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Politics and Pupils: How the Conflict Between the Washington Teachers' Union and the Fenty Administration Impacted Education Reform in the District of Columbia

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

POLITICS AND PUPILS: HOW THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE WASHINGTON
TEACHERS' UNION AND THE FENTY ADMINISTRATION IMPACTED
EDUCATION REFORM IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Can D.C. Schools Be Fixed? Basic yet aggressive, this prominent question headlined the Washington Post on June 10, 2007, just two days before Mayor Adrian Fenty obtained control of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).¹ Washington, D.C. is well-known as the nation's political hub, but the city is also home to 600,000 residents and a 45,000 student public education system.² Public education has long been a topic of national concern, but increased scrutiny has been aimed at failing districts such as DCPS. Morning talk shows, documentaries, and countless other media outlets have saturated airways with ongoing debates about the state of the country's education system, especially in urban districts. In Washington, D.C., Michelle Rhee, Adrian Fenty, Vincent Gray, George Parker, and Randi Weingarten have become reform buzz words, educational rock stars of sorts, and the prevalent dialogue about the city's education system has blurred the relationship between politics and policy as well as education and popular culture.

D.C. schools chancellor, Michelle Rhee, and the head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randi Weingarten, each contributed chapters to *Waiting for*

¹ Dan Keating, "Can D.C. Schools Be Fixed?" *The Washington Post*, 10 June 2007, A1.

² "Who We Are." *District of Columbia Public Schools*. Retrieved from <http://dcps.dc.gov/portal/site/DCPS/>.

Superman,” a supplemental book to the popular documentary chronicling the lives of public school students in the nation’s worst school districts, including DCPS. In the book, Chancellor Rhee adamantly declared, “...far too often in public education we have been willing to turn a blind eye to what’s happening to kids so we can avoid making waves. We can’t do this anymore...That isn’t going to happen on my watch.”³ Shortly after her proclamation, however, Rhee resigned as schools chancellor on October 13, 2010 stating, “I have put my blood, sweat and tears into the children of the District for the last three and a half years and have completely enjoyed every moment of it...The thought of not being in the role anymore is heartbreaking, to put it mildly, but it’s right for the school system and right for the children.”⁴ The intensity of Rhee’s words and the notion of “blood, sweat, and tears” seem more fitting for an action film than an educational press release. Although extreme, Rhee’s bold rhetoric somehow captures the essence of DCPS’ jilted trajectory as a perpetually subpar district, and as the district’s seventh superintendent in less than a decade, Rhee’s departure from DCPS marks yet another period of transition in the troubled school system.⁵

Since his 89% command of the general vote in the November 2006 mayoral election, Mayor Fenty has sanctioned serious reform throughout DCPS.⁶ However, on September 14, 2010, Mayor Fenty lost the Democratic primary to Vincent Gray, D.C.

³ Michelle Rhee. “Putting Kids First.” In K. Weber (Ed.) *Waiting for Superman*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010). 141.

⁴ Michelle Rhee, “Resignation Statement of Michelle Rhee.” District of Columbia Public Schools press release, 13 October 2010.

⁵ David Nakamura and Nikita Stewart, “More Criticism Over Fenty’s Secrecy,” *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2007, A1, A15.

⁶“Local Elections 2006, Washington, DC Full Ballot,” *The Washington Post*, retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/elections/2006/results/general_dc.html.

Council Chairman. Amidst the surprising political rise and fall of the Fenty administration, DCPS' school board struggles, political shifts, and union oppositions generated a national following at the core of urban education reform. DCPS' performance based reform exhibited that not only was teacher accountability an important component of the Fenty administration's educational ideology; it functioned as an essential standard. Over the past three and a half years, mayoral control has challenged the structure of DCPS, and as a result, the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) and the Fenty administration engaged in a relentless dispute over increased teacher accountability and performance-based pay reform. In March 2010, the WTU reached an updated contract with DCPS, but the political residue of the district's relentless conflict produced a serious divide between the system's major stakeholders.

Playing a significant role in the 2010 mayoral election, the conflict between the WTU and the Fenty administration granted renewed political strength to union members through their opposition to Fenty's re-election campaign. The AFT supported Gray and commended his "leadership, hard work, a willingness to listen and engage, and a commitment to ensuring that parents, community members and elected leaders are all rowing in the same direction."⁷ Correspondingly, the WTU officially endorsed Chairman Gray's mayoral candidacy. The political division stemming from DCPS reform greatly impacted the 2010 mayoral election, and as the Washington Post reported on September 15, 2010, "Fenty's most high-profile initiative - the takeover and reform of the city's long-troubled public schools - drew equal praise and criticism for the appointment of hard-

⁷ Randi Weingarten, "On D.C. Mayoral Candidate Vincent Gray's Democratic Primary Victory," American Federation of Teachers press release, 15 September 2010 retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/newspubs/press/2010/091510.cfm>.

charging Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee and the terminations of hundreds of teachers and central office staff.”⁸ Following Mayor Fenty’s loss to Chairman Gray and Chancellor Rhee’s subsequent resignation from DCPS, this thesis will examine how the relationship between the Fenty administration and the WTU significantly influenced education reform in the District of Columbia.

⁸ Tim Craig and Nikita Stewart, “Gray Decisively Defeats Fenty in Race for D.C. Mayor,” *The Washington Post*, 15 September 2010, retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/14/AR2010091407328.html>

CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Performance-Based Pay and No Child Left Behind

Due to the statistical influence of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), much contemporary research examines NCLB and explores how its academic standards and subsequent financial rewards have been woven into educational society. In their article, “Credentials Versus Performance,” Michael Podgursky and Matthew Springer examine how NCLB has encouraged school districts to increase performance pay for teachers.¹ The study explores how NCLB has promoted experimentation with accountability systems to increase competition in contemporary educational society. Podgursky and Springer also compare NCLB’s influence to the impact of the 1983 study, *A Nation at Risk* (NAR). They describe NAR’s influence as encouraging policy makers to experiment with financial incentives, and similarly, NCLB has also sanctioned performance-based accountability. Larry Cuban also evaluates the legacy of NAR and explains that dialogue about the weakness of public schools existed prior to 1983, but NAR served as a catalyst for a greater national discourse about the disparity of public schools throughout the United States.² Gail Sunderman also argues that NAR

¹ Michael Podgursky and Matthew Springer “Credentials Versus Performance: Review of the Teacher Performance Pay Research.” *Peabody Journal of Education* 82, no. 4. (2007): 556.

