

A National K-12 School Reform Policy Proposal

November 2016

The Will to Achieve:

A K-12 Education Surge Policy

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“The only thing broken in my community is the will to achieve.”

T. Willard Fair, Liberty City, Miami, FL

Rationale

The Will to Achieve: A K-12 Education Surge Policy (“*The Will to Achieve*”) is a K-12 education national reform platform designed to help all students crack the code and break barriers to academic achievement by channelling a surge of human resources right to the hearts of students thereby powering their **“will to achieve.”**

Educational progress today is hampered by an over-reliance on experts and the consequential marginalization of the truly key educational human resources—parents, relatives, community leaders, churches, neighborhood organizations, entrepreneurs, teachers, and students themselves. Rebooting American education requires an activation and surge of these most powerful human resources.

The country also needs a surge of hope and optimism to replace the fear, pessimism, and cynicism all too prevalent in American K-12 education. *The Will to Achieve* will contribute to the reawakening the American **“can do”** spirit of daring and hard work—the very same qualities needed to revitalize the American economy and American world leadership.

The time and conditions are right to implement *The Will to Achieve*. It is a platform that is:

- *Sharp and straight*: easily understandable, doable, exciting, and intuitive; yet it acknowledges the harsh realities and inequities **of today’s schools**.
- *Inclusive and unifying*: designed to appeal to rugged and hard-working families, post-racial youth, upwardly aspiring minorities, people who want to overcome divides and the politics of interest groups, displaced segments of the population, entrepreneurs, and educators who want dignity restored to their work lives.
- *Do no harm*: leaves policies in place where schools are working and provides maximal and respectful change where needed; it is voluntary and state-based with the role of federal government limited to constructing educational infrastructure.
- *Post-ideological*: transcends the tired educational rhetoric of the past, stepping beyond politically correct policies and symbolic and meaningless controversies; rejects blame and victimization while still continuing to embrace accountability.

The severe problems in American education are human-made so they can yield only to the collective impact of a surge of human efforts and cross-sector collaboration. *The Will to Achieve* provides the climate and guidelines to facilitate such a reform.

Four—and Only Four—Initiatives

The function of good educational policy is to *make it easy* for students to achieve academic success. Whereas faulty educational policy rests on the efforts of Supermen, good policy enables sincere and hard-working people to achieve superb results. *The Will to Achieve* dramatically prunes back the overgrown vine of the educational system and its dependence on experts to activate a culture of grassroots educational empowerment.

Good educational policy must powerfully draw parents into the education tent. In every home the kitchen table must resume its traditional place as the playing field of teaching and learning. To activate a surge of their efforts, parents need crystal clear standards and an assessment system that they deem fair and workable. A parent should never have to ask *“How can I help my child?”* or wonder *“How is my child doing?”*

Good educational policy must invite students to rush toward learning. To activate **students’ own will to achieve**, teaching and learning must become personalized and student-centric (Christensen), expanding far beyond the classroom and school day to anytime and anywhere. Mobile technology makes this possible and it matches the spirit of the on-demand autodidactic learning style of **today’s** tech-savvy youth.

Good educational policy must also help stakeholders design schoolhouses that enjoy the full respect and trust of every community.

Four--and only four--initiatives are necessary to set new dynamics into motion:

1. Develop new standards for passing through three gateways of schooling (primary, elementary, and middle school):¹ standards that are clear enough for every parent and student as well their supporters to understand and embrace;
2. Provide a means for students to credential competency in these standards through a system of smart and open assessment;
3. Establish a technology infrastructure that enables personalized student-centric and autodidactic learning so students can work toward achieving credentialing anytime and anywhere;
4. Develop exciting new models of the schoolhouse in communities where there has been a history of educational stagnation.

With these initiatives in place, a surge of human talent—*parents, relatives, friends, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and supporters from churches and community-based organizations*—will spark students’ “will to achieve.”

¹ The Will to Achieve focuses on grades K-8. The grassroots empowerment of parents and their supporters will build a climate of educational success that will carry over to high school. High school matters are best left to states and districts.

Initiative One: Standards that are Clear and Comprehensible

The Will to Achieve holds that standards must be universally understood by parents, students, educators, and community supporters. The standards must be welcoming, they must be clear, crisp, and comprehensible.

