



VIEWS & VISIONS

A publication of Bowles Rice LLP

Fall 2013



Working Together for Student Success

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Jamie Vollmer is president of Vollmer, Inc., a public education advocacy firm working to increase student success by raising public support for America's schools.

Mr. Vollmer is the author of *"Schools Cannot Do It Alone,"* proclaimed by the *American School Board Journal* as one of the "top 10 books of the year."

In 2012, he was named the Friend of Texas Public Schools and the Friend of Ohio Public Education. He is the 2010 recipient of the Learning and Liberty Award, presented by the National School Public Relations Association, for his efforts to build trust and support for public schools.

With a background in law and manufacturing, Mr. Vollmer entered the education arena in 1988, as a founding member of the Iowa Business Roundtable. He was, at the time, president of the Great Midwestern Ice Cream Company. In 1990, he changed careers to become the Roundtable's executive director.

Mr. Vollmer has written and produced the videos, *"The Ever Increasing Burden on America's Public Schools,"* *"Why Our Schools Need to Change,"* and *"Teachers are Heroes."*

He holds a Juris Doctor from Catholic University, and a B.A. from The Pennsylvania State University.

This is painful.

I am sitting in front of my TV, having just returned from a 22-city tour of public schools. Everywhere, I saw teachers and administrators working hard to engage the most diverse, distracted, demanding generation of students the world has ever seen. Now, I return home to find another "expert" panel discussing the failure of America's schools and, once again, teachers are taking it on the chin.

A talk show host acts as provocateur. He cites statistics out of context, makes false comparisons and presents test scores in the worst possible light.

A belligerent governor argues for more privatization and competition. Truth is, I once agreed with his "run-it-like-a-business" premise, and I was just as arrogant. But, after years in the trenches, I have learned that his position is free-market rhetoric, posing as practical reforms.

A celebrity CEO/billionaire claims that public schools have put America at risk of becoming "a third-world nation." The audience applauds every word, proving the adage, "When you're rich, they think you really know."

These men are joined by the latest in a long line of tough talking, neo-reformers, lionized by the media. She speaks of putting "students first," but with every snide comment, she undermines public support for public schools.

Everyone assumes that the educators are the problem, and there is much said about the need

for greater accountability. But the language is all about blame and punishment, not development and support.

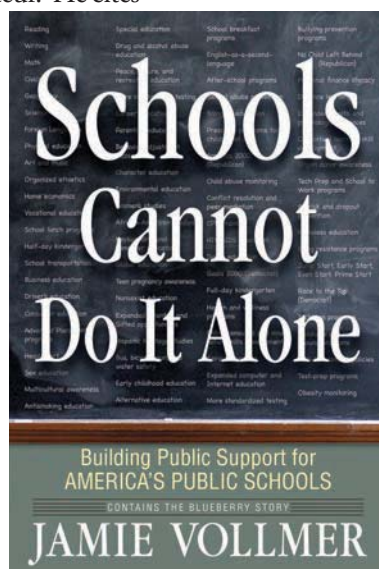
The moderator flashes a chart that compares the rise of per-pupil spending with a decline in aggregate student achievement. Not once does he mention the mountain of social responsibilities that we've heaped upon our schools. No one tells the audience that the mandate is no longer "Teach our kids." It's now "Raise our kids."

As the hour ends, the audience and guests alike push for more standardization and testing and more government control. Their position is not only dangerously anti-democratic, it ignores one of my fundamental laws of school reform: the further the decision-maker is from the child, the dumber the decision gets.

I am witnessing a crusade to annihilate the emotional and intellectual ties that bind the American people to their public schools. As disturbing

as it is, what's most painful about the spectacle of finger-pointing and grandstanding is that it is one more wasted opportunity to increase student success.

We have an enormous task before us. For the first time in our history, all students must receive a high-quality education. At a minimum, all must be prepared for education beyond high school. No society has ever done this yet, every day, the vast majority of America's teachers and administrators pour themselves into the task. Forty hours a week is nothing. Fifty hours, 60 hours, is routine. But they could work 100





hours and not produce the graduates we need, not because they are inept, indifferent or unionized, as critics would have us believe. America's teachers and administrators cannot teach all children to high levels because they are working inside a selecting and sorting system designed hundreds of years ago to prepare children for an agro-industrial society that no longer exists. We have a *system* problem, not a *people* problem. Confusing the two has wasted billions of dollars and denies millions of students the opportunity to succeed.

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We must transform this system. When I say we, I mean everybody. Twenty years of false starts and bloody battles have convinced me that changing our schools means changing America. This will require the energy, creativity and wisdom of everyone in every community – with and without children in school. We need leaders to 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. Instead of bashing schools, which is counterproductive, business leaders must challenge those obsolete notions of "real school" that breed public resistance to change. Media mavens must use their platforms to show how all of us will benefit from helping to remove the obstacles to student success. Finally, elected officials, from the White House to city hall, must do everything in their power to strengthen the school-community relationship and build a national culture committed to unfolding the full potential of every child. Working together to accomplish this unprecedented task is not only in the best interest of every American, it is the most important enterprise of our time. ▽