



RHEE-ality Check

The Failure of StudentsFirst

A Report by New Yorkers for Great Public Schools



New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS) is a coalition of dozens of community organizations, unions, civil rights groups, immigrant organizations, student organizations, parent groups, education advocates and political advocacy organizations that are committed to turning around the direction of school reform in New York City schools because our children cannot take any more of the failed Bloomberg education policies.

New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS) pledges to support a new direction in public education – one that emphasizes collaboration instead of competition, a well-rounded, diverse curriculum instead of test prep, support for schools instead of sanctions, and one that provides parents, students and community with a meaningful voice in schools.

Table of Contents

Overview: A Bad Investment	1
Key Findings: Where StudentsFirst Has Failed the Most	1
A Track Record of Ineffectiveness	2
A Revolving and Increasingly Republican-leaning Staff	6
New Leadership that Does Not Inspire Confidence	7
A Culture of Open and Effective Leadership?	8
Stumbling in New York	10
Is StudentsFirst a Sound Investment?	10

Rhee-ality Check: The Failure of Students First

Overview: A Bad Investment

Since its launch two years ago, StudentsFirst has made bold predictions about the organization's impact on education policy, and what it will accomplish across the country.

This is the first report of its kind to examine whether this education advocacy group founded by Michelle Rhee has made progress toward its key goals. Gathered here for the first time is a body of evidence, data, and analysis showing that Students First has given its donors and supporters a poor return on their investment.

StudentsFirst has failed to live up to expectations in four main areas: fundraising, leadership, electoral politics, and grassroots organizing. These failures are described in detail below. A national education advocacy group with such a track record of ineffectiveness is not what Rhee's investors signed up for.

Key Findings: Where Students First Has Failed the Most

Fundraising:

- Students First promised to raise \$1 billion nationally, but after enduring lagging fundraising, the organization now claims to be a \$100 million to \$150 million operation.
- Students First said it would raise \$10 million a year for five years in New York City to build on Mayor Bloomberg's legacy, but a year after opening, has yet to raise the first \$10 million.

Leadership:

- Rhee's 2011 IRS application for tax-exempt status, where she laid the groundwork for Students First, shows ambitious hiring plans, with projections for 260 total employees.¹ But as of January 2013, Students First employed only 124 people, less than half the projected number.²
- Students First has lost many top Democratic staffers—including former Bloomberg lobbyist Micah Lasher, former Obama campaign spokesperson Hari Sevugan, as well as Ximena Hartsock, Anna Hall, Dmitri Mehlhorn, and Mike Phillips. Several of these Democrats fled just before Republican Khalil Byrd was hired as StudentsFirst's new national president.

¹ http://www.charitiesnys.com/RegistrySearch/show_details.jsp?id={9259825E-DCAF-466F-BCB8-7BBF57D73804}

See page 33 of 'IRS Tax-Exempt application'

² http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-01-12/local/36323347_1_michelle-rhee-scapegoat-teachers-weak-teachers/2

Electoral Politics:

- Students First claims to be successful in electoral campaigns, but their wins are based almost entirely on endorsing in safe Republican incumbent districts. In contested elections, their track record is one of failure—including in California school board elections and a Bridgeport, CT ballot initiative.

Grassroots Organizing:

- Students First claims to be building a grassroots movement, but has failed to generate grassroots support, despite hiring community organizers. Top education policy leaders surveyed agree that Student First is one of the least effective education advocacy organizations in the country.

A Track Record of Ineffectiveness

StudentsFirst launched with the goal of raising one billion dollars over five years.³ That goal seems to have been more hype than reality: the organization's president is on-record alternately claiming to have \$150 million in commitments through 2016,⁴ and stating that StudentsFirst is a "\$100 million effort."⁵

It is difficult to know exactly what the StudentsFirst budget is, since the organization is entirely opaque about the sources of their funding.⁶ Whatever the real figures are, it appears that StudentsFirst has not been able to raise the funds they anticipated raising at their launch.

