

Michelle Rhee: Partnering with City Year DC to Tackle Dropout "Catastrophe"

BY FC Expert Blogger Alice Korngold
Tuesday, August 4, 2009

DC's public school system has 45,000 students and an abysmal dropout rate of about 50%, typical of large cities. With a goal to remedy this dropout "catastrophe" (Gen. Colin Powell's term), while being constrained by a tight economy, DC Chancellor Michelle Rhee is looking to- in her words - "leverage opportunities for the greatest change."

To this end, Rhee believes that one of the best investments that DC Public Schools (DCPS) has made in the past year is its partnership with City Year DC. In 2008/09, City Year corps members proved themselves in a pilot program in 4 of the Washington's most challenging elementary schools.

Jeff Franco, Executive Director of City Year DC explained that "we offered to help the Chancellor to solve her worst headaches." After rigorous training, corps members coached, tutored, and mentored children in grades K - 2, and successfully demonstrated that they could help improve children's reading ability. This achievement will be instrumental in changing the life trajectory of these kids - ultimately increasing the likelihood that they will graduate from high school, go to college, and later, earn greater incomes.

"I've been thrilled with the results of this first year," says Rhee. So thrilled that she and Franco plan a "feeder pattern" strategy to have corps members continue working with these same children all through elementary school, middle school, and high school, while also expanding City Year's involvement with additional schools. The end game: reduce the dropout rate.

Not only are corps members achieving results, but they also "relish being measured and held accountable," says Rhee. And according to Franco, the experience for the corps members is "transformative." As City Year's website explains, corps members "develop civic leadership skills they can use throughout a lifetime of community service."

City Year unites young people of all backgrounds for a year of full-time service, working in schools and neighborhoods in 19 U.S. locations and one in Johannesburg, South Africa. Today, more than two-thirds of City Year service initiatives take place in public schools under the Whole School, Whole Child program as "near peers" to the students they mentor.

Companies and their employees provide vital funding and volunteer resources.