² Larry Cuban. *As Good as it Gets: What School Reform Brought to Austin*. (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2010), 6.

recognized state and local officials as having the “primary responsibility for financing and governing the schools and called on local government to ‘incorporate the reforms we propose in their educational policies and fiscal planning.’”³ While both NAR and NCLB promote accountability from national platform, Sunderman explains that NCLB extended performance-based testing into test-based accountability. The link between teachers and this nationally determined achievement enabled federal education policy to drive curriculum and instruction throughout the country.⁴

Though these articles reveal the past influence of performance-based accountability systems, Kenneth Wong, Francis Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, and Tracey Rutledge examine the contemporary impact of NCLB discourse. In their book, *The Education Mayor*, they describe NCLB as a medium which increased concern about the progress of low performing schools. Despite increased scrutiny of the achievement gap, NCLB and its test-based accountability also yields conflicting views about the necessary role of performance-based pay and accountability in contemporary education reform.⁵ The implementation of NCLB and subsequent performance-based pay systems demonstrates a national commitment to increased accountability. As schools extend accountability from teachers to district officials through mayoral-controlled school systems, the cohesion of district accountability challenges school districts’ traditional organization and “...represents changes in the formal structure of governance that locates

³ Gail Sunderman “Evidence of the Impact of School Reform on Systems Governance and Educational Bureaucracies in the United States.” *Review of Research in Education* 34, (2010): 233.

⁴ Ibid, 234.

⁵ Kenneth Wong, Francis Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, and Tracey Rutledge. *The Education Mayor*. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007).

responsibility for the schools on elected leaders and traditional institutions of local democracy.”⁶

Mayoral Control

In their article, “Marketization in Education,” Wells and Holme establish contemporary educational reform as driven by business models that operate under the principle that “public schools need to be more efficient, competitive, accountable, and more like private businesses than democratic institutions.”⁷ This idea of a productive and responsible system directly links to mayoral control and an education mayor’s responsibility to ensure success of the city’s school system. In his study of the District of Columbia, Joseph Viteritti describes mayoral control as a “jolt” to the school system. He explains, “Washington has had seven superintendents in the past ten years. Mayoral control has jolted the system by closing twenty-three schools, firing ninety-eight central office employees, creating an early retirement incentive for teachers, and overhauling twenty-seven underperforming schools.”⁸ Larry Cuban also argues that education mayors and reformers, such as Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee, intentionally jolt the system to increase competitiveness, innovation, and most importantly, academic performance.⁹

The implementation of mayoral control stimulates educational environments and responds to the lack of centralized power in stagnant education systems. Both Joseph P.

⁶ Sunderman, 244.

⁷ Amy Wells and Jennifer Holme “Marketization in Education: Looking Back to Move Forward With a Stronger Critique.” *International Handbook of Educational Policy* (2005): 19.

⁸ Joseph Viteritti. *When Mayors Take Charge: School Governance in the City*. (Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 61.

⁹ Cuban, 158.

Viteritti and Kenneth Wong et al. cite low voter turnout and poor school performance as examples of why districts have shifted to mayoral control. Viteritti argues that mayoral control often comes to power in districts characterized by a significant minority population, concerned business community, high poverty, low-performing schools, and a dysfunctional school board.¹⁰ Viteritti also references a 2006 and 2007 Gallup poll in which only 29% of the public were in favor of mayoral control in 2006, but by 2007 the number had increased to 39%.¹¹ To determine whether mayoral control significantly enhances districts, Wong et al. conducted research in 104 districts across the United States and determined that an education mayor's power to appoint members of the school board is associated with a 0.2 standard deviation in high school reading and mathematics.¹² They affirm, "...mayor-led integrated governance promises to improve student performance by introducing streamlined governance, an alignment of political incentives, a politics of partnerships, and a reallocation of resources to their most efficient use."¹³ Mayoral control has gained significant support and opposition across districts, but the resulting power relationships and ideological divisions produce an educational environment greatly influenced by democratic ideals and business initiatives.

As Viteritti acknowledges, "With mayoral control, accountability must proceed on two levels: the schools are directly answerable to the mayor, and the mayor is

¹⁰ Viteritti, 38.

¹¹ Ibid, 64.

¹² Wong et al., 76.

¹³ Ibid, 95.

ultimately answerable to the people.”¹⁴ Accountability is the fundamental factor in the growth of mayoral control. Under mayoral control, district’s educational policies are responsive to democratic principles and business initiatives. In appointment of chancellors and school board members, mayors must remain cognizant of the school system’s needs as well as the satisfaction of essential stakeholders, especially teacher unions. Although mayors are ultimately responsible and accountable for proper management of their district’s education system, mayoral control does not ensure system-wide development. Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 is an education and business hybrid initiative that exists because of Mayor Daley’s power as the educational mayor in addition to the city’s desire to retain middle class families in Chicago’s public schools. Viteritti notes that, “Sixty-two percent of the new schools (attended by 3 percent of the system’s 414,000 students) have had their capital needs fully funded compared with 45 percent of traditional schools.”¹⁵ While the increased funding for Renaissance 2010 schools helps propel certain schools, the lack of funding for the 45 percent of traditional schools demonstrates the educational priorities of the city government. Wong et al. argues that, “It may also be the case that the mayors see a greater need to initially establish stronger schools for middle-class residents...High-performing schools serve as an anchor for middle-class families.”¹⁶ The keen focus on specific schools and their students reveals the significant social and political capital these student bodies and their respective communities maintain. Similarly, citizens in Washington, D.C. criticized

¹⁴ Viteritti, 235.

¹⁵ Ibid, 131.

¹⁶ Wong et. al, 110.

Chancellor Rhee's terminations of teachers in specific wards and questioned the chancellor's aggressive approach to reform.¹⁷

Mayoral control has gained widespread popularity because of mayors' ultimate responsibility for ensuring city progress, including education reform. Both Viteritti and Wong et al. define traditional school board elections as plagued by extremely low voter turnout. Consequently, mayoral control responds to the lack of public engagement by centralizing education reform to reflect the political, social, and educational needs of a city and its school system. Although mayoral control increases central accountability and political authority, the power relationships that develop in response to heightened political and media attention can also be detrimental to the city. However, Wong et. al insist that "The evidence we have presented in this book, which spans multiple years and districts across the entire country, suggest that the first wave of mayoral control has been a success. America's urban students are doing better now than they would be if mayors had not become more involved."¹⁸ As mayoral control gains popularity throughout the United States, the necessity of the system remains widely contested. In the District of Columbia, the complex history of the DCPS community coupled with its inconsistent reform developed a unique network of district stakeholders who ultimately impacted the political relationship between the Fenty administration and the Washington Teachers' Union.

¹⁷ Vincent Gray "I said, 'Michelle why would you agree to be photgrpahed with a broom on the cover of Time magazine? What kind of message do you think that sends?'" Bill Turque, "Rhee is Likely to Head for the Door." *The Washington Post*, 17 September 2010, A1, A12.

¹⁸ Wong et. al, 198.

