge problem, because we had educators, both paraprofessionals and teachers, who had not met highly qualified status. But it was a particular problem for the paraprofessionals because there was very sort of little idea about, well, could we find paraprofessionals to fill these positions, and that sort of thing.

I sat down and met with the para union. The folks said, you know, "Look – we feel like our people did not really know or understand what they needed to do to become highly qualified. We really feel like, you know, we want one more year." And, you know, I talked to my staff about this. This was right before school was going to open. There was no way we were going to be able to find high quality replacements in that timeframe. You know?

The sort of union officials assured us that if we worked in cooperation with one another, we could make sure that all these people would get highly qualified over the course of this year, so. We put a lot of money into making sure that people could take classes, and that sort of thing, and came up against the deadline this year. And there were still several hundred people who did not meet the status that we had terminated.

And all yearlong, we'd been sending letters out. We'd been sending reminders. You know, everyone knew that this, you know, had to happen. And sure enough, the moment that we had to move those people out of the system, there was an injunction filed against us. And I thought to myself, wait a second. We've been talking about this all yearlong. We're cooperating on this, right? What happened?

And so when our general counsel came back from court, I said, "So what did they say? Because I really want to know if we've been talking about this all yearlong and everybody knew the ramifications, what possibly could be the rationalization here?" And he said, "Well, the best argument was when they said,

‘You know, people have been telling us for years that the non-highly qualified paraprofessionals were going to have to go. And it never happened. We didn’t actually think she was going to do it’,” which I didn’t think was a particularly high quality argument, but won nonetheless.

So that was one sort of that taught me that sometimes, even when you have the best intentions, the cooperation doesn’t always play out the way you want it to.

The second concept, collaboration. So, one of the things that was probably the most difficult thing that we went through last year was the school closing process. We, last year, had about 50,000 students in our school district. And we had 144 schools, far too many schools for the population of students that we had. For 50,000 students, you should probably be running about half as many schools as we have.

And what it resulted in was the fact that we were not operating as efficiently as we could have, because if you have school buildings that have, you know, 85 to 100 kids in it, you can’t run an effective school. You can barely afford six teachers and a principal with 85 kids in the building. So we went through this process to close 23 of our schools, 15% of our inventory, more schools than have ever been closed in a school district in a single year.

And we got a lot of flak from folks who said, everyone knew that you had to close down schools, but we did not like the process that you went through. It should have been a more collaborative process. So as we went through the several-month time period, you know, I sort of thought, well, I actually think that it went as smoothly as it could have. We got as much community input, you know, as we could have in this period of time. But we kept still hearing, “No, didn’t have enough collaboration.” So it was something that was sort of sticking in my mind.

And I went actually to another city where lots of different school district officials were. And this woman sat me down. She said, “You went through a very interesting school closing process.” And I said, “Yes.” And I sort of explained to her. And she said, “We, in my district, went through exactly the opposite process.” She said, “We spent at least eighteen months. We sat down with community members. We all jointly came up with the criteria by which the list was going to be created. We got input on that criteria. We met over and over and over again.” She’s, like, “For eighteen months we did this. And then after all of this collaboration, we dropped the list of schools that met all of those criteria,” she said, “...and people went ballistic.”

And we said, “Wait a second. All the people who came to all of our meetings and sat and created the criteria together,” said, “Wait a second, we created this criteria together.” And the people said, “Yeah, but we didn’t know it was going to impact *our* schools.” So, you know, the lesson there is that you-- it’s very hard to imagine a process where we’re going to say, “We have to close down 23 schools. Who wants to volunteer to close theirs?” It’s not necessarily something where people are going to come together and it’s going to be a process that we can come out of it and everyone is going to be happy with it.

But what we did, despite the fact that a lot of people said that we didn’t get sort of community input, we did really go out and hear what people had to say, and did get a lot of feedback from folks that made a lot of sense to us, and that did impact our decisions at the end of the day. But I think, you know, the lesson for me was that, whether you take 18 months to do something or, you know, a few weeks to do something, when you’re talking about something as difficult as school closures, you are never going to get to a point where everyone is going to be happy with how you did that.

The next one, the next concept, consensus building. You mentioned that we moved a significant number of principals out of the system between last school year and this school year. And one of the principals was the principal at my own children’s school. And that was one probably that I got the most flak for, both internally, in my own household, and other places. But it was interesting because I, you know, was called to a huge community meeting at my children’s school after this announcement was made. And hundreds of parents were sort of sitting there, and, you know, lots of them yelling and, you know, some of them sort of just confused about why something had happened.