The need for standards has been recognized through the administration of four presidents but efforts have been shipwrecked by the very thickness of standards that have emerged from the work of educational experts. The Common Core Standards as well as many state standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics, while excellent instructional tools for teachers, are thick to the point of incomprehensibility for parents. The lesson learned is this: America must create standards that can be readily grasped and endorsed by parents and their supporters.

When it comes to standards: comprehensible is more important than comprehensive. Unfortunately, in the Common Core and many state standards, comprehensive trumps comprehensible. Consider the first domain standard for sixth grade mathematics:

“Students use reasoning about multiplication and division to solve ratio and rate problems about quantities. By viewing equivalent ratios and rates as deriving from, and extending, pairs of rows (or columns) in the multiplication table, and by analyzing simple drawings that indicate the relative size of quantities, students connect their understanding of multiplication and division with ratios and rates. Thus students expand the scope of problems for which they can use multiplication and division to solve problems, and they connect ratios and fractions. Students solve a wide variety of problems involving ratios and rates.”

Although this describes important mathematical concepts, it is not readily comprehensible even to a parent who is committed to helping his/her child succeed. The parent consequently feels confused about how to help the child and is left with no choice but to repeat well-meaning adages. “Do well in school,” “Finish your homework,” “Listen to your teacher,” etc. are, in effect, the embodiment of parental disempowerment!

The Will to Achieve, in contrast, creates conditions in which parents and their children sit around the kitchen table, working together to meet crisp and clear standards. Good policy must make it easy for them to accomplish this. As noted by Stevenson and Sigler in their seminal work *The Learning Gap* (1994), such clarity is one of the keys to the success of Asian primary schools.

Consider these two proposed samples of clear, crisp, and comprehensible standards for the English Language Arts:

- Elementary: “Read and respond to classic literature for children such the **American Library Association’s** Newbery Award books”²;
- Middle school: “**Read and respond** to the great classics of young adult literature such as Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Award books³ as well as to community newspapers.”

Both of these standards are broadly inclusive of many skill domains detailed in the Common Core but they are entirely comprehensible to parents and their supporters—as well as to students and teachers themselves. Such comprehensible standards in English Language Arts will foster a surge of stakeholders who work together to help students read, discuss, and respond to the great literary classics for their age group. What can be better than this?

The Will to Achieve calls for clear, crisp, and comprehensible standards for mathematics as well and provides a guiding spirit for social studies and science standards.⁴ With these standards in place families, educators, community groups, entrepreneurs, and teachers will become empowered to help students meet them.

Next, as students achieve these competencies they must credential their readiness to pass through the gateways of primary, elementary, and middle school.⁵ This leads to the second initiative—the process of certifying student competency in the standards.

² www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberymedal

³ www.ala.org/yalsa/2014-best-fiction-young-adults

⁴ The inexorable lens of selecting standards will be, “Can all parents help teach this standard around the kitchen table?” In math, the standards for primary and elementary grades should be arithmetic-based, skills parents can grasp; standards for the middle grades should stress problem-solving and building a foundation for more advanced work in high school. Standards for social studies and science are best left to the states and districts, but they should be based on “thin” rather than “thick” textbooks (Stevenson & Stigler) and should prioritize local learning opportunities that are accessible to parents.

⁵ In English Language Arts the vision of competency standards is:

A- Foundational Skills Credential (Early childhood grades):

Description: Knowledge of alphabet, phonemic awareness, and basic sight words; ability to read and respond to books at the literacy level of Dr. Seuss Beginner Books (i.e., The Cat in the Hat).

B- Fundamental Skills Credential (Upper elementary grades):

Description: Ability to read and respond to trade book classics such as Newbery Award winners.

C- Citizenship Skills Credential (Middle school grades)

Description: Ability to read and respond to content at the literacy level of community newspapers and Young Adult classics such as Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) award books.

Initiative Two: Assessments that are Smart and Open

The second initiative of *The Will to Achieve* calls for the construction of a smart and open assessment system that will credential students when they have achieved competency in the standards set in Initiative One.

The Will to Achieve will build a national technology assessment infrastructure so students can credential their readiness to pass through the gateways of primary, elementary, and middle school grades in the disciplines of English Language Arts and mathematics.⁶ There will be one ELA and one mathematics credentialing exam for each gateway.

