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MICHELLE RHEE INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
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Michelle Rhee
American Educator
September 9, 2011
Total Running Time: 55 minutes and 20 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

Michelle Rhee
American Educator

INTERVIEWER:

So Michelle, can we just start with you telling me a little bit about what your family is like and what it was like growing up?

00:00:09

MICHELLE RHEE:

I grew up in Rossford, Ohio, which is a suburb of Toledo. And, uh, grew up in a really sort of idyllic setting. Uh, both my parents were incredibly supportive. They very much focused us on education and making sure that we were doing well in school. I have an older brother and a younger brother. Uh, both my parents worked, uh, I attended public school through sixth grade and then moved on to a private school after that. Uh, so I really don't have any complaints about growing up. It was, you know, the, the worst I can say is that my parents were really strict with me cuz I was the only girl in the family.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you ever have a moment where you wished you were a boy with two brothers and them going a little bit lenient, more lenient on them?

00:00:51

MICHELLE RHEE:

I always, when I was young, wished I was a boy. The– the Korean culture is very sort of male-centric or used to be. Uh, and so, uh, my brothers were always allowed to do a lot of things that I wasn't allowed to do. And I had to do a lot of things that my brothers didn't have to do. And I remember, um, when I was in middle school, I went, uh, with our middle school field hockey team and I visited another school. It was a boarding school right outside of Cleveland. And I fell in love with it. I thought, oh my gosh, this is amazing. I would love to go to a boarding school. So I came home and my par– told my parents, “I wanna go to boarding school.” And they said, absolutely not. You know, girls can't go away for school. Meanwhile, they were encouraging my brothers to apply to boarding schools. Neither of them wanted to go. And so it was those times that I really thought, gosh, I wish I wasn't a girl.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, was it a typical Korean American family, or were, tell me a bit about that.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Rhee Family

00:01:43

MICHELLE RHEE:

I think I grew up in a typical Korean American family in some ways in that my parents were very focused on education. They were very conservative in some ways. They didn't want me to go out late at night and that sort of thing. But there was something I think different, uh, from my family than maybe most Korean American kids my age, which is that my father was very liberal politically. And, uh, so he always talked to us about social justice issues and encouraged us to be involved in community service and not to take for granted what we had, uh, because he happened to be a doctor and we- we, you know, were more well off. And so it was because of that that I think I developed a different level of understanding about the haves and the have nots and just the injustices that existed in the world for some kids.

INTERVIEWER:

And so your outspokenness though, does that come from your mother or your father, do you think?

00:02:42

MICHELLE RHEE:

My outspokenness comes from my mother. Though you would never guess it because unless you know her well, you would think she is very quiet and demure. Uh, she, you know, when you meet her for the first time, she defers a lot to my dad. But if you actually really know my mother, you know that she is extraordinarily competitive. Uh, she's very opinionated. She's gonna let you know what she thinks all the time until you think what she thinks. Uh, so I very much get that tenaciousness from her.

INTERVIEWER:

How important was winning and leading to you as you were growing up and getting into college and whatnot?

00:03:21

MICHELLE RHEE:

You know, I think it was something that- that- that came naturally to me. I am a very competitive person. I think I always have been, uh, probably some of that was, was encouraged by my parents, particularly when it came to academics. You know, we were the sort of family where if you came home with an A, my mother would say, "Well, why wasn't an A plus?" Um, so it was this culture that we had in our family and in our household where you were always striving to do better. You could never, you know, nothing was really good enough. And so, um, you know, I think that winning was really important to me. I think in terms of the leadership, um, that was something that sort of came naturally to me. I was, uh, somebody who in high school, people referred to as the mother hen. I was, you know, sort of always giving people advice and nurturing people and kind of saying, okay, this is what we're gonna do. And, and that sort of thing. Um, and from a very young age, you know, took on some leadership responsibilities that I think started to... to teach me a lot about, you know, the fact that you can't always be popular. Not always, you know, you're not always gonna be in a situation where everyone likes you. So I had those experiences from, from when I was very young.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, let me ask you this. Cause the one common thread that I see in almost all the women that I'm interviewing, and they're very powerful and have

made huge changes. They're all outsiders. Growing up, did you think of yourself an outsider at all?

00:04:47

MICHELLE RHEE:

I was very much an outsider when I was in elementary school. Uh, I was pretty much, my brothers and I were the only kids of color in the school. And so it was a very unusual experience because you– you are– you are just sort of the other, um, and so different from everyone else. So I definitely felt that. And, and, you know, every time kids would come over to our house, they'd say, "Oh my gosh," you know, "The kitchen smells. What is that? You're eating something funny." And I was always trying to hide that and figure out how I could be like everyone else. When I went to the private school, um, though my– my parents had the– the money to pay for the tuition, we didn't have the same social standing as other other people in the school. And so, you know, belonging to all the clubs and that sort of thing was not where we were. And so, you know, from that perspective, I also sort of felt like I wasn't always sort of in the mold of everyone else and, and was very much an outsider trying to, trying to push in and trying to, to fit in.

INTERVIEWER:

What was dating like for you and were your parents very strict? I read a story about your mom and the dress.

00:05:57

MICHELLE RHEE:

My parents were definitely strict growing up. Uh, and so I was only allowed out of the house one night out of the week, and I had to be home by 11

o'clock. So that did not do much for my dating life. Um, my... I went to the prom one year, and when I put on the dress, which I had gotten at my mother's clothing store, my mother owned clothing store, she looked at me and, and she sort of said, mm, I don't- I don't... this is not working for me. And it was because she felt that the front was too, too low. Um, so she took out her sewing kit and she literally sewed me into the dress, both in the front and the back. I wasn't going anywhere. And when I got home from the dance, she literally had to cut me out of it.