And it was interesting because one of the sort of overarching thoughts that people had was-- They said, “Well, you know, you didn’t tell us about this. You didn’t engage us in the process.” And I thought that was interesting, because I go in and out of that school three days a week. I talk to lots of different parents, and everyone trusts me, is always giving me their opinion about the various things that are going on in the school. And so I had actually heard a lot of these, on very different sides of the argument.

But what I said at the end of the day to these parents was, I don’t make personnel decisions by consensus or by committee. So I’m not going to take a vote at the end of the day and say, “Who wants to keep this principal? And who doesn’t want to”-- That’s not how we have to run the school. My job is to hear all of the insights that people might have, and at the end of the day, make the decisions that I think is going to be in the best interest of the school.

People didn't like that answer so much. But interestingly enough-- And mostly because people also didn't have the same perspective on the situation that I did. We had been running a full-fledged, a very aggressive principal recruitment campaign nationally. And we saw the pool of people that had put applications in. So we really knew that there were tremendously talented people who could come into the system, into these leadership roles, that I could see that. And obviously there were a lot of people in the system who couldn't necessarily see that.

But what was interesting to me was that-- It was about a week into the school year when the parents who were probably screaming the loudest at me at that community meeting came up later and said, "We had no idea how much difference a new principal could make. This is a vastly different school. And it's, you know, for the better." So that was-- just sort of taught me a little bit about sort of, you know, consensus building or not, you've got to get people's input into things and you have to hear those insights, but at the end of the day, can't necessarily drive the decision making because there are lots of things to take into consideration.

The last is compromise. And this is something that people say all the time: "She's not willing to compromise. She's not willing to compromise." And there are probably some people on my staff who would agree with that remark. But I think it's a very difficult concept to think of that within the context of public education and when you're talking about kids, this idea of compromise. One very obvious area that you would think I would need to compromise in is this area around the teachers union contract. A lot of people are talking about it, not only in the city, but outside of the city nationally.

And people are wondering, "What's going to happen with the teachers union contract?" And people say to me all the time, "Well, you just need to-- It's been more than a year that the teachers have been working without a contract. You just need to compromise. You need to come to a resolution with the union. And you need to move on so we can all come to closure."

And the fascinating thing is that this is not, at the end of the day, what my endgame is. Because when you are talking about a contract or a collective bargaining agreement that has provisions in it, that I do not believe are in the best interest of children, that I'm going to be in a position where I refuse to sign my name to a document that I think does not do the right thing for kids. This is not me staking a negotiating position and then not giving. This is me being absolutely unwilling to compromise when it comes to the rights and futures of our kids.

And I think part of the problem is that people in the past have compromised when it comes to those things. And when you're talking about the

education of kids, it's not something to be compromised, to settle a contract, in my mind.

So those are a little of the things that I've learned about those four 'C' words. Now, please don't go and write about how the chancellor does not believe in compromise, consensus building, and cooperation, because that is not at all the point. I say this all a bit tongue in cheek. But what I do want to say is that, you know, if those things are what drive your agenda every day, then it's very difficult sometimes to actually do the work that needs to get done, and to make some of the difficult decisions that need to be made. If what my mindset was every day was, "How do I keep everyone happy? How do I keep everyone feeling involved," et cetera, there is no way that we would have been able to move at the pace that we have moved this year. And that would have meant, quite frankly, less movement and less progress for the kids, which I am not willing to compromise on.

So, you know, what I believe is that sometimes instead of sort of being mired in all that, you have to lead from the front. Sometimes you really have to be able to see and show people things that they might not necessarily be able to see from their perspective. I'll say this one last thing from the school closing process. I recently went to one of the schools that was a receiving school for a school that closed. I was walking in the lunchroom and a woman came up to me. She said, "You probably remember me." She's, like, "Because I was at all of the school closing meetings and I was always screaming at you because I did not want you to close our school."

She said, "You know what? You made the right decision." And I was, like, "Wow." I literally was shocked that this woman would actually find me enough to say that, and was beginning to smile when I feel this little tug on my sleeve. And it was this little first grader who said, "I agree. This school is so much better than my other school was."

