

## *Collective Will to Change Education Trajectory by Transcending Boundaries*

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### **Abstract**

It's "a matter of wills": cultural will, social will, organizational will, and political will. Dr. Ron Edmonds said, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than is necessary 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." To address Dr. Edmonds' question takes collective willpower - How do we feel about not having addressed the needs of every child? How can attention to transnational spaces ensure children transcend boundaries, thereby building a collaborative world? How do we establish the cultural, social, organizational, and political will to serve every child, ensuring their empowerment? Thomas Friedman maintains that the world is flat. In a flat world, how do we establish cohesive collaborative structures? Conference attendees will hear the Clover Park School District (Lakewood, WA, USA) story, an intentional design to transform student experiences. The premise: Do you understand the population of students with whom you are working and are you committed to ensuring their progress (cultural will)? Do you believe that every child brings assets to school and our responsibility is to address instructional delivery from that belief system (social will)? Are you willing to redesign the organizational structure to ensure closing of the achievement gap (organizational will)? And, are you willing to commit to policy at the governance level and have the courage to stand in the face of racism and criticism.

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

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## Introduction

Reflection is not only good for the soul, it keeps one grounded in what it takes to reach goals. My journey in social justice began before my actual birth. My father, Earnest McEwen, Jr., was a champion for justice. As an early civil rights leader in the south, he constantly challenged the status quo. At that time in the south, a black man could be hanged for just appearing to look at someone the wrong way, yet my father choose to push back. He was a janitor at “Ole Miss” (The University of Mississippi) and knew that there was something better in store for him. When asked by one of the deans at Ole Miss what he saw for his future, he responded that he would like to go to college but did not have the money to do so. At the time, Ole Miss had not been integrated so the dean was not suggesting Ole Miss for him. However, he told him that William Faulkner might be a benefactor to help him pursue his dream of going to college. My dad, proudly walked into Rowen Oak, the home of William Faulkner, and asked to speak with him. William Faulkner provided the money for my father to attend Alcorn College (now Alcorn State University, Lorman, MS). My dad said he did not know how he would repay him. To that, William Faulkner responded, help someone else. So, with this grounding, I have lived by the favored gospel hymn, “If I can help somebody as I pass along....”

The social justice legacy continued as my dad attended Alcorn College, with a wife and three young children in tow, to pursue his Baccalaureate degree. While at Alcorn College, he became president of the student body. The students became disenchanted with the discriminatory practices of the college and the blatant disrespect of one of the professors (Clennon King) who supported a known racist newspaper (the State Times) by submitting articles, defaming civil rights organizations, supporting racial segregation, and using pictures of Alcorn students without their permission to promote his positions. As a result, the student body, led by the student body president, Earnest McEwen, Jr., decided they would boycott classes. The result was closure of the university by the all-white board of trustees and firing of the President; Most of the student (489 of 571) body walked out in protest. (Williamson, 2008) The administration at Alcorn College, expelled all of the student leadership. When the incident occurred, my father was six weeks away from graduating. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) assisted my father by sending him to Central State University (Wilberforce, OH) to complete his degree. His journey in social justice continued throughout his life. For the purposes of this paper, the grounding in social justice was an ever present part of my life, as a result of the modeling from my father.

Education chose me as a profession for delivering social justice. My legacy (Burgess, 2006), personal legend (Coelho, 2005), so to speak, is in what I can give to children that will make them the orchestrator of their own destinies. Ron Edmonds (1935-1983) was very instrumental in framing my philosophical stance. Edmonds taught social studies at Ann Arbor High School (1964-1968), where I received my diploma, and was a professor at Michigan State University (East Lansing, MI), where I received both my Master’s and my Doctoral degrees. He is considered to be the founder of the Effective Schools Movement and established seven correlates of effective schools. (Education Week, 1992) Although I did not have the privilege of studying directly with Edmonds, I was privy to his work and the extension of his work by Drs. Larry Lezotte and Wilbur Brookover. Ron Edmonds said, “We can whenever