00:06:40

MICHELLE RHEE:

Uh, so they were very, very strict. Uh, um, but interestingly, I actually had a, uh, a, a high school boyfriend whose mother was a teacher. Um, her name was Mary Weiss and she was, you know, one of the very early influencers, um, in my life around education. She taught in an inner city school. And so I went with her to the school and I volunteered in her classroom. And it was such a stark contrast from the- the everyday world that I was living in and the private school that I went to, that that, um, that experience really helped to sort of shape my views on public education, even though I was attending a private school because I saw just such a juxtaposition, uh, between the two types of, of educations.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, is that when you knew that you wanted to be a teacher or going into education? Or were you one of those people that knew from a very early on, this is my goal in life is to do this?

00:07:32

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MICHELLE RHEE:

So I am not one of those people. I am the kind of person who never knew what they wanted to do from one stage of life to another. So when I was in high school, I didn't know where I wanted to go to college. When I was in college, I didn't know what I should major in. When I was graduating from college, I didn't know what I wanted to- to- to do for work. Uh, so I had experiences in Mary's classroom, but I didn't... I didn't sort of connect those two, oh, I, I want to be in education or I wanna be a teacher. I just sort of... what I took from those experiences were, there's this, there's this incredible injustice and an, and an inequity between what is happening with poor kids and what's happening with wealthier kids that I found absolutely unconscionable. And so, you know, that was seated in me early, but it wasn't translating necessarily to, okay, now you, now you have to, you know, go become an educator.

INTERVIEWER:

So how did that happen? How did that dream come up about?

00:08:30

MICHELLE RHEE:

You know, it, it's... I decided to go into education sort of as a default. Uh, I was about to graduate from Cornell University my senior year. I had applied to some graduate schools. I got into, uh, a number of programs, interestingly enough, uh, around industrial and labor relations. So no one would have, uh, guessed that that, uh, now, but that, that was what I was interested in. And, um, I also applied to Teach for America because I had seen, uh, a documentary on PBS about, about TFA. It looked really interesting to me. I

knew my parents were not gonna be so excited about the prospects of me becoming a teacher, but I thought, well, it's a two year program. You can go and do it for two years and then, you know, resume your, the rest of your life. And I went for two years, but I didn't resume the rest of my life. I was- I was hooked. And once I had the experience of being a teacher in an inner city classroom, um, having success with my students and seeing what they were capable of, that was, that was it for me. It set the... it cast the die for the rest of my career.

INTERVIEWER:

But it wasn't an easy start.

00:09:37

MICHELLE RHEE:

It was not an easy start. When I started teaching, I really, really struggled. Uh, in fact, I was a pretty bad first year teacher. Um, I had a lot of problems with discipline. The kids would not listen to me.

INTERVIEWER:

So tell me your... what's your, what was your worst day that you remember going into that classroom? I mean, you wake up, you just, just walk me through it.

00:10:01

MICHELLE RHEE:

Uh, well, routinely I would wake up and I would have a knot in my stomach because I wasn't successful. I wasn't being successful every day. Uh, and that was really hard on me. So I would wake up and just feel it physically from the

moment I woke up. And probably one of the toughest days that I had was very early on in my first year. Uh, and you have to realize that every day I would go in and the kids were just nuts. They were outta control. They wouldn't listen to anything that I said. So on this particular day that I went in, um, I had a conference that I needed to go to, a special education conference for one of the students. So they had to pull me out of the classroom, and they asked the librarian to cover my classroom for me. And I sort of saw it as, oh gosh, this is a nice little break in the middle of the day. I get an hour off. And, uh, I came back in the room and the class was completely silent. Every single kid was on task. They were all doing what she asked them to. And I, I came into the room and I said, well, how they're, how were they? She said they were great. She packs up her stuff and she's about to leave. And she hadn't even crossed the threshold of the door yet. And the kids started going nuts again.

00:11:08

MICHELLE RHEE:

So I, you know, screamed at the kids. I said, wait a second. I said, tell me, I don't understand. Why is it that you can behave for her and you can't do that for me? And, uh, little Anthony Miles, who was one of my biggest discipline problems, looked at me and said, "because she knows what she's doing." And I thought it was the kids basically saying, we know that you can't control us. You don't, you know, you're, you're not so good. And that's why we act like the way we act. And— and I had lots of experiences like that within a relatively short period of time where I came to realize that it wasn't the kids at all. It was, it was me. And I had to do something to improve my practice to ensure that I was creating the kind of environment where kids felt like they could

learn that they needed to be respectful and they needed to, to pay attention to what was going on.

INTERVIEWER:

So, well, how do you turn that around though? That's a huge boat to move.

00:12:05

MICHELLE RHEE:

It was, I had 36 kids in my class, 36 second graders. So that's a lot of kids in a classroom. And, um, I was– I was... I sort of became obsessed with this idea, having watched some of my biggest discipline problems in classrooms with other teachers doing exactly what they were, you know, told, I realized, okay, this is about me. What can I do? And so I was a woman possessed, and I sort of decided I am gonna figure this out. So every three days I'd have a different seating configuration or a different discipline, uh, strategy. And I was just trying to figure out, okay, what's gonna work? And slowly it sort of came to me and it was just this odd thing. I– I, instead of having the kids sitting in groups, I figured out that sitting them in a giant u with some of the kids who were my biggest challenges, kind of sitting in the middle was the way to go, because then I could see everybody at all times and exactly what they were doing.