So just sort of goes to show that sometimes through this process and sometimes, you know, the processes that people think are very difficult can result in the right outcomes that ultimately, even though people couldn't see that, that time, they can see it at a later date.

So all this, again, for me is about how to lead from the front, how to create the vision that we need to have for the school district. I do want to say this, that there is no way that we would be able to do the work that we do every day without the leadership of Adrian Fenty. This man is someone who, through the last 15 months, through all of the difficulties, through all of the things that most politicians just hate-- I mean, they hate when you, you know, wreak havoc and sort of have a lot of movement and do things that are unpopular because then their

phones start ringing off the hook. This man has not blinked once through this entire process. His sole goal is to make sure that the schools have everything that we need to be successful.

And, you know, he has not cared at all about the politics of it. That is incredibly, incredibly unusual. And I will say this from my perspective, people have asked me a lot in the last 15 months, “Well, how have you been able to do everything that you’ve done? And what makes you so aggressive about this?” And what I will say is that there is nothing particularly special about me. I have colleagues across this country in school districts everywhere who want to do the same types of things that I did, they just don’t have the political backing of a mayor who is willing to push all of these reforms at the pace that we have.

And I will say, you know, from Mike Bloomberg to Daley in Chicago and Menino in Boston, all of those mayors also have mayoral control. And they have great superintendents. But I can tell you that none of those mayors even come close to holding a candle to Adrian Fenty in terms of the support that he has given the schools. That’s the only reason why we’ve been able to move in the way that we’ve been able to. And I believe that that is the kind of leadership that’s needed at the national level as well when it comes to education, education reform.

If what we’re trying to do is to placate people and keep everyone happy, then we’re not going to see the radical reforms that we need for children in this country. And you have to look at the situation that we are in now. People all the time ask me, they say, “Well, you know, as a nation, we are the wealthiest nation, you know, in the world, and you particularly are, in the nation’s-- What’s wrong with public education today?”

And what I often tell people is if you look at Washington, D.C. and what’s happening in Washington, D.C., it’s a microcosm of the problems that exist nationwide in the education system. But we have a circumstance right now where we have about 50,000 children in the system. And we are the only school district in the country that is on high risk status with the U.S. Department of Education. We have about a 70 percentage point achievement gap between our wealthy white students and our poor minority students at the secondary level in some subject areas — 70 percentage points. Of all ninth graders who begin school with us, only nine percent of them graduate from college within five years. Of our eighth graders, only 12% of them are proficient in reading, and only eight percent of them are proficient in math according to the NAPE(?) exam.

The most recent data that I’ve gotten, which is incredibly jarring, shows that our kindergarteners actually come in and their achievement levels are relatively comparable to kindergarteners in other jurisdictions. And as they go through the district, their learning outcomes worsen. And by the time they’re in

the third grade, it's incredibly disparate. So essentially we have a system that the longer you are going to DCPS, the worse off you are. We are doing you a disservice every day by you coming to school. You're further and further behind.

So you might look at all that and say, "My gosh, is there any hope?" There absolutely, *absolutely* is hope. There is no doubt in my mind. I'm extraordinarily confident that we have everything that it will take to turn the school district around and turn it into the highest performing urban school district in this country, and to completely close the achievement gap between white students and their poor minority counterparts. We have seen this through this system already. So if you look at the achievement just in one year, what we've been able to do, we saw an eight percentage point gain in elementary reading last year, eleven percent in math, at the secondary levels, nine percent each in reading and math.

And for the first time since NCLB has been implemented our black students, our Hispanic students, and our poor students actually met AYP. We managed to close the achievement gap by eleven percent, both between Hispanic and white students and between black and white students, all in one year.

And I'm going to close on this. We have unbelievably motivated and hardworking teachers, principals, and parents who are working incredibly diligently every single day to make sure that our kids are getting a great education.

I want to point out one example. At Raymond Elementary in the district, last year, they saw a 26% gain in reading and a 33% gain in math in one year, which is just unbelievable. And when we were talking to the principal and the teachers there, and we sort of asked, "Well, how did you do this? What did you implement?" one of the things the principal said was, "We had every single adult in this building working with groups of kids, tutoring kids, to make sure that no kid fell through the cracks." So every child who was not on grade level got assigned to one of these tutors. And these tutors would meet with the kids all the time.

