

LEARNING MATTERS

PODCAST - Community Engagement and Public School Reform

MARGOT BERKEY It's very difficult for us as citizens here to have another new superintendent of schools, Chancellor of schools, whatever you want to call the person, come in and start telling us what's going to happen to our schools. We really want to be involved in shaping that with her.

JOHN MERROW **CAN A SUPERINTENDENT ACHIEVE LASTING CHANGE WITHOUT LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY? SHOULD NEW LEADERSHIP ALWAYS MEAN RADICAL CHANGE? DOES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SLOW DOWN SCHOOL REFORM? MARGOT BERKEY, A LEADING PARENT ADVOCATE IN WASHINGTON, DC, WOULD ANSWER ALL THREE QUESTIONS WITH A RESOUNDING 'NO.' BUT BERKEY DOES A LOT MORE THAN SAY 'NO,' AS YOU WILL HEAR.**

I'M JOHN MERROW. MY COLLEAGUE CAT MCGRATH SAT DOWN WITH MARGOT BERKEY TO TALK ABOUT MICHELLE RHEE, WASHINGTON DC'S NEW SCHOOL LEADER, WHOSE EXPLOITS WE HAVE BEEN CHRONICLING ON THE NEWSHOUR WITH JIM LEHRER ON PBS.

MARGOT BERKEY The District of Columbia has been through so many different bosses over the years (Laughs) that we've done a lot of planning, we've done some excellent plans, that never really get implemented, because of the tremendous amount of change. Even in the seven to ten years that I've been working actively on school issues in DC, we've had ... I don't know, I've probably worked with seven different superintendents. And so we keep ... we keep changing so fast that nothing ever really gets implemented.

CAT MCGRATH How would you describe your feelings about D.C.'s school system?

MARGOT BERKEY How do I feel about ... the ... I think the D.C. Public School System right now is in a state of chaos. The state that we're in now is ... is really a ... it's no one's particular problem, but it is the result of a pattern of a lot of kind of transition, constant transition.

MEETING

I am telling you, that you are not being serious about taking parent and community input into account. (Claps, cheers)

JOHN MERROW

IN DECEMBER 2007, NEW SCHOOL CHANCELLOR MICHELLE RHEE AND MAYOR ADRIAN FENTY REVEALED PLANS TO CLOSE 23 SCHOOLS IN WASHINGTON. THE PROPOSAL DREW IMMEDIATE FIRE FROM MANY PARENTS AND ACTIVISTS IN THE DISTRICT WHO FELT THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN A LARGER PART OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS.

MARGOT BERKEY

What we're getting is here's the proposal, which feels very much like "a plan" that's been pre-determined. And then we're supposed to react to it. And in governing in that style, all you get is management of the community sentiment and not active engagement in a democratic process that moves the city forward. So it's an uncomfortable place for people to be. And this is a very tricky issue in the District of Columbia, because I don't think most Americans experience anything like we do, where we are completely at the mercy of Congress, our budget has to be approved by the President of the United States. We can't just make our own laws and carry them out. So much of what we do is ... is ... or what we try to accomplish as a city is controlled by others who are non-resident and non-en- ... you know, non-engaged in our affairs.

CAT MCGRATH

What would you say is the number one message that parents would like to deliver to the Fenty administration?

MARGOT BERKEY

Hmm. I think ... I think the number one message of parents in this city for the Fenty administration is: please work with us to do the right thing for our children. It's as simple as that. I don't think it's a complicated thing. It's work with us, not at us, not ... don't do to us or for us what you think is the right thing. But work with us to determine what is the right thing. And not everyone has the time or the energy to get involved in the nitty gritty, and go to hundreds of meetings, and ~~that~~ all of ~~that~~. But they want the information about the decisions that are being made. They want to understand what the thinking is first, and then see how that thinking translates into proposed actions.

CAT MCGRATH

Do you think the lack of information is intentional on their part?

MARGOT BERKEY I ... I think that um ... just as knowledge is power, information is power. And the um, leaders ... the ... the Mayor and the Chancellor's team are using information in a very controlled way, so that we learn about um, pieces of what they're working on when they're ready to tell us about them. (Laughs) And uh, in the way that they want to inform us. And I think that um, there could be much more openness and ongoing communication, much more transparency. And um, I think instead of obvious transparent action on that front, we've seen a greater focus on uh, the kind of personnel reforms that she feels are necessary, in order to change the school system. You have to replace people. You have to just break it apart. Change the management entirely. You know, do something radical. Uh, this is very much someone who's come from a start up background. And I think what we're getting is a start up approach to fixing the school system. It's ... you know, it's "break it down, start over again." Instead of uh, that ... that process of transformation which is much more deliberate and uh, progressive.

JOHN MERROW **MARGOT BERKEY TOLD OUR COLLEAGUE CAT MCGRATH THAT HISTORY SEEMED TO BE REPEATING ITSELF. "DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN," AS YOGI BERRA PUT IT.**

MARGOT BERKEY I think the Chancellor is ... is falling into the same pattern that a lot of people do when they come to the district. We've um ... we've seen the same pattern every time. (Laughs) Folks come in. They think we must all be a bunch of idiots, because we've messed things up so badly. They feel like they've got to fix things for us. And they ... they come in and ... and try to move forward a lot of their own good ideas. And um, meanwhile we've just been slogging through this for decades. You know? And it's not just parents, it's teachers who've been with the system. It's administrators. And it's people in the broader community. And what most of our former superintendents have realized as they leave office is that they should have connected more closely with the community. The Chancellor is falling right into that trap, and hopefully she will you know, find a new way to ... to start working with us, instead of just making these proclamations.

CAT MCGRATH How are people perceiving the chancellor at this point?

MARGOT BERKEY

Ha-uh ... I think there's a ... there's still ... there's a tremendous support for, uh, the new leadership, for the Fenty team. You know, a lot of people in the city really have a lot of hope that things are going to be better. And ... and so there ... a lot of people are ... are still, you know, really interested in seeing this through and making sure that we can all be successful. Uh, on the other hand, I think that there is a level of suspicion and mistrust that comes from the chancellor's failure to ... to be more transparent and more inclusive in her decision-making and in for- ... working with us to formulate these changes for the city. They're holding information very close to the vest and that's creating this tension with the community and I just think that this is going to be a very rocky year that we're going through and hopefully, it won't create so much destabilization that there isn't much of a D.C. public school system at the end of it because ... we could lose a lot of our schools and a lot of our families. We don't need to accelerate the sort of ... enrollment decline in the district. We need to do things, uh, move people in a positive direction toward being more closely engaged with their schools building a greater sense of confidence in the schools. But when you push too much change on people, at one time, and they don't know why you're doing that change for them, or to them, uh, you know, it ... it can tend to just push people away. And I don't know what will be left of DCPS if this isn't more effectively managed as we go forward.

JOHN MERROW

THAT'S WASHINGTON, DC, COMMUNITY ACTIVIST MARGOT BERKEY, TALKING TO MY COLLEAGUE CAT MCGRATH. WE'LL BE WATCHING WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR ONGOING NEWS HOUR COVERAGE OF SCHOOL REFORM IN WASHINGTON, DC. YOU CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT CHANCELLOR RHEE, AND HEAR MORE PODCASTS LIKE THIS ONE, BY VISITING OUR WEBSITE AT WWW.PBS.ORG/MERROW (THAT'S M-E-R-R-O-W).

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THIS PARTICULAR PODCAST WAS PRODUCED BY JANE RENAUD AND EDITED BY CHRISTINE RENAUD. I'M JOHN MERROW. THANKS FOR LISTENING.