One important topic in academia today is education reform. This term is very ambiguous because each political party, politician, union representative, teacher, and parent has a different definition. Each definition is manipulated to the benefit and self-interest of the person or entity with power. Many times, the true purpose and focus of the reform, student achievement, is glazed over with policies and initiatives that perpetuate maximization. These types of reform only scathe the definition provided by Merriam Webster (2013), “to put or change into an improved form or condition or to amend or improve by change of form or removal of faults or abuses” (p. 618). A more powerful definition, “to put an end to (an evil) by enforcing or introducing a better method or course of action,” (p. 618) is the type of reform groups in education that many shy...
away from (Merriam Webster, 2013). In *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*, author Michelle Rhee chronicles her unchartered path of putting an end to the evil she perceives in public education: lack of a quality education for all students. This path is clearly delineated by three major parts; the Journey, the Movement and the Promise. In this pseudo memoir, Rhee provides insight on her life experiences that have shaped her beliefs and motivation for education reform, as well as one failed attempt. She also delves into the intricacies of policies and initiatives that she believes will provide the reform that public education needs. Many of these policies and initiatives are avant-garde, which have dubbed her as radical, and a fitting name for the book.

Chapter One is entitled *Roots in the Classroom* and shares the background of Rhee as a first generation Korean American woman with unique upbringing and staunch Korean principles, that emphasize academic success and the role of girls. Also discussed was her strong lineage from educators and inspiration from her father, a prominent doctor in the community, to always help others. Rhee explained how other life experiences from grade school, to high school and college helped to shape her personality into a mix of “radical and the practical” (Rhee, 2013, p. 28).

In this recall of her life experiences, Rhee addresses three salient issues of public education. One is the cultural differences between home and school, white flight and students becoming a product of their environment. Rhee experienced the “feeling of being an outsider” (p. 5), because her Korean family culture was very different than the dominant culture at her school (Rhee, 2013). Despite being of a high socio-economic status, and a part of the voluntary minority, Rhee still felt some of the isolation that involuntary minorities experience. According to John Ogbu, “involuntary minorities experience persistent problems in school adjustment and academic performance” (Ogbu p. 47). Rhee’s attitude and treatment was similar to that of an involuntary minority, so she was faced with the daunting task of working against the cultural difference to attain academic achievement. The issue of white flight is the story of countless current urban districts. Toledo, Rhee’s hometown, experienced this swing in demographics that drastically changed the quality of
education provided. Once high achieving school districts, the quality of education decreased as white residents moved to the suburbs. The other issue of urban students being a product of their environment was told in the story of Rhee’s friend. Dede represented other students from low-income families, who were academically able, received scholarships, experienced more hardships, such as crime, drug use and teenage pregnancy, but still reached a prestigious college. Dede’s story showed that “environment did not determine fate” (Rhee, 2013, p. 20). These issues are foundational to improving education for students in urban districts.

In the second chapter, Heart of Teaching, Rhee describes her experiences as a member for Teach for America, in Baltimore City Schools. Her experience was latent with difficulty from her placement process, to her assigned paraprofessional and her second grade class. She had the class of low achievers, according to the tracking process of Harlem Park Elementary. She did not have classroom management experience or any skills in engaging students. Her experiences raised three important issues of teacher preparation, mentoring and professional development.

All of Rhee’s challenges inside her classroom were directly related to her lack of preparation from her TFA training. Like Rhee, teachers will face major obstacles if they did not receive effective or efficient teacher preparation. According to The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2012), “well-prepared teachers produce higher student achievement. Well-prepared teachers are more likely to remain in teaching. Teacher preparation helps candidates develop the knowledge and skill they need” (p 3). Mentoring is another source of support for teachers. Rhee was not able to redirect her class, until mentors from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and a veteran teacher provided help. School districts must utilize available resources from within the building and local universities and colleges to mentor new teachers. The issue of adequate professional development is the missing link to effective teachers. “If you give engaged, motivated people a kernel of crucial information, they’ll take the kernel and grow it into something ten times more valuable” (Rhee, 2013, p.47). The issues of teacher preparation, mentoring and professional development must all be addressed
simultaneously, to increase teacher effectiveness and ultimately student achievement.

