The Anti-intellectual Environment of American Teens

Books and ideas have no deep impact

American Teen
As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Something in the achievement of American students doesn’t add up. One-quarter of the students graduating from public high schools in 2007 took an Advanced Placement (AP) exam, up from 18 percent for the Class of 2002. College attendance is rising, along with the long-term economic benefits for earning a degree (see “The Education Factor,” book review, page 71).

Why, then, do measures of student knowledge and skill, and college graduation rates, show no parallel gains? SAT scores have stagnated, as has the performance of 17-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And only 15 percent of those 2007 graduates had earned a passing grade of 3 or higher on any AP exam. With more challenging class time happening, and more students planning for college, more knowledge and academic success should follow, but they don’t.

One explanation appears, of all places, in a high school movie from last summer, American Teen. The documentary film follows four kids through senior year in Warsaw, Indiana, each one a recognizable type. Upper-crust blond cheerleader Megan must get into Notre Dame, working-class basketball star Colin needs to keep his rebounds up if he wants a scholarship, artsy free spirit Hannah aims to make movies in California, and pimpl-y nerd Jake, well, he’s just gotta get a girlfriend. They’re good kids, minors hooking up and breaking up, to be sure, playing video games and texting puerile messages, but they ponder their futures with dreadful seriousness.

Yes, Colin admits, he never does homework, Megan draws an obscenity on a classmate’s window, Hannah can’t bear to return to school after a boyfriend dumps her, and Jake gets drunk in Tijuana. Social life is intense, and tribal rituals of adolescence are in play (such as the sly, sadistic circulation of a classmate’s nude photo through the web), but they don’t hate their parents or curse the Establishment. Their striving and relative decency make a crucial aspect of their lives all the more disturbing. In 95 minutes of film, not a single book, artwork, historical figure, philosophy, scientific field, or political position comes up. And their teachers might as well be cashiers at McDonald’s serving up meals, for all the influence they wield. Seniors spend six hours a day in English, history, biology, calculus, civics, etc., and their futures depend on how well they do. Outside of class, though, the curriculum doesn’t exist. Novels, past heroes and villains, foreign affairs, metaphysical ideas, Darwin, the Constitution...they mean nothing. Students don’t even complain about them. When Hannah explains that she wants to make movies because she wants people to remember her and her work long after she’s dead, she doesn’t realize the sad irony of her statement, for she never cites a single film or filmmaker who inspired her. She remembers nobody.

History, literature, civics, and science are for coursework, that’s all. It may be that few high school students have ever been enthralled with books, ideas, and fine art, but never has the rejection been so complete, even among the ambitious ones heading to college. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the percentage of seniors who read on their own “almost every day” dropped from 31 percent in 1984 to 22 percent in 2004. Back in the 1980s, according to the American Freshmen Survey, not even 40 percent of them spent less than one hour a week talking to a teacher outside of class, but by the mid-’90s the rate surpassed 50 percent and has stayed there ever since.

How regrettable that none of them realizes that history, literature, science, and civics offer not only knowledge for school but resources to manage the vagaries of adolescence. Comisserating with a buddy after a breakup helps, but so does reading about Gatsby and his dream. Learning about how Mendeleev arranged the elements might grant a reprieve from the way sophomores take seats in the cafeteria. The heroism of George Washington sets the aura of the popular crowd in welcome perspective.

But not for these kids. Books and ideas have no deep impact. Learning signifies only homework, grades, and admissions, nothing personal, and so all they have is each other. Reality is immediate, selfhood based on peer review. No wonder knowledge and skills haven’t kept pace with coursework: once the courses end, students have no motive to retain what they have learned.

Mark Bauerlein is professor of English and director of the Program in Democracy and Citizenship at Emory University.