The District of Columbia

In their article, “Facing the Rising Sun: A History of Black Educators in Washington, DC 1800-2003,” Rona Frederick and Jenice View study the history of African American educators in Washington and explore their position as integral components of public schools throughout the District.¹⁹ Frederick and View link educational change to the historical experiences of African Americans throughout the District and assert, “...we believe that positive change requires a shift in thinking about the ways we are truly investing in the welfare of children attending U.S. schools, especially those who are colored or poor. One way is to examine the contributions, history, experiences, and insights of Black educators changing the lives of Black students.”²⁰ In consideration of this statement, Frederick and View utilize the experiences of Black educators and students in the District to preserve the legacy of the educators that “contribute to our understandings of how to foster liberatory spaces for Black children in urban schools in spite of shifting policies and administrations.”²¹ This purposeful organization and cultural connection demonstrates the integral role African American educators play in the District of Columbia. Frederick and View’s study of the racial divisions within DCPS illuminates the range of cultural and historical implications associated with Mayor Fenty’s reform and his appointment of the first non African American superintendent in six terms.

¹⁹ Rona Frederick and Jenice View “Facing the Rising Sun: a History of Black Educators in Washington, DC, 1800-2008.” *Urban Education* 44, no. 5 (2009).

²⁰ Frederick and View, 604.

²¹ *Ibid*, 601.

Because of the current nature of the District of Columbia's education reform, there is a lack of literature examining the relationships amidst DCPS' whole-system reform. Larry Cuban notes the complexity of reform and demonstrates the significant influence of external factors in urban districts. He asserts, "The piling up of hodgepodge reforms spurred by external political and social pressures is apparent especially in urban district where demands for improved student academic performance in largely minority and poor schools date back decades."²² DCPS' inconsistent leadership and its status as a failing school district have encouraged reformers to demand greater teacher accountability and student achievement. Since the implementation of Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee's radical reform standards, the volatile relationship between the Fenty administration and the WTU has infiltrated reform rhetoric and structural change. This document-based analysis will examine the relationship between the Fenty administration and the WTU to reveal the external and internal factors stimulating change and division within the DCPS community.

²² Cuban, 6.

CHAPTER THREE

THESIS, HYPOTHESES, QUESTIONS

In his book, *Reforming Education*, Benjamin Levin asserts, “Obviously nothing becomes a political issue unless important politicians accept it as such. They make the decision as to which items will be acted upon. The immediate pressures on politicians come from both political and institutional sources.”¹ Demonstrating this political influence, Adrian Fenty assumed office on the pillar of educational reform and granted significant validity and authority to radical change within DCPS. The mayor’s website cited Fenty’s dedication to the District’s educational reform as the essential “hallmark” of his administration, and the website prominently displayed the mayor’s educational commitment and district achievements:

He has made quality public education for all and efficient and accountable government hallmarks of his administration. Fenty has become a national leader in the area of urban education reform after changing the city’s public schools governance structure in his first months in office. The new structure, which placed the city’s school chief as a direct report to the mayor allowed him to make swift changes in the system’s central office, improve teacher qualification requirements and implement a dramatic school consolidation process focus resources on stronger academic programs.²

¹ Benjamin Levin. *Reforming Education*. (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 67.

² The Fenty Administration, “About the Mayor.” Retrieved from <http://mayor.dc.gov/DC/Mayor/About+the+Mayor/Mayor+Biography/Adrian+M.+Fenty>

The Fenty administration remained committed to its trademark reform, but the WTU persistently opposed the mayor's takeover, namely Chancellor Rhee's absolute autonomy. As Levin noted, politicians decide which issues to undertake, but these issues are not detached from institutional pressure.³ In the case of DCPS' contemporary reform, the Fenty administration failed to reach a second term, and Chancellor Rhee resigned with a year and a half left of her revolutionary contract. The rapport between vital stakeholders, the Fenty administration and the WTU, developed from an exclusive conflict into a symbiotic relationship between two integral political entities.

The primary research question this thesis aims to answer is: how has the turbulent relationship between the WTU and the Fenty administration shaped education reform in Washington, D.C.? The broad goal of the study is to examine the relationship between the WTU and the Fenty administration as a political division that directly impacted educational reform in the District of Columbia. More specifically, the objective is to uncover how fundamental stakeholders and policies affected Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee's tenure as district reformers. The thesis will begin with mayoral control instituted in Washington on June 12, 2007 and will conclude with Chairman Gray's victory over Adrian Fenty in the 2010 mayoral election. DCPS contract negotiations, performance pay initiatives, and mayoral control will exhibit the instrumental roles of the WTU, city autonomy, and political authority in the District of Columbia's contemporary reform framework.

³ Levin, 62.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROCEDURE

Charles Payne refers to reform as a “dance of ideology.”¹ He outlines the conservative model of change as a system built upon an incentive structure: some are rewarded while others are penalized. Conversely, the progressive model works to obtain results by demonstrating value in reform and fostering change through the development of critical stakeholders.² Although conservative and progressive reform approaches differ ideologically, reform, whether conservative or progressive, evolves in response to cyclical patterns. Steven Brint describes the cyclical nature of reform and asserts, “In some cyclical theories, periods of liberal and conservative reform are thought to be systematically linked: The more relaxed and inclusive standards brought on by liberal reforms feed into dissatisfaction among conservatives, leading to a new period of conservative reform.”³ To examine the relationship between the WTU and the Fenty administration amidst Chancellor Rhee’s reform policies, this document based analysis will evaluate the DCPS teachers’ contract, the IMPACTplus performance-based pay system, and the Education Reform Act of 2007 to penetrate reform rhetoric and reveal policy goals, assumptions, and outcomes.

¹ Charles Payne. *So Much Reform: So Little Change*. (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2008), 192.

² Ibid, 193.

³ Steven Brint. *Schools and Societies*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 255-256.

Due to the current nature of this topic, primary research and information has been gathered from newspapers, magazines, the WTU contract, press releases, public opinions from newspaper “letters to the editor” and “opinions,” and official speeches. These primary documents will be utilized to connect policy decisions to stakeholders and will examine common themes and concerns to reveal the development of policy dialogue throughout the DCPS community. Because of the recent mayoral election, public opinion gathered from sources such as newspaper letters to the editors and interviews will be especially useful in gaining an understanding of the shifting views and opinions of the citizens of Washington and the DCPS community. Additionally, the WTU teachers’ contract will be evaluated in conjunction with the Chancellor’s initiatives, outlined in the DCPS Chancellor’s notes, to examine the relationship between district standards, union rights, and drastic system-wide reform. The use of these primary documents will enable the historical analysis of a district amidst radical educational reform and political change.

