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The Ever Increasing Burden on America's Public Schools

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America's public schools can be traced back to the year 1640. The Massachusetts Puritans established schools to: 1) Teach basic reading, some writing and arithmetic skills, and 2) Cultivate values that serve a democratic society (some history and civics implied).

The founders of these schools assumed that families and churches bore the major responsibility for raising a child. Gradually, science and geography were added, but the curriculum was limited and remained focused for 260 years.

At the beginning of the twentieth 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 the citizens—and workers—of the new industrial age. They began to expand the curriculum and assign additional duties. That trend has accelerated ever since.

From 1900 to 1910, we shifted to our public schools responsibilities related to

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

From 1910 to 1930, we added

- Physical education (including organized athletics)
- The Practical Arts/Domestic Science/Home economics (including sewing and cooking)
- Vocational education (including industrial and agricultural education)
- Mandated school transportation

In the 1940s, we added

- Business education (including typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping)
- Art and music
- Speech and drama
- Half-day kindergarten
- School lunch programs (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, we added

- Expanded science and math education
- Safety education
- Driver's education
- Expanded music and art education
- Stronger foreign language requirements
- Sex education (Topics continue to escalate.)

In the 1960s, we added

- Advanced Placement programs
- Head Start
- Title I
- Adult education
- Consumer education (purchasing resources, rights and responsibilities)
- Career education (occupational options, entry level skill requirements)
- Peace, leisure, and recreation education [Loved those sixties.]

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

- Drug and alcohol abuse education
- Parenting education (techniques and tools for healthy parenting)
- Behavior adjustment classes (including classroom and communication skills)
- Character education
- Special education (mandated by federal government)
- Title IX programs (greatly expanded athletic programs for girls)
- Environmental education
- Women's studies
- African-American heritage education
- School breakfast programs (Now some schools feed America's children two-thirds of their daily meals throughout the school year and all summer. Sadly, these are the only decent meals some children receive.)

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

- Keyboarding and computer education
- Global education
- Multicultural/Ethnic education
- Nonsexist 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
- Preschool programs for children at risk
- After-school programs for children of working parents
- Alternative education in all its forms
- Stranger/danger education
- Antismoking education
- Sexual abuse prevention education
- Expanded health and psychological services
- Child abuse monitoring (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 (Democrat)
- Expanded Talented and Gifted opportunities
- At risk and dropout prevention
- Homeless education (including causes and effects on children)
- Gang education (urban centers)
- Service learning
- Bus safety, bicycle safety, gun safety, and water safety education

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, we have added

- No Child Left Behind (Republican)
- Bully prevention
- Anti-harassment policies (gender, race, religion, or national origin)
- 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
- Entrepreneurial and innovation skills development
- Media literacy development
- Contextual learning skill development
- Health and wellness programs
- Race to the Top (Democrat)

This list does not include the addition of multiple, specialized topics within each of the traditional subjects. It also does not include the explosion of standardized testing and test prep activities, or any of the onerous reporting requirements imposed by the federal government, such as four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates, parental notification of optional supplemental services, comprehensive restructuring plans, and reports of Adequate Yearly Progress.

It's a ponderous list.

Each item has merit, and all have their ardent supporters, but the truth is that we have added these responsibilities without adding a single minute to the school calendar in six decades. No generation of teachers and administrators in the history of the world has been told to fulfill this mandate: not just teach children, but raise them!