

Teacher Will: A Framework to Transform Classroom Practices! It's Intentional

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Abstract

The single unit of change in what matters for student learning is an effective teacher. What makes an effective teacher? Teacher and Administrator WILL. How do you design your classroom to ensure attention to “will power?” What are the teaching practices that align with “will power?” It’s intentional. Explore a framework that has been proven to increase student achievement: Social Will (belief), Cultural Will (understanding the population), Organizational Will (infrastructure), and Political Will (courage to act). Ron Edmonds (1979) said it clearly, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.” The question remaining is, how do we feel about the fact that there are many students in our charge who are not being successful in their schooling? What is our collective and individual responsibility to change their trajectory? The four wills framework is a distillation of complex educational concepts that can be incorporated into classroom and leadership practices. These four wills are a part of an intricately woven tapestry between administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community. Explore practical ideas to transform classrooms into learning spaces that address every child and districts into systems for every child, using "will power" that sets systemic and systematic change.

Keywords: Social justice, educational achievement, closing achievement gaps, social-cultural-organizational-political will, change

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Introduction

Teaching is at least rocket science. It is a complex process that involves social architecture of human beings. The school administration and teaching force combine efforts to create educational environments that forge student achievement and success; for most students. Educators and communities alike recognize that the single unit of change for the trajectory for student achievement is the teacher. It is what the teacher does in the classroom that impacts the teaching and learning process. When the classroom door closes, they are on their own to deliver instruction to students. They can set a student on a course for success or failure by their daily actions and interactions. However, delivery does not happen effectively without design. Closely linked to teacher behaviors is the support administrators give to teachers. Central office administrators and campus administrators play a vital part in student achievement by the education design they put in place. The design and delivery of educational processes and procedures determine efficiency and effectiveness. (CMSi 2017) The design and delivery are the underpinnings of high student achievement. Given this understanding, which is elementary in nature, why then do we have students who are not successful. Transformation of school classrooms and teacher practices rest on their “will” power to do so. Ron Edmonds (1979) made it clear over four decades ago: “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.” So, the central question is how do we feel about the fact that some of our students are not being educated to optimum levels. If indeed we know how to do this, why are we not doing so? What framework can educators use to transform classroom practice?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the “teacher will” to create classrooms that help every child succeed at top levels. My experiences as Superintendent in Clover Park School District (Lakewood, WA) serve as a reference, as well as the myriad of experiences throughout my educational journey. The following questions frame the discussion: 1) How do we feel about the fact that we have not addressed the needs of every child? 2) How do we establish the cultural, social, organizational, and political will to serve every child? 3) How do you design your classroom to ensure attention to “will power?” What are the “high fives” teachers can put into place in each of these areas?

Framework of Will: The Clover Park School District (CPSD) Story

Changing students’ lives in the CPSD began with the mission that every child would be a productive member of their community. This was coupled with the belief that students who were educated in the CPSD would be prepared for their future, academically, socially, and emotionally, and look back on their CPSD experience with pride. There was a moral imperative to educate children and a responsibility to extend hope. Some people in the community said, “Not every child will go to college.” As superintendent my response was, “They might not all go to college, but

our collective responsibility is to give them the skills so they can make the choice; to give them hope.”

Rev. Dr. Patrick O’Neill shared information with his colleagues in the 1980s that remains true today – children are the future. (O’Neill, 1999) O’Neill wanted to know how our behaviors would change if we asked the question about children in America that the fearless Masai warriors ask daily, . “Kasserian Ingera,”: “How are the children?”

It is still the traditional greeting among the Masai, acknowledging the high value that the Masai always place on their children’s well-being. Even warriors with no children of their own would always give the traditional answer, “All the children are well.” Meaning of course, that peace and safety prevail, that the priorities of protecting the young, the powerless, are in place, that Masai society has not forgotten its reason for being, its proper functions and responsibilities. “All the children are well!” - means life is good. It means that the daily struggles of existence, even among a poor people, do not preclude proper caring for its young. Patrick T. O’Neill