But their general ineffectiveness goes beyond fundraising. Their efforts to influence political races across the country have also fallen short, and signal the group's steady progression towards exclusive partisan support for Republicans.

Their efforts to influence political races across the country have also fallen short of the mark...

StudentsFirst likes to tout an 80% success rate in the 2012 general election.⁷ While

true, the success rate is largely the result of the organization's backing of safe Republican incumbents in Maine, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Georgia.

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/25/corrected-national-education_1626053.html

⁴ http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-01-12/local/36323347_1_michelle-rhee-scapegoat-teachers-weak-teachers/2

⁵ <http://www.linkedin.com/in/kahlilbyrd>

⁶ http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-05-15/news/sns-rt-us-usa-education-rheebre84e10a-20120515_1_michelle-rhee-studentsfirst-grade-level

⁷ www.studentsfirst.org/press/entry/studentsfirst-electoral-activity-in-2012

Where StudentsFirst opted to spend significant funds on contested races, their record is less commendable:

- **California school board races:** StudentsFirst and their board members spent over \$300,000 backing the candidacies of Kate Anderson for Los Angeles School Board, and Francisco Castillo for the West Sacramento School Board. The Los Angeles race was a magnet for big spending education reformers. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a StudentsFirst ally put \$1 million into 3 candidates including Anderson,⁸ and former NYC Chancellor Joel Klein a StudentsFirst New York Board member put in \$25,000.⁹ News America, a division of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. contributed \$250,000 to the Coalition.¹⁰ Murdoch is also a StudentsFirst donor. Anderson lost in Los Angeles and Castillo lost in West Sacramento. StudentsFirst attempted to spin their loss in LA into a gain, noting that they had backed a slate of three candidates, the other two of whom were successful. But neither of the other candidates was in a competitive race.¹¹
- **Bridgeport ballot initiative:** StudentsFirst spent \$185,480 on a Bridgeport, CT ballot initiative that would have eliminated the city’s elected board of education, replacing it with one appointed by the Mayor.¹² Bridgeport, the 169th most populous city in America, may not seem like a natural choice for such expensive political advocacy. But Rhee, eager to put a marker down in any blue state, seemed desperate for a win. Rhee’s husband, Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, flew to Bridgeport to advocate for the measure.¹³ StudentsFirst poured money into canvassing and advertisements and leveraged contributions from her allies.¹⁴ Together, supporters of the referendum spent more than half a million dollars—the most spent on a referendum in the state’s history—only to lose. Mayor Bloomberg also contributed \$20,000 to this initiative.¹⁵
- **Michigan ballot measure:** StudentsFirst spent \$500,000 opposing Michigan’s Proposition 2, a ballot measure proposing to codify collective bargaining in the state constitution. The measure had no direct connection to public education. Pre-election polling showed the measure as unlikely to succeed.¹⁶ Instead of sitting it out, StudentsFirst—still purporting to be a bipartisan organization—put half a million dollars as well as significant political capital into fighting the ballot measure. It appears that their support for this measure cost StudentsFirst some of their best talent, with the *Huffington Post* citing the incident as the impetus for an exodus of Democratic staff.¹⁷ While Michigan voters rejected a constitutional amendment enshrining collective bargaining, StudentsFirst’s contribution is likely to have done little for that effort, while burning considerable good will with Democrats.