CHAPTER FIVE
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Education Reform Act of 2007

Upon Congressional approval, the District of Columbia Education Reform Act inaugurated mayoral control of DCPS on June 12, 2007. The act states, “The mayor shall govern the public schools in the District of Columbia. The Mayor shall have authority over all curricula, operations, functions, budget, personnel, labor negotiations and collective bargaining agreements, facilities, and other education-related matters...”¹ Fenty swiftly capitalized on his newly established educational autonomy and immediately appointed Michelle Rhee as Schools’ Chancellor at 12:00 A.M. on June 12. However, the mayor’s bold appointment of Rhee instigated friction between the Fenty administration and the D.C. community as many citizens did not feel adequately involved in the selection process. On June 13, the Washington Post reported a tense relationship between the Fenty administration and the D.C. City Council claiming, “Fenty conducted his search furtively, talking to education experts in other cities and rarely consulting with local officials or parents. He had interviewed Rhee at city hall a few weeks ago, but no council members knew of Fenty’s interest in her until they both showed up at Gray’s

¹Public Education Reform Act of 2007, *West Group Publisher*. 103A.

office about 11:30 Monday night.”² Adding increased scrutiny to the Mayor’s choice, Chairman Gray confirmed his lack of knowledge regarding Rhee’s status as a prospective candidate. Regarding Rhee’s appointment, Gray remarked, “There he [Fenty] was with Ms. Rhee. He gave me her name but didn’t give me a context...She hasn’t had a vast amount of management experience. There will be a wait-and-see period.”³ Despite some concern, the WTU and the D.C. Council conferred the mayor’s selection, and Rhee began a five year contract proclaiming, “I will change the expectations of parents, teachers, the central office and ensure that everyone who is engaged in the education of kids is willing to take a personal responsibility of ensuring outcomes.”⁴

To ensure the selection of a capable and respected chancellor, Section 105 of the Education Reform Act requires a review panel of WTU members, parents, and students to participate in the evaluation of prospective nominees and “...aid the Mayor in his or her selection of Chancellor” in addition to the nominee being adequately qualified by “experience or training for the position.”⁵ However, Mayor Fenty did not officially inform Clifford Janey, former superintendent, of his dismissal until a day prior to Rhee’s appointment, and as Chairman Gray noted, the mayor did not formally present Rhee to the Council until the night before his takeover of DCPS. Adding to the skepticism of Fenty’s seemingly concealed methods parents were also outraged by their lack of participation and contribution. DCPS parent Cherita Whiting criticized the mayor’s lack

² David Nakamura and Nikita Stewart, *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2007, A10.

³ Vincent Gray, *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2007, A9.

⁴ Nakamura and Stewart, A15.

⁵ Education Reform Act, 105 a2, 3.

of transparency in selection of the chancellor, “We’ve had six or seven new superintendents over the past 10 years, and every one of them were interviewed by a panel of community members. The mayor denied us that.”⁶ Despite community scrutiny, the D.C. Council confirmed Rhee’s appointment, and the Fenty administration granted the chancellor almost complete autonomy of the school system.

Rhee was originally approached by the Fenty administration at an education conference in May 2007 but initially resisted leading the district asserting, “No, not me.”⁷ After meeting personally with Mayor Fenty, however, Rhee accepted the mayor’s offer. The mayor promised to completely support Rhee’s reform; an allegiance Rhee later cited in her resignation statement as a commitment that “has been steadfast” in addition to “his[Fenty] impatience for improvements to give every child in this city a world-class education..”⁸ In spite of the Education Reform Act and a dynamic partnership between a popularly elected mayor and his zealous chancellor, the district’s reform dissolved into an incumbent mayor’s Primary loss, a chancellor’s resignation, and the school district’s eighth superintendent in less than a decade. At a news conference in June 2007, Rhee ardently stated, “To go from where we are now to where we need to be will take tremendous work. Get ready to work hard but get stronger, to be pushed but also to excel. Every day, my pledge is to make decisions with the unwavering confidence that you can

⁶ Nakamura and Stewart, A9.

⁷ Ibid, A15.

⁸ Rhee, “Resignation Statement of Michelle Rhee.”

do this.”⁹ But perhaps the eager chancellor missed an important question: did the DCPS community actually want to “do this” under Rhee’s agenda?

After stepping down as chancellor, Rhee responded to critics who felt the message sent to the DCPS community was solely that the chancellor closed schools and fired the community’s teachers. She admitted, “That’s on me. That’s my fault. I don’t know what the right path is. I don’t think there’s another superintendent out there who went to more community meetings than I did...But trying to engage a community and successfully engaging a community are two different things. If people didn’t feel engaged, that means that I wasn’t utilizing the right strategies.”¹⁰ Although candid, Rhee’s blunt response suggests a sense of superiority and reduces the conflict between Rhee and the DCPS community into winners and losers: people who didn’t understand the reform and those who did. Throughout her tenure as chancellor, Rhee consistently pledged to bring success to D.C. schools and committed herself as a superintendent who would be available to all community members through emails, office hours, and meetings.¹¹ However, Rhee’s brash interviews with extensive media outlets frequently clashed with her professional identity as chancellor. Rhee praised teachers in correspondence with the local community but also gave contradictory interviews during which she labeled the education in D.C. as “crappy” or something to be “embarrassed by”¹² Despite her professional inconsistency with the DCPS community, Rhee quickly

⁹ Nakamura and Stewart, A15.

¹⁰ Michelle Rhee “The Education of Michelle Rhee.” *Washingtonian* 46, no. 3 (2010): 28.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 27.

¹² Amanda Ripley, “Rhee Tackles Classroom Challenge,” *Time*. 26 November 2008, 2.

became a national phenomenon. She was applauded by President Obama as a “wonderful new superintendent,”¹³ yet was criticized by Chairman Gray for not being “more respectful of parents’ and teacher’s concerns about change.”¹⁴ Throughout the national spectacle, however, the Fenty administration continued its pledge to renovate D.C.’s school system, and the Education Reform Act granted Mayor Fenty the legal power to fully support Chancellor Rhee’s agenda, regardless of public disapproval. Still, the WTU continued its wariness of Rhee as President George Parker warned, “You can’t fire your way into a successful school system.”¹⁵

Chancellor Rhee and Teacher Terminations

Chancellor Rhee gained notoriety as the grassroots founder of the New Teacher Project and served in Baltimore Public Schools as a Teach For America corps member, but community members questioned her ability to run a challenged, urban district and successfully implement structural changes. Despite many members of the DCPS community outspokenly proclaiming their reservations, Rhee embraced her authority as Chancellor. Rhee vocalized her commitment to radical reform throughout her first month on staff, adding to her already weak rapport with the WTU. The dialogue between DCPS and the WTU became increasingly heated and escalated into harshly divided opinions about Chancellor Rhee’s ability to lead the large district and more specifically, her performance based reform. Responding to the widespread criticism, DCPS designated a

¹³ Ibid, 1.