The Will to Achieve moves the current system of one-time annual grade assessments to a smart and open system of gateway credentialing. This conception is borrowed straight from Department of Motor Vehicles licensing system. It is not relevant when or how many times a person takes a driving test; what matters is whether a new driver is credentialed at the end to have the competency to take the wheel; similar example are found in SAT and professional testing such as bar exams.

Current high stakes annual assessments are flawed and unpopular because (1) assessments are not linked to clear and widely accepted standards, (2) the arbitrary one-time administration of a high stakes test is inflexible and causes needless anxiety, and (3) the playing field, zipcode by zipcode, is uneven.

Surmounting these objections, *The Will to Achieve* advocates a credentialing system that is (1) “**smart**”--linked to the crisp and comprehensible standards for each band of grades described in Initiative One and (2) “**open**”--giving students flexible opportunities to demonstrate their competency.⁷

The starting point of *The Will to Achieve* is the full cooperation of parents and their supporters. To gain this level of parental involvement assessments must be fully transparent. Test questions would be drawn from an extensive and publicly accessible crowdsourced database of questions.⁸ Crucial to the success of *The Will to Achieve*, questions from this database must be deliverable to parents and teachers in accessible ways in order that rigorously predictive on-demand practice tests for school or home can be created. Through this delivery system parents can

⁶ The Will to Achieve builds an infrastructure for credentialing but leaves decisions about promotion and graduation to schools, districts, and states.

⁷ A note on school and teacher accountability: Rather than the hyper-focus on the one-time administration of high stakes assessments, schools and teachers would be evaluated on the percentage of their students who cross the finish line of credentialing.

⁸ See www.readnquiz.com for a commercial sample of crowdsourced exams.

accurately know at any time how close their children are to being credentialed. Gone will be the mystery and surprises that come with annual assessment results.

This would dramatically increase parental confidence and buy-in to the teaching-learning-assessment cycle.

The Will to Achieve will thereby unleash an explosion of new efforts to encourage academic achievement:

- “Shared accountability” of parents, supporters, and students. Parents, supporters, and students themselves would unite with the efforts of schools to help students work toward achieving credentialing.
- Classroom instruction targeted toward test preparation would become targeted and economical. As advocated by E.D. Hirsch, with efficient instruction only 50% of classroom time needs to be targeted toward meeting standards; once mastery is established, classroom time can be devoted to applications of learning. This approach would build the educational foundation of American creativity and entrepreneurship for the 21st century.
- A **culture of “the will to achieve”** would be created in schools, the home, and in the community. Self-efficacy will set in as stakeholders find success in helping students credential the mastering of one standard after another. This will contribute **to a renaissance of the American “can do”** spirit of hard work and optimism—values essentially needed in the economy and to re-establish American global leadership.

Initiative Three: Autodidactic Learning through Technology

The Will to Achieve recognizes that technology has already transformed our youth into native autodidactic learners. Mobile technology provides the promise of expanding the classroom to the world, making it possible to learn anywhere/anytime.

The Will to Achieve actualizes the work of Clayton Christensen of the Harvard School of Business who has predicted a disruptive shift away from prevailing classroom-centric learning to hybrid forms of classroom instruction coupled with personalized, student-centric instruction based on the development of an extensive menu of digital learning apps. These learning apps will be designed by educators, publishers, entrepreneurs, and students themselves—vastly expanding the number of people involved in the teaching tent. App writers will post their work on a learning app marketplace similar to those exchanges hosting Apple and Android apps. The creators of the learning apps would compete to meet the unique learning needs and styles of students.

According to Christensen, the development of these apps hinges on two infrastructure components:

1. Designing the universal marketplace where learning apps are posted, downloaded, reviewed, and rated.
2. Building an easily accessible technology to facilitate the authoring of learning apps by large numbers of educators, teachers, publishers, or students. The process of developing a learning app should become as easy as posting a YouTube video.

The Will to Achieve will build this technology infrastructure. Once in place, the process of teaching and learning will be revolutionized. Instead of deliverers of content, school teachers will transition to becoming coaches: experts of subject matter, motivators, managers of student learning, and community builders. As schools cease to become monopolies where instructional content is delivered, they will become workshops where craftsmanship is fostered, laboratories where rigor is nurtured, studios where creativity is born, playing fields where values of hard work and sportsmanship are developed, and launching pads to community service and the workplace. These qualities will make American youth the leaders of global citizenship in the 21st century. Such schools will also bring dignity back to the work life of teachers.

