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Student Success Depends on Public Accountability

By **Jamie Vollmer**

The contract that exists between the American public and America's public schools has changed. For decades, the terms were reasonable. Parents asked schools to help them teach their children the things they needed to know to become successful, responsible adults. Those days are gone. Over the years, we have heaped a mountain of academic, social, and medical responsibilities upon our schools. With each new session, legislators from both parties add more to the burden, but they've not added a minute to the school calendar in decades. As a result, the contract has changed. It no longer reads, "Teach our kids." It now reads, "Raise our kids." [← Back to Story](#)

Our schools cannot do this alone. Educators must have the understanding, trust, permission, and support of the American public if they are to accomplish this unprecedented goal. But rather than rally public support, shortsighted politicians, business leaders, talk-show hosts, and neo-reformers have chosen the opposite tack. They cite statistics out of context, make false comparisons between public, private, and charter schools, and present test scores in the worst possible light. The failure of some schools is attributed to all schools. Teachers and administrators are often vilified but rarely praised. These critics claim that greater student achievement is their goal. But if this is true, then everything I have learned in 22 years of working toward that end tells me that their negative campaign is misguided and wrong. Rather than expedite reform, their speech and actions retard the process by destroying the intellectual and emotional ties that bind the American people to their schools.

We have an enormous task before us. For the first time in our history, changes in society—particularly the challenges posed by the global economy—demand that all students receive a high-quality education. At a minimum, all must be prepared for education beyond high school. The vast majority of America's teachers and administrators pour themselves into this task each day. They work to engage the most diverse, distracted, demanding generation of students our country has ever seen. Many of these kids are victims of a pop culture that assaults their physiologies, fractures their attention spans, and breeds a dangerously overdeveloped sense of entitlement. A 40-hour workweek for most teachers is nothing. Fifty hours, 60 hours, is routine. But teachers could work 100 hours and they would not produce the graduates we need. Not because they are inept, indifferent, or unionized, as their critics maintain. America's educators cannot teach all children to high levels because they are working in a system designed to do something else: select and sort young people for an industrial society that no longer exists; a system designed to leave children behind. We have a system problem, not a people problem. Confusing the two not only wastes time and taxpayer dollars, it also allows the sorting system to grind on unfazed, churning out results we no longer want.

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We must transform this system. But 20 years of false starts and bloody battles have taught me that any attempt to restructure the system collides with local traditions and beliefs. Ask any superintendent who has been sacked because his or her plans ran contrary to established notions of "real school." Ask any board member who's been told, "That ain't the way we do it around here." The hard truth is that we cannot touch a school without touching the culture of the surrounding community. If, therefore, we seek to increase

student success, we must do more than change our schools, we must change America. And when I say we, I mean everybody—including the 70 percent of adults who have no children in school.

We need leaders within and beyond the school walls who will make this case to the American public.

Instead of blaming the people who work inside our schools, which lets everyone else off the hook, the nation's governors must push for greater public accountability for student success: a shared sense of ownership for local schools, combined with a communitywide willingness to accept partial responsibility for their results. To achieve this end, our political leaders must help their constituents understand that their prosperity, security, and general well-being are tied to their ability to come together and remove all the obstacles to student learning, both in and out of school.

Instead of bashing schools, which hinders progress and destroys morale, business leaders must help their educators challenge public resistance to change so we can break the grip of the status quo. They must explain the implications of changes in the workplace, and connect the dots between these changes and the rising need for workers who have postsecondary education and training. They must help the public see that the competitive equation has changed, and that the nation's human-capital needs will never be met if we cling to the schools of the past.

If they are serious about raising achievement, media mavens, and reformers of every persuasion, must help Americans rethink our core assumptions about what constitutes real school. They must describe—in layman's terms—what we now know about how, when, and where children learn best. They must present this information in a way that makes it easier for everyone to understand why the system needs to change, and why it is vital that everyone support the change process.

For their part, educators must do a better job of sharing their achievements with the public. They must get out in the community and prove that they are eager and able to prepare all children to succeed as adults, and that they are willing to be held accountable for results. They must also make it crystal clear that they cannot do it alone: They cannot meet the vast array of academic, social, and medical responsibilities that society has placed upon our schools without the active support of everyone in the community, whether or not they have children in school.

From the White House to City Hall, in boardrooms, newsrooms, think tanks, and schools across the country, America's leaders must do everything in their power to create a new, national culture committed to unfolding the full potential of every child. Working together to accomplish this task is not only in everyone's best interest, it is the most important enterprise of our time.

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