⁸ <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/12/local/la-me-bloomberg-laUSD-20130213>

⁹ <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/10/local/la-me-school-board-money-20130211>

¹⁰ <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2013/03/05/news-corp-puts-its-thumb-on-the-scale-of-la-ele/192915>

¹¹ <http://blogs.sacbee.com/capitolalert/latest/2013/03/mixed-bag-for-michelle-rhee-in-tuesdays-school-board-races.html>

¹² <http://blog.ctnews.com/kantrowitz/2013/01/17/corporate-education-reformers-spend-563000-and-counting-in-bridgeport-loss/>

¹³ <http://onlyinbridgeport.com/wordpress/pelto-files-campaign-finance-complaints-involving-education-ballot-initiative/>

¹⁴ <http://blog.ctnews.com/kantrowitz/2013/01/17/corporate-education-reformers-spend-563000-and-counting-in-bridgeport-loss/>

¹⁵ http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/11/bloomberg_donates_bridgeport.php

¹⁶ [http://ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/Michigan_%22Protect_Our_Jobs%22_Amendment,_Proposal_2_\(2012\)](http://ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/Michigan_%22Protect_Our_Jobs%22_Amendment,_Proposal_2_(2012))

¹⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/04/michelle-rhees-studentsfirst_n_2411484.html

The organization doesn't seem to do much better at rallying grassroots support for their efforts.

- In a leaked document posted by the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, StudentsFirst's general counsel threatened to sue the Connecticut Parents Union after a Connecticut rally held by Michelle Rhee drew almost no attendees.¹⁸ The rally's sparse attendance suggests that the organization and its "astro-turf" partners are incapable of mobilizing a grassroots base. Pictures, posted on Twitter, appear to confirm that.¹⁹
- In Florida, StudentsFirst was so desperate to present the veneer of grassroots support that former state director Catherine Durkin Robinson proposed doling out gift cards to listserv members in exchange for pro-reform comments on blogs.²⁰
- In Missouri, with all of their money and "members," StudentsFirst couldn't even turn out a single person for one event.²¹ According to reporting by Fired Up! Missouri, StudentsFirst organizers had to cancel a luncheon scheduled in May 2012 due to lack of attendance.



Turn-out was low at a Connecticut rally funded by StudentsFirst

StudentsFirst organizers had to cancel a luncheon scheduled in May 2012 due to lack of attendance.

Spending good money after bad to promote its agenda has been a hallmark of StudentsFirst's advocacy work. For example, the organization went all-out in its efforts to support the Hollywood film *Won't Back Down*, a big-budget film that was widely panned as little propagandizing for so-called Parent Trigger laws. StudentsFirst paid employees to positively review the 2012 film's release,²² and spent millions of dollars promoting the movie. StudentsFirst gave away thousands of tickets to the film, and hosted showings at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions last summer. For its efforts, the forgettable *Won't Back Down* was the lowest grossing opening weekend of any movie of similar distribution, ever.²³

Another StudentsFirst priority was the development of annual "state report cards" measuring adherence to StudentsFirst's policy agenda. Reportedly over a year in the undertaking, the first round of report cards was released in early 2013. They were met with considerable skepticism. Academics criticized the report cards as having methodological errors and providing "no useful policy examination or guidance to policymakers."²⁴ The report card effort was also negatively reviewed by educators, policy makers and media:

¹⁸ <http://boldprogressives.org/leaked-documents-show-michelle-rhee-coordinating-with-astroturf-group-to-push-alecs-parent-trigger/>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/CTConfidential/status/180005826235351040/photo/1/large>

²⁰ <http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2012/07/27/studentsfirst-asks-florida-allies-to-hit-the-blogs-win-a-gift-card/>

²¹ <http://www.firedupmissouri.com/content/students-first-tries-fails-be-real-grassroots-organization>

²² <http://jerseyjazzman.blogspot.com/2012/09/studentsfirst-astroturfing-movie.html>

²³ http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/10/debate_over_wont_back_down.php

²⁴ <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-Students-First-Grades>

- The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial board stated: “Everything that is wrong with the debate over improving public schools can be seen in the latest report card from Michelle Rhee’s StudentsFirst organization” and said “they merely labeled the schools “failing” because state

StudentsFirst report cards provide “no useful policy examination or guidance to policymakers.”