One further note about teens and adults who have opted to drop out: The essence of autodidactic learning is that any student, at any moment, should have the opportunity to rapidly accelerate and credential their learning. Through the platform of mobile technology, *The Will to Achieve* creates a loop mechanism to enable rapid autodidactic learning for youth and adults who have been left behind and want to re-engage in formal education.

Initiative Four: New Models of School Choice

Both Horace Mann and John Dewey assumed that public education would be linked to vibrant and accountable public spheres. Schools there are most likely thriving in the many communities where this holds true. Such accomplishments should be applauded and protected.

Unfortunately, in all-too-many other neighborhoods students have been denied sufficient academic opportunity. *The Will to Achieve* recognizes this harsh reality but moves beyond value-laden terms such as **“failing” schools**. Rather than finger-pointing, *The Will to Achieve* seeks working solutions for students whose learning opportunities have been restricted due to the realities of their schools, communities, and inequitable funding sources.

The Will to Achieve holds the country does not need single-bullet educational solutions designed by experts; rather, it needs many new forms of the schoolhouse emerging from the grassroots that can help specific students in specific communities to flourish. *The Will to Achieve* will foster a surge of new schoolhouse models that inspire the support and trust of parents.

The precursors of this development are, of course, small schools and charter schools. However, students who are not succeeding even in these settings could flourish in still more intimate microschools of 25-100 students where teachers can work with their students in more personalized ways. This model already exists in the so-called **“free school” movements of Scandinavia, New Zealand, Chile, and the United Kingdom**. New York City’s new system of Universal Pre-Kindergarten also is based on such an entrepreneurial community-based model.

As distinguished from the complicated applications for charter schools, *The Will to Achieve* will make it easy to open and shutter microschools. Each will represent a unique effort at cracking the code and breaking the barriers to student achievement and an opportunity to attract new pools of human talent into the education tent. They will come in many sizes and shapes:

- schools based on partnerships with organizations that enjoy the trust of the community;
- schools created by entrepreneurs;
- schools developed as parent cooperatives;
- home-schooling collectives;
- Teacher Professional Partnerships.⁹

⁹ Ted Kolderie, senior advisor of “Education | Evolving,” advocates that groups of teachers in school buildings be given the opportunity to create semi-autonomous entities called “Teacher Professional Partnerships” or **“teacher-led schools.”** Each TPP will have unique programs and personalities and would compete for students. TPPs will be organized around legal contracts far less onerous than those of charter schools.

Conclusion

By nature American students are bright, sincere, hard-working, and creative. Good education policy taps into these qualities so students become motivated and self-directed **learners**. The current “flight from learning,”¹⁰ today all too pervasive in education, must now **transition to a “rush to learning.”** No current problems in education can withstand the will to achieve.

To accomplish this “*The Will to Achieve: A K-12 Education Surge Policy*” focuses on galvanizing the inexhaustible resources of parents, communities, and students themselves who are yelling out: “**Just show us a clear and direct path forward, provide some guardrails for the difficult parts of the journey, and remove the mysteries and surprises! We will do the rest!**”

An educational policy based on this perspective will resonate with a public that has been exhausted and demoralized by recent directions in public education. It celebrates schools that are succeeding yet opens boundless possibilities in communities where educational success has been persistently elusive. Its appeal transcends politics, ideology, and narrow interests.

Moving beyond conventional approaches to school reform, *The Will to Achieve* is a fresh and common-sense approach that creates the conditions necessary to unlock **students’ inherent “will to achieve.”** It consists of four—and only four—initiatives that work together synergistically. Each is essential; nothing can be added or removed.

The goal of *The Will to Achieve* is to foster capable youth who can spark a renaissance in our country and the world. Access to a full and spirited education is their fundamental human right. Students need the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in the harsh global society and time for educational activities that can engender creativity, resilience, dialogue, relationship-building, and respect for others.

Confident and hopeful, American students must emerge as the force to create a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Note

The Will to Achieve comes with an accompanying document, “**One Hundred Days of Action**”, which projects how these four initiatives could be rolled out in a single big city school system.

¹⁰ Daisaku Ikeda, <http://www.ikedacenter.org/sites/ikedacenter.com/files/assets/desktop/NL17.pdf>