Driven by the belief that in every child would be a productive member of their community, the vision for the CPSD was inspired by the vital question the Masai ask – How are the children? This is a critical question for those of us who are serious about the education of all students. We know that the answer should be: “And all the children are well.” Student wellbeing is manifested as a result of our daily practices. As superintendent, classrooms visits were a part of my routine schedule; every day between 7:30 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. At first, teachers at first were hesitant, the union skeptical. But if the trajectory of student lives is to change, it can be done only by changing what takes place in the classroom. The staff became accustomed to my visits, and eventually teachers would anticipate my visits. When I had not visited their classroom in a while, they would stop me, eager to ask, “How are the children?” All the children are well when each one of them is successful and positively contributing to their community. That is the mission of the district, that is what underlies the belief system, and that shared belief system is what attracted me to CPSD. I knew that believing in the children helps them to believe in themselves. I said, “It is our expectations of them that determines whether they expect anything of themselves. It is our determination to ensure their success that determines whether they are successful. Changing the trajectory of student lives is a moral imperative.” It begins in the classrooms, with teacher will. It is supported by leadership. Leadership compels a belief in oneself. It is about one’s own personal mastery. “The core to leadership strategy is simple: To be a model. Commit yourself to your own personal mastery.” (Peter Senge, 1994)

As I entered my tenure as superintendent in the CPSD, thoughts about how to portray the work in a cohesive form centered through four lenses: **Social Will, Cultural Will, Organizational Will, and Political Will**. Based on this framework, thus began in the CPSD the collective will for every child to be successful. This is how students’ lives and trajectory for their future were changed. The four Wills, coupled with the pervasive question “How are the children?”, and the establishment of a simple acronym ABCs framed the vision for students in the CPSD. The CPSD staff became committed to the ABCs: A – All, that is each and every, students can and will learn;

B – Build bridges and infrastructures to ensure their learning; and C – Communicate and celebrate successes. The transformation also included a curriculum management audit, which provided strategic direction for the work. The curriculum management audit recommendations were the basis for developing the strategic direction for the district but the framework was always within the four Wills.

Social Will

Social Will is about the belief in whether each and every child can and will be successful in the educational system. It is about teacher belief and administrator belief. As previously mentioned, Ron Edmonds points out that to “successfully teach all students” is a choice. (Edmonds, *Effective Schools for the Urban Poor*, 1979) Ron Edmonds’ study on effective schools was a response to the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) which intimated that family background and socioeconomic status contributed more to student achievement than what happens in schools. Edmonds’ position was that schools can and do make a difference in student achievement. He conducted a study in urban schools that showed success in student achievement despite family background and economics and devised correlates that directly impact student achievement (Edmonds, *Programs of School Improvement: An Overview*, 1982): Leadership, Instructional Focus, Safe and Orderly Climate, High Expectations, and Evaluation. These original five correlates were later expanded to seven (Lezotte, 1991): 6. Positive home-school relations, and 7. Opportunity to learn and student time on task.

Most educators do not really believe that every child can and should go on to higher education. They make discriminatory determinations about who should continue into high levels of learning and who should not. In other words, the success of students is in the minds of their teachers. Think of the enormous impact we have on children’s lives daily. We can change their trajectory with the stroke of a pen, with the words, we say, with whether we believe in them or not. Ron Edmonds asked us, how we feel about the fact that we have not had the will to educate every single child although we know how to do so. It is about our belief system. When we were engaged in high school reform in the CPSD, our fight came from many fronts – one of them was from our own staff who said, “If we educate all children for college, who will make the hotel beds?” What would our response be if we asked which of our own children we want to make up hotel beds? The responsibility is to model at the leadership level that this thinking is not acceptable. It is not okay to “dis” (disrespect) our children. We have succeeded because someone believed in us. We must do the same for the children in our schools. It is unacceptable to throw away another generation of children. Social will is about our belief system. Teachers manifest social will when they establish practices that demonstrate belief in every child. Some practical examples of teacher belief are included in the “high fives” listed below:

- Asset-based teaching: The understanding and practice of acknowledging that every child brings assets to the classroom. It is the teacher’s responsibility to discover and develop those assets.
- Helping students set high goals for their success in the classroom and providing learning opportunities to reach those goals.

- Use a success journal to help students celebrate their academic successes, enhance writing skills, and critically think about how they will accomplish their success goals.
- Process praise – identify specifics when giving praise.
- Engage students in relevant and experience-based learning. Engagement, rather than “drill and kill”, offers students an opportunity to build learning through networking with others. In the classroom, this practice reinforces teachers’ beliefs that students are capable of building their learning as oppose to being a vessel where knowledge is dumped.
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The second framework is the area of cultural will. The frameworks are interrelated and interdependent. While social will is about the ingrained belief that every child can be successful when we have classroom practices that support them, cultural will is about how well a teacher understands the children in their classroom.

