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Rhee Gets Plaudits Before Council

Nominee Praised For Work With Underprivileged

By [Nikita Stewart](#) and [Theola Labbé](#)

Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, July 3, 2007; Page B01

Acting D.C. schools chancellor [Michelle A. Rhee](#) received accolades yesterday from nationally known educators, former students and some of the staunchest critics of [Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's](#) school takeover plan, appearing to undercut criticism about her lack of experience to run a 55,000-student school system.

Rhee, 37, has never been a superintendent or chancellor and taught for just three years in [Baltimore](#) public schools more than a decade ago.

But at a [D.C. Council](#) confirmation hearing, two dozen witnesses testified that Rhee's management skills and her passion for educating underprivileged children outweighed her inexperience. The council will vote on her nomination July 10.

Rhee testified that being poor would not be an excuse for low test scores under her leadership. "We will no longer describe failure as the result of vast impersonal forces like poverty or a broken bureaucracy," she said.

Her approach to public school systems has made a strong impression on educators through the New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization she founded in 1997 to recruit and train teachers to work in urban districts, including the D.C. public schools. She also has made a good first impression on parents, teachers

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Nominee Michelle A. Rhee, right, sits with Victor Reinoso, the District's deputy mayor for education, left, and two members of Rhee's management team, Kaya Henderson and Richard Nyankori. (By Dayna Smith For The Washington Post)

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and residents whom she has met since Fenty (D) announced her appointment three weeks ago.

Yesterday's seven hours of praise from witnesses reflected Rhee's aggressive whirlwind tour to sell herself to council members and District residents. Several parents testified that they found Rhee extremely personable, based on meeting her in "living room chats" she held throughout the city.

Cherita Whiting, who led a demonstration in March in front of Fenty's house to protest his takeover of public schools, told council members that after meeting Rhee last week, she was convinced that Rhee could lead the school system. "A résumé cannot tell you what you need to know about a person," Whiting said.

[Former NBA](#) star Kevin Johnson, who personally called nearly all 13 council members last week, flew from [California](#) to tell council members yesterday that Rhee is a hands-on executive who works round-the-clock. He credited her with helping to turn around Sacramento High School, where he said 80 percent of the first graduating class under the nonprofit group's control was accepted into four-year colleges. Four years earlier, the rate was 20 percent, Johnson said.

Council members had few questions about claims on Rhee's résumé that she dramatically improved test scores of students at Harlem Park Elementary School in Baltimore, for which she has no documentation. Former principal Linda Carter, who recalled significant gains, testified that she had discarded paperwork long ago and that it was not available through the Baltimore school district.

Yesterday's only other controversy surrounded the way Rhee was selected.

Fenty, who escorted her into the council chambers, did not provide her résumé to a review panel, as required by law, before she was nominated. Although representatives of the Washington Teachers' Union testified that they had expressed concerns to the mayor that the law had not been followed, [D.C. Council Chairman Vincent C. Gray \(D\)](#) said he was disappointed that the union, which had pushed for the review panel and union input, was not outraged.

Harsher words came from council member [Phil Mendelson](#) (D-At Large), who asked Rhee whether she "endorsed" the way she had been selected and the way former superintendent [Clifford B. Janey](#) had been ousted with little notice.

Janey learned of his firing through an 11:30 p.m. phone call June 11 from Fenty, who announced Rhee's appointment the next day. Janey's school system e-mail account was canceled hours later.

"I think that was really very tacky," Mendelson said.

Rhee, who is moving from [Denver](#), testified that she knew by June 8 that she had been named. She said she has tried to contact Janey but has been unable to do so.

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