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In the Name of Reform? A Lesson About Michelle Rhee's Big Plans from Art Siebens



Reporter: “The teachers’ union is saying that their concern is arbitrary firing.... that it just isn’t possible to give everyone sort of a level of fair scrutiny.

Rhee: “It’s interesting because, I mean, the bottom line is that people are saying, ‘Well, great teachers could be fired arbitrarily.’ My answer to that is, ‘Why would I ever create a system where we were arbitrarily firing great teachers? That would not benefit me or the school system.’” - [Michelle Rhee on NPR](#)

All along the Eastern corridor, folks are buzzing about firing teachers. In New York City two weeks ago, the New Teacher Project once again called for the district to put [excessed teachers](#) who have not been hired after a year on unpaid leave. Last week in his *Washington Post* column, [Jay Mathews](#) also sang a paean about the virtues of principals firing teachers at will. And in Michelle Rhee’s proposed contract, teachers would give up tenure in exchange for performance pay. Now, she’s moved to “[Plan B](#),” which involves giving “bad teachers” 90 days to improve, or else face dismissal.

In all three cases, the assumption is that principals know best, that they make decisions based on the best interest of students, that “kid issues” will be put before “adult issues” in hiring decisions, and that concerns about fair treatment are retrograde - even passé.

Yet right under Michelle Rhee’s nose, her own theory of action – that principals will always pick the “best teachers” – has been tested by the case of [Dr. Art Siebens](#). Few things manage to keep this groggy, dissertating kid awake once my head’s hit the pillow. But the case of Siebens, a biology teacher at [Woodrow Wilson High School](#) in Washington, DC for the last 18 years who was not rehired when the school reconstituted 20% of its staff last spring, is haunting for the glimpse it offers into the brave new world of unchecked principal autonomy.

By all accounts, Michelle Rhee should be carrying Art Siebens around on her shoulders, because he exemplifies all of the qualities she desires in DC Public Schools teachers:

* Rhee wants to recruit more highly qualified alternate route teachers. With a PhD in Biology and post-doctoral work at Yale and NIH, Siebens has credentials that leave most TFA corps members in the dust.

* Most important to Rhee are test results: “To work here,” she says, “you've got to be a bottom-line person.” In that spirit, Siebens outdid every other AP Biology teacher in the district. During the 13 years in which Siebens taught AP Biology at Wilson, 72% of his students earned passing scores on the AP test (i.e. scores of 3-5). Across DCPS in 2007, 95% of DC Biology AP students with scores of 3-5 were taught by Art Siebens. This is all the more impressive because his courses were no less diverse than other AP courses at Woodrow Wilson High School, and almost all of his students took the AP test. Because of these achievements, Siebens has received an Advanced Placement Recognition Award from the College Board.

* Rhee, often drawing on her own chaotic first year of teaching, speaks of the need for high expectations for student behavior. Siebens was widely known to be a steward of order and discipline, even taking it upon himself to maintain a database tracking compliance with Wilson’s behavior management system, as well as truancy. Moreover, Michelle Rhee personally gave Siebens password access to student attendance data so he could track Wilson’s truancy and tardiness rates. When the district brought in a restructuring guru, he reviewed Siebens’ data to make sense of the school’s climate.

* Rhee wants teachers who are willing to “sweat” - teachers who go the extra mile and don’t just “follow the contract.” Siebens held lunchtime and after school review sessions. He attended his students’ sporting events, plays, and musicals. He composed and performed songs about biology to help his students remember biological processes – songs that apparently work because they’ve been adopted by biology teachers across the country. This fall, his work using music to teach biology has been featured in a five-part series on XM and WorldSpace satellite radio. (You can find archived versions of the first three parts here.)

* Rhee wants team players who will go out of their way to help their colleagues. From the letters of support from other teachers in his school, it is clear that he was the consummate colleague, one who supported new teachers and worked towards the good of the school, not just the good of his own students.

Rhee often says that her motto is, “Ensuring that adult issues never come before the best interests of children.” Why, then, was Art Siebens exsessed and then involuntarily transferred when Woodrow Wilson restructured last spring and reconstituted 20% of the faculty?

Your guess is as good as mine. The only peep criticizing Siebens has come from a group of minority parents, who nonetheless maintain that they had no hand in Siebens’ dismissal from Wilson. (They did not respond to multiple attempts to contact them.) Siebens’ former students, their parents, and his colleagues have come out of the woodwork to support his return to Wilson. You can see their testimonials about how he touched their lives here.

In the meantime, we’ve now had an inside look at how Michelle Rhee’s system manages talent. Siebens applied for all open science positions at a hiring fair in June, and was not called for interviews at any of the schools to which he applied. He interviewed at several other schools

over the summer, and either was not offered the position or told that “the position has been filled for us.” On the first day of school, Siebens – who has a PhD in Physiology - was assigned to teach 9th grade environmental science, a course he has never taught before. To date, he has not even received the teacher’s edition of the environmental science book, despite asking for it repeatedly.

And the kicker? The [Washington Post](#) reported a week ago that Wilson has a science vacancy. Is this what the “strategic management of talent” looks like?

["What I need is for you to have trust, in me and in the school district..."](#) I know that trust doesn't come overnight, and I have to earn that trust," Michelle Rhee recently said. What Rhee must realize, of course, is that debacles like the dismissal of Art Siebens eat away at that trust, as does her refusal to even consider that the principal made the wrong call here. Art Siebens has 18 years of data, a PhD, a gaggle of national awards, and a legion of parents and students standing behind him. If this can happen to him, it can happen to almost any teacher in the DC system.

Checks and balances, my friends, are the hallmark of the American system of governance, and I see no reason why we should abandon them in public education.

Posted by eduwonkette at 10:07 AM