and wherever we choose successfully teach all students whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far." (Edmonds, *Effective Schools for the Urban Poor*, 1979) It is this quote that has resonated in every aspect of my professional career and my personal life journey. I constantly ask myself and others, how do you feel about the fact that we have not educated every child? This is an intense moral question that leads to the framework of collective will. Must we only educate those whose schooling is important to us or do we have the will to establish educational systems that are structured to serve every child? The collective will to change education trajectory for children is accomplished when we transcend boundaries. Collective will is even clearer when we demonstrate that every child's education is of interest to us. There are no boundaries, geographical or otherwise, that should keep us from working as a global community on behalf of every child.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the collective will to transcend boundaries. My experiences as Superintendent in Clover Park School District (Lakewood, WA) serve as a reference. 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, ensuring their global responsiveness? 3) How can attention to infrastructures ensure children interact globally? 4) In a flat world, how do we establish cohesive structures?

### **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. In the CPSD, there is 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."

Just as Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neill shared this information with his colleagues in the 1980s, his message 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 Masai ask daily: "How are the children?"

Among the most accomplished and fabled tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is perhaps surprising then to learn the traditional greeting passed between Masai warriors. "Kasserian Ingera," one would always say to another. It means, "And 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 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 classroom is the single unit of change that impacts student achievement. 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.” 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, Cultural, Organizational, and Political. 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 change work 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. 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: the principal's leadership and attention to the quality of instruction

Instructional Focus: a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus

Safe and Orderly Climate: a safe and orderly school climate conducive to teaching and learning

High Expectations: teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery

Evaluation: the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program 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 be continue into high levels of learning and who should not. In other words, the success of students is in the minds of their teachers. My personal story might help amplify this point.

I was born in Oxford, Mississippi to sharecroppers. I spent my early days riding on a cotton sack because I was too young to pick cotton. In my family, education was a given. My father believed it was "the great equalizer." I shared part of his story in the Introduction. Although he graduated from college, his struggle continued. Because he could not find work as an architect (the area in which he graduated) he once again became a janitor. My father continued his studies and became a self-taught hematologist and blood bank technician at the hospital where he provided janitorial services. He was later hired as an engineer at Ford Motor Co., many years after he had received his Baccalaureate degree. At times, my father worked five jobs so we could get ahead. Like many men of his generation, he worked very hard and died too young. My mother was a classic homemaker. She had a strong family ethic. When she married my father, she had not completed high school. She went on to earn her GED (General Education Diploma). Her greatest satisfaction has always been raising her family. Among her five daughters, they have 15 college degrees, including two with PhDs, and one with an MD.

When the family joined my dad in the north, we did so in Detroit (MI). I went to upper elementary and junior high in Detroit Public Schools. It was when I moved to Ann Arbor (MI) that I faced my greatest challenge, covert personal racism as well as institutional racism in the public schools. My first challenge was getting into Algebra. They would not schedule me into Algebra. Because I attended the Detroit Public Schools, they said, "I was not prepared the same as students in Ann Arbor." That did not sit well with my dad. He met with the principal and made it clear that I was to take Algebra and added to that I was not to have any, what he called, "Sop courses."

When I was preparing my admission packets for college, my counselor refused to write a letter of recommendation for me to attend college. Did he change the trajectory of my life? He definitely could have sent it on a downward spiral. I had strong family support. Many of our children do not. My dad did not let that stop me from going to college. He insisted, "In my home, it's not a matter of if you go to college, it's was a matter of which college are you going to attend."

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. As I previously stated, not everyone believes our children can learn at high levels. 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?" This is appalling. 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.