Cultural Will

Cultural Will is about understanding the population of students with whom you work. We all have culture, heritage, and background. Gloria Ladson-Billings stated:

What makes this difficult is the finding that far too many teachers in U.S. schools possess only a surface understanding of culture - their own or anyone else's. As noted in another of my earlier studies, many middle-class white American teachers fail to associate the notion of culture with themselves. Instead, they believe that they are "just regular Americans," while people of color are the ones "with culture." This notion of regularity serves a normalizing function that positions those who are "not regular" as "others." Not recognizing that they, too, are cultural beings prevents these teachers from ever questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of human thought, activity, and existence. (Ladson-Billings, 1998)

One must embrace who they are first before they can truly understand who their students are and what they bring to the table. Teachers must recognize their heritage and culture and how that impacts their interactions with their students. They must also celebrate and appreciate the cultural differences of their students. John Stanford, former superintendent in Seattle, said there are no excuses for students not achieving. (Stanford, 1999) Understanding Cultural Will is about understanding the influence of heritage and culture. Knowing the cultural nuances of students can be used to their advantage.

When we view people through their cultural lens, we enrich not only ourselves, but others as well. In the CPSD, we had district-wide book studies as a part of our monthly administrative meetings. Each of the Wills was studied over the course of a year or two. Books were chosen that would help further the conversation on the particular Will. We pushed the envelope to help individuals understand themselves as a cultural being and then to understand the population of students with whom they were working. The culminating project was a cultural quilt, with each piece done by a district administrator to reflect their cultural heritage and commitment to Cultural Will. This quilt was hung in the foyer of the central administration building (Student Services Center). An extension of the quilt project would be for every teacher, indeed

every staff member in a district, to build their own quilt patch for their classroom or workspace.

Research is rich in the connection between relationships and student achievement. (Howard, 1999) (Delpit, 1995) (Tatum, 2003) (Skria J. S., 2003) (Kuykendall, 2004) One of the best ways to establish relationships is to understand the culture and heritage of the students with whom you are teaching. A small gesture with a huge impact was to change the conversation from “all” students to “every” student.

As superintendent, I was often called to speak in large assemblies of either students or staff, or both. I noticed early on that when I looked at a crowd of people - sometimes as much as 2,000 persons, I saw a blur of faces. This was particularly true when I used “all” in my language. But when I used “every” it shifted my mental model, allowing me to focus on individuals. I proposed a change to the district’s mission statement. Rather than using the term “all students will learn”, change it to “every student will learn”. This small, but significant, gesture helped to reposition how educators in Clover Park view students.

Cultural will is about our classroom practices that demonstrate an understanding of the rich cultural heritage and diversity that is our public schools, and yes, our society. Teachers manifest cultural will when they establish practices that show the tapestry of their classroom and how they intimately understand their own heritage and appreciate the heritage of the students in their classrooms. Sharing cultures is an important part of your understanding and their understanding. This may be an “old fashion” show and tell.

Some practical examples of teachers’ understanding of cultural will are included in the “high fives” listed below. They are not in any priority order:

- Intentionally group students so that they are exposed to the many cultures in the classroom. An example might be in how you arrange your room or seat your students.
- Ensure curriculum materials and activities are multicultural in nature and representative of the students in the classroom, and/or world in which they will eventually interface. An example, go back and think about how the lesson relates to the teacher’s culture and student’s think about how it related to their culture and experiences.
- Respond to students using a lens of cultural understanding. Go to student events and be involved in their culture. An example, might be to walk the neighborhood and go to businesses, talk with those in the community.
- When students are using grammatically incorrect language based on their code-switching, provide reminders of standard English without insulting or demeaning them.
- Visually represent different cultures and populations throughout your classroom (bulletin boards, classroom decor)

The third framework is the area of organizational will. Organizational will are the things that impact the design of instruction.

Organizational Will

Organizational Will is about the infrastructure. From a system's perspective, we ask the questions: What are the hiring practices that contribute to or impede student learning? Where are the most effective teachers placed? How is funding allocated? From the classroom perspective, teachers ask different organizational will questions: How do you structure classrooms so that the flow of student learning is maximized?

Research from Ed Trust tells us that it is the quality of the teacher that makes a difference in student achievement. "Teachers are by far the most important in-school factor in determining whether our students succeed and our nation's schools improve. An ever stronger and more sophisticated body of scholarship confirms what parents have long suspected: Highly effective teachers help children soar, while ineffective teachers actually hobble students' chances for success." (www.edtrust.org) Ed Trust research showed students had very different achievement levels in 5th grade depending on whether they had been assigned 3 effective teachers or 3 ineffective teachers in prior grades. In fact, students assigned to three ineffective teachers lost ground; where in 3rd grade they scored at the 57th average percentile rank, by 5th grade they dropped to the 27th percentile rank. The teacher is the single unit of change for student achievement:

"...teacher effects appear to be cumulative. For example, Tennessee students who had three highly effective teachers in a row scored more than 50 percentile points above their counterparts who had three ineffective teachers in a row, even when they initially had similar scores. An analysis in Dallas found essentially the same pattern there: initially similar students were separated by about 50 percentile points after three consecutive years with high- or low-effectiveness teachers." (Hancock, 2009)

Organizational Will at the systems level asks these question: "How are students placed in advanced placement classes?" What access do students have to college preparatory tests? Algebra is considered the gate-keeping course for students to do well in college. Why is Algebra not required of all students? At the classroom level, the questions become what criteria are you using as a teacher to recommend students for gifted, honors, and advanced placement classes? How are you designing your classroom to encourage students to take college preparatory courses and placement tests?

