



California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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In case you missed it...

California Progress Report

Michelle Rhee, Once More, Fast and Loose with the Truth

By Joshua Pechthalt

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"When will the Teflon wear off?" is a question many have asked about Michelle Rhee, self-proclaimed public school advocate, but in practice, tip of the spear for the school privatization industry.

According to the *L.A. Times* last month, Rhee's claim that her children attend public school **proved "misleading" at best**. This is consistent with her challenged relationship with telling the truth in general. Overseeing a staff of 120 on a lavish budget funded by anti-public education billionaires and their foundations, Rhee talks like a progressive but walks like a disciple of Ayn Rand and free market competition.

Her constant references to being a "radical" and co-opting the language of the civil rights movement belie a fundamental disdain for millions of families and children struggling to survive, and suffering from a marketplace gamed to punish poor and working class families while rewarding those with wealth. And she wants to move its rules into the classroom.

While superintendent of the Washington D.C. school district she was trumpeted far and wide for raising student test scores - until it turned out in *a*

USA Today investigation that in one of the schools with the largest increase in scores there was an alarmingly high percentage of irregularities. It seems that answer sheets in one "high achieving school" featured erasures at a much higher rate than at other "less successful" schools in the district. That students, teachers or administrators may have been encouraged to cheat because they, *like those in Atlanta, Georgia*, were under severe pressure to raise test scores, apparently made no difference to Ms. Rhee. She resisted investigating once this information came to light.

She claims to be pro-collective bargaining, but her political action committee funds state legislative lobbying straight out of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)'s playbook (funded by the Koch brothers and the Walton family, among others) around the country to destroy unions. She supports turning public schools into private charter schools, parent trigger laws, and school vouchers, which offer the illusion of reform but in fact shift attention away from the primary causes of underachievement: chronic underfunding of public schools and growing poverty in many communities.

She poses her decision to advocate "for students" as necessary *due to* the lack of existence of "an organized national interest group with the same heft [as teacher unions] advocating on behalf of kids," assuming no one will notice that the main advocates in lobbying for restoring cuts to school programs after years of austerity are teachers and their unions.

Tellingly, when the California teacher unions worked - alongside Governor Brown and an enormous coalition of unions and community organizations - on behalf of a tax increase on the wealthy, Prop 30, to restore a measure of funding to public education, Students First and Michelle Rhee were nowhere to be found.

The most damning evidence against Rhee as advocate for students is her mocking attitude and worldview about public education as a social good. In the *Los Angeles Times* article, as elsewhere, Rhee spoke about how public schools "coddle" students, presumably instead of providing them with even more of the harsh but necessary tonic of narrowing the curriculum to test-taking.

Rhee's boot camp perspective on education flies in the face of the problems many of our children face: California ranks at the bottom of the nation in

funding and average class size; and the U.S. has one of the highest rates of child poverty among the world's industrialized countries, with 40% of African American children and 20% of all children living in poverty.

Michelle Rhee has referred on more than one occasion to her brief experience as a classroom teacher as proof of her insider's knowledge of what sort of discipline students need. She talks proudly about duct taping her students' mouths when they couldn't stay quiet. She seems completely unaware that this action represents a failure, not a success, in classroom management. But no better image captures the reality of Michelle Rhee in her make believe quest to provide students with "a voice."

*Joshua Pechthalt is the president of the **California Federation of Teachers**, representing over 100,000 teachers and education workers.*

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