



Management Principles and the Washington, DC Public Schools (C): Former DC Mayor Adrian Fenty Reflects

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So the question is, is there such a thing as too much change? Do you actually hamper the ability to get things done by introducing too much change? There is some line out there that you can cross where you're making so many changes that you're risking your ability to continue on in a leadership position.

—Adrian Fenty, former mayor of Washington, DC

The message is you cannot omit and exclude parents, teachers and communities in terms of developing an education reform platform. It is a referendum on the kind of leadership the city wants. The mayor's style — un-collaborative and un-transparent — had as much to do with the election as education itself.

—George Parker, former president of the Washington Teachers' Union¹

On Tuesday, August 24, 2010, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Washington, DC would receive \$75 million in school grants after winning the Race to the Top competition. Remarking on Washington, DC's victory, Mayor Adrian Fenty said, "The District won a major victory today, but our students are truly the big winners. We've got the team, we have the will, our students are ready to learn, and now, the District of Columbia is set to serve as a national model for education reform."²

The celebratory mood over DC's victory, however, was short-lived. A mere three weeks later, on Tuesday, September 14, Vincent Gray, the chairman of the Washington, DC Council, won the mayoral democratic primary, beating Fenty 54% to 44%. Gray went on comfortably to win the

¹ Kendra Marr, "Adrian Fenty Loss Worries Education Reformers," *Politico*, September 18, 2010.

² "DC Schools Win \$75M in Race to the Top Funding," *Targeted News Service*, August 24, 2010.

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general election in November. Many observers of Washington, DC politics believed Fenty's loss was a referendum on his administration's education reforms and, specifically, DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee's leadership. As one former Fenty supporter said, "He fired those teachers, that did it for me. Does he understand that a job is a family's livelihood? ... Would never trust him again."³ In mid-October, Rhee announced her resignation; her deputy, Kaya Henderson, an African American, took over as interim chancellor.

During a meeting at a Washington, DC-based venture capital firm nine months after his loss, Fenty reflected on his four-year term as mayor. Having lived his entire life in the District and spent 12 of his 14 years since law school in politics, Fenty remained committed to his beliefs about how to run the District and his philosophy of change, even if, in the end, they made him a one-term mayor.

DC, Inc.

In the spring of 2005, as he was completing his fifth year on the DC Council, Fenty announced his candidacy for mayor. Even though he had only experienced the private sector while working as a teen in his parents' running apparel store, Fenty's campaign message was clear: "I ran my campaign with the message that I was going to run the city like a private business, on a broad but aggressive platform." As he explained it, this meant hiring great people, prioritizing performance and results above everything else, eradicating waste and inefficiency and abuse, having systems for measuring performance, downsizing, and improving results. He communicated this message during the 15 months he spent campaigning door-to-door. "I came up with this idea," Fenty explained,

because it is the antithesis of how DC was run when I was growing up here. As Martin O'Malley, the former mayor of Baltimore, used to say, it was patronage over performance. When I was elected in 2006, I went on a best practices tour around the country. I learned two very important private-sector philosophies: hire great people and stay on top of operational issues.

Fenty's desire to infuse private sector management principles into the public sector was further motivated by a number of other performance- and results-oriented mayors in office including O'Malley, Cory Booker of Newark, Gavin Newsome (San Francisco), Michael Bloomberg (New York), Richard Daley (Chicago), and Thomas Menino (Boston).

Improving education was one of Fenty's main goals and, in step with his commitment to run DC like a private sector company, he wasted no time taking over the school system after being sworn into office in January 2007. Unlike his predecessor who had twice attempted to take over the school system, Fenty moved fast and early, introducing legislation at 9:00am the first day he was in office. Fenty believed that mayoral control was the best way to reform urban school systems. He also believed there were two other key ingredients:

³ Paul Schwartzman and Chris L. Jenkins, "How D.C. Mayor Fenty Lost the Black Vote – and his Job," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2010.

You have to hire a chancellor who is brave, courageous, intelligent and who will get things done and you have to give them all the political support they need to get the job done. But even if you just do step one, at least the school system will be well managed. Under a board it is not well managed which is glaringly obvious if you visit most school systems in this country and you see the broken windows and the bathrooms. When we took over the DC school system, there were 22,000 work orders back logged. This basically means that if you submit an order for work to be done, it will never get done. Nothing is ever going to get fixed. My point is the way things used to be done doesn't work. Now to regular people, if you do something different than what has been done for 35 years and not worked, then that's good. Do something different. Don't do the same thing. It's not working. That was my whole approach to running the school system.