00:13:02

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, and then I developed a discipline system where I would put kids' names up on the board when they were doing something good. And when they continued to do good things, I would put stars next to their name. And if they happened to do something that was, you know, against the rules or whatnot,

then I would erase a star. So it was more positively focused than negative. So it wasn't about, okay, if you get, you know, X number of X's next to your name, then I'm gonna call your mom or whatever. Instead, it was very positive, focused. And I found that my kids reacted better to that. It was a challenge because that meant that for some of my discipline problems, right when they walked in the door, I'd have to, I'd have to sort of put their name up. Oh great, you came to school name up on the board. Great, you sat down in the chair name up on the board of star, you know, that sort of thing. So that there was then something for them to lose. And I created this very complicated system where at the end of the day, for every star they had next to their name, they got a certain number of tickets. And at the end of the week, they could take those tickets and come to the store at, on my classroom store, and exchange the tickets in for, you know, prizes.

00:14:02

MICHELLE RHEE:

And, you know, it was a system that had evolved over time. And I've tried lots of different things, but it actually worked. And so by April of my first year, I had really turned a pretty significant corner and gotten to a place where the kids said, nah, maybe she's not so bad. She's here for the long haul. She's not gonna go anywhere. We'll actually listen to what she says.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, how important is it for a teacher to be there for the long haul?

00:14:27

MICHELLE RHEE:

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I think it's incredibly, uh, important. Um, not, not that you're necessarily there for 30 years, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Visiting J.O Wilson Elementary School

Washington. D.C., August 23rd, 2010

MICHELLE RHEE:

– but that the children know that you are committed to them and their success. And the children that I had my first year, uh, teaching had– had been together from kindergarten on because my school tracked kids by both behavior and academics. So this was the lowest track. The kids that supposedly had the, the biggest discipline problems and who were behind academically. So they knew how to push each other's buttons, but they also knew how to push the buttons of teachers. So they had had, you know, a series of teachers come in and out over the course of several years and they had come to believe that, oh, if we just act crazy, then that teacher will leave and another teacher will come in. And having a teacher actually stick with them through the entire year and stick it out with them and, you know, all through all the ups and downs, I actually think was, was a pivotal sort of moment of their realization that, okay, she cares about us. She's, she's not going anywhere.

INTERVIEWER:

So tell me, how did you make the leap from teacher to superintendent of one of the lowest rated school systems in the country?

00:15:39

MICHELLE RHEE:

My journey from being a teacher in my twenties to being the chancellor of the school district, uh, in Washington, D.C. well, by the time I was 37 was not a typical path at all. In fact, it was probably the most unlikely path that a superintendent could take. When I, uh, when I left–

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Master of Public Policy Graduation

Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government

MICHELLE RHEE:

– teaching after three years, I went to get my graduate degree in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. And after I graduated from that program, I was trying to figure out what could I do in education to have a more systemic impact. And so I started an organization called The New Teacher Project, which is a national nonprofit organization that recruited great new teachers into districts that needed, uh, high quality teachers the most. So urban, inner city, and rural school districts. And I ran that organization for 10 years and was very sort of active in the school reform community.

00:16:32

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, I think people knew me as somebody who wasn't afraid to– to take on controversial issues, to speak out, et cetera. And, um, I went to a conference one day and, uh, the deputy Mayor of Education in DC, Victor Reinoso, came

up to me and he said, you know, "I wanna take you out to dinner because you know, all of the, uh, superintendents in the country and we are, we're about to take over mayoral control of the schools, and we are looking for somebody great. So I wanna, I wanna sit down and, and, and hear who you think is good." So I went out to dinner with him at the end of the night. I thought I got, you know, I got, he got his money's worth because I gave him four really solid names of people who should take the job. And, um, then later he came up to me and he said, well, what about you? And I said, absolutely not. I would, I would never do that.

00:17:26

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, meanwhile, sort of at the same time, uh, Joel Klein, who was the chancellor of the schools in New York City, had developed a relationship with Mayor Fenty, uh, because the mayor wanted to take over control of the schools. And so it took the whole city council up to New York City to watch, you know, what was going on there and to see that. And so Klein called Fenty one day because Fenty had been harping on, on Joel Klein. "I need somebody like you. Find me you for here in DC." And Klein called him one day and said, "Okay, I have two people for you. Um, you know, this first person is, is, yeah, I feel like he could do it," you know, and Fenty said, ah, it's not, not not, you know, it's too much of a usual suspect, not not on what I'm looking for. And Klein said, "Well, the second one is, is not a usual suspect, but I don't think you can hire her," um, "or I don't think you're going to hire her." Fenty said, why not? And she said, he said, because she's 37 years old and she's Korean and she's never run a school. And, uh, politically, that would be really almost impossible for you to pull off.

00:18:30

MICHELLE RHEE:

He said that's that I think she could do it. And so Fenty said, great, I need to meet her. And that's sort of how it started. I, I met the mayor and at the time I said, you do not want me for this job, trust me. And he said, what are you, what are you talking about? You're the one I want you. And I said, no. I said, if I were to take this job, I would wanna go at it with everything that I had. And what that would mean is that we would be making incredibly problematic, meaning contentious decisions. Right. Um, decisions that would be, um, really hard for you politically because they would, they would stir a lot of opposition. And you're a politician and you wanna keep your poll numbers high and you want to keep your constituents happy. And so I am not the person that you want. And he looked at me and he said, "You know what? I totally disagree."