We heard the story about the custodian who was the most diligent of all of the people. I mean, he would have his little group of kids together every single minute that he can, so much so that the kids were, like, "Don't you have to clean the building or something? I mean, you always have us here. We want to go outside." But this was the kind of dedication that we had, from not just the teachers who did a phenomenal job, but also every single adult in that building just focused on the same end result.

And what the ultimate result there was, was just an enormous gain. So we absolutely believe it can be done. We know that we have what it takes. And under

the leadership of the mayor and the willingness, I think, to make the hard calls that are necessary, we know that we're going to be able to turn this school system around. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: Thank you so much. We have just tons and tons of questions. The first question is, what percentage of D.C. teachers do you think would take up your higher pay versus tenure proposal? And has this been tried elsewhere? And where did you get the idea?

MS. RHEE: Good question. In terms of the percentage-- So just a little bit of background for folks who may not know, we have a proposal on the table to radically change our teachers union contract. And part of the proposal calls for differentiated compensation system where we would have a red tier and a green tier. If a teacher chooses the green tier, they would have the possibility to make almost, actually, in some cases, more than twice as much as they're making now in bonuses and incentives based on the performance of their students.

So people are often asking me, "What percentage of people do you think are going to go green versus stay red?" We actually don't have any idea of that, nor does it essentially really matter ultimately. If people think that red is the way to go, we want to encourage them to do that. If they really think that they want to go on green, we want to encourage that as well. In either scenario, we're going to ensure that the resources are there to support that.

Based on my, you know, sort of straw poll of when I'm out there, I'd say that it's sort of falling about 50/50 in terms of people who feel very, very adamantly that green is the way to go versus people who are a little sort of more, I'd say tentative about things. They don't know necessarily how things are going to work. And those people are saying that they want to stay on red. They'd want to see how it plays out and see how it goes, and then they'll make the decision from there.

Has this been tried elsewhere? No, it has not. We will be piloting this contract and it will be the first of its kind anywhere in the nation. The idea actually came from teachers, people who said, "You know what? We are tired of being in a system that does not recognize, reward, and value people for the incredibly hard work they're doing every single day." And there is nothing more difficult than being an effective teacher in an urban classroom, nothing more difficult than that. And I feel that, you know, the people who are doing that and serving our kids well should be the most highly compensated educators in this country.

MS. SMITH: What is the likelihood that your capital gains projects to pay students an allowance for good grades, turning in their homework, and

behaving well will be enacted, especially if funding has to come from the city's budget?

MS. RHEE: So we have already begun implementation of the capital gains program. The money is not coming from local funds. Half of it is coming from our partner, which is the Innovation Lab at Harvard, and half of it is coming from monies outside of the local funds for DCPS. So we are moving forward with that initiative. It's very interesting, because I've gotten, you know, some decent sort of volume of emails and calls from people saying, you know, "Well, it's a sad day when you have pay kids to do the things that they should have been doing anyways."

What I remark is, yesterday was a sad day when we weren't doing anything about the incredibly low achievement levels of the kids. And I will say that at the school level, they think that this is the greatest idea that we've ever come up with. The teachers and the students, the parents are very excited about the program.

MS. SMITH: When you say half the money is coming from outside the school budget, where is that money coming from?

MS. RHEE: That will come from privately raised dollars.

MS. SMITH: Has the money been raised?

MS. RHEE: Yes.

MS. SMITH: Is there any obligation attached to that privately raised money?

MS. RHEE: No.

MS. SMITH: Questioner says, please tell us more about the changes to enrollment boundaries and the rules that you want to undertake next year.

MS. RHEE: So the boundaries in DCPS have not been redrawn, or sort of enrollment patterns have not been looked at in a way that we're sort of assigning home schools to every household in the district in more than two decades. So it's high time that we do that. In fact, we were talking here at the table and someone said, you know, "Did you know that there's a street in Capitol Hill that is zoned to Wilson Senior High School?" And that actually doesn't surprise me at all. A lot of the way that our boundaries are drawn don't make a lot of sense right now.

We were hoping to take this on for this year. We actually decided to push it off a year because there was less predictability than we would have guessed in where the students from our closed schools actually ended up in school this fall. So we want to let that shake out through this fall, understand where all the kids are actually enrolled now, and then take that process on moving forward.

MS. SMITH: You mentioned that you wouldn't sign a contract that you didn't feel was adequate for the students. Isn't that basically nullification of the collective bargaining system in the U.S.?

