

D.C. Schools Turn Again to Mass Firings of Teachers

Following the District of Columbia Public Schools' July 23 decision to fire 241 teachers under the District's new IMPACT evaluation system, AFT president Randi Weingarten says that Chancellor Michelle Rhee's signature education philosophy appears to be that you can hire and fire your way to better schools.

Rhee fired more than 75 teachers last year under her old evaluation system. Last November, she used a budget crisis as an excuse to dismiss another 266. Now, the initial implementation of the new IMPACT system already has resulted in terminations of more than 200 teachers. Questions have been raised not only about the validity of IMPACT, Weingarten notes, but also about the chancellor's penchant for firing teachers rather than providing supports to develop their skills.

"Mass firings such as these, and questions about the validity and reliability of IMPACT, are precisely why DCPS agreed with the American Federation of Teachers and the Washington Teachers' Union and signed two side letters to the contract dealing with the system," she says. "One letter calls for an independent review, and the other provides teachers with an opportunity to share their concerns regarding the IMPACT system.

"Our hope is that the recently approved contract for DCPS teachers will usher in much-needed changes for District schools. The terms of the contract call for all teachers to receive targeted professional development throughout their careers, with particular support for new teachers and for those who need specific supports. "Firing teachers en masse may sound to some like strong action is being taken, but in the absence of real professional supports and valid teacher evaluations systems, it simply perpetuates a destructive and failing strategy. Rhee's approach ignores the fact that good teaching is much more of a learned skill than it is innate. All of us who have taught know this. Our common goal must be to improve teaching and learning so that the children educated in the District's public schools are prepared to succeed in college, work and life.

"Chancellor Rhee has numerous tools available to her in the contract we recently reached. She has a responsibility to follow the lead of school systems that successfully use such tools to develop highly skilled teaching forces, rather than stubbornly adhering to the destructive cycle of 'fire, hire, repeat.' " July 23, 2010