

The Ever-Increasing Burden on America's Public Schools

By Jamie Vollmer

America's public schools can be traced back to the year 1635. The Massachusetts Puritans who founded these schools assumed that families and churches bore the major responsibility for raising a child, and they organized their schools accordingly. The charge to teachers was simple:

1. Teach basic reading, some writing and rudimentary math skills, and
2. Cultivate values that serve a democratic society (Some history and civics implied).

Some science and geography were added in the late 1700s, but the curriculum remained focused for 260 years.

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, politicians, academics, members of the clergy, and business leaders saw public schools as a logical site for the assimilation of immigrants and the social engineering of citizens of the new industrial age. They began to expand the curriculum and assign additional duties, and that the trend has accelerated ever since.

From 1900 to 1910, we added responsibilities related to:

- Nutrition
- Immunization, and
- Health (Activities in the health arena multiply every year.)

From 1910 to 1930, we added:

- Physical Education, including organized athletics
- The practical arts
- Vocational education, including home economics and agricultural education
- Mandated school transportation

In the 1940s, we added:

- Business education
- Art and music
- Speech and drama
- Half-day kindergarten
- School lunch programs appeared

In the 1950s, we added:

- Expanded science and math education
- Safety education
- Driver's education
- Expanded music and art education
- Foreign language requirements were strengthened, and
- Sex education was introduced (Topics continue to escalate.)

In the 1960s, we added:

- Advanced Placement programs
- Head Start
- Title I
- Adult education
- Consumer education
- Career education
- Peace, leisure, and recreation education

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

- Special education (mandated by federal government)
- Title IX programs (greatly expanded athletic programs for girls)
- Drug and alcohol abuse education
- Parent education
- Behavior adjustment classes
- Character education
- Environmental education
- Women's studies
- African-American heritage education
- School breakfast programs appeared

In the 1980s, the floodgates opened, and we added:

- Keyboarding and computer education
- Global education
- Ethnic education

- Multicultural/non-sexist education
- English-as-a-second-language, and bilingual education
- Teen pregnancy awareness
- Hispanic heritage education
- Early childhood education
- Jump Start, Early Start, Even Start, and Prime Start
- Full day kindergarten
- Pre-school programs for children at risk
- After school programs for children of working parents
- Alternative education in all its forms
- Stranger/danger education
- Anti-smoking education
- Sexual abuse prevention education
- Health and psychological services were expanded
- Child abuse monitoring became a legal requirement for all teachers

In the 1990s, we added:

- Conflict resolution and Peer mediation
- HIV/AIDS education
- CPR training
- Death education
- America 2000 initiatives (Republican)
- Inclusion
- Expanded computer and Internet education
- Distance learning
- Tech Prep and School to Work programs
- Technical Adequacy Assessment
- Post-Secondary enrollment options
- Concurrent enrollment options
- Goals 2000 initiatives (Democratic)
- Expanded Talented and Gifted opportunities
- At risk and dropout prevention
- Homeless education
- Gang education (urban centers)
- Service learning
- Bus safety, bicycle safety, gun safety, and water safety education

In the first decade of the 21st Century, we have added:

- No Child Left Behind (Republican)
- Anti-Bullying education

- Anti-Harassment Policies
- Civic literacy
- Expanded early childcare and wrap-around programs
- Elevator and escalator safety instruction
- Body Mass Index evaluation (obesity monitoring)
- Organ donor education and awareness programs
- Personal financial literacy
- Employability skills development
- Entrepreneurial skills development
- Media literacy development
- Contextual learning skill development
- Health literacy and wellness programs
- Race to the Top (Democratic)

The list does not include the addition of multiple, specialized topics in the traditional subjects. It also does not include the explosion of standardized testing and test prep activities, or any of the long list of onerous reporting requirements imposed by Feds, such as four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates, parental notification of optional supplemental services, comprehensive restructuring plans, and reports of adequate yearly progress and value-added, student performance tracking.

All of these items have merit, and all have their ardent supporters, but the truth is that we have added these responsibilities to the list, effectively asking our schools to raise America's kids in an era of declining parental support, without adding a single minute to the school calendar in six decades.

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