

Testimony of

Michelle Rhee
Acting Chancellor
District of Columbia Public Schools

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Vincent C. Gray, Chairman

**Hearing on the “Nomination of Michelle Rhee as Chancellor of the District of Columbia
Public Schools”**

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Council Chamber
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 500
Washington, DC 20004

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Council. I am honored to appear before you today as you consider my nomination as Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools. Even as the 'newcomer' to the District, I fully grasp the significance of this moment – I am overwhelmed with excitement at the possibilities presented by the journey we are about to begin together.

Today, I would like to do three things:

- 1) First, to tell you about myself
- 2) Second, to share the principles that will drive my work
- 3) And last, to outline my top priorities moving forward

1) About Myself

I have worked in the field of urban education for the past 15 years. I founded and built The New Teacher Project, one of the country's most well-respected education reform organizations. TNTP is dedicated to improving public education by increasing the quality and quantity of teachers who work in low performing schools and districts across the country. In its work with some of the largest urban school districts in the nation, The New Teacher Project has had a systemic impact in ways that were not thought possible. Across the country, we've brought over 23,000 teachers into these systems (enough to staff DCPS 4 times over) who have taught over 2 million children. As an organization, we spearheaded legislation in California that impacted over 1000 school districts and over 9,000 schools across the state. I've advised some of the most successful superintendents in urban districts (including Joel Klein, Barbara Byrd Bennett, John Deasy, Arne Duncan, and Michael Bennett) on teacher quality, and having worked in NYC, Chicago, Oakland, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Baltimore and DC, I know first hand the challenges (and potential) our urban districts have today.

My career in education began as a classroom teacher at Harlem Park Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland. My experience there shaped the rest of my career. I saw that students who were performing far below grade level could quickly achieve at the highest levels if they were exposed to a quality academic program. I did three main things as a classroom teacher. First, I had high expectations for all students. Next, I engaged the parents and community in what we were trying to accomplish. And last, we worked hard and long. Seeing the growth of my students showed me that the academic outcomes of our students had nothing to do with their ability and potential (which was endless) and everything to do with the education they were receiving in the schools.

Coming away from my experiences in Baltimore, I knew that in order to significantly change the educational outcomes of students in urban communities, we must focus on the quality of educators.

2) Share the principles I bring to the work

Human Capital. This brings me to the first principle that will drive my work -- the importance of quality educators throughout the system. I believe that people are paramount to the success of the district. I will focus relentlessly on building a corps of effective principals and teachers. Let me first say a few words about principals. We all know that the leader of a school matters most in ensuring excellent instruction throughout a school building. You may be aware that there are many high profile principal vacancies at this time. As my first Executive Order, I required those vacancies to be filled by interim acting leaders until we have had the time to launch a massive principal recruitment campaign throughout the nation. Only extremely strong candidates will receive permanent appointments. In the same way, I will take teacher recruitment and induction efforts to a new level. We will bring intensity to the effort to attract and retain teacher talent and measure our results. We will operate with intelligent human resources policies designed to compete successfully with other districts by hiring talent early and enabling it to grow and flourish.

But there is far more than successful recruitment and hiring to building a strong corps of educators. We currently have many excellent educators in the system, and it's critical that they are recognized and rewarded. We must also have outstanding induction, professional development, and career growth opportunities for staff at every level. Building human capital requires high quality working conditions and professionalism, as well as delivering the tools educators need. But most of all, it requires not compromising on quality. The role of a principal is critical in sustaining talent. We must support school leaders in becoming great talent managers. We have to insist on quality all the way down this system.

Accountability. Next, I believe we must transition from a culture of diffuse accountability to individual responsibility for student achievement. The Mayor has made clear that he will focus on accountability, and I intend to do the same. The way to do this is clear – through a combination of high expectations for performance and substantial support to meet those expectations.

First, we will establish and communicate very clear expectations for everyone in the system, from teachers and principals to students and parents to staff and administrators. Everyone must understand what they are responsible for doing, how it is aligned to student achievement, and how their performance will be evaluated. After we lay out these expectations, we must, as a system, ensure that all individuals have the training, support, and resources they need to be successful. And lastly, we must hold everyone accountable for providing a quality education to each student in this district.

Accountability also means responsiveness. DCPS is a service organization. We serve students and their families. We have a responsibility to respect our constituents, to provide them with information proactively, to elicit their input, and to respond to their questions and concerns in a timely manner. This means

responding to student needs, to parent needs, and to the needs of the school-based staff. If we want a laser-like focus on academic achievement and high quality instruction, then we must have the systems and processes in place centrally to ensure that operational issues can be taken care of efficiently. We must have systems that ensure prompt repairs of leaky toilets, painting over graffiti, and people being paid on time for the hard work they are doing. These systems must be seamless functions that support our work at schools, not hinder them.

