



By ANDRÉ RAVENELLE

The Duties of Public Education Have Grown Markedly in Recent Decades

Reading, writing and arithmetic. At one time these “three Rs” were all that defined public education. Home and community shouldered the remaining responsibility for preparing a child to be a successful student who would later become a successful citizen. When students did fail in school, they slipped out of the educational system, barely noticed, to begin work at a blue-collar or similar entry-level job that provided a living wage and, often, a ladder of opportunity to future achievement and success.

Today, the three Rs serve only as the center of an educational system that often provides students with dental and medical care, two daily meals and nutritional education, health and wellness education, computer science education, provisions such as personal computers, training in emergency response preparedness, and a host of social-emotional skills that students need in order to navigate a much more complex world. This additional list of school-based responsibilities is often directed by educational policy and legislation that impose substantial additional curriculum demands and legal mandates—accompanied by complex accountability systems to track progress and achievement.

Mandates are based on the broad objective of creating an inclusive learning environment so that *all* students can learn. Over the last thirty years, new legislation and policies have enabled students who were often excluded from the classroom to be given the tools and support they need to learn alongside their peers. Legislation and policy assure that a student’s particular medical condition, sexual identity, religious beliefs, or dietary needs are not barriers to receiving a free and appropriate education. Students are also assured of a safe and supportive school environment, and every school is now accountable for providing that environment.

New Responsibilities Require New Skills

This expansion of responsibility has led to a system of complex annual reviews, requiring days or weeks of meetings and mountains of documentation. At Fitchburg High School, for example, there are about forty students who are either placed in a group home by the Department of Children and Families or closely monitored by the agency in their own homes. These students often have significant additional needs and issues that are unreported, leaving the school to try to support them despite their profound challenges. The daily effort to meet those needs while meeting the needs of a broad educational demographic is a challenge for the principal and staff.

Given the parameters and scope of the mandated requirements related to assessment, evaluation, school improvement/turnaround plans, disciplinary hearings and procedures, English language learner (ELL) and special education mandates, principals can spend upwards of thirty hours per week addressing these complex issues and communicating the process or outcomes to teachers, students and parents.

These rigorous and complex assessment systems require extensive training, implementation procedures, and time away from learning for preparation and testing. They have led to a comprehensive infusion of non-academic responsibilities—monitoring and intervention—in areas such as attendance, suspension, expulsion, college attendance, dropout prevention, bullying, social media, concussions and substance abuse, to name a few, each with its own procedures, forms and data collection.

These new mandates, which are the responsibility of all school districts, can create particular challenges in urban settings. The public assumes that every student arrives at school ready to learn, even though, in Massachusetts, 45.2 percent of all students are categorized as “high-need.” This number does not paint an accurate picture for urban districts,

however, where the number can be 70 percent or higher. In reality, many students in urban communities arrive at school hungry, without the necessary hygiene or clothing, abused or traumatized, homeless or under the care of the Department of Children and Families, perhaps even living in multiple foster settings each week. An increasing number of students in urban, suburban and rural districts have serious behavioral challenges as a result of one or more of these conditions, as well as the competitive performance stressors that are more common in wealthier districts.

These conditions become Job One for educators. Teachers who trained primarily for the academic responsibility of their chosen career are now faced with managing a complex mix of student needs that require attention, sometimes continuously, before teaching can take place.

Social-Emotional Issues

I have witnessed a student with school phobia that reduced the child to uncontrollable sobbing each morning, requiring staff attention to reduce the anxiety to an extent that allowed the student to eventually enter the classroom. I have witnessed the impact of home-based trauma that regularly reduced a child to cowering in the fetal position, eventually to be coaxed out by a caring educator so the student could return to the classroom setting. And I’ve seen a student screaming and kicking uncontrollably for thirty minutes, eventually calming down with the attention of school staff and returning to the classroom, only to re-engage in the cyclical behavior an hour later. Sometimes, staff is not able to alleviate an extreme social-emotional issue, and the student must be removed by ambulance and sometimes hospitalized. In certain cases, my school administrators have served as go-betweens with insurance companies trying to access coverage for a child in crisis. None of the systems of accountability or assessment measure the skill, patience and care these educators bring to a growing number of students as they “ready” these students to learn. Rather, blunt data-gathering systems focus only on academic or social consequence results.