Legislatures haven’t adopted the policy prescriptions pushed by Ms. Rhee’s group.”²⁵

- A superintendent of schools in Hollister, MO spoke out against his state’s ‘D-’ ranking, saying that “building up public schools... obviously isn’t [StudentsFirst’s] agenda.”²⁶ Noting that the report cards did not measure student performance, or any other indicator of educational quality, California deputy state superintendent Richard Ziegler called his state’s failing grade “a badge of honor;”²⁷
- Teachers bashed the report card in blogs on the Huffington Post²⁸ and Yahoo.com;²⁹

It’s no wonder, given these missteps, that StudentsFirst gets low marks on effectiveness from one of the leading scorekeepers of the education policy debate.

Whiteboard Advisors is a respected consulting practice in Washington, D.C. Focused on education, Whiteboard provides research and strategic support to investors and philanthropic donors, government leaders and entrepreneurs interested in shaping the education policy debate. Whiteboard conducts a monthly survey of influential leaders in education policy—including current and former White House and Department of Education staff, congressional staff, state schools chiefs and leaders of major education organizations, to gather their reflections on a range of topics. In December 2012, one of the topic areas in their survey was around the effectiveness of multi-state advocacy groups.

Respondents to the survey were very skeptical of StudentsFirst’s overall effectiveness as an advocacy group. Among the education policy leaders surveyed by White Board, StudentsFirst was ranked the third *least* effective group in the ratings, beating only the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and Students for Education Reform (SFER), despite having a larger budget than these, and most other education reform organizations.³⁰ 32% of respondents rated StudentsFirst either “ineffective” or “very ineffective” at state policy advocacy.

StudentsFirst fared even worse at “Coalition Building” with 52% of respondents categorizing them as “ineffective” or “very ineffective,” making them dead last in the category. Not a single respondent categorized StudentsFirst as “effective” or better at coalition building.

²⁵ http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/columns/the-platform/editorial-studentsfirst-report-card-misses-the-mark/article_7b322d39-8cff-5271-8fde-c5a9ffb7dbd.html

²⁶ http://www.komc.com/13295/hollister_superintendent_speaks_out_against_studentsfirst.html

²⁷ http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/columns/the-platform/editorial-studentsfirst-report-card-misses-the-mark/article_7b322d39-8cff-5271-8fde-c5a9ffb7dbd.html

²⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randy-turner/studentsfirst-report-card_b_2424381.html

²⁹ <http://voices.yahoo.com/michelle-rhees-studentsfirst-state-education-report-11965228.html>

³⁰ [http://www.whiteboardadvisors.com/files/Dec%202012%20-%20Education%20Insider%20\(Constoria,%20Student%20Surveys,%20Advocacy%20Groups\)_0.pdf](http://www.whiteboardadvisors.com/files/Dec%202012%20-%20Education%20Insider%20(Constoria,%20Student%20Surveys,%20Advocacy%20Groups)_0.pdf)

The White Board Advisors study also gave StudentsFirst poor marks for the third and final category, “Persuasive Policy/Data Analysis.” 42% of respondents rated the group “ineffective,” placing StudentsFirst third from last, again ahead of only BAEO and SFER.

A Revolving and Increasingly Republican-leaning Staff

Rhee’s 2011 IRS application for tax exempt status shows ambitious hiring plans, with 260 total employees projected.³¹ As of January 2013, StudentsFirst employed 124 people, less than half the projected number.³²

To make matters worse, the organization has already lost much of its top talent . Democrats like former Bloomberg lobbyist Micah Lasher, and former Obama campaign spokesperson Hari Sevugan both recently left the organization. They join other Democrats, Ximena Hartsock, Ana Hall, Dmitri Mehlhorn, and Mike Phillips, who reportedly left over what one anonymous source described as “significant differences over political strategy and policy matters.”³³

StudentsFirst... is viewed as a savvy bipartisan political and grassroots power player in the state.

But is it?

Moreover, by the fall of 2012, StudentsFirst was hit with another round of staff and organizational leadership problems which undermined the organization’s effectiveness even further.

