

Michelle Rhee's Cheating Scandal



Alex Wong / Getty Images

Michelle Rhee

Bad education policy is no excuse for cheating—especially cheating from principals and teachers, whom we hope will serve as role models for our kids. But the sad truth is that we shouldn't be surprised by [USA Today's disheartening findings](#) on test score irregularities in the Washington, D.C., public schools during the reign of [Michelle Rhee](#), the firebrand former chancellor best known for firing teachers, closing underperforming schools, and linking teacher and principal pay to student test scores. Such irregularities are, in part, the unintended consequence of a spate of popular education reform policies that over-rationalize teaching and learning—both of which are creative processes—by measuring them almost exclusively through the results of

multiple-choice standardized tests.

Reporters Jack Gillum and Marisol Bello found that from 2008 to 2010, D.C.'s testing company, CTB/McGraw-Hill, recommended that the school district investigate higher than typical answer sheet erasure rates at 103 of its 168 schools—possible evidence that adults had corrected students' mistakes. Even D.C.'s own superintendent of education, Deborah Gist, recommended that Rhee's administration launch an investigation of erasures at eight schools, those that displayed a consistent pattern of wrong answers being replaced by correct ones.

Rhee stepped down last year after D.C. voters booted her patron, Mayor Adrian Fenty, from office—in part because of [dissatisfaction with his education agenda](#). Since then, however, [Rhee's national influence](#) has only grown. Though she identifies as a Democrat, she is advising rising-star Republicans such as Florida Gov. Rick Scott and Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval. In December, she [appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*](#) to announce that her new advocacy organization, StudentsFirst, would raise \$1 billion to promote education reform policies like the ones she pursued as chancellor.

USA Today reports that Rhee at first resisted Gist's suggestion that she look into the irregularities, but eventually, in 2009, hired an outside consulting company to conduct a cursory investigation, which ended up absolving every school of wrongdoing. Meanwhile, under Rhee's controversial merit pay program, principals of eight schools with high erasure rates received annual bonuses of up to \$10,000 for boosting student test score averages by as much as 48 points. Classroom teachers at the schools were eligible for an additional \$8,000 in pay each year.

Rhee deserves credit for recruiting more middle-class families into the Washington, D.C., public schools, and for streamlining the system's once-corrupt and dysfunctional bureaucracy. But the USA Today exposé raises serious questions about the wisdom of the more controversial aspects of her reform agenda.

In the social sciences, there is an oft-repeated maxim called Campbell's Law, named after Donald Campbell, a psychologist who studied human creativity. Campbell's Law states that incentives corrupt. In other words, the more punishments and rewards—such as merit pay—are associated with the results of any given test, the more likely it is that the test's results will be rendered meaningless, either through outright cheating or through teaching to the test in a way that narrows the curriculum and renders real learning obsolete.

In the era of No Child Left Behind, Campbell's Law has proved true again and again. When the federal government began threatening to restructure or shut-down schools that did not achieve across-the-board student "proficiency" on state reading and math exams, states responded by creating standardized tests that were easier and easier to pass. Alabama, for example, reported that 85 percent of its fourth-graders were proficient in reading in 2005, even though only 22 percent of the state's students demonstrated proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gold standard, no-stakes exam administered by the federal government.