¹⁴ Vincent Gray, “How School Reformer Michelle Rhee may be a Factor in the D.C. Mayoral Race.” Pat Wingert, *Newsweek*, 2 July 2010, retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/the-gaggle/2010/07/02/how-school-reformer-michelle-rhee-may-be-a-factor-in-the-d-c-mayoral-race.html>

¹⁵ George Parker, “A School Chief Takes on Tenure, Stirring a Fight.” Sam Dillion. *The New York Times*, 12 November 2008, retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/education/13tenure.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&ref=michelle_rhee

section of its website to the Chancellor's ideas, reflections, and response to parent and teachers' concerns. In an effort to merge communication between the Chancellor and the local community, the "Chancellor's Corner" section of the DCPS website served as Rhee's casual albeit professional platform to reach the extended DCPS audience and explicate her reform ideals.

Rhee promoted a "culture of data,"¹⁶ a philosophy she believed would help the district, parents, and teachers more accurately evaluate student achievement and growth. In April 2009, Rhee utilized the "Chancellor's Corner" to explain her loyalty to data as an essential tool in promoting positive reform. She defended the use of data and explained that during her time as a teacher in Baltimore Public Schools she was required to maintain a binder for each student, which included the student's work and other pertinent information. Rhee linked this experience to her data-driven reform in a "Chancellor's Corner" post titled, "Admit it, You Like Data Too: 'Data Driven Decision Making'"

Since then, I have been convinced that the collection and maintenance of reliable data is inextricably linked with student achievement growth. Now, every week I pore over data about our schools and the system with different teams, asking questions about the data and what it says...Now that we have more information than in previous years, we are gaining the tools to manage it, track it and put it into forms that make our goals and challenges visible.¹⁷

However, Rhee's strong commitment to data-driven analysis was often the focus of union opposition. During her speech at the American Federation of Teachers Convention in July 2010, Randi Weingarten vehemently opposed the notion of "good" and "bad" teachers and challenged the heavy use of data-driven evaluation:

¹⁶ Stephen Sawchuk "D.C. Schools Chief to Tackle 'Hard Decisions.'" *Education Daily* 40, no. 135 (2007): 1-2.

¹⁷ Michelle Rhee, "Chancellor's Notes," *The District of Columbia Public Schools*, 29 April 2009.

True educational success isn't just a test score, just as economic success isn't just GDP growth. And it's also not simply knowledge of math or the ability to read...So, we are caught in this vortex—with recessionary forces, socioeconomic forces and global economic forces whirling around. And what does the blame-the-teacher crowd say? *'If only there were fewer bad teachers, all would be right in the world.'*¹⁸

But all was not right in the DCPS world; relationships throughout DCPS were alarmingly toxic, and the notion of “good” and “bad” extended beyond teacher performance and into opposing sides of the WTU/DCPS ideological division.

Following Weingarten's AFT convention remarks and Rhee's consistently harsh language regarding the “dysfunctional”¹⁹ and “crappy”²⁰ education system in Washington, D.C., the divide between DCPS and the WTU was painfully obvious as Mayor Fenty ran for re-election in the fall of the 2010. The WTU and Chairman Gray were initially skeptical of Rhee's ability to lead DCPS, but the fierce clash of ideologies was not as publicly apparent upon the Council's conferral of Chancellor Rhee in 2007. The WTU and DCPS maintain a symbiotic relationship with one another, and this relationship cannot function without shared value and belief in implemented reform. In his book, *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform*, Thomas Popkewitz highlights the evolution of reform as an extension of previous ideals. He explains, “Current calls for school reform maintain the visions of the previous era but extend and redefine them in

¹⁸ Randi Weingarten, “Saving Public Education,” keynote speech at AFT Convention, 8 July 2010, 4. Retrieved from http://www.aft.org/pdfs/press/sp_weingarten070810.pdf

¹⁹ Lesli Maxwell “Mayor T http://www.aft.org/pdfs/press/sp_weingarten070810.pdffakes Control: Picks Novice to Lead Troubled D.C. District.” *Education Week*. 19 June 2007, 23.

²⁰ Weingarten, “Saving Public Education,” 2.

relation to contemporary transformations”²¹ In contrast, the implementation of mayoral control in DCPS redefined ideologies of the previous era but failed to extend the system already in place.

Failing to extend the previous system, however, was the exact intention of the Fenty administration. The deteriorating district was regarded as “broken,”²² and the rhetoric used to promote Fenty and Rhee’s reform ideologies advocated for elimination instead of evolution. Fenty declared, “This system needs radical change; it really needs a shake-up”²³ Rhee initiated drastic reform and without delay, proposed performance-based pay scales to eliminate “bad” teachers and allow for “good” teachers to excel. Only a year into her term, Rhee terminated 250 teachers and 500 aides who had not met the certification deadline implemented at the beginning of the 2007 school year.²⁴ The WTU opposed these terminations and on August 21, 2008, the union announced it had filed a lawsuit against DCPS regarding the termination of 70 probationary teachers. President George Parker defended the lawsuit as the responsibility of the union to protect teachers’ rights and exclaimed, “Even though these teachers were meeting the expectations of their probationary period, DCPS terminated them without providing them the due process rights and procedures guaranteed in the WTU/DCPS collective

²¹ Thomas Popkewitz. *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), 144.

²² Rhee, “Putting Kids First,” 128.

²³ Nakamura, A1.

²⁴ Ron Schachter, “Washington’s Bold Reformer,” *District Administration*, September 2008.

bargaining agreement.”²⁵ Rhee remained dedicated to fixing the broken system, but her extreme terminations and subsequent union backlash severely damaged that the relationship between the Fenty administration and vital district stakeholders.

Public education is a civil institution and therefore, cannot be isolated from the society in which it exists. Education, especially in a prominent district such as DCPS, does not evolve in a political or historical vacuum; it progresses in an active societal environment defined by past and present policy residue. As Popkewitz affirms, “Various institutional layers and contexts intertwine as threads in the fabric of reform.”²⁶ This “fabric of reform” is particularly relevant in consideration of DCPS. Popkewitz’s description of reform reveals that each layer of change grows from previous patterns of reform, and DCPS’ swift teacher terminations and subsequent union opposition reveals the split between the district’s intricate layers of reform. Despite criticism of the initial 250 terminations, the chancellor continued her stern reform, terminating 388 teachers six weeks into the 2009 school year.²⁷ As both the WTU and DCPS asserted their political standards, either disapproving of or defending the terminations, the Fenty administration remained steadfast to its trademark reform and its increasingly controversial chancellor.

After two years of reform debates, Fenty’s firm dedication to Rhee granted enormous political capital to the chancellor’s initiatives. While an understanding of the

²⁵ George Parker, “The Washington Teachers’ Union Filed Lawsuit This Week Against DCPS Over the Dismissal of More Than 70 Probationary Teachers,” *Washington Teachers’ Union*, 21 August 2008. Retrieved from http://www.wtulocal6.org/pdf/Press_Release_Lawsuit.pdf

²⁶ Popkewitz, 46.

