

Fire At Will

One fall, a boy named Will was enrolled into one of my junior-level classes. Although he showed up only occasionally, on the days that he did come to class – after folding his tall thin frame awkwardly into one of my room’s pre-formed plastic desks, he would sit and smile broadly.

Will attended classes so sporadically that often he had little understanding of the day’s lesson. He seldom brought paper or pencil. No one answered the phone at any of the numbers listed for him on our class register, and none of the attendance personnel had managed a successful home contact.

Will wasn’t a handsome boy. His patchy, three-toned skin, in fact, was unusually distracting; blotchy dark-to-light, multi-colored freckles covered his nose and part of his cheek. His ubiquitously sported once-upon-a-time-snazzily-patterned but now clearly overworn and unappealingly unwashed hoodie jacket – broke my heart.

On the other hand?

Nobody could smile like Will. His marvelously positive approach to whatever life had thrown at him, his willingness to smile and keep on trying, made a world of difference. It was exactly this exuberant readiness which he always brought to my attention. I would get on him about his attendance, about his lack of supplies, about his scattered focus. How, I would ask, are you going to pull this off, Will? How are you going to get that diploma?

“Ah, don’t worry, Miss,” he would tell me, grinning widely and readying himself for a favorite joke: “You know what they say:

“Where there’s a *Will*, there’s a way!”

I often worried about how things would turn out for Will; I tried hard to remember, and believe in, his optimism. While so many reform supporters and innovation campaigners never stopped talking about how much they *cared about the kids* – talk, as they say, is cheap. The seriously poor; the kid without parental involvement; the kid living on the street or out of somebody’s car; the kid who wasn’t clean, who wasn’t quiet and well-behaved; the unappealingly stereotypical kid who was an unspoken embarrassment to eminent civil rights’ activists and wealthy-to-middle-class voters – wasn’t the kind of kid that reform supporters protected or promoted when they pushed their low-income school innovations.*

They didn’t put kids like Will in their commercials, on their billboards, or into their movies. Many would prefer, in fact?

That he was never brought to their attention...at all.

Attending high school in days of a highly retaliatory (but, oh my, *surely compassionate*) test-score-based accountability, as Will struggled to find his way through already complicated teenaged years inside a low-income and largely culturally-different high school, his task became increasingly difficult as a ruthless chain of test-score dictates mandated the repetitive cycle of reform. Money-attached transformations, one after the next, hit hard, fast and incessantly, without consideration for him, or any other student at his school.

By the time I knew Will?

His building had already (with great fanfare and big promises) hired, and then almost immediately released, three short-term, quick-change principals; he was headed into his senior year under yet another defensively blustering I-don’t-know-you-do-what-I-say “fixer.” He had experienced full turnover in all executive and disciplinary offices, and hadn’t had the same teacher twice in any of his core classes. Every one of Will’s three previous counselors had come

and gone; the counselor he would have next year, the one to take the place of a woman abruptly dismissed from our building, had not yet been hired. She, or he, wouldn't know Will, wouldn't know his name, his home situation, his grades, his dreams, his jokes, or his issues with attendance.

Wouldn't, even, know his smile.

The one employee with whom Will had managed to build a small connection – a man hired to work directly with issues of truancy – had recently (and very unexpectedly) been “let go” for speaking up at a meeting: a meeting where he had had the temerity to criticize policies enacted by a brand-new, barely-out-of-college, never-done-this-before assistant principal. A frustratingly unseasoned administrator who had so very suddenly, and so very ineffectually, found herself placed in charge of attendance.

In Will's world – a modern-day world now committed to the no-excuses “benevolence” of an immovable test-score liability; a world where testing concerns took an absolute precedence?

A devastatingly short-sighted management policy had begun to drift ominously into reform-abused schools. Stealing in on the heels of the *bad teacher/bad union* status shift, it was a policy now able to turn Will's academic experience into an eternally whirling Merry-Go-Round; a dizzying amusement park ride located immediately next to a relentlessly revolving door. Arriving hand-in-hand with the nationally promoted teacher blame game and efficiently tied to the modern-day theory of a don't-talk-back management, it was a policy now arguing that daddy – *or any one of daddy's abruptly hired and defensively inexperienced cohorts* – would, when placed uncompromisingly in charge of a school?

Know intimately and undoubtedly who should stay.

And, even more importantly?

Who had to go.

Despite minimal, despite even nonexistent, time spent working alongside actual in-house personnel; despite a loudly professed lack of interest in actually knowing or talking with those whom they had been so suddenly hired to identify, evaluate, and aggressively eliminate – a modern-day, corporate-style management conjecture held that *true* educational leaders?

Would instantly and instinctually (presumably through the magical abilities inherent to Superheroes) recognize *bad* employees. Ignoring the demands for due process made by unions, state statutes, and long-term contracts, surely the most definitive “fix” for low-income schools would be the absolute and unrestricted empowerment of top-down fixer administrators – and any one of their bevy of unproven and easily antagonized evaluator personnel – to:

Fire at will.

And, in a truly ironic twist?

The feverishly aimed and indiscriminately deployed weapons of a low-income school reform now struck so accurately, finding their targets so exactly, hitting harder than almost any other contemporary attempt at a socio-economic and cultural devaluation?

That they did, indeed, fire *directly at Will.*

And all of the children like him.

*Possibly missing that fact that, in the United States, rather than spend their days working inside factories or digging minerals out of the earth, *all children are mandated to attend school* – a recently lauded school reform “expert” (the term *expert* being attached, as has apparently become the norm in truly modern days, to the simple fact of owning massive personal income) shockingly argued that *since it is not possible to reach children living in deepest poverty,*

we should more expediently reach out only to those who are most motivated by dumping yet larger sums of money into the sign-up-charter-school movement (and thus, presumably? Help fill the pockets of those who, like this already wealthy man, are most willing to heavily invest themselves in the increasingly popular charter-chain theory of a selective superiority).