00:19:18

MICHELLE RHEE:

He said, "I...the, my, my top priority in doing this job is to fix the schools. And so I want somebody who's gonna come in and, and, and question everything that's happening and turn everything upside down if it needs to, to be turned upside down. And so I will back you a hundred percent. You don't have to worry about the polling, you don't have to worry about the politics." And so I thought, gosh, this is, this is... I've never heard a politician talk like that. Uh, this is a school district that certainly does need, uh, a transformation. And so I thought, okay, I'll take it on.

INTERVIEWER:

So were you welcomed with open arms?

00:19:56

MICHELLE RHEE:

I was not welcomed with open arms at the– at the very beginning. When he first announced me, uh, I was the, the diametric opposite of what people both wanted and expected in a school's chancellor. And so I was initially greeted with a lot of skepticism, um, particularly around sort of race, uh, because people said, there's this little Korean girl from Toledo, Ohio. Is she gonna be able to relate to inner city parent African American parents, uh, in, you know, ward aid of Washington D.C.? So that was sort of the early skepticism. I think that, um, through the first few months, I won people over. I was out in the community constantly. I was talking to people, I was, you know, I, I think I can be fairly, uh, you know, charming when I wanna be. And so, I won a lot of people over and, and got to the point where people were saying, okay, she's passionate.

00:20:51

MICHELLE RHEE:

She knows what needs to happen and so we're gonna give her a chance. And, um, you know, at the end of the day, I'm– I'm a very firm believer that, that being a mother and the fact that I put my kids in the public school system spoke, uh, a lot about how I was gonna run the district because, uh, I– I never in my, you know, 20 years of being in this field, I have never met a, a, a mother anywhere who wanted anything different for her kids than what I want for my kids. And so I think people could relate to me on that level of knowing she's a mom first and foremost, and she's gonna make decisions, you know, with that, with that context.

INTERVIEWER:

But you were so controversial, weren't you down there?

00:21:35

MICHELLE RHEE:

Yes. Very, I was a controversial figure in the city for lots of different reasons. And I think if I tried to unpack that, I would say one of the primary reasons, at least initially, was because visually it was very striking sort of stark picture, right? Here I was leading a school district that had 80% African American kids, another 11 or 12% Latino kids, and here's an a, uh, an Asian American woman walking into that, a young one at that, it just caused a very stark visual. Um, and that visual of God, this, this doesn't look right, you know, it's so counter to what we would expect to see sort of caused a lot of people to, to pay attention to what we were doing. So we were under the microscope, um, more than an average superintendent is. I think that my- my style and demeanor, uh, also played into that a little bit.

00:22:29

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, you know, I- I am somebody who is very straightforward. Um, I, I'm very honest. I feel like people appreciate hearing the truth. And I, throughout my entire time in DC um, you know, I still do believe that is that, you know, I could have gone into meetings and, and when people were complaining about something, I would've said, I could've said, yeah, I'll do what you want me to do, and then turned around and not done it. Um, that's not the type of person that I am. I'm gonna tell you, uh, you know, if, if I'm gonna do something that you're not necessarily in favor of, I'm gonna listen to you. Sometimes you can

change my mind, but if you don't change my mind, I'm gonna tell you very honestly that that's what I'm gonna do. Um, so it, it, it was very different. I think for some people, uh, I'll give you an example.

00:23:18

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, very early on I met with, uh, funders, philanthropists in the city. And, um, I went to the meeting and I said, I'm, I'm about to say something that you are not expecting. I want you to give me a little space because there's a lot of stuff going on right now, and I know that you have a lot of programs and priorities, but I feel like what this district needs is focus and discipline. And so what I'm gonna do is choose, you know, three or four things that we're really gonna focus on first. Let me fix those things and then I'll expand from there. And people were nodding their heads and saying, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I said, but what that means is that there might be some things that are priorities for you that I'm not gonna be able to address right away. And I want you to know it's not because I don't think it's important. It's because we have to have this focus and discipline. So, you know, I got a lot of head nods.

00:24:10

MICHELLE RHEE:

And then afterwards people came to me and said, I totally agree with what you said, except my program. So let me tell you about that. And I really need you to focus in on that. And I, I stuck to my guns and, and, and, you know, for a while sort of said to the funding community, look, I, I need to focus for a while first. As time went on, we developed our capacity, we got better, we fixed a lot of things. And then, and then we had the capacity to, to take more things on. So, um, you, you know, ultimately we did get there with them, but it

was, I think, very shocking to them at the outset to have somebody come in and say, actually don't need your help right now. Um, and again, it wasn't because we didn't want lots of different people to, to help us. And certainly not that we didn't want the extra resources, but one of the things that I found, uh, broken about the system was that you would walk into a school and the principal would rattle 40 programs and partners off that they had.

00:25:02

MICHELLE RHEE:

And when you actually went into the school in the classrooms, you realize that none of that was— was real. They, they put the banner up, but they weren't implementing those things and it's because they didn't have the capacity to treat every partner, uh, the way that they ought to be treated. And so what I tried to do is sort of really get people to, to focus and not to have, try to do 50 things and spread yourself too thin, but, but to do several things well. And so to schools it was, you know, the message was, have a couple of partners and have those be really, really strong meaningful partnerships instead of having 40 partners who are all frustrated because you won't return their calls.

INTERVIEWER:

But, um, one of the other things that you did was you took on the unions.

00:25:45

MICHELLE RHEE:

Yes. I... my— when, when I got to the district, uh, I was sort of trying to figure out how do you take a system that is so broken, so fundamentally broken on so many different levels, and it has so many things wrong with it, how do you,

how do you go about fixing it? And um, for me, you know, it, there was sort of an order of operation of what you took on. And the first to me was basic operations. So we were a school district that the kids were, um, freezing cold in the wintertime because the heaters were broken and they were ridiculously hot in the summertime because the air conditioners didn't work. A school district that, um, I found, uh, hundreds of thousands of books, uh, locked up in the warehouse and schools didn't have the books and paper and pencils and that sort of stuff where the— and and they're all sitting in the warehouse.

