

**LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Michelle Rhee in Washington, D.C.**

**Podcast Title: Not the Only Kid on the Block**

**July 22, 2008**

**TRANSCRIPT**

GEORGE PARKER: Prior to charter schools, for the most part, I think that as a union we could relax a little bit, because for the most part we were the only kid on the block. Unless you could afford to send your child to a private school, you pretty much had to come to us.

JANE RENAUD: DID YOU GET WHAT THAT UNION PRESIDENT SAID? THAT'S WHAT THE *CRITICS* OF UNIONS HAVE BEEN SAYING FOR YEARS. AND NOW A UNION PRESIDENT IS SAYING IT? YOU ARE GOING TO WANT TO HEAR THAT AGAIN—AND I PROMISE YOU WILL. I'M JANE RENAUD. GEORGE PARKER IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE WASHINGTON TEACHERS UNION. WE'VE INTERVIEWED HIM A NUMBER OF TIMES OVER THE COURSE OF THIS PAST YEAR, AS WE'VE FOLLOWED MICHELLE RHEE, DC'S NEW SCHOOLS CHANCELLOR, FOR THE *NEWSHOUR* WITH JIM LEHRER. MY COLLEAGUE JOHN MERROW SAT DOWN WITH GEORGE PARKER ON JULY 10<sup>TH</sup> TO TALK ABOUT THE CONTRACT HE AND RHEE ARE NOW NEGOTIATING. JOHN TOLD ME THAT HE TRIED HALF A DOZEN TIMES TO GET MR. PARKER TO TALK ABOUT WHAT MIGHT BE IN THE CONTRACT, WITHOUT SUCCESS. UNTIL THIS.....

GEORGE PARKER: My intent is to ... uh, present to the members a contract that makes sense. Um ... that is progressive, but still protects their rights, their interest, and still gives them the kind of support that is needed to, um, facilitate, uh, student achievement.

JOHN MERROW: You said 'progressive.'

GEORGE PARKER: Yeah.

JOHN MERROW: What does that mean?

GEORGE PARKER: Progressive means w- ... that ... that the contract is lookin', uh, toward the future, rather than the past. In terms of ... um ... I think in D.C. we're in a very, uh, unique situation. We have charter schools by the numbers, um, so ... so we are now a competitive school district where student achievement may very well determine our existence. Uh, certainly the union cannot survive if we don't have teachers. And we can't have teachers unless we have students. Uh, and so we have to stop the movement of students right now from our public schools to our public charter schools, because we're losing too many annually. So it becomes very important for us as a union,

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as a part of our agenda, to ... to take on educational success along with bread and butter issues, which is more of a progressive agenda. Because normally ... uh, unions have not had to contend with any sense of accountability or responsibility for student achievement, bec- ... and our existence and survival has not ... um ... depended upon that. But when you're in a competitive market, as we are today, and ... and the trend is goin' in the wrong direction ... the charter school enrollment is increasin', public school enrollment is decreasin' ... we have to make that a part of our agenda, to make sure that we turn schools around. So then ... uh, our progressive agenda has to be twofold now. It has to be let's deal with bread and butter issues, but let's deal with a contract that also ensures that we can promote student achievement so that we can maintain students, even get them back to the public schools, so that we can survive, both as a profession and as a union. I think that ... that ... that in this case, teachers and ... and politicians, for the most part, would all be on the same page. We got to stop the hemorr- ... uh, hemorrhagin' of students from the public schools. Uh, we've lost too many students over the last ten years. And teachers. We've gone down from a union of roughly 5,500 teachers ten years ago to down ... now we're down to about 4,000, so we've lost, uh, roughly 1,500 teachers based on student enrollment and the decline in student enrollment, uh, over the last ten years. So, uh, I think that the loss in enrollment is directly related to a perception by parents that D.C. public schools are not doin' the job. Now, with that said, I certainly don't think charter schools, by any means, are doing any better. But if there is a perception among our parents that the public schools aren't doin' the job, then it results in a movement of students from the public schools. So then we have to take on as a part of our agenda, creating g- ... good public schools and great public schools so those parents will have a perception and a reality that D.C. public schools is great.