StudentsFirst recently hired former Americans Elect CEO Kahlil Byrd to be president of the organization. Politico reported Byrd’s hire in September 2012,³⁴ but for reasons as yet unclear, StudentsFirst didn’t acknowledge Byrd as the president until January 2013.³⁵

StudentsFirst may have been attracted to Byrd because his political leanings track those of Rhee’s “bipartisan” organization. Byrd, a graduate of Morehouse College and Harvard University, first made a name as the Communications Coordinator for Democrat Deval Patrick’s successful campaign for Governor of Massachusetts. But Byrd’s next venture was for Republican Jeff Beatty’s senate campaign. Byrd now self-describes as a Republican.

Byrd’s arrival at StudentsFirst further erodes the organization’s credentials as truly bipartisan. Byrd has thrown his hat decisively in with the Republicans over the last several years, and his arrival coincided with the departure of several well-respected Democratic operatives.³⁶

³¹ http://www.charitiesnys.com/RegistrySearch/show_details.jsp?id={9259825E-DCAF-466F-BCB8-7BBF57D73804}
See page 33 of ‘IRS Tax-Exempt application’

³² http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-01-12/local/36323347_1_michelle-rhee-scapegoat-teachers-weak-teachers/2

³³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/04/michelle-rhees-studentsfirst_n_2411484.html

³⁴ <http://www.politico.com/blogs/burns-haberman/2012/09/former-americans-elect-chief-may-head-rhees-studentsfirst-136564.html>

³⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/04/michelle-rhees-studentsfi_n_2411484.html

³⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/04/michelle-rhees-sutdntsfirfirst_n_2411484.html

New Leadership that Does Not Inspire Confidence

Kahlil Byrd launched Americans Elect in April 2010. The organization sought to nominate a third party presidential candidate through an online platform, and get that candidate on the ballot in every state—an ultimately unsuccessful endeavor. Under Byrd’s leadership, Americans Elect spent millions on a collection of high-priced consultants, fancy office space, and excessive salaries.³⁷ Byrd himself received \$141,125 in 2010, and a contract for \$132,500 was funneled to Sung Media Ventures, a sole proprietorship owned by Byrd.³⁸ Byrd also received \$86,000 in salary in 2011, while simultaneously earning \$142,875 through Sung Media Ventures.³⁹ Sung Media Ventures also took in \$75,000 from the predecessor organization to Americans Elect.⁴⁰

While Byrd and his army of consultants⁴¹ made off with a significant chunk of Americans Elect’s \$35 million war chest, Americans Elect seemed to be sabotaging their own organization. Despite spending millions of dollars to secure their name on the ballots of several states, the organization was not able to nominate a candidate. Americans Elect buried the voting link for the nomination in a blog post, and did not notify their online membership about the polling.⁴² That mistake caused one commentator to opine that “Americans Elect has not yet demonstrated that it actually understands the Internet.”⁴³ This failure was despite the fact that they spent \$9 million on a web voting platform.

Ultimately, these issues made Americans Elect a profoundly unsuccessful organization. Gail Collins of the *New York Times* called the group “delusional, in a deeply flattering way.”⁴⁴ A profile on Slate.com called Americans Elect “an inevitable failure” and chastised them for spending their hedge fund-backed money on “swank offices a stone’s throw from the White House.”⁴⁵

Byrd has a checkered past beyond his relationship with Americans Elect. For example:

- In May of 2008, Byrd joined Jeff Beatty’s campaign for John Kerry’s senate seat.⁴⁶ Beatty lost the election in a landslide, spending \$1.7 million of the nearly \$2 million he raised for the campaign on out of state fundraising.⁴⁷ Byrd is listed as both a spokesperson and advisor to the campaign. Beatty, a Republican in a heavily-Democratic state, was projected to lose. Not only was he

³⁷ <http://irregulartimes.com/index.php/archives/2012/07/01/whos-to-blame-for-the-americans-elect-implosion-blame-lbi/>