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Nevertheless, public educators do not resist these added tasks, for which they are largely untrained, but rather embrace them. Some navigate and support high-performing students through the pressures of rigorous coursework, high-stakes assessments, and the accumulation of an impressive portfolio now necessary to even get a look from an Ivy League university. Others work with students dealing with urban or rural poverty, assessing where the students are educationally and emotionally and often developing an individualized approach to help each student reach his or her goals. This work is often undervalued by the public in the abstract but praised by every parent who has watched a teacher transform their child.

In part through policies and legislation, our nation made a decision that *all* students have a right to an education. But the hard work lies in implementation. It is one thing to say that homeless children must be educated, as schools are the most stable component of their young lives. But it is far more difficult to teach a homeless student who has the insecurity of living with a whole family in one small hotel room, with food prepared on a hot plate, and who may be spending an hour on a bus to be transported to his or her school of origin three towns away. It is one thing to demand protection of the rights of the perpetrator of bullying alongside the rights of the bullied. But it becomes the school personnel's responsibility as final arbiters, both legally and emotionally committed to maintaining the rights and dignity of both parties, with the hope of creating, maintaining and implementing a safe and secure learning environment.

Providing for these additional services has required the addition of multiple programs and staff. These include, but are not limited to, behavioral interventions, bullying prevention programs, dropout prevention programs, mental health programs, and responses to a variety of severe psychological behavioral manifestations. Along with these programs, new positions such as board-certified behavioral analysts, adjustment counselors, student program support administrators, and, most recently,



“The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.”

– Benjamin Franklin

directors of social-emotional learning have been added to school payrolls, and the existing job descriptions of what were formerly guidance counselors have been reworked to meet the changing needs of the student body. All of this takes another slice out of an ever-shrinking school budget pie, often diverting resources from existing programs.

Increasing Costs and a Challenging Environment

Many districts are faced with either declining enrollment (and a corresponding decrease in funding) or an increase in the number of students with needs that require additional services but may not qualify for additional funding from the state. While the Foundation Budget Review Commission correctly identified the growth in health insurance and special education requirements as unsustainable, a funding solution does not appear to be in sight. With increasing structural costs and a more challenging environment, school districts are continually reassessing what is best for students and what is required. The challenge gets more difficult each year, yet Massachusetts educational leaders meet this challenge head on.

Schools today do not operate in a vacuum. In any given week, school personnel interact regularly with police, social service agencies, mental health experts, legal advisers, medical personnel and others. All become relied-upon partners who collaborate with us in the work of caring for students. For many students, public schools are the “best thing going” in their lives, as we provide the

stability and care they need, nutritious meals that keep them healthy and teach them good eating habits, and extracurricular opportunities that might be their main reason for staying in school. Most important, we provide these students with people who welcome and accept them for who they are, people who are committed to addressing what is needed for their success now and in the future.

All of this work today is made more challenging in the age of social media. Judgments about a situation, an event, a teacher, a school or a district that were once discussed, clarified and responded to within the school setting are now immediately available in a public space that is often absent of context, content, accuracy or consideration for the individuals involved. Because all educators are bound by the rules of confidentiality, and thus unable to respond, they are often negatively affected by the social media discussion. Everyone knows that there are always two sides to a story, but a school's responsibility to the privacy of the families they serve means that only one side is represented in a social media scenario.

While the complexity and responsibilities of public education have grown, so has the ability of most educators to meet the challenge, through new methods, resources and training. What has not changed is the personal commitment educators make each day to the students they serve to help them achieve at the highest level, and to the community to care for its children and prepare them to be the next generation of citizens and leaders. 🌟