Organizational Will at the system level is also about the allocation of resources. Are schools funded equally or equitably? When every schools in a district receives the same amount of money that is not necessarily the most effective for student achievement. (Skria L. , 2009) Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in schools with more affluent parents have the capability to raise more funds than PTAs in less affluent area. Some districts have gone to allocation of resources to schools based on their need. (e.g., Clover Park School District (WA) and Portland Public Schools, OR) Organizational Will is about what you change in the structure of the school system and the schools within the system. Bolman and Deal calls it reframing organizations to maximum effect. (Bolman, 1993), indicating that the structural frame helps establish and maintain formal roles and relationships, the human resource frame focuses on improving relationships, the political frame provides insight into managing the competition for power and scarce resources, and the symbolic frame addresses the

need people have to find meaning in their work. The same is true of classroom practices.

Organizational will in the classroom is manifested in how you structure learning on a big scale: The flow of the lesson, the flow of the day, how you keep students engaged. Periods after lunch may be different than what you have done with the same class in the morning. How do you structure to ensure learning is happening?

Some practical examples of teachers' understanding of organizational will are included in the "high fives" listed below. They are not in any priority order:

- Seating students – use intentional groups to maximize learning; create an environment that is inclusive
- End lessons with a culminating event (field trip or activity) – an intentional structure to create learning experiences that not only bring closure but increase exposure; backward design the lesson
- Allow the classroom space to be used as a safe haven – students who may need to come during lunch or other times when they do not have friends, etc.
- Avoid busy work – challenge them by having them create what makes sense for them in their learning packets.
- Lesson plans help focus both the teacher and students. Use them to help students understand what they should know and be able to do.

In the CPSD, some of the high school reform took the form of small learning academies with specific designations for example human services, communications, technology, science and math. Other reforms became school within a school where a large high school was reconstituted into four smaller independent schools. Still another reform was starting a school from scratch as a school with grades 5-12. This school phased in a couple of grades at a time. This school grew from 150 students to one with over 450 students and a waiting list to attend. It became the location of the district's International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Putting this school in place took courage amid pushback from community and staff, which leads to Political Will.

Political Will

Political Will is the courage to do what is right for our children. It is the determination to change the trajectory of students' lives from the policy level. In the CPSD, one of the first things we did as a superintendent and board team was to put a policy in place so that the position on every child being successful was clear. It was our equity and excellence policy. Because the position of superintendent is very tenuous, in order for change to be sustainable, there needed to be a policy in place so that the work would be secured.

The same passion for equity guided the work at the Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB). The Board was formed by the Governor of Oregon to provide policy recommendations on where strategic investments should be made to ensure equity of outcomes in education. The Chief Education Officer established four subcommittees to begin this work. One of the subcommittees, Equity and Partnerships, took on the task of developing and recommending an equity lens from which the OEIB could review its work. The lens was approved for OEIB, as well as agencies throughout the

state. (McEwen, OEIB Equity Lens, 2012) It now serves as a guide for school districts and organizations as they develop their policies on equity.

Political will in the classroom is embedded in making sure the playing field is level. As an educational advocate, we are expected to stand in the gap and build a bridge for them. (M. Walker, personal communication, January 5, 2017) We should use instructional time to ensure that students address the myriad of social issues impacting and that will impact their lives. Many times, teachers do not view their role as political, however with political will, teachers show their courage in doing what is right for students. This may manifest itself in their interactions in their communities, their classroom management, or their interactions with parents.

