The Ever Increasing Burden of America's Public Schools

This is a story about America's public schools as told by nationally acclaimed author Jamie Vollmer. Specifically, it's about how we, as a society, have changed what we ask our public schools to do. How we respond to this story will affect everyone's future, whether or not we have children in school.

America's first schools appeared in the early 1640s. They were designed to teach children—white boys—basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, while cultivating values that served a democratic society. The founders of these schools assumed that families and churches bore the major responsibility for raising a child. Gradually, some civics, history, science, and geography were introduced, but the curriculum remained focused for 150 years.

By the beginning of the 20th century, America's leaders saw public schools as the logical place to assimilate immigrants and select and sort young people into groups of thinkers and doers to meet the needs of the industrial age. We began to shift non-academic duties to the schools. The trend has accelerated ever since.

From 1900 to 1910, the new responsibilities were mainly related to student health.
We added:

- Lessons in Basic Hygiene
- Courses on Nutrition
- Immunizations, and
- Screening for Vision, Hearing, and Dental problems

From 1910 to 1940, child labor laws swept the nation. We began tracking students, and to this end we added:

- Vocational education, including the Industrial Arts and Agricultural education
- Domestic Science/Home Economics, including Sewing and Cooking
- Phys Ed was expanded, including a growing roster of team sports, and
- School transportation was mandated. (For decades kids got to school on their own. Now we had to fetch them.)

In the 1940s, in a decade overshadowed by a horrific war and a remarkable recovery, we added:

- Business education including typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping
- Music and Art classes were expanded
- Speech, including drama, became a separate academic subject
- Half-day kindergartens were introduced, and
- School lunch programs first appeared. (We take this for granted today, but it was a huge step to shift to the schools the job of feeding America's children one third of their daily meals.)

In the 1950s, the student population exploded as the Baby Boomers poured into the schools. The Soviets launched Sputnik, and in response:

- Science and math education were greatly expanded
- Foreign language requirements were strengthened
- Fire, tornado, and "duck and cover" drills became compulsory
- Driver's education was offered, and
- Sex education was introduced. (Sometimes I wonder how we made it as a species prior to the fifties.)

In the 1960s, the pace of change accelerated. Congress made its first major push into public education with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and we added:

- Head Start
- Bilingual education
- Advanced Placement programs
- Adult education
- Consumer education, including purchasing rights and responsibilities
- Career education, including occupational options and skill-level requirements
- Peace studies, Leisure and Recreation education. (God bless those sixties.)

In the 1970s, the breakup of the American family accelerated, and we added:

- Special Education
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse education
- Parenting education,
- African-American studies
- Women's studies
- Talented and Gifted programs
- Alternative education
- Character education
- Behavior Adjustment classes, including proper communication skills
- Environmental education
- Title IX expanded athletic programs for girls
- The Supreme Court ruled in favor of free speech rights for students, and
- School breakfast programs appeared. (Now schools must feed their students two-thirds of their daily meals and, for many, it's the only wwnutritious food they get.)

In the 1980s, the floodgates blew open as global competition began to change the U.S. economy forcing millions of women to enter the workforce. New technologies began to appear in schools, and we added:

- Keyboarding and Computer education
- Sexual Abuse Prevention education
- Stranger/danger education
- Antismoking education
- Teen Pregnancy Awareness programs
- Abstinence education
- Global education
- English as a Second Language instruction
- Multicultural education
- Nonsexist education
- Hispanic Heritage education
- Jump Start, Early Start, Even Start, Prime Start
- Full-day Kindergarten
- Preschool programs for children at risk
- After-school programs for children of working parents
- Expanded Health and Psychological Services, and
- Child abuse monitoring became a legal requirement for all teachers.

In the 1990s, the school reform movement shifted into high gear and collided with the spread of technology. The World Wide Web was born, and we added:

- Computer Labs and Internet Instruction
- Tech Prep
- School To Work Programs
- Distance Learning
- Homeless Education and its effects on children
- HIV/AIDS Education
- Death Education
- America 2000 Initiatives (Republican)
- Goals 2000 Initiatives (Democratic)
- Bicycle Safety, Gun Safety, and Water Safety Instruction
- Conflict Resolution Classes
- Service Learning Programs
- Annual CPR Training
- Technical Adequacy Assessment
- Dropout Prevention Programs
- Anti-Gang Initiatives
- Inclusion and Mainstreaming Requirements
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act greatly expanded the scope of Special Education
- And, in response to horrific acts of violence, we saw unprecedented efforts to ensure school security.

In the 21st century, driven by the pressures of a rapidly changing society and the emergence of an increasingly literate global workforce, we added:

- No Child Left Behind (Republican)
- Internet Safety
- Bullying Prevention Programs
- Texting and Social Media Etiquette
- Elevator and Escalator Safety Instruction
- Body Mass Index Evaluation (Obesity Monitoring)
- Eating Disorder Counseling
- Suicide Awareness Programs
- Organ Donor Awareness Classes
- Steroid Abuse Prevention Programs
- Media Literacy Training
- Expanded Early Childhood Wrap Around Programs
- Financial Literacy Development
- Intruder Lockdown Training
- Health and Wellness Programs
- Leadership Training
- Contextual Learning and Skill Development
- Entrepreneurial/Innovation Skill Development
- Credit Retrieval Programs
- On-Line Learning Requirements
- Race To The Top (Democratic)
- Common Core Standards, and
- S.T.E.M Programs

And we have not added a single minute to the school calendar in six decades!

The contract between our communities and our schools has changed. It's no longer "Help us teach our children." It's "Raise our kids." No generation of teachers and administrators in history has had to fulfill this mandate. And each year, the pressure grows.

Social and economic conditions demand that we unfold the full potential of every child. Our futures are tied to their success as never before. But this is a job for all of us. Our schools cannot do it alone. We must all come together in a great conversation and help our schools remove the obstacles to student success both in and out of schools.

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