

Q & A with Michelle Rhee, Founder & CEO of StudentsFirst

Interview conducted by Adam Miller, Senior Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, EdTec Inc.

As an outspoken advocate for overhauling America's public school system, Michelle Rhee can be a controversial figure. EdTec caught up with the former Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, founder of StudentsFirst, new author, and self-described radical prior to the 20th Annual California Charter Schools Conference to get some insight into her vision for reforming American schools and bucking the status quo.



Q: *You've been on the board of a charter school organization, **St. HOPE Public Schools**. You're a keynote speaker at the 20th Annual Charter Schools Conference and have spoken at that conference previously. What do you see as the role of charter schools in the larger education reform movement?*

A: Charter schools can provide another choice for parents and students who may not have a strong option in their traditional public school. If a school is not meeting a student's needs or is low-performing, it's detrimental to a student's future success, so we have to ensure that family has another option. No student should be trapped in an underperforming school.

This only works, however, if charter schools are provided the autonomy and resources they need to succeed and then are held to a very high bar for results for students. That is not happening widely enough right now -- most state charter laws are weak when it comes to accountability. We have to hold both the charter schools and their authorizers accountable for results, and if they're not producing great outcomes for kids, they need to be out of business. Simply being another education option is not enough -- the goal is to provide families with a better option.

Q: *You are one of a very small number of people who have held leadership roles in both a charter school and a school district. Often charters and districts have an adversarial relationship. Do you see missed opportunities for reform due to this adversarial relationship? Do you see opportunities to improve the relationship?*

A: The competitive environment in which districts and charter schools find themselves can sometimes turn adversarial, and I do think there are missed opportunities when that happens. District leaders and charter school leaders should be working toward the same goal -- and when they do, there is so much on which they can collaborate and so much they can learn from each other.

In DC, I viewed my role as chancellor as being responsible for ensuring that every kid in the city got a great education, regardless of the kind of school he or she chose to attend. My priority was to defend students, not the system. If a charter school was able to give a student a better education than the DCPS school they were assigned to, I supported that decision. We collaborated a fair amount with some of the best charter schools in the city, particularly around professional development and use of assessments and data. I wish we could have done even more.

Q: *Related to the prior question, D.C. Public Schools was not the charter school authorizer in Washington D.C. In many states EdTec works in, for example Tennessee and California, there is an ongoing debate about alternative authorizers, e.g. universities, non-profits, state agencies. Based on your experience in D.C., what are your thoughts on alternative authorizers? By taking charters out of your reform portfolio as Chancellor did that help or hinder your work?*

A: When it comes to the growth of charters and to improving their oversight and monitoring, alternate authorizers play a key role. The reality is that most school districts are so focused on their own schools that they pay little attention to their authorizer duties, and as a result, the schools suffer. District-authorized schools tend to be lower-performing, and accountability from district authorizers tends to be significantly weaker. Moreover, because of the competition that can arise between charters and districts, many district school boards are reluctant to grow a strong portfolio of charter schools.

Q: *Congratulations on your new book, Radical. In it you say that you are a radical, “Because in order to live up to our promise as a nation, we cannot rest until we provide a quality education for all of our children.” Many charter school operators and teachers hold similar beliefs and have set out to disrupt the status quo. What is your advice to these other radicals trying to shake up and improve the education system?*

A: In a single word: urgency.

Every day, in almost every community in this country, parents send their children into classrooms that are failing them. That should outrage every American.

In D.C., when I shut down low-performing schools, fired ineffective principals, and fought to empower parents, I thought these were common sense ideas. But others called my actions “radical” and said I was a lightning rod of some sort. So, I thought, if standing up for our kids is radical, everybody should be a radical.

Q: *Recently, your organization, StudentsFirst, announced support for the Coalition for School Reform, an organization dedicated to reforming Los Angeles Unified School District. Many parents, community leaders, politicians, and organizations over the years have also tried to reform LAUSD with mixed results. Why do you think this time may be different and how will StudentsFirst measure if true reform/improvement is occurring?*

A: Mayor Villaraigosa has shown true leadership for school reform in Los Angeles. And what’s important is that the Coalition for School Reform is supporting candidates for the school board who are committed to continuing Mayor Villaraigosa’s work after he leaves office and supporting Superintendent John Deasy.

Q: *We are in an exciting time in education; every couple months we hear of a new game changer: teacher evaluations, value-added assessments of student/school performance, blended learning, flipped classrooms, the Common Core, etc. Of all the new and exciting things buzzing around, which, if any, do you think will really improve education in this country and which may be relegated to the rather large bin of education fads?*

A: If I had to boil all reform efforts down to a single, simple idea, it would be “accountability.” That’s the game changer. There’s a complete lack of accountability at all levels in American public education today. Accountability for charters. Accountability for administrators. Accountability for ineffective teachers. At the end of the day, we need measures and metrics to assure us that our kids are receiving quality educations. I think that’s the ultimate sticky idea in school reform.

Q: *When discussing improving education, the conversation often turns quickly to adequate funding. In D.C. you had one of the highest per-pupil funding rates in the country, while your current state of residence, California, is towards the bottom, at a rate less than half that of DC. Do you have an idea of what an adequate level of funding is that will allow US students to be competitive and how many states are there? If most are there, how should we rethink allocating those dollars to get better results?*

A: How can we possibly have an intelligent conversation about how much funding is appropriate before we even know where the current funding is going?

In California, I’ve asked policymakers how much money really goes into the classroom and have been told something between \$5,500 and \$6,500 a year. However, the per-pupil number is closer to \$9,500, but so much of that is lost to overhead and other costs unrelated to instruction.

That’s why StudentsFirst advocates for transparency in education funding and governance as one of our three major tenets.

Q: *Lastly, you’ve just completed a book tour, talking to members of the media, parents, and education leaders across the country. Did you find overall support for your view that improving education for everyone is an urgent and essential issue or does the country, or some segments of it, still need convincing?*

A: The great thing about a book tour is you find yourself in front of audiences that support your point of view! So, yes, I found overall support!

But of course, huge portions of the country still need convincing. They know our public education system needs reform, but they aren’t sure exactly how to do that. They want to support teachers but confuse that with supporting the views of teacher unions, which exist to protect adults’ benefits, not kids’ needs.

That’s why StudentsFirst exists -- to provide a counterweight to the billions of dollars that are spent in our country every year to protect the status quo. 🍃