## **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. John Stanford, former superintendent in Seattle (WA), said there are no excuses for students not achieving. (Stanford, 1999) Understanding Cultural Will is about understanding the influence of heritage. Knowing the cultural nuances of students can be used to their advantage.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's story and the misperceptions that come from categorizing people based on lack of experience with their culture is an example. When she was 19 she went to study in the United States and was surprised when her roommate went to the "default position" of pity. She asked her to hear some of her tribal music and was shocked when Chimamanda played Mariah Carey. Chimamanda grew up in a middle class family in Nigeria, not in a tribal village, but was immediately categorized as tribal because she was from the continent of Africa. Media, literature, and other venues show people as one thing and only one thing and

hence that is what they become to others. Hence Chimamanda's premise of the danger of a single story. She says, "Insisting on negative stories, flattens our experience. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. Single stories rob people of their dignities. It emphasizes why we are different rather than how we are alike."

([http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story))

Cultural Will embraces Chimamanda's view of the danger of putting people into single categories. 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).

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 viewed students.

## **Organizational Will**

Organizational Will is about the infrastructure. What are the hiring practices that contribute to or impede student learning? Where are the most effective teachers placed? How is funding allocated? In the CPSD we used the urban teacher perceiver instrument to hire teachers. This survey provided guidance on whether an incoming teacher could work with our population of students. 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. 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: initially similar students were separated by about 50 percentile points after three consecutive years with high- or low-effectiveness teachers. (Hancock, 2009)

Organizational Will 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?

Organizational Will 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 call 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.

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.

### **Summary of the Framework of the Four Wills**

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. In the United States, these are primarily students of color. The four Wills are not in priority order. 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 transcending global boundaries.

### **Transcending Boundaries and the Framework of the Four Wills**

Robinson says, “What is at issue is the relation between our knowledge of the world and social structures. Social structures is becoming transnationalized; an epistemological shift is required in concurrence with this ontological change.” (Robinson, 1998) Robinson goes on to espouse Featherstone’s (1990) point that “Human beings cannot interact in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture as shared symbols and adaptive systems, and a focus on “global culture” has an important contribution to make to transnational studies.” (Robinson, 1998)

The meaningful interaction of cultures occurs in several ways, not the least of which is the interdependence of educational systems. Schools and districts continue to reach across geographical boundaries and interact with students in other countries, thereby eliminating boundaries. There are examples of “sister city” exchanges, foreign student study programs, journal exchanges and visits from various countries. During my

tenure as superintendent, the district participated with the City of Lakewood (WA) in hosting students from Okinawa (Japan). The students lived with families of middle school students, exchanging culture and establishing relationships. (McEwen, Weekly Sharing for October 17, 2003, 2003). During my high school days, I was fortunate enough to have a foreign exchange student from Venezuela live with my family, exposing me to the value of interacting across cultures. Social media has allowed this to occur at an ever increasing rate. What is new is that technological changes have made it possible for immigrants to maintain more frequent and closer contact with their home societies. (Bruneau, 2010)

The University of Washington (Seattle, WA) had a teacher exchange program with Zayed University (Dubai, UAE), where professors at the University of Washington went to Zayed University to teach master's level courses to students studying educational leadership. One of the major benefits of the exchange was the sharing of cultures. Visiting other countries provides a firsthand knowledge of cultures. The key is to be open to receiving the new experience in a nonpejorative way. There is richness in experiencing other cultures. In addition to these benefits, the experience also solidified collective will in transnational spaces, thereby minimizing cultural boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

The Wills framework posits the connection between collective will and transcending boundaries:

Social Will transcends geographical boundaries. Social Will is the belief that every students can be successful regardless of where a student is located in the world. It remains a moral imperative to have a belief system that embraces every student, without prejudice.

Cultural Will calls for deep understanding of the culture of 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. Our destinies are inextricably linked.

Organizational Will requires a change in the infrastructure. Social media is accelerating infrastructure changes.

Political Will commits to policy at the governance level to allow the interaction of students in social media space, and other mediums. It is the courage to ensure that education crosses boundaries and is considered from a global perspective.

The Social, Cultural, Organizational, and Political Will to educate every student is an idea whose time has come. The collective will to transcend boundaries and therefore change the trajectory for children is a concept whose time is past due. We can no longer live in isolated communities. The world is our communities. Educators must come together and look at ways to work to enhance the trajectory of children. The world does not exist for a few.

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