Some practical examples of teachers' understanding of political will are included in the "high fives" listed below:

- Classroom management – the courage to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to learning for every child in the classroom.
- Your voice in ensuring that teacher contract is designed to support student learning and what is best for students, not just the adults in the system.
- Supporting and encouraging student voice in classroom and school processes. Student protest about social issues should be opportunities for students to be thoughtful and critical.
- Engage community and expose students to the adult role models in their community (e.g., law enforcement, board members)
- Recognize parents as the primary teacher – first teacher – and use them as a resource in your classrooms

Summary of the Framework of the Four Wills

The framework of the Wills evolved from my 44+ years as an educator. The premise of the four Wills is that when taken together, the collective will can be actualized to close the achievement gap for students who have not been successful in the public education system. The Wills must be addressed at both the systems level and the classroom level. The four Wills are not in priority order, but they must interface and are interactive. The four basic questions that frame the Wills are:

- Do you believe every child brings assets to school and that it is the responsibility of educators to address instructional delivery from that belief system (Social Will)?
- Do you understand the population of students with whom you are working and are you committed to ensuring their progress (Cultural Will)?
- Are you willing to redesign the organizational structure to ensure closing of the achievement gap for marginalized students (Organizational Will)?
- Are you willing to commit to policy at the governance level and have the courage to stand in the face of racism and criticism to make sure that every student is given the keys to their future (Political Will)?

When we have the belief, the understanding, the infrastructure, and the courage, we open the doors for transforming classrooms into ones where students intentionally

succeed. And, we animate the collective will, the will that can embrace closing the achievement gap for students.

Conclusion

The Wills framework posits that classroom practices are intentional and can be designed and delivered so that every child is connected and learning at high levels. Again, the four Wills are:

- Social Will is the belief that every student can be successful. Their success is deeply rooted in whether educators truly believe they can learn. Social Will is about high expectations. It is about the ability to give hope.
- Cultural Will calls for deep understanding of the culture and heritage of oneself and others. The value we put on others' culture speaks volumes about how we value ourselves. This requires a commitment to develop our individual response to others, and specifically our students. Our destinies are inextricably linked.
- Organizational Will requires a change in the infrastructure. What must change in the structure of the classroom so that students experience success?
- Political Will is about the courage to do what is right for students and to commits to policy at the governance level, however there are also behaviors teachers can demonstrate to show their courage at the classroom level.

Each of the four framework areas include “High Fives” – examples of practices for classroom teachers to consider in understanding and implementing social will, cultural will, organizational will, and political will. High Five is a term used for enthusiastically expressing support, agreement, and greeting. Oxford Dictionaries provides the following definition: a gesture of celebration or greeting in which two people slap each other's palm with their arms raised. (<http://en.oxforddictionaries.com>) These “High Fives” are not intended to be exhaustive. Teachers, administrators and other educators will undoubtedly have many examples of their own. The high fives for each of the four frameworks are summarized below:

Social Will

- Asset-based teaching
- Helping students set high goals.
- Have students use a success journal
- Process praise – identify specifics when giving praise.
- Engage students in relevant and experience-based learning.

Cultural Will

- Intentionally group students for classroom instruction.
- Ensure curriculum materials and activities are multicultural.
- Respond to students using a lens of cultural understanding.
- Be aware of code-switching and provide reminders of standard English without insulting or demeaning them.

- Visually represent different cultures and populations throughout your classroom.

Organizational Will

- Group students intentionally for small group work.
- End lessons with a culminating event.
- Allow the classroom space to be used as a safe-haven.
- Avoid busy work.
- Use Lesson plans to help focus both the teacher and students.

Transforming classrooms

Social, Cultural, Organizational, and Political Will is a framework to transform educational systems. It has a proven record of success, as evidenced by the change in trajectory of achievement for students in Clover Park School District (Lakewood, WA). Clover Park School District went from schools scoring in the single digits on state standardized test to scores in the 80 and 90 percent for those same school. It was a clear focus on the ideas espoused in the framework. This framework is one that can also transform teaching practices. Examples are provided as “High Fives.” Transforming school classrooms is a matter of collective will. It is intentional!

Successful transformation of school classrooms is a combined effort of teachers and campus/district administrators. The education of students is complex. It involves molding and shaping human beings. Just as an architect designs and builds physical structures, an educator designs and “builds” human structures. The design of instruction must be thoughtful and intentional and the delivery must be thoughtful and intentional. What a teacher does daily in the classroom is the single most indicator of student success. Therefore a successful teacher must believe in their students and have the highest of expectations for each of them (social will); understand the rich culture and heritage they personally bring to the classroom as well as those of their students (cultural will); organize the learning process with attention to the infrastructures that create student success (organizational will); and have the courage to address the issues that may impede student success and encourage those that will enhance student success (political will).

Addressing the needs of every child is a commitment to address Ron Edmonds statement that we already know how to do so, and the visceral feeling that we haven’t done so is abhorrent. Our answer, as educators, when asked, “How are the children?” will be a resounding “And the children are well” because we will use a framework of wills to ensure their well-being.

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