³⁸ <http://irregulartimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/AmericansElect2010Form990.pdf>

³⁹ <http://thatsmycongress.com/AmericansElect2011Form990.pdf>

⁴⁰ http://www.opensecrets.org/527s/527cmtedetail_expend.php?ein=272285014&cycle=2010

⁴¹ <http://irregulartimes.com/index.php/archives/2012/07/01/whos-to-blame-for-the-americans-elect-implosion-blame-lbi/>

⁴² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/17/americans-elect_n_1525031.html

⁴³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/17/americans-elect_n_1525031.html

⁴⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/opinion/collins-time-to-elect-the-worst-idea.html?_r=0

⁴⁵

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2012/05/americans_elect_an_inevitable_35_million_failure.html

⁴⁶ <http://www.redmassgroup.com/diary/1528/>

⁴⁷

http://web.archive.org/web/20081204092712/http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/10/30/despite_2m_raised_kerry_rival_gets_little/

running against a well-liked incumbent, Beatty ran for the U.S. Senate during a presidential election that mobilized Democrats as never before.⁴⁸

- Byrd was the political strategist for Ken Block’s 2010 gubernatorial bid in Rhode Island on the Moderate Party ticket.⁴⁹ Block, a software engineer and founder of the Moderate Party, won only 6.5% of the vote.⁵⁰

Is Kahlil Byrd’s track record the type that will boost the confidence of prospective StudentsFirst donors and help them meet their oversized fundraising goals? If his past at Americans Elect is any indication, the answer is a resounding no.

A Culture of Open and Effective Leadership?

In addition to its advocacy efforts Students First is a vehicle for the promotion and personal enrichment of its founder and CEO, Michelle Rhee. StudentsFirst has spent a considerable sum promoting Rhee’s new book, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*. Rhee’s book website is hosted on StudentsFirst’s server,⁵¹ and the StudentsFirst website allows visitors the ability to read excerpts.⁵² Nothing suggests that any portion of the book sales will be donated to StudentsFirst. StudentsFirst has also organized events promoting Rhee’s book, including six stops in Pennsylvania.⁵³

Rhee charges \$50,000 in speaking fees, plus first class travel and accommodations, per speaking engagement.⁵⁴ These sums are paid to Rhee Enterprises LLC, a private for-profit company created by her brother.

Rhee remains a lightning rod at StudentsFirst, much as she was during her tenure as the Chancellor of the Washington, D.C.’s public schools.

Rhee was hired to take over the D.C. schools after the city’s hugely popular new mayor, Adrian Fenty, convinced the City Council and Congress to give him unilateral control over the District’s troubled school system. Rhee, who had been a classroom teacher for only three years and had never served as an administrator inside a school system, promised that, within five years of her arrival, D.C. Public Schools would become “the highest performing urban school district in the country and one that has the faith and confidence of the citizens of the city.” Like her bellicose fundraising predictions for StudentsFirst, her results missed the mark.

After three years as Chancellor, the District of Columbia Public Schools were confronting significant problems: Teacher turnover had risen to a nation-wide high of 50% within five years. Over 30% of the city’s principals had been removed. Educators complained that there was no curriculum to go with

⁴⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate_election_in_Massachusetts,_2008

⁴⁹ <http://www.independentpoliticalreport.com/2010/04/moderate-party-of-rhode-island-gubernatorial-candidate-ken-block-firms-up-campaign-team/>

⁵⁰ <http://www.rifuture.org/the-moderate-party-needs-an-identity.html>

⁵¹ <http://www.bing.com/search?q=ip%3A108.163.166.178&qs=n&form=QBLH&pg=ip%3A108.163.166.178&sc=0-3&sp=-1&sk=>

