

Response by Alan Ginsburg to Paul Peterson: "Michelle Rhee v. Her Critics."  
*Educationnext*. April 11, 2011

"In the case against Michelle Rhee," Paul Peterson presents three alleged flaws in my analysis that concluded that the math and reading gains under Rhee "were no better than under her predecessors Vance and Janey."

(<http://therheedcrecord.wikispaces.com/>). Two of Peterson's proposed flaws simply misstate my methodology. The third makes the highly questionable adjustment that the DC school system deserves credit only for DC gains above the national average, presumably giving credit to the Bush administration or some unknown cause for DC gains up to the national average.

First, Peterson claims that my analyses did not adjust for the fact that "Rhee was in office for only two years, while Vance was in office for three and Janey for four." This is incorrect. The analyses (Exhibit IIB and IID below) clearly represent annualized gains. In math, Rhee's annualized gains fall between Vance and Janey and in reading the annualized gains are about equal between Janey and Rhee.

Second, Peterson also claims that I used the DC NAEP sample that "in 2009 did not include students attending charter schools not authorized by the district, while in 2007 all charter school students were included." This is also factually incorrect. My report clearly specifies that I used the state NAEP series because of its consistent treatment of charter schools over the full 2000-2009 period.

Third, and crucial to Peterson's claims, is that the DC score improvement should be computed only as the excess above the national average NAEP gain. In the highly decentralized U.S. education system in which the federal government is prohibited from specifying curriculum, this criticism makes little sense. DC's prior poor scores and the improvements during the first decade of 2000 depend primarily upon what happens in DC. In fact, for math which can be measured over the full 2000-07 period, DC gains at grade 4 were higher than any state and at grade 8 DC gains were tied for fourth highest. Yet Peterson would not give DC much credit for these outstanding gains during this period.

One valid challenge in estimating DC gains for which there are no available answers is how to treat gains under Rhee between public school students attending charters and non-charter public schools. Although charter and non-charter gains during Rhee can be separated under NAEP, the Rhee administration closed a number of schools in DC during the 2007-09 period causing enrollment in charters to increase by half and enrollment in non-charter DC public schools to decrease by one quarter in only two years. With such large demographic shifts, the National Academy report cited in Peterson's paper is correct in stating that the longitudinal tracking of students is essential to estimating DC gains. Unfortunately, the DC contract for longitudinal data system development had to be cancelled for malfeasance in 2009.

What is clear is that DC score gains for all public school students have been impressive over the whole 2000-09 period. That includes the public school student gains under Vance and Janey that were comparable to those under Rhee.