²⁷ “The Washington Teachers’ Union Files Lawsuit on Behalf of Laid-off Teachers,” *Washington Teachers’ Union*, 8 October 2009, retrieved from http://www.wtulocal6.org/custom_images/file/PRESS%20RELEASE%20RIF%20LAWSUITv2.pdf

union's ideological thread was necessary for Rhee's negotiations with the WTU, it was not crucial to the continuation of performance-based reform since Rhee maintained the authority to terminate teachers and close schools. As Larry Cuban explains, many atypical reformers fail to remain cognizant of previous reform trajectory:

Most policy entrepreneurs and elite leaders are ahistorical in their thinking about school reform...Instead, these policy brokers draw from first-hand or second-hand experience in schools and the corporate world, while soaking up stories others tell. They assume that nothing can be learned from the past because conditions today are so different from conditions long ago. They err in their assumption."²⁸

Fenty and Rhee's perception of DCPS as a broken system directly influenced the district's reform trajectory, but Rhee's commitment to fixing the broken system did not ensure community belief in her radical "shake-up" of the system. Consequently, in April 2009, DCPS and the WTU began collaboration on a collective bargaining agreement, assisted by mediator Kurt L. Schmoke.²⁹

WTU and DCPS Contract Negotiations

The pivotal topic of concern between DCPS and the WTU remained the teachers' contract. Both parties were committed to producing a collective bargaining agreement that would adequately represent stakeholders and fairly bridge the professional relationship between the WTU and performance based reform. However, as the relationship between the WTU and DCPS soured amidst teacher terminations, Dean of Howard University School of Law and former Mayor of Baltimore, Kurt Schmoke, was selected as the official mediator to oversee the contract negotiations. Shortly after Schmoke's selection in April 2009 negotiations commenced, and the following year,

²⁸ Cuban, 168.

²⁹ Washington Teachers's Union media statement on 14 April 2009.

George Parker, Michelle Rhee, Randi Weingarten, and Kurt Schmoke signed a new contract, approved by 80% of the WTU. The contract established a significant role for the WTU in consulting with the Chancellor on teacher evaluation procedure and also focused on issues of quality, partnership, and evaluation. Section 2.1 of the DCPS/WTU Collective Bargaining Agreement states:

With this contract, the WTU and DCPS are committed to establishing a partnership, which we define as shared commitment, responsibility, responsibility, and accountability for student achievement. This partnership requires open communication, trust, respect, collaboration, shared decision making, and compliance with all agreements.³⁰

Ensuring this partnership, the contract requires that the Chancellor and the WTU President meet bi-monthly and provide a list of agenda items at least a day prior to the meeting.³¹ Despite the WTU/DCPS contract approval, the union's past opposition to Rhee's termination of hundreds of teachers as well as her consistently negative rhetoric deeply strained the rapport between the Chancellor and the WTU. The approved contract explicitly designated each stakeholder's responsibilities and rights, but the professional relationship between DCPS and the WTU was significantly damaged by the constant flux of overpowering rhetoric, policy churn, and lack of trust needed to engage in dialogue beyond contractual negotiations.

In their book, *Strategic Communication during Whole-System Change*, Francis Duffy and Patti Chance highlight the importance of trust in effective transformational

³⁰ District of Columbia Public Schools/Washington Teachers Union Collective Bargaining Agreement, Article 2.1.

³¹ *Ibid*, 11.2, 47-48.

change.³² They explain that trust is twofold and must build upon positive relationships solidified by facts and common understanding. Duffy and Chance cite research conducted by Bryk and Schneider in the Chicago public school system. Bryk and Schneider's study of public schools throughout Chicago demonstrated that high levels of trust existed in high-achieving schools but were minimal in low-achieving schools. Additionally, the study concluded that trust facilitated conditions conducive to "implementing and sustaining activities necessary for improvement" in addition to reducing vulnerability when implementing new reform.³³ Although DCPS ultimately reached a contract with the WTU in March 2010, the contract was not established until almost three years after Rhee assumed control, and as a result, the sense of trust vital to the continuation of collective reform was trapped in a three year abyss of policy shift, complicated rhetoric, and divided ideologies. Adrienne Washington, staff writer for the Washington Times and the Washington Afro-American papers, commented on the lack of trust present throughout reform efforts stating, "You cannot forge successful reform or manifest any major social movement through intimidation, false accusations and questionable sanctions; you must negotiate a respectful and trustworthy partnership."³⁴

Despite internal conflict, DCPS and the WTU were able to finally reach an updated contract with 80% union support. Upon Chairman Gray and the D.C. City

³² Francis Duffy and Patii Chance, *Strategic Communication During Whole System Wide Change*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2007), 115.

³³ *Ibid*, 117.

³⁴ Adrienne Washington, "No Superman-or Superwoman Needed to Fix D.C. Schools" *The Afro-American*, October 30 – November 5, 2010, A9.

Council's approval of the contract on June 29, 2010³⁵, the WTU released a statement that commended the Council's approval and illustrated the significance of the district reaching an agreement after almost three years of negotiations: "Again, we would like to thank our members for their support throughout this long process. The real work can now begin as we continue our effort to ensure that teachers are provided with the tools they need, including competitive compensation, to dramatically improve education in the District of Columbia."³⁶ The new contract included a revamped version of Chancellor Rhee's performance-based pay evaluation system, IMPACT, as well as new "checks and balances" to ensure the validity of excessing and reductions-in-force.³⁷ IMPACTplus built upon the previous IMPACT program proposed by Rhee, but the new version was created in collaboration with the WTU and enabled the potential for higher pay. Additionally, teachers were not required to give up their tenure to participate in the program as the previously proposed IMPACT system suggested.³⁸ Established as a voluntary, individual pay for performance program which teachers are required to qualify into, IMPACTplus created the potential for teachers to earn a 21.6 percent pay increase over five years as well as \$20,000 bonuses.³⁹ The money allocated for such bonuses is not funded not by the city budget but by private investments. Supported by four main

³⁵ Michelle Rhee, "DCPS Testimony of Chancellor Rhee to Council of DC" on 21 June 2010.

³⁶ Washington Teachers' Union, 29 June 2010.

³⁷ Washington Teachers Union, "Questions and Answers," *Tentative Agreement*.

³⁸ Section 36.4 of the DCPS/WTU contract states, "The individual performance-based pay system shall be on a voluntary "qualify-in" basis with the qualification including student growth for tested and non-tested grades and subjects and not requiring permanent status Teachers to relinquish their tenure. 95.