Chapter Three discusses, ‘Recruiting Teachers,’ and conveys Rhee as a more knowledgeable and prepared teacher. Due to her success after receiving proper mentoring and professional development, Rhee was intensely motivated to provide the quality of education for students through policy. She enrolled in Harvard’s Public Policy Master’s Program, with a concentration in educational policy. During her studies, Rhee mentions many influential individuals, but one stood out. Her name was Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America. Through experiences with students that intensified her desire for education reform and inspiration from Wendy Kopp, Rhee began to shape her ideologies. These ideologies would be the base for The New Teacher Project, founded by Rhee.

Rhee’s goal was to work for a foundation that gave money to education reform initiatives. However, Kopp plainly expressed, “You don’t want to do that. That’s not where you’re going to have the kind of impact you want” (Rhee, 2013, p. 58). This encouraged Rhee to raise critical issues that she believed needed to be addressed teacher recruitment, union contracts and revealing research studies. A solid teacher recruitment program and process can provide a higher quality of teachers for districts to choose from. Many districts enthralled in their bureaucracies, do “the opposite of what must be done to recruit and hire the best teachers” (Rhee, 2013, p. 76). After teachers are hired, their contracts reflect a major issue. Last in, first out and the dance of the lemons represented some of the faults with union supported contracts. The clauses that were necessary to safeguard teachers in the 1960s were no longer relevant today. What should be relevant is data from studies that disclose shocking information, albeit pertinent. Districts should perform internal and external audit endeavors to address “Missed Opportunities” and “Unintended Consequences” (Rhee, 2013, p. 79). These three issues guided the efforts of The New Teacher Project.

Chapter Four, the Road to DC, documents the various encounters that combined to prepare and secure Rhee as the Chancellor of Washington, DC, Public Schools. Her
long-time client and subsequent mentor, Joel Klein, the Chancellor of New York Public Schools, had recommended her. Adrian Fenty, the newly elected mayor of Washington, DC, traveled to New York to observe a school district with mayoral control. Rhee remained focused on providing high quality teachers for districts from The New Teacher Project, and in some instances, controlled the hiring of the Human Resources department, because the position of DC Chancellor did not appeal to her.

Over time, Rhee became more open to the position of DC Chancellor, as she realized she would be able to implement the successful polices from The New Teacher Project, on a much larger scale. As Rhee contemplated accepting the position, the preparation of her departure uncovered important issues she had to address, to ensure the continued success of The New Teacher Project. These issues were transformative leadership, effective leadership, and opposition push-back. She believed that “well organized leaders always plan for their succession, and that they do it well in advance of their departure” (Rhee, 2013, p. 88). Rhee considered employees who had proven themselves to her in their original responsibilities, but she believed who she could “motivate [them] to do more than they originally intended and even more than they thought possible” (Bass, Avolio, 1994, p. 4). Rhee also believed that a good leader should be a good manager, by knocking down barriers that impede staff performing their jobs and creating an environment that promotes success. These principles support effective leadership at all levels of a school district, but are pertinent at the building level for student achievement. A leader of reform should be prepared for intense pushback, from those with opposing views because “there is no change without pushback” (Rhee, 2013, p. 101). With Mayor Fenty willing to risk everything to support Rhee and her radical polices as Chancellor of DC Public Schools, she was able to tackle these issues to move forward with her new responsibilities.

Breaking Barriers in Chapter Five was an astounding recollection of Rhee’s first encounter with DC Public Schools as Chancellor. Her evaluation revealed a district filled with disarray and dysfunction. It also revealed a district filled with tension and politics perpetuated by the Washington Post. Rhee’s visits to several schools and the
district warehouse, as well as conducting community meetings and reviewing existing data, exposed arguably three of the most important issues in education reform. The major barriers of DC Public Schools were school clusters divided-by-class, a large achievement gap, and data driven decision making.