MS. RHEE: So there are processes in place for all of this. The bottom line is that I, you know, as the leader of this district and as the representative, ultimately of the children of this district, can't sign onto an agreement willingly that I believe does not serve their best interests. I just won't do it. I know that's not a popular stance with some people. But it is what I believe needs to happen in order for us as a community to understand that--

I mean, when we are allowing the rights and privileges and priorities of adults to drive things that will result in not the best outcomes for a school program or for kids, that is something that I can't accept. There are processes in place, though. If we reach an impasse, then it will go to arbitration. And that's all a part of what everyone knows of how, you know, contracts get bargained.

MS. SMITH: Should those contracts have much more focus on education achievements, educational skills, classroom performance, and so forth, as opposed to the traditional things that one finds in a collective bargaining agreement, which is wages and hours?

MS. RHEE: So this is really what we are hoping to do with the contract, is to have much less focus on the input differentials — so, you know, if you have a masters degree or a Ph.D., and that sort of thing, and paying much less attention to that and putting much more attention in terms of compensation on the outcomes. So are students actually learning? Is this teacher moving kids from Point A to Point B? Because we have teachers who really are doing unbelievable things in the classroom. A lot of our teachers teach children who are operating two, three, four grade levels below where they should be, and make phenomenal progress with their group of children. If you're moving your kids two or three grade levels in one year, a teacher is doing that, I mean, that is really a heroic act. And we have to recognizing and rewarding the teachers who are seeing those kinds of outcomes for their kids, and to really make sure that people understand that when you are delivering results for kids, then you are going to be rewarded properly.

MS. SMITH: Questioner says, how do you assess No Child Left Behind? Every program can be tweaked, but should Congress repeal it?

MS. RHEE: It's a great question. I am actually a fan of No Child Left Behind. I think that it does something that was long sort of needed in public education, which is it brings accountability to this system. And that it ensures that if you are a school that is not seeing progress with your students or with groups, subgroups of students, that that is actually pointed out, and that you, you know, are not shown as making the adequate progress necessary.

I do, as in all things, think that there are some tweaks that could be made that would strengthen the law. So for example, I think that the way that we measure the progress of our limited English proficiency students or our special education students should be looked at very carefully. I believe that instead of, you know, looking at highly qualified teachers based on the credentials that they bring to the table, allowing teachers to show over a period of time that they're effective in the classroom, so moving from highly qualified to highly effective teachers. Those are some of the tweaks that I think need to be made.

But I would be very, very concerned if there was any repeal of the law. Or I heard someone on the Hill saying that sanctions should not be implemented over the course of this time when we're trying to reauthorize the law. I think that that would be extraordinarily detrimental as well, because I think that the one thing that is incredibly important to ensure is going on in public education is that we're holding people accountable for seeing results for kids.

MS. SMITH: If you were going to make tweaks with respect to students whose first language is not English or students who are special needs students, what would those measurements be?

MS. RHEE: So I think that, for example, for limited English proficient kids, depending on their proficiency in English, I don't think we should have a lower bar for them. But I do think we have to think about the timeframe over which we expect them to be completely proficient in English. So that just sort of makes sense. Do you expect that a kid who just came into the country, you know, within nine months of schooling is going to be proficient in English? That's not necessarily a realistic expectation. For special education students, at the end of the day, I think it's very confusing for educators to have an IEP that legally articulates what success looks like for that child, and then have a law that articulates something else. So I think at the end of the day for special education students, it's the IEP that should determine whether or not that students has met mastery in skills or not.

MS. SMITH: And IEP of course is individual education plan. Thank you. How do you address the problem of absent or uninvolved parents?

MS. RHEE: You know, this is a question that I get a lot. I have people often sort of say to me, you know, “You can do everything that you are saying, and still not see any progress because you can’t control the most important thing, which is what’s going on in the home or what’s going on outside of the school day and out of the school building.”

And while it’s absolutely true, that what’s happening to our students outside of school will have a significant impact on them, those are things I can’t control. And we can’t advocate responsibility of the education of our kids merely because of what is going on in these places. If that was the case, then we could all sort of just throw up our hands and say, “Well, there’s no way we’re going to ever change the learning outcomes for kids until we change or solve poverty.”

And I actually think it’s the other way around. I don’t think we’re going to solve the problem of poverty until we solve the problem of education in this country. What we know is that in individual classrooms and in individual schools across this city that there are unbelievable educators who ensure that, despite all of the challenges that kids come to school with, that they overcome every single one of those challenges to ensure that their kids are learning. So we have to take personal responsibility as district administrators, as building principals, and as classroom teachers to make sure that that is happening. We see it over and over again. We know it can happen. But it’s not for everyone. It really isn’t.