³⁹ Michelle Rhee, "Chancellor's Notes," *District of Columbia Public Schools*, 9 July 2010, 4.

investors, the private investments generated 64.5 million dollars to be used for start-up costs of the IMPACT program. Addressing concerns that the pay raise implemented by IMPACT would not be sustainable, Rhee assured the DCPS community that such start-up costs would not require funding by 2012.⁴⁰ Paired with a clause that removes teachers from the system after a full year of “ineffectiveness” in spite of professional development, the IMPACTplus program was approved by the WTU and served as the revolutionary foundation of the WTU/DCPS contemporary contract.⁴¹

On June 21, 2010, Chancellor Rhee addressed the D.C. Council regarding the changes established in the new contract and asked for the Council’s approval. Rhee commented on the long process of attaining a new contract and performance-based pay system approved by both DCPS and the WTU, and referred to the contract as vital to the success of both the DCPS system as well as the entire District of Columbia community:

As the reform legislation was the catalyst for incredible progress over the past three years, our new contract can be the catalyst for making the important shift in the way we view teaching in this country...In 2012, when it is time to negotiate a new contract, I look forward to being here to talk about our children’s continuing progress. The prosperity of the city rests on the foundation of its school system, and the District of Columbia will only be as strong as the children we send into adulthood from our classrooms. With your blessing on a teacher contract that the city and teachers stand behind, the school system will become the foundation for prosperity that the citizens of the District of Columbia expect and deserve.⁴²

The Council approved the contract shortly after Rhee’s address, but another important vote took place three months later, the mayoral primary. Education reform was a pillar of Mayor Fenty’s leadership, and Fenty utilized his political authority to boldly challenge

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

⁴² Michelle Rhee, *District of Columbia Public Schools Press Release*, 21 June 2010, 5.

the District of Columbia's damaged school system. However, without the buffer of a traditional school board election and citizens' substantial input in the chancellor's selection, Mayor Fenty ultimately risked being held responsible for all changes, whether popular or unpopular, made throughout the district. The mayor exercised his political power through his appointment of an unlikely chancellor, but D.C. citizens of were directly impacted by his choices, and those citizens cast votes in the 2010 mayoral election. Comprising the voting population were DCPS parents, board members, union teachers, and other citizens of the disgruntled DCPS community. Despite the new contract and its recent approval, the damaged relationship between the Fenty administration and the DCPS community could not be easily mended. The contract and performance-based pay scale may have been too little too late or simply too much too often. After a three year reform battle and the option to vote against the mayor who initiated reform, the citizens of the D.C. elected Chairman Gray as the Democratic candidate on September 15, 2010.

WTU, Vincent Gray, and the 2010 Mayoral Election

In the fall of 2010, the District of Columbia was one of twelve states to win \$75 million in President Obama's Race to the Top competition.⁴³ In addition to the competition, DCPS commenced the school year with an updated teachers' contract, IMPACTplus performance-based pay system, a \$34.3 million renovated elementary school⁴⁴, and a spotlight in the popular documentary, *Waiting for "Superman"*.

⁴³ Michelle Rhee, "Chancellor's Notes," *The District of Columbia Public Schools*, 13 September 2010, 1.

⁴⁴ *District of Columbia Public Schools Press Release*, 17 August 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Press+Releases+and+Announcements/Press+Releases/Fenty+&+Stoddert+Students+Unveil+New+Look+for+First+Day+of+School>

However, over three years of Rhee's "blood, sweat, and tears" were not successful in ultimately strengthening the Fenty administration's controversial reform efforts. On September 15, Mayor Fenty lost the Democratic primary to Chairman Gray, and four weeks later, Rhee resigned as schools chancellor. A week following her resignation, *Washingtonian* magazine asked the former chancellor: So what have you learned? Rhee frankly responded, "I've learned that results are not enough."⁴⁵ The chancellor who had consistently promoted the necessity of data-driven reform in conjunction with whole-system change was not able to solely stand upon statistical improvement and increased funding.

While citizens in a mayoral-controlled district do not possess the power to elect their chancellor, they are vital stakeholders able to vote in a mayoral election. Although Fenty's loss can be attributed to many issues, the community's disdain for such radical reform throughout DCPS did not work well with the mayor's re-election campaign. Many community members resented Rhee's rise to national, superstar status while personally feeling victims of the chancellor's brash initiatives. In an editorial the day of Rhee's resignation, Petula Dvorak remarked, "School reform is bigger than Michelle Rhee, no matter how much attention she got from her ardent admirers in the media and the Obama administration."⁴⁶ Conversely, other community members deemed the district's reform failure a direct result of a system and community unwilling to change. In the local opinion section of the *Washington Post*, Sheri Singer voiced her frustration

⁴⁵ Rhee, "The Education of Michelle Rhee," 32.

⁴⁶ Petula Dvork, "School Reform Can Survive Rhee," *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2010, A1.

with Rhee's departure: "She took on an archaic education system that doesn't work and tried to make real and substantial changes. She failed. Is it a surprise? No. No one, not even those who make the cover of national magazines, can take on a monster bureaucratic system and win."⁴⁷ The severe division between proponents and critics of the district's reform efforts demonstrates a vigorous debate and reveals the necessary synthesis of political and social capital throughout drastic reform. Yes, Rhee was able to generate significant results over the course of her tenure, but results produce outcomes, and outcomes have consequences. Although Rhee led the DCPS to success in Race to the Top and implemented a revolutionary, contemporary performance-based pay system, her reform initiatives decreased the social capital vital to the community's investment in her leadership.

Examining the political trajectory of Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee's educational liaison, Joseph Viteritti asserted:

The lesson here is that the reform agenda cannot get ahead of the politics. We saw this before in similar cases in Baltimore and Detroit where many people identified with the people who worked in the school system and they thought they were unfairly bearing the brunt of the reform. It is great to become a national symbol. But it's the voters in your city that you need to keep on board if you want your agenda to go forward⁴⁸

The WTU endorsed Chairman Gray in the 2010 election. Conversely, Rhee campaigned against Gray and persistently asserted she could not work for anyone other than Fenty.

As Viteritti illustrated, however, being a national sensation, even one endorsed by the President, does not ensure local buy-in and voter approval. The WTU represents 4,000

⁴⁷ Sheri Singer, "Local Opinions," *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2010, A22.

⁴⁸ Joseph Viteritti, In Ian Urbin "Washington Mayor's Loss May Imperil School Reform," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2010, A23.

teachers in the District of Columbia, a considerable percentage of the District's 600,000 residents. Additionally, Chairman Gray was a prominent political figure who maintained a significant role in the district's educational conflicts throughout Fenty's tenure and frequently criticized Rhee's extreme approach.⁴⁹ Multiple factors contributed to Fenty's downfall and the subsequent resignation of Chancellor Rhee. The volatile relationship between the Fenty administration and the WTU created a system under constant stress, ultimately leading to the demise of Mayor Fenty's hallmark educational reform. The fate of DCPS now rests in the authority of mayor-elect Vincent Gray and Interim Chancellor Kayla Henderson. This new educational team will have the chance to improve the District of Columbia Public Schools and achieve holistic success and community belief in the school system. After her resignation, Rhee confirmed the definitive power of voters in mayoral-controlled districts and explicated the impact of the city community in education reform: "This was not somebody leaving because she got tired of it. This was the people—voters—saying we're ready for a change. People knew that if Fenty left, I would leave and there would be new leadership in the schools. That's democracy."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Bill Turque, "Rhee is Likely to Head for the Door," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 2010. A1, A12.

