

## **An Educated Citizenry II**

*Faster than a Speeding Bullet, More Powerful than a Locomotive, Able to Leap Tall Buildings in a Single Bound*

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What a difference ten days can make.

Ten days ago, on the eve of the release of Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting For Superman*, I wrote an editorial about the film as well as the anticipated public response to it. While indulging in this cheap form of therapy, I attempted to place the storyline of the movie into a broader context.

The movie portrays Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of the Washington, D.C.'s school district, as a hero. Rhee has ascended to near-celebrity status in the world of education and among politicians. The movie, however, cannot claim sole responsibility for her ascension. In November of 2008, TIME magazine published a feature about her story and promise to make Washington the highest-performing urban school district in the nation. The article highlighted the fact that each then-presidential candidate tried to "claim her as his own" during their final debate. Candidate Barack Obama referred to her as a "wonderful new superintendent." More recently the Washington Post quoted Terry Branstad, former governor of Iowa in his quest to reclaim his old position, about Rhee: "She's probably one of the most leading innovators there is....."

Listen to Rhee long enough and you too will be convinced she has all of the answers, regardless of how complex the problems are facing our nation's schools. Like so many unable to resist the urge to order the latest kitchen gadget or skin care product following that irresistible infomercial, many innocent victims have spent lots of money trying to emulate Rhee's *secret solutions*.

Why have we been waiting for Superman so long? Silly us. We have missed the obvious. Close the failing schools. Fire some teachers and principals. Move to merit pay. Take a swing at the unions. Another swing at tenure. Require student uniforms. Silly us, why didn't we think of any of this? Innovation at its best. It is so easy.

Or is it?

Now, ten days following my therapy session, Michelle Rhee has announced her resignation. The resignation culminates three years on the job in D.C. Three years made Rhee one of the longest-serving school leaders the city had experienced in recent history. Rhee was the seventh chancellor in ten years. But therein lies the problem as I see it and it is not unique to D.C. According to a survey conducted in 2008 by the Council of the Great City Schools, the average tenure of urban superintendents was 3 ½ years. The 2008

survey actually reflected an improvement from the 1999 data when average tenure was about 2.33 years. The problem is also not unique to cities as turnover trends in suburbs have become nearly as profound.

Some have suggested Rhee was forced out of the position prematurely due to politics. Of course only Rhee and the politicians know if this is the case or not. But for me, and certainly for students, I am not sure it matters either way. Sustainable success, as a school leader or a leader of any entity in any field, requires finding a way to navigate the multitude of forces pulling on you (and often working against you) – including political ones. Politics are indeed part of the beast – part of the complexity of serving as a leader. Politics are not excuses.

Anyone can march in, turn their entrusted organization-team-community upside down, scoff at change-process theories, and implement initiatives at their whim without sticking around long enough to truly measure the outcomes. Sustainable success and change require a drastically different approach.

In the foreword to Michael Fullan’s book, All Systems Go, Peter Senge writes: “In essence, we have thrown more money at more ineffective reform agendas than any nation. In so doing, we have shown a virtually inexhaustible penchant for using supposed educational reform to feather political nests and, as with other crucial national issues, a tragic inability to subordinate special interests to common good.” Senge continues: “In short, we must imagine a vision for school that is far more compelling than fixing a broken system. As it has been for all of human history (not just in the Industrial Age), education is how a society shapes its future.”

Perhaps the most profound lines of Senge’s narrative appear in his first two lines: “America has been trying to turn around its schools for a quarter century, with tragic results. One simplistic quick-fix nostrum after another has seized the political limelight and been driven through the system as if it was all that was needed.....”

Just as her resignation may be premature, so is the assessment of Rhee’s impact on D.C. schools. Time will tell and we should remain fair before drawing conclusions. I have full confidence that the statement embedded in Rhee’s resignation announcement is sincere and 100% true: “I’ve 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.” Rhee, like educators everywhere, undoubtedly work tirelessly to make a difference and to turn the tide. Most educators have been doing so for more than three years – many under very difficult circumstances.

However, school leaders and educators must remain mindful of what they are working tirelessly on. The one resource that we never have enough of is time. Conversations about education need to be elevated. Too much time and money has already been squandered to waste another minute on the worn-out rhetoric and headlines dominating the current reform and turnaround conversations.

Rhee's resignation definitely places *Waiting For Superman* into a broader context.

I cannot help but wonder about what Rhee may have been able to accomplish if she had remained at the post and had an opportunity to move onto the next tier of efforts. Something tells me she would have elevated the conversation.

But time ran short.

Borrowing from the lyrics of Frank Sinatra, something also tells me that the best *is yet to come* for Rhee as well as D.C.'s schools. All that is required are new conversations and time. The tenacity, the resiliency, the energy – and the heart – are already there.

An educated citizenry requires more than a three-year...dare I say...tenure.