⁵² <http://www.studentsfirst.org/pages/radical>

⁵³ <http://www.eventbrite.com/org/3333089440>

⁵⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/guess-what-michelle-rhee-charged-a-school-to-speak/2011/10/24/gIQAen6GJM_blog.html

standards enacted just before Rhee arrived. Information was hard to come by—with no data on drop-out or graduation rates or other indicators available. One of the most frustrating features of Rhee’s tenure in DC was the opacity and mismanagement of the school system’s budget. According to a long-time watchdog of the DC schools, DCPS under Rhee did not follow its approved budget, sometimes engaging in “massive mid-year reprogramming” and over-spending. Budget numbers were not released, or made no sense. And, contrary to Rhee’s rhetoric about downsizing DCPS central offices, the number of central office employees in DCPS when Rhee departed was higher than in any year since 1981, when the district had twice as many students.⁵⁵

District students fared no better under Chancellor Rhee. In fact, DC continues to have the lowest graduation rate of any major urban center in the country. Test scores, the sole standard of success that Rhee expresses belief in, have remained totally flat. The NAEP exams reveal an extremely disturbing set of outcomes; rather than closing the education achievement gap, the gap has actually widened astronomically—by 29% in 8th grade reading and 72% in 4th grade math.

And there’s more. While the nation is shocked now by the alarming test score cheating scandal in Atlanta, there is considerable evidence of similarly large-scale cheating during Rhee’s tenure in D.C. As fully exposed in a scathingly detailed recounting by PBS News Hour education correspondent John Merrow⁵⁶ there is significant evidence that Rhee knew about the cheating. Her failure to investigate and come clean with the facts about test score cheating under her tenure may have helped her burnish her reputation, but does not bode well for the type of leadership that can successfully improve our public schools.

Rhee’s abrasive personality and disdain for public disclosure of information are widely credited with bringing down her sponsor—the highly popular and charismatic Mayor. Just three years after winning the Mayoralty in a landslide, Fenty was ousted by the voters in 2010, and his loss was widely pinned on his support for Michelle Rhee.

Rhee is divisive, even among fellow market reformers. When White Board Advisors, conducted their December 2012 poll on education policy, they asked about Indiana Commissioner of Education Tony Bennett’s defeat. One responder opined: “People didn’t like him—[he was] too Rhee-like.”⁵⁷

Even the organization’s public statements about whether or not Rhee’s children attend public school raises questions about transparency. As part of a March 2013 profile in the *Los Angeles Times*, a spokesperson for StudentsFirst described Michelle Rhee as “a public school parent.” Yet Rhee’s daughter reportedly attends Harpeth Hall, an elite private school in Nashville, TN.⁵⁸ Instead of simply correcting the statement, spokesperson Erin Shaw obfuscated, saying, “It was not our intention to be misleading. It is our policy not to discuss where Michelle’s children attend school out of respect for their privacy... While it is true Michelle is a public school parent, we understand how that statement was misleading...”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Testimony before the Committee of the Whole, District of Columbia Council, by Mary Levy. April 7, 2011.

⁵⁶ <http://takingnote.learningmatters.tv/?p=6232>

⁵⁷ [http://www.whiteboardadvisors.com/files/Nov%202012%20-%20Education%20Insider%20\(Federal%20Policy%20-%20Testing%20-%20Elections\)_0.pdf](http://www.whiteboardadvisors.com/files/Nov%202012%20-%20Education%20Insider%20(Federal%20Policy%20-%20Testing%20-%20Elections)_0.pdf)

⁵⁸ http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/blog/michelle_rhee_public_school_pa.php

⁵⁹ <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/political/la-me-pc-michelle-rhee-a-public-school-parent-20130328,0,6195587.story>

Stumbling in New York

StudentsFirst moved into New York state a little more than a year ago. Announcing itself in a *New York Times* article, then executive director Micah Lasher boasted: “This organization is really going to represent a redoubling of efforts, new energy and serious resources, invested in making our schools great.”⁶⁰ The article stated that StudentsFirst New York planned to raise \$50 million over five years, to purchase the influence necessary to push through unpopular reforms supported by the organization.