**JOHN MERROW:** Why has it taken so long for student achievement to be a bread and butter issue for unions? Why hasn't it been a bread and butter issue all along?

**GEORGE PARKER:** I ... I don't know. But th- ... that is a ... it is a very interesting question. I think that there ... uh, has been a union paradigm of union and management of ... of this is your turf, this is our turf, over the years. And, um, you don't get involved in our turf and we don't get involved with yours. Prior to charter schools, for the most part, I think that as a union we could relax a little bit, because for the most part we were the only kid on the block. And ... and you pretty much had to come to us. Uh ... unless you could afford to send your child to a private school or et cetera, you had no other choices. Charter schools have created, uh, competition that we have to take serious in order to maintain our students. So ... I don't think the school district can do it in isolation. And neither can the union do it in isolation. That, uh, the survival of public

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education, uh, D.C. public schools, and the survival of the union is tied to student achievement.

JOHN MERROW: Are you gonna get in trouble for speaking so candidly?

GEORGE PARKER: Get in trouble with?

JOHN MERROW: I don't know. Pretty rare to have a union leader say, "Well, we haven't really had to worry about student achievement in the past. And now we have to."

GEORGE PARKER: Well, I don't think it's just unions. Look, school districts haven't had to worry about student achievement, other than from a humanitarian standpoint. Um, I think that, uh, No Child Left Behind has some very glaring weaknesses, but probably one 'a the things that it did do is put all school districts on notice that you're not gonna let schools, um, continue to fail without some type of repercussion. So, um, I think it has made all school districts a little more accountable. Um, so I don't think it was just the union. I mean, uh, we ... we've had what? Seven superintendents in ten years, number one. I think it's unrealistic to think that any school district is goin' to be successful when you have seven changes in leadership in ten years. Um, but I think that those who make decisions have had somewhat of a ... a relaxed attitude inasmuch as what are the consequences if the school district isn't successful? There are consequences now, though I think the consequences are punitive more than supportative... or supportive. I think the consequences of No Child Left Behind are punitive rather than supportive.

JOHN MERROW: So you and Rhee agree about the need for accountability, you and Rhee agree that the system has to change in order to keep parents sending their kids to your schools?

JANE RENAUD: WITH THE UNION WORRIED ABOUT SURVIVING, MICHELLE RHEE WOULD SEEM TO BE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT DURING CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS. RELIABLE SOURCES INDICATE THAT SHE WANTS RADICAL CHANGES IN THE UNION CONTRACT. SHE'S SAID TO WANT A TWO-TIER SYSTEM IN WHICH NEW HIRES WOULD NOT BE ELIGIBLE FOR EITHER TENURE OR SENIORITY PRIVILEGES BUT COULD MAKE CONSIDERABLY MORE MONEY—IF THEIR STUDENTS DO WELL ON TESTS. VETERAN TEACHERS COULD KEEP THEIR TENURE, OR GIVE IT UP AND BECOME ELIGIBLE FOR HIGHER PAY. PARKER DEFENDS TENURE AND

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SENIORITY AND SEEMS OPPOSED TO PAY FOR PERFORMANCE. IN THE INTERVIEW, JOHN MERROW KEPT LOOKING FOR AREAS OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT.

GEORGE PARKER 01:32:07 I think the system has to be successful.

QUESTION 01:32:09 You ... you and ... you and Rhee disagree on how to hold teachers accountable? What do you disagree on?

GEORGE PARKER: I don't know specifically, because I don't know all the Chancellor's beliefs. I can only talk about my d- ... my beliefs. I do not believe that the success of a school district, uh, depends upon an attack upon the workforce. I think that generally, uh, teachers have taken too much of the blame for poor administrators, poor politicians, poor superintendents. Um, and, uh, when you have, uh ... and research shows if you g- ... give a school a poor principal and you're gonna have poor results, regardless of how outstanding your teachers are. You give a good principal a poor superintendent (Laughs) ... you're gonna still have a poor school system. You give a good superintendent a poor group of politicians or school board members, you're gonna have a poor school system. So I think that the failure is as a result of a lot of other people, but teachers have, unfortunately, taken the blame for a lot of inefficient leadership, uh, on the parts of a whole lot of other people.