In short, there will no longer be faceless failure and unresponsiveness; we will no longer describe failure as the result of vast impersonal forces like poverty or a broken bureaucracy. Instead, when we confront failure we will be able to trace the causes of the failure and remedy them effectively. It will no longer be enough to say the schools are failing. Everyone is going to feel the pressure to perform. At the same time, there will be strong, visible support to succeed.

That may sound tough, and it is. But no one will celebrate success more intensely than my administration. As Chancellor, I will shine a bright light on achievement; and I intend to make the District of Columbia Public Schools among the brightest in the nation.

Focused and consistent instruction. Last, I am going to insist on an instructional approach that is consistent and aligned throughout our schools, beginning with reading. By consistent and aligned, I mean that nearly every school will adopt the same highly proven programs and implement them with fidelity across schools. Professional development will focus entirely on these specific programs, and will be delivered in most cases by a single specialized provider across schools. We will track progress in implementing the curriculum rigorously and consistently across schools and across classrooms. Consistency does not, however, mean a one-size fits all model; it must be balanced with autonomy. We

have many schools that have shown strong results and progress. Those schools will be able to continue with their programs and, in fact, we will look to demonstrated best practices to inform our broader work and decisions.

3) Outline my top priorities

Before I talk about the most pressing issues facing our district, I will tell you that I believe community and parental engagement in our schools is critical. In my short time here, I've been incredibly impressed with the outpouring of interest, concern, and support of DCPS. We must harness that energy for the improvement of our system. I will work to ensure that we are communicating consistently and constantly with community members, and engage them in the decision-making process. Parents and community play a critical role in improving our schools – their voices must be heard and their input must be sought.

Additionally, the principles I have just outlined will inform my priorities. Most of all, I will attend to the quality of human capital at every level. I will focus on common instructional approaches, beginning with reading. I will put policies in place to support individual responsibility and responsiveness at all levels.

In addition to these priorities, there are some specific issues facing the District that I will work head-on to address. The first is special education. Previous school administrations have failed on their promise to rebuild special education. Parents and students have waited far too long. Until we address this critical need, we will continue to lead the nation in cost per pupil to educate while trailing the nation in test scores. The current special education arrangement is costing us dearly at the expense of every DCPS student. We will rebuild this system. It will cost money up front. It cannot be done overnight. We will begin this effort by focusing on a child's needs long before he or she winds up on a long bus ride to a school far from their

neighborhood. We must be proactive in articulating a vision for inclusive, comprehensive special education services that meet the needs of our special needs populations in an efficient and effective manner.

Next, I believe we need to take a comprehensive approach to preparing our high school students for life after graduation – whether they choose to continue their education or go into the workforce, every student should have options. I say this with full recognition of the need to revitalize and expand the District's career and technical education offerings. The goal of quality instruction is to prepare students for life, to prepare them to succeed and to provide for themselves and their families, and to prepare them to participate as citizens of our democracy. I know that the ability to learn a trade is closely tied to both staying in school and ensuring that students can find employment after graduation. We will provide a robust career technical education program, ensuring that students have opportunities to learn in high school the skills necessary to enter the workforce and compete in today's job market. But I want to emphasize that I do not view preparing a student for work and preparing a student for college as mutually exclusive. When I speak with employers and college admissions officials, I find that they want graduates with similar skills and well-rounded educational experiences. Therefore, we must ensure that our students graduate with the options and opportunity to pursue whatever they dream – to prepare them for any less is to rob them of a chance to change direction or careers or to meet the challenges of an increasingly demanding job market.

Last, I am going to implement a high quality interim assessment program that will measure our progress as we go, not just at the end of the year. Students and families will use this data to better know whether they are on track. Teachers will use this data to better understand and respond to their students' strengths and weaknesses. School leaders will use this data to focus their professional development on the areas it is most needed. And central administration will analyze the data to identify where, as a system, we are

seeing results and where we are falling short. We will not drive blind. We will have a constant, determined focus on student achievement.

Reaching out beyond the schools, as Chancellor, I will ignite the ambition of our corporate, philanthropic, and artistic communities to contribute at a new level of focus and impact. As I said when I was appointed, it is time that the wealth of this great city – economically, socially, culturally, politically – is reflected in its public schools. Accomplishing this task will not only require giving more; it will require the school system to become a better partner and recipient.

We could talk about a lot of other things, but to summarize, the following components will be the core of my strategy for all students, regular education students and special education students:

- A relentless focus on the quality of the professionals working with them.
- An insistence on individual responsibility for success and failure.
- Common instructional programs measured by aligned interim assessments.
- And a campaign to engage students, parents, educators and the broader community in an intensive effort to drive achievement.

We have everything we need to do this – and we can do this if we take our collective talents, resources, desires, and minds and turn them into an undeniable collective will. For me that is truly the question before us today – do we have the will to move forward, to do what is right, and to deliver on our promises to our children? I believe we do.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to your questions.