Fenty anticipated that there would be pushback to the changes his administration was trying to implement. The changes included taking away civil service status for central office employees and making them employees-at-will, closing schools, firing ineffective teachers, and taking a tough stand with the teachers' union. Despite the resistance, Fenty believed the changes were critical, and he refused to back down:

I had assumptions that people were going to be very upset by the decisions we made. Intuitively, everyone agrees the schools should be excellent, but why aren't they excellent? The reason is that the decisions that have to be made to make them excellent upset people, and politicians are not in the business of upsetting people because it increases the chance they won't get reelected. Pretty much every mayor, every city council member and every congressional representative who's been elected in DC has said they are going to fix the schools in low-income neighborhoods. But year after year, no one ever fixes the schools. So by deduction, the only way you're going to fix the school system is by making people upset.

The fact that I was making these tough decisions and that they could limit me to a four-year term was on my mind, but not for very long. I could not and would not entertain anything that in my mind struck of political expediency. It's the complete antithesis to what I believe about politics. I'd much rather serve one term where I did everything exactly as I believe then serve multiple terms compromising and watering things down. It was all about what was the best decision to get things done.

As expected, Fenty's desire to get things done upset many people. His constituents' discontent became glaringly apparent as he began campaigning for re-election.

Adults vs. Kids

As Fenty began his door-to-door campaign for re-election in the summer of 2010, many constituents wanted to know why Chancellor Rhee had recently fired 240 teachers (after firing 266 the year

before), most of them African American. This preoccupation struck Fenty as the crux of the challenge in fixing schools:

So what's interesting about this is if you go back to the summer of 2010 and look at how many states and cities fired teachers, I guarantee you we were nowhere near the top. But look at how many states and cities fired teachers for performance. I guarantee you we were the only one. So the issue had nothing to do with teachers at all. The issue was that we were not firing them based on inverse seniority, last in first out. We were firing them based on performance. I am sure that a good percentage of teachers in cities like Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Indianapolis who were fired were also African American and the difference was there was no outcry because they fired them based on seniority. So, if you take this set of facts and connect them to this other set of facts, and ask yourself why there's not more outrage in other cities and states, the only difference is that we fired people based on performance and they fired people based on inverse seniority. They're still African American teachers. They're still being let go in greater percentages than DC.

This is a perfect example of why schools don't get fixed, this level of preoccupation with why people get fired and what impact it has on adults and none on the performance of kids and how the schools are doing. And this is exactly what happened in the campaign and exactly what happened in the higher discussions about the school system. My question is, who cares who gets fired? I don't care if you fire 200 teachers or 300 teachers. I don't care if they're six feet tall or five feet tall. I don't care whether they're green or purple. If you told me as the person who is in charge of the school system, appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council, that they aren't getting the job done I don't care how many you fire. Fire all of them if they haven't done a good job. All I want to know is, 'Are you going to have a great teacher in every classroom?' That's the question that should be asked and that's not the question that gets asked.

Looking Ahead

Uncertain about his next career move, Fenty had his eye on joining the private sector as a businessman, but he also wanted to remain involved in the national effort to reform schools. For him, the two paths were not mutually exclusive:

When it comes to education, not only does the business community get its importance, they're more passionate about it than politicians are. They are more focused on doing something about it than the people who are supposed to be focused on doing something about it. And some of it might be altruistic, but most of it is because they get it. They get it because if you have all these kids, if you really want to break the cycle of poverty in our country, if you really want to make our inner city finally come back to life and poor kids have an opportunity, the only way to do it is by fixing the schools.

By early 2011, the other members of Fenty's education reform team had settled into new jobs. Rhee had founded and become CEO of an education advocacy non-profit, Students First; in May 2011, to the surprise of many, former Washington Teachers' Union president George Parker joined her organization as a senior fellow; and Fenty's former deputy mayor for education, Victor Reinoso, was serving as a senior adviser to Georgetown University's President John J. DeGioia and CFO Chris Augustini. Meanwhile, in March 2011, Mayor Gray named Interim Chancellor Henderson, known for her personable style,⁴ Acting Chancellor, a move that many voters viewed as tacit support of Rhee's reforms.⁵ In June, as Gray struggled with an approval rating that had fallen from 60% on election to 47%, a drop motivated in part by allegations of nepotism, electoral corruption, and excessive staff salaries,⁶ the DC Council unanimously approved Henderson as the new chancellor of the DC public schools.

⁴ Bill Turque, "Kaya Henderson Coasting to Confirmation as DC Schools Chancellor," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2011.

⁵ Richard Whitmore, "D.C. Mayor Gray Embraces School Reforms He Attacked," *The Washington Times*, March 16, 2011.

⁶ Nikita Stewart, Jon Cohen, and Peyton M. Craighill, "Gray's Popularity Takes a Plunge, New Poll Shows," *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2010.