StudentsFirst New York has advocated for policies that are not popular with New Yorkers. The organization lobbied against a moratorium on school closures,⁶¹ despite polling showing that less than forty percent of New Yorkers support school closures.⁶² And while StudentsFirst New York is organized to protect the policies of Mayor Bloomberg, polling also suggests that that fewer than one-in-three New Yorkers trusts that Bloomberg's education best protect student interests.⁶³ While Bloomberg himself has donated to StudentsFirst efforts in other states, there is no evidence that he has contributed to StudentsFirstNY.

StudentsFirst New York has not enjoyed popular support over the past year. A recent rally in Bedford-Stuyvesant drew only a handful of people, none of whom had children at the school where they were protesting.⁶⁴ Of the few attendees, one was a parent of a student at Community Roots Charter School,⁶⁵ which contradicted earlier statements by StudentsFirst New York, who claimed not to be seeking to involve charter school parents.⁶⁶

StudentsFirst New York has also lost key staff members, including director of education Anna Hall and executive director Micah Lasher.⁶⁷

Is StudentsFirst a Sound Investment?

Investors in Rhee's new flagship, StudentsFirst need not look to Rhee's tenure in D.C. to raise concern about her management style, political sophistication or educational effectiveness. Indeed, in the first two years of its existence, StudentsFirst has squandered huge investments and failed to meet initial

60. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/04/nyregion/group-aims-to-counter-influence-of-teachers-union.html?ref=education&_r=0

61.

https://apps.icope.ny.gov/lrr/Administration/LB_HtmlLBimonthly.aspx?x=EFwvq0xTWtbSBu20Fs7JHQxix6hcBOfbVTlOmwiyp%2fieg%2fEMj2TtlG2et21TUKsJ5V9GN0Tm4XsubAcRzXwnlujYRpcsJKC5ucwbEH7dH9LWKvPrC6PeSBhf9FBcXRoBYaQ5cX%2f99WGc75V0bgOyoFc1gaPyMpif2E%2b6EM%2bm78ysKhNwd9ZKixFxnWhjDlaScUyFSS1JdapR6%2b9RfhYhN1GDv4QKaoyb9kA20pKx40oMpzTa4FEdqXV6NkKsqD4O4TD2Anaq3pApNiZ%2bZGEj6ol23zYIY6lQBTX1Vnsc3H

62. <http://gothamschools.org/2012/05/10/poll-few-nyers-see-school-closures-as-sound-education-policy/>

63. <http://gothamschools.org/2012/02/08/poll-nyers-dont-trust-bloomberg-to-protect-students-interests/>

64. <http://gothamschools.org/2013/04/18/bed-stuy-rally-shows-studentsfirstnys-organizing-challenges/>

65. <http://gothamschools.org/2013/04/18/bed-stuy-rally-shows-studentsfirstnys-organizing-challenges/>

66. <http://gothamschools.org/2012/11/19/parents-rally-at-city-hall-but-their-protest-is-directed-elsewhere/>

67. <http://gothamschools.org/2013/03/25/micah-lashers-studentsfirstny-exit-leaves-direction-in-question/>

expectations about its impact on education reform. Introduced as a bipartisan effort “for the children,” StudentsFirst is clearly settling into Republican policy circles—a development that has led to the departure of several high-powered Democratic operatives that had been hired into the organization. In competitive political races and ballot measures StudentsFirst has a poor track record despite spending large sums of money and leveraging the support of closely affiliated large donors. Kahlil Byrd, the new president of StudentsFirst has a track record that does not inspire confidence and his most recent venture raises serious questions about his competency in the national political arena. Fundraising has been significantly slower than expected. The organization claims 2 million members, but refuses to release any verification that their “members” are anything more than petition signers or purchased names on email lists. Attempts to show political muscle by turning out grassroots constituents at rallies, lobby days or even at movie theaters have flopped. In short, the organization has failed to accomplish most of its goals and has therefore become a generally ineffective advocacy group.