



Public Education...Then and Now

by Craig Gerlach, Superintendent

As people age and reach milestone birthdays, typically time is spent reminiscing about the differences between “back in the day” versus “now.” These conversations usually include comparing the changes in the cost of items purchased on a weekly basis (e.g., gas, milk, bread, eggs, etc.), as well as the design changes of automobiles over the years. Many times the consensus is that things were better back in the “good old days.”

Reflecting on the changes society has placed on the expectations for public schools, I believe most individuals would be surprised, maybe even shocked, at the weight of responsibility placed on America’s public schools.

To assist in outlining the major changes that have occurred over time, I am sharing a list developed by award winning author Jamie Vollmer. Mr. Vollmer has spent the last 25 years working with school districts across the nation in an effort to build support for America’s public schools. His research developed the following list of differences between “then” and “now” in what public schools are asked to do. I encourage you to read on.

1900-1910

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.

1910-1940

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
- Physical Education 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.)

1940s

In the 1940s, 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.)

1950s

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.
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1960s

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 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.

1970s

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 nutritious food they

1980s

In the 1980s, the flood gates 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.

1990s

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
- HIV/AIDS education
- Death education
- America 2000 initiatives (Republican)
- Goals 2000 initiative (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.

2000s

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
- Lessons in 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.

As you reflect back to the 1900s and cast forward, the numerous responsibilities and/or requirements from one given decade to the next is cumulative... **nothing comes off the list!**

The demands on public schools are great. The need for parent and community support are more important than ever before. As stated by Jamie Vollmer, "Social and economic conditions demand that we unfold the 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. Our schools cannot do it alone."