00:26:37

MICHELLE RHEE:

So it was a fundamentally broken system and I thought, you have to meet people's base level needs first, so let's make sure that people are being paid, that they're on the proper healthcare, that they have the books and materials that they need to teach, et cetera. So I handled those first. But right after that, to me, I thought if you look at the research, it is very clear that the number one in-school factor that determines whether or not kids are successful or not is teacher quality. So the, the, the, the, this is gonna be the thing that I focus in on teacher quality. As a parent, I knew this too. Any parent can tell you that the experience that their teacher— that their kid has in school every day is so tightly correlated to who their teacher is. So if you have a great teacher one year, your child is flourishing and loves going to school.

00:27:25

MICHELLE RHEE:

And if you have a not so great teacher, you hear it every single day. And so I thought our goal should be to have amazing teachers in every single

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classroom. Um, and that's what I'm gonna focus my efforts on. And it did, um, end up causing me to have a somewhat challenging and very, um, a very, uh, exciting relationship with the teachers union because a lot of the, the policies that I was trying to push were so counter to the way the district, um, unions operate that uh, they just didn't know what to do with me.

INTERVIEWER:

So, but you've been labeled as being anti teacher and anti-union. Is that true? Are you?

00:28:09

MICHELLE RHEE:

Nothing could be further from the truth. I am the most ProTeacher person you could possibly imagine cuz I was a teacher, number one, I'm a mother number two. And I, I see the power that teachers have and I think we're at an unfortunate point in the education debate in this country because we are at a place where if you, if you at all call question to policies pertaining to teachers and teacher equality, you get labeled as anti teacher. So I say, for example, we should make it easier to pay great teachers more and we should make it easier for ineffective teachers to be moved out of the profession. I feel like that's a pretty basic thing. I don't know that there's anybody out there who would disagree with what I just said, but, um, you would think that I, uh, don't, I don't know.

00:29:01

MICHELLE RHEE:

I mean the, you know, people have said, oh, she's anti teacher, she's, you know, trying to bust the union. She's scapegoating teachers, et cetera. That's

not what it is at all. What I'm saying is that teachers play such a critical role in kids' lives that we should aspire to try to ensure that every single kid is in a classroom with a great teacher every year. Well, why, why wouldn't we do that? And um, and you know, we have to have policies in place that ensure that's happening. So for example, and this is where sort of my- my motherhood comes in. Um, I knew every day as I was making decisions that I had to live with that, not just as the chancellor, but as, but as a mom too. So for example, we were, uh, developing a new teacher evaluation tool in the district, and, um, we had four categories that teachers rated highly effective, effective, minimally effective, or ineffective.

00:29:58

MICHELLE RHEE:

And the policy question came up of, if a teacher is rated as ineffective, what do we do with that person? So there was debate going back and forth amongst my staff. Do we allow that person to stay on for another year or two? We professionally developed them X, Y, and Z. And you know, I looked at my staff and I said, look, if we're gonna let a person who has been rated as ineffective stay on for another school year, then I have to be willing to have my own kid in that person's classroom. And let me tell you, I am not willing to have one of my child- my children be taught by an ineffective teacher. I don't know what parent in this country would say, oh yeah, I'm good with that. So if I'm not willing to make that decision for my own child, then I certainly can't expect any other mother in this city to accept that for their- their child.

00:30:50

MICHELLE RHEE:

So no, we're gonna... if a teacher has been rated as ineffective and they have that year, you know, that year to, to improve and they're still ineffective, then, then we have to remove them from the system. That is the best thing for the children. I don't understand how that can be perceived as being anti teacher. Um, mostly because the- the people in society who have the least amount of acceptance of- of ineffective teachers is effective teachers. It drives effective teachers crazy when they have a colleague next door who isn't pulling their weight, who isn't doing their fair share, uh, because they know it's not good for the profession. They know it's not good for kids. Um, and so effective teachers are the ones who are sort of at the front of the line saying, yeah, we have to, we have to find a way to remove those people from the classroom. And that's not, that's not anti teacher, that is pro kid. It might be anti ineffective teacher, but you know, I, I don't know anybody out there, you know, who can look me in the eye and honestly say, "I think it's good for kids to keep somebody who's not effective in the classroom."

INTERVIEWER:

I'm playing devil's advocate of someone who might be watching this. Of course you would fire a teacher. Why is it so difficult?

00:32:02

MICHELLE RHEE:

One thing that I think lots of people don't understand in society is that it is nearly impossible to fire a teacher in this country. If you look at any of the statistics around, um, how many teachers are rated as ineffective or how many teachers are let go because of performance reasons, it is less than 1% across the- the nation. And, um, if you, if you ask school administrators, uh,

superintendents across the country, they will regale you with stories about teachers that they know are not doing the right thing by kids. Um, who it is very, very difficult, if not impossible to, to fire these folks. It's an, it's, it's interesting, I just read a, a story not too long ago about a teacher in New York City who, um, had been found passed out drunk in her classroom. Uh, now, no, that this is, the vast majority of teachers in this, in this country are wonderful.