For many districts, the divide-by-class was distinct by certain markers, whether railroad tracks or a river. This divide represented the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ Simply put, the “haves,” who generally had higher test scores, than the “have nots” (Mial, 2003, p. 115). True reformists understand that the disparity in socioeconomic status and the negative impact was not all the fault of the students and their families. It is their responsibility to ensure equity of resources and quality education. The divide of class propagates the achievement gap. In urban districts such as DC, “the achievement gap was a canyon” (Rhee, 2013,p. 111). Closing the achievement gap should be the focal point of all reform efforts, driven by data used to inform decisions. A variety of qualitative and quantitative data will yield vital information about the current status of the district and school, and its needs. If data was not being used to guide decision making, it would be synonymous to flying blind (Whorr, 2003). These issues are the nexus of obstacles for urban districts.

Chapter Six, which is entitled ‘In Labor,’ dissects Rhee’s reasoning, and rationale as she continued with tough decision-making and negotiating. It also displayed how naïve she was with regards to the press and media. But most of all, it dissected the breakdown in her ability to garner sufficient community support and Mayor Fenty’s consequent re-election loss. Rhee admits that the union strength as an opposition was a force she underestimated.

As test stores increased, she was battled three salient issues, including teacher effectiveness, tenure, and collective bargaining. In a meeting with high school students, the importance of effective teachers was stressed from their perspective. “A recent Harvard study that looked at more than two million students over a twenty year time period showed that kids who had just one effective teacher in their lifetime, had a higher likelihood of graduating from high school, going to college and making more money as a professional” (Rhee, 2013, p.
Reassessing tenure policies was a method to ensure effective teachers were coveted, and seniority didn’t trump results. Teacher unions resented this idea, at the sacrifice of student learning to benefit adults. Collective bargaining agreements served a purpose, but when major reform was evident, the negotiating could be intense and laborious; but money talked. Increasing teacher pay and offering performance based bonuses can lighten the tension. The strength of the teacher union cannot be overlooked, but teacher effectiveness, tenure and collective bargaining, should be in the interest of what benefits student achievement.

Chapter Seven, ‘Students First,’ represents Rhee’s re-emergence, after her ousting as Chancellor after Mayor Fenty’s loss. She was faced with a plethora of opportunities from reform juggernauts, such as Eli Broad and politicians, such as Chris Christie. Each group wanted her skills in their organization or state. The issues of the dynamics of politics in education, grassroots, and balancing unions emerged as the Achilles heel of Rhee’s tenure in DC, but also education reform, in general. Rhee was determined to learn from these lessons and continue the reform work. She developed StudentsFirst, to be the catalyst. The name was self explanatory.

The political dynamics of education had developed into a push-pull movement between politicians, teacher unions and special interests groups. Education Reformists with ‘big thoughts,’ must be willing to gain the investment and support to influence the current dynamics, because they need “the right policies [with] the right politics” (Rhee, 2013, p. 177). Part of this support must be from the community, parents, or the grassroots perspective. To be successful reformists, a grassroots movement would ensure “the very people who would benefit most from reforms were driving and fighting for the changes” (Rhee, 2013, p. 177). The unions must be balanced to give parents, as well as teachers, a voice in education reform. Union power and clout was solid on the inside, with decades of lobbying and supporting legislators, as well as years of vengeance for opposition. The outside forces must be mobilized to “put pressure on legislators and counterbalance union money” (Rhee, 2013, p. 198). Rhee concentrated on these three issues with her StudentsFirst organization.
Honoring Teachers, in Chapter 8, begins Part II of the book, the Movement. Rhee reflects on her accomplishments as Chancellor of DC Public Schools. She made significant gains in developing an infrastructure that would remain intact, even with her departure. Her Deputy Chancellor, and current Chancellor Kaya Henderson, had the collective bargaining agreement and a crucial evaluation system to continue Rhee’s work. She remained steadfast to these principles of teacher quality, and increased teacher compensation, and improving student achievement for global competition.

