

New chief seeks DC schools fix where others failed

By BRIAN WESTLEY – 8/24/08

WASHINGTON (AP) — She has shuttered 23 schools, fired more than 30 principals and given notice to hundreds of teachers and administrative workers.

Just a year on the job, District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee is making bold changes as she tries to accomplish what six would-be reformers in the past decade could not: rescue one of the nation's most dysfunctional school districts.

The hard-charging schools chief is unwavering in her belief that she can succeed. "My goal is to make D.C. the highest performing urban school system in the country," Rhee said as she prepared for the start of classes Monday.

It is an audacious task for the founder of a teacher-training organization who had no experience running even a single school when she arrived.

Rhee is an unconventional choice in other ways. The Korean-American is the first D.C. schools chief in nearly four decades who is not black. And at 38, the Ivy-League educated Rhee is one of nation's youngest leaders of a big urban school district.

She wants to fix a great injustice: the inability of America's public schools to educate students equally — particularly in the nation's capital.

Like many urban schools, Washington's are struggling to educate students amid poverty and violence. Students also have suffered because of entrenched cronyism, which has led to incompetent bureaucracy and fiscal mismanagement.

Although the district is among the nation's highest-spending school systems, its students rank near the bottom in reading and math proficiency. Schools have leaky roofs and broken fire sprinklers. Bathrooms are decrepit, with broken toilets and missing stall doors.

Not surprisingly, enrollment in the 49,000-student system is shrinking as parents move their children to charter schools, which are publicly funded but independently operated.

"People want Michelle Rhee to succeed because no one knows what's going to happen if she doesn't," said Mary Levy, who has been involved in the schools since her children enrolled in the 1970s.

Levy is wary, though. She has seen school chiefs arrive with great fanfare only to leave in exasperation. Army Lt. Gen. Julius Becton Jr. was tapped in 1996 by a presidentially appointed board. He quit after 18 months.

"I consider it the most difficult job I ever had," said Becton, who fought in three wars and was awarded two Purple Heart medals.

Urban education experts like Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, blame the mess in part on a long-running power struggle among local politicians, Congress and community activists.

"You've had so many varying actors ... pulling on the school system with such strength that ultimately it went nowhere," he said.

This time will be different, Rhee believes, thanks to Mayor Adrian M. Fenty, who made school reform his top priority when he was elected in 2006.

Fenty quickly seized control of the schools, doing away with the school board. He also won the power to hire and fire the superintendent. He tapped Rhee, founder of the New Teacher Project, which trains teachers to work in urban schools.

"You don't want me for this job," Rhee initially told him. She believed fixing D.C.'s schools would be impossible without radical change, requiring unpopular choices for a politician.

Rhee is convinced a motivated teacher can help even the most disadvantaged student achieve. She said her belief is shaped by three years of teaching in Baltimore.

At first, the 8-year-old students "pretty much ran me over," Rhee said. She saw dramatic improvements in her second and third years when she combined classes with another teacher.

"The (neighborhood) violence didn't change," she said. "We drove the kids relentlessly and they achieved."

So far, Rhee has streamlined Washington's central office by firing nearly 100 employees. She dismissed 36 principals she considered ineffective, including one at the elementary school her two daughters attend. She also sent termination letters this summer to 750 teachers and teacher's aides who missed a certification deadline.

Rhee's approach has its critics. The decision to close 23 under-enrolled schools was particularly controversial; some parents accused her of rushing the process.

"Anyone who raises concern is labeled as being for the status quo," said Crystal Sylvia, a D.C. schools social worker whose son is entering kindergarten.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said the revolving door of superintendents is demoralizing. "It's the fad of the month, the flavor of the year."

Even the D.C. Council, which approved Fenty's schools takeover plan, has balked at not being consulted on decisions and has held up money for school repairs.

Still, Rhee can point to some momentum. Recent test scores show the number of schools making adequate progress in math and reading under the federal No Child Left Behind law increased from 31 to 47 — or about one-third of the school system.

Some say the credit lies with reforms by Rhee's predecessor, Clifford Janey, who now leads the schools in Newark, N.J. Rhee attributes the change to a culture of accountability — something she is hoping to improve by linking teacher pay to student achievement.

By soliciting donations from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other groups, Rhee wants to make Washington's teachers among the nation's best-paid with salaries that could reach \$131,000.

However, teachers would have to give up seniority and spend a year on probation, exposing them to the possibility of being fired.

Weingarten, whose national organization includes the D.C. teachers' union, said there's nothing inherently wrong with pay-for-performance plans. But she doesn't believe they should be based on standardized test scores — something Rhee has indicated she supports. Negotiations with the union are ongoing.

The plan could be a big boost for Rhee in her quest to attract top instructors. But she cautions that fixing D.C.'s schools won't happen quickly and has given herself eight years to reach that goal.

Many will be watching, including Becton, the retired general. When pressed on whether Rhee can pull it off, he wouldn't give a direct answer. Instead, he replied: "If anyone can be successful, she can."