I mean, I do think it takes a different kind of person with a very specific mentality, someone who says, “You know what? Despite all of these challenges, I know that my kids can achieve. I might have to do things differently. I might have to work a little longer. I might have to, you know, have my kids on weekends, whether it might be to get there.”

And that’s why, you know, a lot of times I say that we have to change the sort of culture in the city to people understanding that it’s not-- You know, we’re not going to start blaming all these external factors and sort of leave it there at the schoolhouse door, but really, you know, people who are going to work in this system, at least under me, have to understand that we’re going to hold people accountable, you know, despite those things.

I will also say this, though. We are taking significant steps with the city to make sure that we are providing additional support services for the kids in our schools. So we know that when kids come to school with significant socio, emotional problems, that can, you know, hamper their ability to be able to focus and concentrate in school, that if we can provide these supports, that their

schooling experience can be much more productive. So we're running a pilot this year in eight of our highest need middle schools in the city where we're bringing in a lot of those support services in, social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, behavioral coaches, and those types of folks to help our neediest students be able to be set up for success in school.

MS. SMITH: This questioner says, you cited the poor achievement in dc schools and said there's hope of fixing it. But you haven't spelled out what the causes are and what should be done to fix that. It goes on to say, are closing schools and restructuring teacher incentives enough?

MS. RHEE: I don't think that closing schools and restructuring the teacher incentives or the teachers union contract is enough in and of itself. I think one of the sort of misconceptions out there is that there's going to be one idea that is going to solve the problem of public education in this country. I absolutely don't believe that that's going to be the case. It's not going to be, you know, one 100% solution. It's probably going to be 50, you know, 2% solutions. So closing the schools in order to have a more efficient and effective utilization of dollars, so that the dollars aren't being spent on, you know, air conditioning and lighting of half-filled buildings, but making sure that the money's going into the classroom, that is going to help the situation. Making sure that we are valuing and retaining our most effective teachers, that is certainly going to be part of the solution.

I mean, so, lots of the things that we're talking about in terms of, you know, student incentives and professional development for teachers and that sort of thing, all of those things, I think, are going to be part of the ultimate solution that we come to. So, I mean, I think it's important to note that there's sort of not one fix for this. In the same way, I also think it's important for people to understand, there's not one reason why we are in the situation that we're in either.

I will tell you this, though. I can tell you one very definitive thing that is not causing these problems, and that is our students. Too often, people sort of, you know, kind of say, "Well, the students, their parents aren't coming," or, "...they're not motivated," or, "...they're not"-- whether it might be. If you go into any single one of our schools, choose a student randomly, talk to them for 15 to 20 minutes, you can see that our kids have immense potential. There is nothing that these kids can't do, if we as educators in the system are doing our jobs.

So, I mean, we can sort of, you know, point to a lot of things that have led us to the situation that we're in now. But I can definitely say that it has not been about the kids.

MS. SMITH: How many more schools will be closed in the next two academic years?

MS. RHEE: So I don't have the exact answer to that question. What I will say is that we believe that the bulk of the school closings that were necessary were done last year. The master education, master facility plan that we inherited actually called for, I think, you know, three schools to be closed over the next six years, and that sort of thing. And what we decided was that if we knew that those schools were going to have to be closed, it was better to do it all in one year. So we did the bulk of them last year. There may be a few more that we'll have to do over the next couple years, but we don't anticipate that number being very large.

MS. SMITH: Several questions about the firing of the principals — this one says, what criteria did you use to determine they were underperformers?

MS. RHEE: So there were a number of things that we looked at for principals. And one of the things that we did when we came in last year was, we developed what we call a school data summary sheet. And on the sheet, basically wanted to be able to look at all the data, that in one place, would tell us how the school was doing. So obviously we looked at the achievement data for the time period that the principal had been in that particular school. And that weighed, you know, heavily into things. But we also value and want to look at things like teacher retention in that building. We want to look at parent satisfaction. We want to look at student satisfaction when it comes to the secondary levels. We also want to look at things like, you know, compliance with timely IEP completion, because we have a very significant special education problem in our city.