Despite the obstacles many children face daily in their families, homes and neighborhoods, teacher quality was still important. According to a 2011 Report prepared by the Center for American Progress and the Education Trust (February 23, 2011), “students who have three or four strong teachers in a row, will soar academically regardless of their racial or economic background” (Rhee, 2013, p. 210). High compensation of teachers reinforces high teacher expectations and ultimately student achievement. “The so-called single-salary schedule, which emerged in the 1920s as a way to make teachers' pay less arbitrary and more equitable, seems inefficient in an era where education policy seeks to improve student outcomes and education systems must compete with other sectors for talent” (Craig, 2010, p. 1) Since the Nation at Risk study and many others, the US has focused intently on becoming more competitive across the globe. Increasing student achievement is the only way. Erick Hanushek, an economist from Stanford believed that if PISA scores were to improve to the level of an educational sound nation like Finland, the US would raise its gross national product by more than $100 trillion over the lifetime of a child born in 2010 (Rhee 2013). To attain the lofty goals of global competition, these issues are paramount to reform success.

Chapter Nine, entitled ‘Listening to Students,’ Rhee reminisces about her cherished moments as Chancellor. These moments were meeting with students at high schools across the district, to provide them the opportunity to express their perceived needs, wants and concerns. Rhee did so frequently with the development of her Student Cabinet. She trusted and valued the participation of students, especially because it was on the right track. In
talking to students, the issue of student input on teacher evaluation became central to the reform. It was imminent that students knew best what was going on in the classroom, so their voices should be heard. Based on Rhee’s experiences, student assessment of their teachers and schools were very accurate. In a study from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *Measures of Effective Teaching*, it was found that “there is a very strong correlation between how students rate their teachers and how well those teachers do at attaining goals in student achievement” (Rhee, 2013, p. 231). Therefore, adding student input on evaluations can serve as another link for education reform.

Chapter Ten discusses ‘Empowering Parents,’ and breaks down another valuable lesson Rhee learned in DC. As Chancellor, she engaged some members of the community, and much of the focus was on non-supporters or skeptics she wanted to convince in the beginning of her tenure. Since then, she realized that all parents should be given an outlet of support as activists, for all children; not just their own. Rhee’s frustration with union leaders continued to grow almost exponentially, as she argued that they and some teachers criticize the lack of parental involvement in schools. But when parents show discontent and request more accountability, these same union leaders and teachers are very combative.

Rhee now understood the importance of Type 6, of parental involvement from Joyce Epstein’s ‘Parental Involvement Framework’ (2011). According to the Framework, an educational leader should “identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development” (p. 409).

Rhee more intently believed “parents must begin to see their role in changing the laws and policies at the district and state level, so that they can solve the problem once and for all” (Rhee, 2013, p. 237). *StudentsFirst* gained members quickly, closing in on its one million member goal. Cities like Detroit and Tallahassee felt the power of parents uniting for education reform. Union leaders did not appreciate this type of involvement that they believed was a direct conflict to the benefit of adults and special interests, although the purpose was to benefit students.
Challenging Politicians in Chapter Eleven exposed the fickleness of education politics in America. Rhee became conscious of this and redefined her identification as a devout Democrat. While her beliefs and ideologies did not change, she accepted some Republican initiatives that were parallel to the education reform she perceived necessary. Along the way, she continued to endure the issues of selfish politics of many politicians and opposition to pertinent policies like vouchers.

In the lens of true education reform, Democrats are the most hesitant, cautious and undecided. There was constant opposition, conflict or just dislike of many reform policies like No Child Left Behind. While understanding the dire need of educational reform, Democrats must ask themselves: “Are we beholden to the public school system at any cost, or are we beholden to the public school child at any cost?” (Rhee, 2013, 251) The answer should undoubtedly and unequivocally be the child. This also applies to the issues of vouchers. The National Education Association (2013) “opposes school vouchers because they divert essential resources from public schools to private and religious schools, while offering no real ‘choice’ for the overwhelming majority of students” (p. 256). Rhee raises the point that Pell Grants do the same as vouchers and are well accepted. Therefore, with improvement on accountability of private and religious schools that accept vouchers, the quality of education for all children can improve.