JOHN MERROW: So ... so you're ... you're in the position of saying to your members, hey, the world has changed. We now have to be accountable for whether the kids are learning. Get ready for this new world. What are your teachers gonna say? How do they react when you say things like that to them?

GEORGE PARKER: I think that our teachers are some of the most committed people, um ...

JOHN MERROW: Yeah, but they haven't had to ... you ... you yourself said they haven't had to, at the end of the day, care ... I mean, uh, their job didn't depend on whether the kids learned. You're saying now the survival of the system depends on whether the kids learn.

GEORGE PARKER: Yeah.

JOHN MERROW: So what do your teachers say when you say, hey (Overlap) ...

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GEORGE PARKER: I don't ... I don't think ... I ... I ... I think that the fear of change is no greater among teachers than it is any of us.

JOHN MERROW: Are your teachers afraid of change?

GEORGE PARKER: I don't think they're afraid of change. I think they're afraid of those who are implementing change. Uh (Overlap) ...

JOHN MERROW: Michelle Rhee.

GEORGE PARKER: I think some of our teachers are afraid, uh, of the Chancellor. I think that, um, this would not come as news to the Chancellor. There ... there are quite a few of our veteran teachers who feel that the Chancellor wants to get rid of them. Um ... whether it's a reality or a perception. That's how many of them feel. Um ... but I think that from a standpoint of being afraid of change itself, I think our teachers are very adaptable ...

JOHN MERROW: But you're saying (Overlap) ...

GEORGE PARKER: ... to change.

JOHN MERROW: ... to them ... you're saying, 'Hey, the world has changed. We have to now be (Overlap) ...

GEORGE PARKER: It's changing.

JOHN MERROW: ... accountable.'

GEORGE PARKER: Oh, I ... I think that there's no question about us being accountable (Overlap) ...

JOHN MERROW: What do your teachers say, w- ... how do they react when you say (Overlap)?

GEORGE PARKER: Our teachers are not afraid of bein' accountable. I ... I think the push-back that ... that ... that would come from any teacher is not a matter of bein' accountable. I haven't heard one teacher say ... uh, that he or she does not want to be accountable. What I hear among teachers is, "Look, I want to be treated fairly."

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JOHN MERROW: Uh ... Chancellor Rhee's had a ... you know, kind of a whirlwind year. A lot of ... a lotta headlines and all that stuff. W- ...

GEORGE PARKER: Whirlwind, I haven't heard of that one; that's a good one.

JOHN MERROW: What ... what's your sense of ... of, uh, her first year, how has she done?

GEORGE PARKER: If you ask me on the 25th of August I could tell you.

QUESTION: Would you give her a grade right now?

GEORGE PARKER: I could. But I think the most important grade is gonna be how well school opens on the 25th. I think that the decisions that were made in terms of ... of closing the schools, restructuring schools, uh, the firing of the principals, central office staff, I think the overall impact of that is all going to converge on the 25th. Are schools open, are they ready, are the supplies there, are all teachers in place, all your principals in place? Uh, the, um ... modernizations or the, uh ... work that had to be done on the buildings, is it all complete? And I think at that point, we'll all be able to give a grade.

JOHN MERROW: August 25th (Overlap).

GEORGE PARKER: Everything else is philosophical.

JOHN MERROW: August 25th.

GEORGE PARKER: August 25th, when the students return.

JANE RENAUD: THAT WAS JOHN MERROW, TALKING WITH GEORGE PARKER IN JULY. WILL THE TEACHERS UNION HAVE A CONTRACT BY THE TIME SCHOOLS OPEN? VISIT OUR WEBSITE TO KEEP FOLLOWING THIS STORY. THIS PODCAST WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM THE ELI AND EDITH L. BROAD FOUNDATION, AND THE ANNENBERG, GATES, HEWLETT WALLACE AND FOUNDATIONS. THIS PODCAST WAS PRODUCED BY SELLY THIAM, WITH JANE RENAUD AND CAT MCGRATH. I'M JANE RENAUD. THANKS FOR LISTENING.