So there are multiple factors that we believe go into whether or not a principal is running an effective school. I think, you know, what we don't have is a rubric that says, you know, "We're going to judge you, and 20% is going to be achievement, and 10% is going to be parental participation," et cetera. Because sometimes a person will have a problem in one particular area that is so problematic that it means that they can't, regardless of what else-- what other skills they might have, they can't be effective in that building, in that job. And so obviously as with, really most employers out there, there is a bit of subjectivity to what we're doing every day.

MS. SMITH: There was a story in *The Post* today that talked about the vacancy, the teacher vacancies. And there was a dispute about the number. But several of the questioners have asked, does it make sense to let teachers go when there are that many vacancies in the system?

MS. RHEE: So glad you asked that question. This is what you get in the press when the press doesn't portray things accurately. Part of the issue is that we don't lack teachers right now in the system. Part of our problem is that we have too many teachers in some schools and not enough teachers in other schools. And

so we are going through the process right now called equalization, which every single district, school district goes through around this time of year. Because what we can't afford to do (which we did last year, and then it cost us several million dollars) is to hire teachers into those vacancies without-- and leaving, or holding harmless the schools that are under-enrolled.

Because what happens then is that it has a significant impact on your budget. One of the things that we want to make sure that we're doing is trying our best to live within our means, and to have a balanced budget. And that means that we have to look at what the enrollment trends are in a school, and make sure that the money is following the kids. It's not fair to schools that are over-enrolled or have, you know, more than what we thought their student enrollment was going to be to have larger class sizes, and then in some schools we've got class sizes of nine. We have to do that equalization. It's a part of sort of the day-to-day reality. So that's what we're doing right now, is moving teachers from the under-enrolled schools to the over-enrolled schools. And once we complete that, we anticipate that we won't have any vacancies.

And just for the record, a lot of information in that article this morning was just absolutely incorrect. For example, it said that Wilson High School has five vacancies. It actually has no classroom teacher vacancies, so. That's just my two cents. In fact, I wish I could come here every morning and clear the record. (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: Questioner wants to know, will you be able to proceed with the red and green plan, irrespective of the teachers union?

MS. RHEE: No. I have a diehard group of teachers who email me all the time and they really, really want the plan to go through. And they want to meet with me and they want to sort of, you know, talk about what they can do. I have to keep an arm's length from that. One of the things that they keep saying is, "Well, even if there's a group of people who don't want to do this, can those of us who want to do this go on the plan?" And I'm, like, "No, that's not how collective bargaining works."

So unfortunately, we're not going to be in a situation-- But in essence, we knew that some teachers would be sort of for this idea of incentives and greater rewards for, you know, putting their jobs on the line, and those who wouldn't. That's why we created this two-tier system. And I will say this, that when we first created the system, I mean, I just thought, "This is brilliant." Everybody's got a choice. If you don't want to go, you know, you don't think the incentives are good, you don't want to go on your probationary period, stay on red. And you're still going to make 28% more money. You're still going to make \$10,000 in

innovation stipends. You're going to make a whole lot more money. You're not going to give any of that stuff up. So stay on red.

And only if you want to go on green, and you know you can-- But we thought that having that choice was important, so everyone would know that this was sort of a fair process, right? And so when we came up with this plan, I thought, I am going to be the hero of the teachers of Washington, D.C. I was wrong. (Laughter.) People have come out and said, you know, "You're trying to be divisive. And you're trying to bust the union." No, none of those things are true, you know? What we were trying to do was to create a system where people had choices, where we were respecting teachers as professionals who have the ability to sort of wade through all of these things and make the decisions that are right for them.

So, you know, if you don't want to take the risk of that probationary year, you can still stay on red and make a whole lot more money. So that's the reason why we came up with the two-tier system to begin with, was because we wanted people to have that choice.

MS. SMITH: What do you think of charter schools? When D.C. parents choose a charter school, is that a commentary on public schools?

MS. RHEE: So I think I look at this issue a little bit differently than a lot of urban superintendents across the country. I am a fan of effective charter schools. I'm a fan of any school that serves children well. In fact, I believe that part of my job-- We have 100,000 school-aged children in the city of Washington, D.C. And my goal is to ensure that every single one of those kids is in a great school. I am much less concerned with what kind of a school it is, or, you know, "How do I increase my market share of kids" and that sort of thing. I want to make sure that every single kid is in a great learning environment.