Chapter Twelve, entitled, ‘A Radical’s Vision’ affirms Rhee’s beliefs of what education reform should look like. StudentsFirst had already surpassed its one million member goal, and had made a significant impact in many cities across the nation. The actions of overcoming entangled bureaucratic principles, increasing the competitive culture of education, and improving teacher evaluations, were the path to such reform.

These three issues may not initially appear radical, but their solutions as education reforms were contradictory to the current status quo. The bureaucracy of education had caused “for too long approached education policy decisions by pitting the interests of adults in the system-the school boards, the union leaders, the textbook”
manufactures, the charter operators-against one another. The special interests won. And the students lost” (Rhee, 2013, p. 272). To be globally competitive, the competitive culture of education could only increase with higher expectations and increased accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act was the first attempt. Improving teacher evaluations beyond scores of mere satisfactory or unsatisfactory, would keep the focus on student achievement.

This book strengthened our views in a myriad of ways. Information from this book gave us an in-depth understanding of Rhee’s policies and it strengthened our opinions of respect and support.

Although unchartered, her path was precisely what DC Public Schools needed, and education reform across the country. The simplicity was uncanny; “if we are going to spend more money than any other country in the world, then let’s make sure that money is felt by students, parents and teachers everyday” (Rhee, 2013, p. 280). This book has reaffirmed our beliefs that a grassroots approach, heavy in parental involvement, can reap great benefits in education reform, from the national to the local level. It is encouraging to know about the various organizations, especially StudentsFirst, that are “putting the interests, dreams and future of our children at the forefront of our country’s collective efforts” (p. 282) for education reform.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWERS

Kerry-Ann Spence is an elementary school teacher and a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Clark Atlanta University. In 2011, she began her doctoral studies at Howard University as a member of their Educational Administration Guided Leadership Experience cohort. She received her B.A. degree in Political Science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and her MAT in Elementary Education at the University of Georgia. Kerry-Ann Spence is the founder and President of Kamili Krew, Incorporated, a community organization for girls ages 6-10. Kamili Krew is committed to inspiring young girls to be leaders in their schools and communities by enriching their lives through educational and social interventions. Kerry-Ann Spence has taught for 7 years in urban school districts in Georgia and Washington, DC. She has an affinity towards authentic urban districts and believes these students and their communities yearn for and deserve
leadership and instruction unsurpassed by their suburban neighbors. Kerry-Ann Spence was born and raised in Jamaica. She invokes her family’s emphasis and value of education while on her quest as a Critical Thinking Change Agent for Social Justice.

Sheila T. Gregory, Ph.D. is a professor of educational leadership and higher education at Clark Atlanta University. In 2005, Sheila Gregory's fifth co-authored book, Daring to Educate: The Legacy of the Early Spelman College Presidents, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Also in 2005, she received the prestigious national award of Teacher and Scholar of the Year. Dr. Gregory is the author of seven scholarly books and nearly four dozen articles, book chapters and other scholarly publications. She has been awarded and completed three Indigenous Visiting Research Scholar Appointments at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, the University of South Australia, Adelaide, and the University of the West Indies System in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad-Tobago. Dr. Gregory has also consulted with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Association in Pocatello, Idaho, and the Las Vegas Piautes in Nevada, where she trained and evaluated Non-Native American Indian teachers on the ways of knowing and learning within the Native American Indian culture. Dr. Gregory continues to work several P-12 school districts on community service projects, curriculum development, mentoring programs, Small Learning Communities (SLC) and School Improvement Plans, including a two-year collaboration with the New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) and the New Orleans Public School District (NOPSD) which provides opportunities for doctoral students to also serve as mentor and visiting teachers in the NOPSD. She continues to consult with numerous universities, community colleges, P-12 school districts, and tribal associations around the country and abroad.

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