⁵⁰ Rhee, "The Education of Michelle Rhee" pg. 31.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Three and half years later, the question posed by the Washington Post in June 2007 remains: Can D.C. schools be fixed?”¹ Considering Rhee’s radical reform and its generated data, the district has achieved significant improvement over the past few years. The achievement gap has been closed, reading levels have risen, and the WTU and DCPS reached a contractual agreement with 80% of WTU approval.² The Fenty era of educational reform in the District of Columbia reveals the absolute complexity of whole-system change in a mayoral controlled school district, and Chancellor Rhee’s three and a half year tenure as head of DCPS characterizes much more than a fleeting moment in the District’s public education history. The story of DCPS throughout Fenty’s term as mayor demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between politics and pupils, or more appropriately, politics and paychecks. In 2007, Mayor Fenty and Michelle Rhee began their “jolt”³ to Washington’s school system, but less than four years later, the hopeful mayor and the radical chancellor did not maintain the political clout necessary to survive their self-induced “shake-up” of the system.

¹ Keating, A1.

² Michelle Rhee, “Chancellor’s Notes,” District of Columbia Public Schools, 26 August 2010.

³ Wong et al, 18.

As Randi Weingarten affirmed, “No teacher—myself included—wants ineffective teachers in the classroom. Schools are communities where we build on one another’s work...We need true accountability, accountability that is meant to fix schools, not to affix blame, accountability that takes into account the conditions that are beyond the teacher’s or school’s control, and accountability that holds everyone responsible for doing his or her share.”⁴ Educational communities are significantly impacted by standards, collective buy-in, tracked progress, and explicit accountability. Weingarten’s criticism of affixed blame in relation to stakeholder accountability demonstrates the absolute necessity of communal belief in the district’s reform standards. While Rhee aggressively worked to increase educational accountability from all stakeholders, Fenty’s political accountability was simultaneously assessed during the 2010 mayoral election. Mayoral control places educational authority upon mayors and ultimately holds district officials responsible for educational advancement. However, the political power attained through mayoral control must be coupled with political longevity and continuity of purpose and action.

Fenty and Rhee were able to achieve an updated WTU contract during their tenure as district reformers, but the Fenty administration did not assume office solely to create an innovative teachers’ contract. As a pillar of reform, the Fenty administration campaigned to implement a school governance structure that would ensure “quality public education for all.”⁵ The WTU/DCPS teachers’ contract was an essential

⁴ Weingarten, “Five Foundations for Student Success” In K. Weber (Ed.) *Waiting for Superman*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 151, 157.

⁵ The Fenty Administration, “About the Mayor,” retrieved from <http://mayor.dc.gov/DC/Mayor/About+the+Mayor/Mayor+Biography/Adrian+M.+Fenty>

component of the Fenty administration's educational reform, but it was not the definitive goal. Rhee embraced the district as a system that needed a shake-up and utilized her position as chancellor to radically challenge the system's structure. In a mayoral-controlled district, politicians fade in and out of reform, but the needs of students remain. Although the Fenty administration and the WTU were able to reach an updated union agreement and performance-based pay system, the working relationship between the Fenty administration and the WTU did not flow freely as political divisions infiltrated crucial negotiation discussions.

Politics and pupils; in a mayoral-controlled district, what or who comes first? Public education systems are formulated to strengthen communities and educate young citizens, but students in a mayoral-controlled district such as Washington, D.C. are directly affected by political conclusions. In December 2010, just a month shy of Vincent Gray's mayoral inauguration, Rhee defended her resignation as chancellor:

After the shock of Fenty's loss, it became clear to me that the best way to keep the reform going in the D.C. schools was for me to leave my job as chancellor...I loved that job. But I felt that Mayor elect Vincent Gray should have the same ability that Fenty had to appoint his own chancellor...When you think about how things happen in our country—how laws get passed or policies are made—they happen through the exertion of influence...Education is no different.⁶

Education is inextricably linked to politics, regardless of mayoral control or traditional school board elections, and political growth requires ample time for genuine change and progress. Educational policy must remain connected to school systems while simultaneously assessing the significant repercussions of shifts in district reform and reformers. Adrian Fenty and Michelle Rhee were willing to challenge a failing school

⁶ Michelle Rhee, "I'm Not Done Fighting: The Real Battle for School Reform Begins Now," *Newsweek* 13 December 2010, 40.

district in spite of community disdain and heightened national scrutiny. However, Fenty and Rhee's initiatives were dependent upon the approval of the Washington Teachers' Union and the D.C. Council. Mayor Fenty successfully achieved an updated WTU/DCPS contract during his tenure as education mayor, but his administration's ultimate goal was to change the culture of the system and maintain successful governance. Rhee and Fenty catapulted to power as bold reformers willing to risk political capital for educational progress, but on November 2, 2010, the citizens of the District of Columbia elected Vincent Gray to continue and modify the school district's education reform and culture. Michelle Rhee noted her crucial role in the 2010 mayoral election, poignantly affirming:

...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.⁷

Independent of governance structure, the ultimate measure of system success in public education is not political power or union influence but rather student development. Student achievement becomes the legacy of the partnership amongst government leaders, teachers' union members, the community at large, parents, and students.

In his study of mayoral controlled districts, Joseph Viteritti explains:

Mayoral control is a governance and administrative arrangement, not an identifiable and consistent package of pedagogical and reform strategies. The argument in its favor is that, over time, a district under mayoral control will be more likely to find and adopt the right policies or that, in general, if implementing the same policies, it will do so with greater efficiency and effectiveness than

⁷ Ibid, 38.

school systems with more traditional school boards...the proof of that pudding depends on how the institutional form operates when different drivers are behind the wheel.⁸

The District of Columbia's recent educational transition confirms Viteritti's notion that mayoral control may aid a district in achieving greater efficiency or effectiveness over time, but a system's growth is directly connected to the governance of the mayor and ultimately, the power of the voters. Wong et al. maintain that a common criticism of mayoral controlled systems is that they take away power from citizens and are "undemocratic because they are replacing an elected school board with an appointed one."⁹ However, the District of Columbia's recent mayoral election suggests otherwise as the very essence of democracy, power of individual voters, was utilized to dismiss Mayor Fenty. The Fenty administration's educational initiatives cannot be immediately assessed, but the failure to reach a second term by the district's first education mayor demonstrates the absolute power of democracy and voters' impact in a smaller, mayoral controlled district such as Washington, D.C. When responding to Mayor Fenty's loss, Michelle Rhee simply affirmed, "That's democracy¹⁰," and in the District of Columbia, democracy catapulted the first education mayor's reform initiatives but in the end, allowed voters to elect a new mayor.

⁸ Viteritti. *When Mayors Take Charge*, 21-22.

⁹ Wong et al., 5.

¹⁰ Rhee, "The Education of Michelle Rhee"

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