All the time when I give speeches like this, people will come up to me afterwards and say, "I really like what you're doing. I really support your efforts. I sent my kid to a charter school." And they're embarrassed. And I always say to them, "Absolutely not." I mean, parents have to make the decisions for their children that they believe is right for that kid. They should not feel guilty about that. We have no right to sort of say to a parent, "Oh, you should be sending your kid to this school versus that"-- Absolutely not. The job of a parent is to determine, "Out of all the choices that exist, what environment is going to serve, you know, my child the best?"

And so what we want to do within DCPS is create incredibly compelling and effective options for parents out there so that those who do choose to send their child to a neighborhood or DCPS school have, you know, a choice of lots of

different, effective schools. That's what my goal is, not to shut down the charter schools or anything like that. Because again, you know, if-- I think at the end of the day, five years from now, people are going to be much less concerned, and there's going to be much less differentiation between what's a charter school and what's a DCPS school. I just think we're going to start to blur those lines tremendously.

MS. SMITH: You mentioned five years from now. That segues into the next question. How committed are you to keeping your position as chancellor for two Fenty terms? Would you be tempted to move to the Obama Administration if Senator Obama is elected President in November?

MS. RHEE: I don't think I'm going to be asked to move anywhere, because I've been a little-- Well, I've given some constructive criticism, I think, to both presidential campaigns. What I will say is this. I think that it's incredibly important to have longevity of leadership in an urban school district. And so I love my job. I think that I have the best job, literally, that a person could possibly have. And so my hope is to stay here as long as I possibly can. And yes, the mayor and I often talk about taking two terms to really truly transform the school system and the learning outcomes for kids.

I was talking to some of my table mates here. Someone said, "Well, congratulations on making it through your first year." And the folks in my office will tell you that on my one-year anniversary, I made the comment and I said, you know, "It does not feel like it's been a year. It feels like it's been three months, maximum." And someone said to me, "Well, that's very interesting, because on the blogs this morning, one of the advocates who doesn't like you said, 'Geez, has she only been here one year? It feels like she's been here for eight.'" So it's all just a matter of perspective.

MS. SMITH: This questioner says, is excellent grammar important anymore? One rarely hears it. Is the standard changing due to electronic communication, with shortcuts for spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure? Thank you for listening to I. (Laughter.)

MS. RHEE: I think having good grammar is still very important. I get lots of questions like this. You know, people say, "Well, is it really necessary to teach kids how to write in cursive anymore given the fact that by the time those kids grow up, you know, they probably won't be handwriting anything?" And, you know, I got an email from chancellor Klein this morning from New York City who-- You know, he sends probably hundreds of emails a day. And he's, like, "Okay, can you," you know, 'u', "...call me," you know, that sort of thing. So I think that shorthand and how we communicate now via email has just sort of, you know, permeated, you know, every aspect of where we are.

I think that for me anyways, you know, the kids can text message. And I can't even read those text messages because I don't even know what they all mean anymore. But certainly, you know, for a long time, there's been slang that kids use in one part of their life, and then sort of the proper grammar that they use in another. And obviously, I think, it's going to be important for kids to be multilingual.

MS. SMITH: We're almost out of time. But before asking the last question, a couple of important matters to take care of. First, let me remind our members of upcoming speakers. On Friday, we have James Glassman, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. He'll discuss the new age of public diplomacy. On October 7th, we have Christo and Jeanne-Claude, world renowned contemporary artists. And of course on October 23rd, we have Billy Joel.

And also, I would like to present you with the world famous National Press Club coffee mug. And for the last question, do you believe in being a role model for students? If so, how do you explain the Cheetos diet? (Laughter.)

MS. RHEE: Yes, I believe in being a role model for students. And I also believe that being a good role model is to tell young people what to do and what not to do. And so eating Cheetos for lunch is not something that I would highly recommend. But it is something that, in a pinch, it will get you through the lunch hour. Thank you.

MS. SMITH: Thank you very much. (Applause.) Thank you chancellor Rhee for coming today. We appreciate it very much. I'd also like to thank you for coming and thank the National Press Club staff members who coordinated today's event — Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, JoAnn Booz and Howard Rothman. Also thanks to the Press Club Library for its research.

A video archive of today's luncheon is available at the Broadcast Operations Studio. And you can reach that at www.archives.press.org. For more information about the Press Club, please visit us at www.press.org.

Thank you very much and we're adjourned. (Gavel sounds.)

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