

An Increasing Burden On America's Public Schools

Historical review of the non-academic duties placed on America's public schools.

Excerpt from Jamie Vollmer, author, business owner, and proponent of public education.

This is a story about America and America's public schools. Specifically, it's about how we, as a society, have changed what we ask our public school 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 young people—originally, white boys—basic reading, writing, and arithmetic while cultivating values that served a new democratic society. The founders of these schools assumed that families and churches bore the major responsibility for raising a child. During the 1700s, some civics, history, science, and geography were introduced, but the curriculum was limited and remained focused for 150 years.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, America's leaders saw public school as the logical place to select and sort young people into two groups—thinkers and doers—according to the needs of the industrial age. It was at this time that we began to shift non-academic duties to the schools. The trend has accelerated ever since.

From 1900-1910, 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, industrial arts, and agriculture education. In addition, home economics, physical education, and team sports were added. School transportation was mandated.

In the 1940s, we added business education, typing and shorthand, and bookkeeping. Other subjects added were music, art, speech, and drama. Half-day kindergarten was introduced and school lunch programs first appeared.

In the 1950's, the student population exploded as the Baby Boomers poured into the schools. The Soviets launched Sputnik, and in response science and math education was greatly expanded. Foreign language requirements were strengthened, driver's education was offered, and sex education was introduced. Fire, tornado, and "duck and cover" drills became compulsory.

In the 1960's, the pace of change accelerated. Congress made its first major push into public education with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Head Start was

introduced along with bilingual education, Advanced Placement programs, adult education, consumer education, career education, and recreation education.

In the 1970's, the breakup of the American family accelerated, and we added special education, drug and alcohol education, African-American studies, Women's studies, alternative education and character education. Title IX expanded athletic programs for girls and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of free speech rights for students. Breakfast programs were also introduced.

In the 1980's, 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 and stranger/danger education. Antismoking education, Global education, and Hispanic Heritage education was also introduced. English as a Second Language was added along with multicultural education. Health and psychological services were expanded.

In the 1990's, 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 instruction, Tech Prep, School to Work programs, and distance learning. Conflict resolutions classes, dropout prevention programs, and anti-gang initiatives were introduced. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act greatly expanded the scope of Special Education, and school security became a high priority.

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, internet safety, bully prevention programs, and digital citizenship. STEM initiatives, Common Core Standards, credit recovery, financial literacy, and health and wellness also have been introduced.

And we have not added time to the school calendar in six decades!

The contract between our communities and our school has changed. It is 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 burden 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, whether or not we have children in school. Everyone, in every community, must come together in a Great Conversation. We must do our part to remove the obstacles to student success, both in and out of school. Our schools cannot do it alone.