00:33:03

MICHELLE RHEE:

So this is an exception to the rule, but she was passed out drunk in her classroom. People found her, um, you know, tried to, to remove her, you know, get her fired. Um, didn't happen. She sort of got reinstated with back pay and everything. And, and folks found her again after she was reinstated, passed out drunk in the classroom again. And, uh, and after the woman actually went to get some help and became sober, she, she also said, I don't know why they let me, you know, stay in the classroom. They should not, that should not have been the case. That was, I was doing a disservice to kids and, and the union who's protecting me. I mean, they shouldn't have held me up as, you know, somebody who, who should have been protected. And so, you know, I think that, um, we, we can't get to a place in society where we truly value and respect teachers for what they're doing, which is just, I mean, tremendous work.

00:33:56

MICHELLE RHEE:

Unless we are also, you know, looking at the teachers who are not as effective and saying, you, you can't have the privilege of teaching our kids. And, um,

you know, to be pro teacher doesn't mean that you have to, you know, protect every single teacher even when they're not good. I think being pro teacher means that you respect the profession and the importance of, of, you know what it means to be in the classroom with kids every day. And that means that not everybody is cut out to do it. And, um, and so I think that's a nuance that unfortunately has gotten lost in the debate that we really have to find a way to recapture.

INTERVIEWER:

And, um, what about people that say it's pie in the sky, that these are— a lot of the kids are poverty stricken, they come from broken homes, they're not, you know, they have, they don't even get breakfast in the morning mm-hmm. So how can you expect them to learn like everybody else?

00:34:51

MICHELLE RHEE:

Yeah. So it drives me absolutely crazy when people, well-meaning people, um, who I think are— are good people and they care about children, lower the expectations that we have because kids are coming from challenging circumstances. So, don't get me wrong, let me be very clear. Poverty matters when a kid is coming from a family and, uh, a home environment where, uh, nobody fed them breakfast the morning of school, nobody put them to bed the night before at a decent hour. Maybe the electricity got cut off in their house and they couldn't do their homework. Uh, they have a cavity in their tooth which is causing an abscess. I mean, those are real things that make it much, much harder for a child to be school ready. And you cannot ignore

those factors because they do have a tremendous impact. So, I, I wanna be clear about that.

00:35:47

MICHELLE RHEE:

On the other hand, I believe that schools and teachers and education can— can go a long way in helping to solve the problems of poverty in the long run. If, if we as a society are saying, because you're poor, poor thing. We can't expect you to learn cuz look at all the problems you're having at home. We're actually not doing that kid any favors in the long run because we're lowering our expectations and we're saying, gosh, we couldn't possibly expect you to learn at high levels cuz you're poor. How's that helping the kid have a better life? I believe that we need to look at the challenges that they come to school with and say, yep, those are real. Can't ignore them, but we're still gonna high have super high expectations for you. The data is very clear on this. The data says that if a poor, minority kid, kid living in poverty, kid of color, uh, has three highly effective teachers in a row versus three ineffective teachers in a row, it can literally change their life trajectory.

00:36:53

MICHELLE RHEE:

It, it incr— it significantly increases the chances that they will graduate from high school and go on to college. You have those three highly effective teachers in a row. So why wouldn't we do— knowing that poverty exists, why wouldn't we do everything that we could to make sure that, that every kid has highly effective teachers, that if that can help put the kid on a different trajectory for life. I mean, that, that, that's my, that's my mission. That's my goal, is if we know that that can make a difference, and again, this is not

blaming teachers, it's not scapegoating teachers. This is saying that teachers can be the answer for so many kids if we're doing what we should be doing as a system. And I'm just not willing to, to write a generation of children off because of the circumstance that they were born into. We have to acknowledge that circumstance and understand the challenges, but I'm not willing to say because of that. We can't help you. Sorry, kid.

INTERVIEWER:

So was taking on the union professional suicide for you and political suicide for Mayor Fenty?

00:37:58

MICHELLE RHEE:

There's no doubt in my mind that-

ON SCREEN TEXT:

D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty

Appointing Michelle Rhee as Schools Chancellor, 2007

MICHELLE RHEE:

-taking on the teacher's union was politically a very, very tough call for Mayor Fenty, my boss. Um, at the end of the day in his reelection bid, the teacher's union put a million dollars into the campaign of his challenger. They were very serious about not wanting that man in office anymore and not wanting me in office anymore. The most telling thing for me, and I think this is a lesson in leadership for, for any young person out there the day after the election when f he lost, I felt very guilty. Cause I thought, you know, what, if

this man hadn't taken on all of these, you know, really controversial issues on school reform, he might have gotten reelected. So I sent him an email and I said, you know, I'm so sorry.

00:38:44

MICHELLE RHEE:

I wish that there was something that I would've done that, that could have allowed you to stay in office and allowed this work to continue. And he sent me an email back and he said, I don't have any regrets. He said, there is, there is nothing that I have done in my life, nor will I do for the rest of my life. That will be as important as the school reform work that we've done over the last three and a half years. I believe that the children of D.C. are better off for us having done this work. And if it means, you know, me not being in office anymore, but the student achievement levels are higher, and now we have, uh, growing enrollment for the first time in 41 years, and the school buildings are fixed. It will be, it is all worth it to me. And, uh, I thought that was just so telling of his integrity, um, and his, of his leadership style, that he was willing, I mean, he took this on knowing that at the end of the day, it could cost him his political career. He knew that and he was willing to put it all on the line.

INTERVIEWER:

Great. And, um, so take me through what I walk into. What's your ideal school? What does it look like? What do I see, what's happening?

00:39:58

MICHELLE RHEE:

You know, I think the wonderful thing about education is that you can walk into lots of different schools, high performing schools, and see very different

environments, uh, and have them still all be effective. I think the things that are consistent through any really great school is one, you have the right culture. You have a culture of high expectations of kids, of parents, of teachers, of everyone. That there is, uh, a set of rules and norms that everybody abides by everybody, um, you know, lives around and everyone knows is a part of why learning can occur. So that culture is an important piece of it. You have a great principal. Every- every wonderful school has a, a phenomenal principal who understands how to develop both children and teachers and provide the kind of environment that everyone can flourish in. Um, and you have classrooms that are meeting the needs of kids and you know, you can see excellent teachers who teach in very different ways, but all really great teachers know their kids really well. And differentiate for kids.

00:41:16

MICHELLE RHEE:

When you have a classroom full of 25 children, one of the hardest things to master as a teacher is how do I meet the needs of every kid? Because they're all at different places. They all learn in different ways. And the, the, the most phenomenal teachers are the ones who know the quirks of every kid, know how they each learn best and then modify their instruction to individualize for every single kid. And it's very, very difficult to do. Um, but when you, when you see it happening in, in a classroom, it's like magic.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you brought up so that marriage was a given and how did that work?

00:41:56

MICHELLE RHEE:

I definitely grew up in a household where there were certain givens. Going to college was a given, getting married, having kids was a given. Uh, I grew up in a very tight-knit family. Um, and, uh, I lived in sort of an— an odd world because my mother, though she took on very traditional Asian woman, uh, dynamics in our household, she was always the one that cooked. My dad didn't know to do any household chores and that sort of thing. She was also very strong-willed. And so I kind of grew up with my mom saying, you have to be the one that packs your brother's lunches in the morning. And I thought, well, why me? Why not them? Um, so I had that into me, but I also had that kind of, the strong will and the focus. Um, so it was a, it was a little different.

00:42:48

MICHELLE RHEE:

And, um, so I always knew I was gonna get married. Um, uh, my first marriage, I got married very young and, uh, after my divorce I thought, I am never gonna be able to get married again because there's nobody who can live— To be able to live with me, you have to sort of live with all of the kind of, you know, stuff of my, my, my professional life and be comfortable with that. Uh, and also know that in my personal life, I just, I, I just, I wanna be a girl. I wanna cook and do the laundry and have you take out the trash and that sort of thing. So, um, you know, I just thought it's gonna be impossible to, to, to find somebody who fits that mold.

INTERVIEWER:

But you have.

MICHELLE RHEE:

I have, yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Um, has there ever been any backlash for you for, um, dating and then marrying someone and actually twice who was not Korean?

00:43:43

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, you know, when I first started dating Kevin, uh, who's the mayor of Sacramento, um, I thought, I don't know how my parents are gonna react to this. Um, but my, my, my parents love him. They accepted him. Um, they think he's very good for me. So I think I was very fortunate on that front. Um, his family has also been very accepting of me, and I, I haven't felt, uh, um, any sort of backlash. I mean, I'm sure that people talk about it, but they, they certainly don't talk or haven't talked about it in front of me. I, I've felt, um, interestingly enough, and I don't know if this is because we have so much in common on the education reform front, we're both such outspoken, uh, leaders on, on that front that people think, oh, that's a natural fit. Or whether it's something else.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Michelle Rhee & Kevin Huffman

MICHELLE RHEE:

But, um, I've, I've felt a lot of acceptance from people and, and nothing but sort of well wishes and in our relationship in our marriage.

INTERVIEWER:

Would you identify yourself as a feminist?

00:44:48

MICHELLE RHEE:

I definitely see myself as, as a feminist in a lot of ways because I don't think that I fall into the traditional molds of what people expect either from a woman or from, uh, an Asian American woman. And, you know, it still drives me crazy when I, you know, people say, well, sexism doesn't exist. Now there's all this equality. Yeah. Right. I mean, I... even in the coverage of me when I was a chancellor, people, um, would write a magazine article and say, um, she was walking through the halls in her slim back black pants with her Manolo Blahniks clicking on the hall, you know, on the hallway. And I thought if I was a 50 year old white guy, you would not be commenting on what my pants looked like or what shoes I was wearing.

00:45:42

MICHELLE RHEE:

There's, there's no way you would be looking down at the loafers. You know? Um, so there, there, there still is a lot to, I think the, the sexism that we see, um, particularly— I often found myself, um, in situations where I'd go to meetings of superintendents and I was the only woman there, I was the only, or I would be the only woman of color there. Um, and uh, so I think that the, you know, the, the, the glass ceiling still exists. I think it is. Um, you run up against lots of things. Um, people, I think, expected me to be less blunt and frank and, you know, more accommodating. Uh, and when I wasn't, I think that it shattered the expectations that they had and, and potentially made the reaction to me more, more visceral, um, in a lot of ways

INTERVIEWER:

Do you think there's a difference in the way women lead and men lead? And what is that difference?

00:46:42

MICHELLE RHEE:

I'm not sure whether I can tell you specifically that there's a difference between the way that, uh, women lead and men lead. I can tell you— I know that my leadership style is very different from the prior superintendents in Washington, DC, most of whom were men. Um, in that I am not hierarchical. I don't, you can be the intern, you can be the person who makes the copies. When we're in a room together and we're trying to figure out the solution to a problem, everybody is equal. And this was something that was really hard for, for me when I first got to the school district, because in all the organizations that I had run prior to being in the school district, I had created the organization from scratch. So the culture was the way that I was and the way that I, you know, wanted to, uh, people to operate, which was, you know, we, we shout, we argue, we debate, we come up with an answer, and then where we go out to lunch afterwards, right?

00:47:35

MICHELLE RHEE:

And when I got to the school district, I realized that, and this took a little bit of time for me to understand, that people, um, felt like because I was the superintendent, they just had to listen to everything that I was saying. And I brought people into a room once I realized this, and I said, look, I come up with dumb ideas too. If I come up with a dumb idea, I need you to say, that's

stupid. We can't do that. I can't, I don't— I can't have you saying, okay, yeah, and then go implement something when you know it's not right. Um, you gotta question me. You have to, you have to, you know, challenge me and sometimes I'm gonna stick to my guns and sometimes you're gonna change my mind. But we have to have that kind of a dialogue and, and, um, I feel comfortable with that. I don't know whether that's because I'm a woman, uh, and then, and men need to, you know, operate in a different way. I'm not, I'm not sure if it's a gender thing or not. Um, but it is very different management wise than, than what I've seen, you know, other, again, other school leaders doing.

INTERVIEWER:

I had read that you had played sports growing up. Yeah. Were you impacted by Title IX then, do you think?

00:48:38

MICHELLE RHEE:

You know, I did play sports growing up, but I went to an independent school, and so, uh, it was a school that was very focused on making sure that girls had just as many opportunities as boys did. And I don't know— So I don't think it was that I was impacted by Title IX directly so much as probably indirectly with, with public policy being focused on, you know, ensuring gender equality in things, uh, like, uh, extracurricular activities. Uh, I, I was fortunate enough to attend a school where proactively they thought, this is a good thing. We're gonna, we're gonna develop better women if we, you know, nurture our, our girls appropriately and give them all the opportunities, uh, along the way.

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INTERVIEWER:

Okay, great. What's the most meaningful or useful piece of advice that you've ever received?

00:49:32

MICHELLE RHEE:

The best piece of advice that I've ever gotten was from Joel Klein, who's the chancellor of, was the Chancellor of Schools in, in New York City. And he gave me this piece of advice when I first started in DC and he said, lead from the front. And at first when he told me that I didn't know what he was talking about, so I said, okay. Uh, and it didn't take me very long to figure out what he was saying. You know, you sometimes, especially in controversial situations, you have to be the person who's out in front. You have to know where you're going. You have to understand this is the best route to take. And even if other people aren't there, you, you, you sort of, you have to be out in front of the issues. If you get too mired in the middle of things, trying to please everybody, trying to sort of placate all the different interests, then you, I, I think you often get sort of pulled down and you don't accomplish as much. And so sometimes being out in front is a little lonely. But I think in the end it was, it was one of the best pieces of advice that I got.

INTERVIEWER:

Great. What's the one piece of advice that you would give to a young woman?

00:50:38

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, well, I have two young girls, and so I'm to think, you know, one of the things that I, I often try to tell them is, you just have to be you. Uh, and I think that's hard for, for young girls and, and often for women who are starting their careers, they're trying to fit in, they're trying to figure out what, what do I need to do? How do I need to act? How do I need to be in order to either be accepted or, or move up the career ladder or the social ladder or what have you. Um, and I think that at the end of the day, you will be happiest and you will be most successful if you are just you, if you try to bend to, you know, what you think the social norms are or anything else, you're going to end up either being unhappy or just, you know, not being where you want to be in life.

00:51:22

MICHELLE RHEE:

So that's the first thing that I would say. I would also say, uh, especially for women kind of at the beginning of their careers, you have to find something that you love doing that you feel passionately about. The success will come after that. Um, you know, and, and my mother is somebody who will tell you this, uh, fully today. You know, she would say, I wanted my daughter to be a doctor or a lawyer or a stockbroker, because I thought that's how she was going to see success. And I never would've guessed that by her becoming a teacher, that she would be successful. But for me, it was such a passion and I, I just wake up every day and I love what I'm doing and I, I feel so strongly about it. And so, you know, if you, if you pursue something, not that, that you think is the right path or that somebody else wants you to do, or where you're gonna make a lot of money or anything like that, but something that you feel passionately about, then all the rest of those things will fall into place.

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INTERVIEWER:

And now these are all one word answers except for the last. Um, what did you, when you were little, what did you wanna be when you grew up?

MICHELLE RHEE:

A doctor.

INTERVIEWER:

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

00:52:34

MICHELLE RHEE:

Raising two great kids.

INTERVIEWER:

What was your first, very first paying job?

MICHELLE RHEE:

I was a waitress at a Delic Taan.

INTERVIEWER:

Which three adjectives best describe you?

MICHELLE RHEE:

Um, I would say driven... I would say... goofy. Uh, and I would say... generative.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, great. Of people that you have met, is there anyone that's had an incredible impact on you?

MICHELLE RHEE:

You know, somebody that I admire a lot is— is Warren Buffett. So, I've actually met him before, so... or I would've answer him to the other question. I admire him greatly because he is somebody who has seen greater success than almost anybody has, and he remains unbelievably humble. And he is so personable, and I think for somebody who has as much wealth as he does, he also has a sense of perspective about things. His recent comment about, yeah, I should be taxed more because I make a lot more money. And there's no reason why I should be taxed at a lower rate than the people who work for me who make a lot less money than I do. I just think for somebody in that position to have that sense of perspective is amazing. And when I resigned my post in D.C., he wrote me a note. I thought this is crazy. Why is Warren Buffett writing me a note? But the fact that he would take the time to do that and he, you know, just said, despite the fact that this was not the ideal outcome for you, nothing can take away the fact that you really had an impact. Not just on the kids in Washington D.C., but the kids nationally. It was just shocking to me, and I would hope that my kids, me, anybody that I know, could be the kind of person who, it doesn't matter what you accomplish in life, you always sort of stay grounded and remember the little things that matter and make personal connections with people, and always keep a sense of perspective. I think that's incredible.

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