

# Disengagement and Loathing in High School

by Lawrence A. Baines and Gregory Kent Stanley

“Learning takes place most effectively and economically in the matrix of a situation which grips the learner, which is to him vital—worth while.” (Davis 1927, p. 8)

A friend once said that he could tell a good high school from a bad one within seconds of setting foot in the building. After visiting 200 or so schools over the past decade, we think we have developed a similar aptitude. Although we still find plenty of good schools, we have noticed a definite change in the “feel” of many high schools. Students in the halls seem less exuberant; administrators more businesslike; teachers more frazzled than ever.

Although some researchers (Roth et al. 2002) have categorized student activities at school by curricular areas, little research has been conducted concerning how students feel about school. We wanted to probe beneath the surface of course titles to find out what adolescents really think about life in high school. Accordingly, we asked seventy-five adolescents to keep journals about their day-to-day experiences. They were to describe not only the curriculum but also how their teachers taught, what they learned, and how they felt about what they learned. We requested that for five days or more they write at least a page about school life. Most managed to write that much; some wrote much more. In all, fifty-two students turned in usable, readable transcripts.

The overwhelming majority of these student writers characterized schoolwork as irrelevant, or as one student put it, “boring as cr— and worthless.” Even students who received mostly good marks said that they endured their classes to attain marks that would qualify them for particular colleges. The journals of the college-bound students seemed at least as detached as those traditionally considered at-risk. One college-bound student in an urban school wrote, “Sitting on your a— all day and doing nothing is a waste. I wouldn’t come to school, even if someone paid

me. Personally, I’d rather take out the trash than show up for first period.” Signs of joy in journals appeared most often in descriptions of extracurricular activities, lunch, or encounters in the hallways between bells.

## A Reliance on the Textbook

Fifty of our fifty-two students reported receiving classroom instruction that relied heavily on textbooks. An honors student from a rural high school wrote:

The teacher stays at her desk for a moment, finishing the roll, then announces that today we will begin our study of Mark Twain. She hands us a sheet of notes, with big blanks where important points should be. “Fill in the blanks and work by yourself. This will take you all period.” She returns to her desk and does something on the computer. She’s right—it takes all period. There are too many chapters to read completely, so we are reduced to filling in the notes by skim reading. We’re expected to read the chapters at home, I suppose, but we’re not told to and the tests come from the notes. I’m a good skimmer, but it takes me awhile to do it. The class passes quietly in a blur of characters, settings, and plot details.

Imagine reading literature this way seven hours a day, 185 days a year. At one school *all* juniors, regardless of academic track, had to spend three weeks of their English classes reviewing nothing but material from the state exam handbook.

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By contrast, one of the two students who took classes not dominated by the textbook wrote extensively about her favorite class, American Literature. "We have a textbook," she wrote, "but we never use it. The teacher brings in a lot of supplemental reading that he picks. We discuss a lot with the teacher and with ourselves. It's the most active class I have. Even the videos we watch are thought provoking. That was something new for all of us. From grades seven through ten we only saw videos when the teacher needed to grade papers or when we had a sub."

A student in an International Baccalaureate program added that her favorite classes always shared the same attribute—an enthusiastic teacher who referred to the textbook only occasionally. But the experience of the other fifty students was summarized by a cheerleader who wrote, "Schools could be improved by allowing us to learn, not only what we need, but about things we're interested in."

Coleman (1965) noted that real learning is anything but dull. "The adolescent has abundant energy, but he will not spend it on his studies unless there is possibility for positive action" (p. 54). Conspicuously absent from our students' journals were indications of any real engagement with the material.

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### **The Wide Spectrum of Students**

Dissatisfaction with school seemed strongest at the extremities of the academic scale—among both gifted and academically at-risk students. One student who was failing miserably in college-preparatory English described how he requested placement in a vocational program so that he could "work on cars." When the teachers and counselors concurred, his parents protested, "Oh no! You're not going to put our son in with *those* people!" He remained in the college-preparatory track but wound up failing.

From the evidence of the journals, vocational training is seldom well integrated into the curriculum. Several students noted with regret the dearth of vocational offerings. One student wrote, "I'd like to learn something useful, like computers or how to fix stuff, something that

might actually help me get a job. But, this school doesn't have it [a vocational program]."

Similarly, students who identified themselves as "gifted" or "taking AP classes" noted that they were seldom allowed any input into the curriculum. An excerpt from a multiple-page entry about an AP English class typifies the entries from gifted students:

Once the teacher gets the class quiet, which takes a few minutes, we try to have a discussion about the book. But as usual, other things get in the way. Rod protests everything, Dionne in the back laughs out loud and interrupts, and we get the teacher off on so many tangents that the book is almost forgotten. She is grading us on having the book by today—she told us a week ago to buy the thing. But half the class is empty handed, and we go through a long session of excuses and complaints about "being a poor high school student" or "couldn't get to the book store" before the flustered teacher decides to move on. She's a nice woman, but the class is rather overwhelming—I've always blamed it on boredom, because we don't work very hard and the whole class is exceptionally smart. But I also think they're exceptionally lazy—the privilege they think comes along with being AP seniors. . . . The bell approaches rapidly, and since we're seniors, we prepare to leave two minutes early (senior privilege, you know). As usual, the class is dissatisfying—the root of the class's rowdiness, believe, is the boredom that comes with not being challenged.

A straight-A freshman reported that every teacher at her school taught at least one section of language arts. She had the same teacher for biology and language arts. She wrote, "Although the principal says that literacy is necessary in all fields, Mr. Matthews is a great biology teacher, but a terrible English teacher. In bio, we do these really cool experiments like cutting up a frog, but in English all's we do is read aloud and take vocabulary tests."

Students often commented upon a teacher's enthusiasm level. A student council member wrote, "When the motivation for a teacher to

teach is there, then the motivation to learn usually follows. If the teacher doesn't show enthusiasm or the willingness to teach, then you get the same reaction from students."

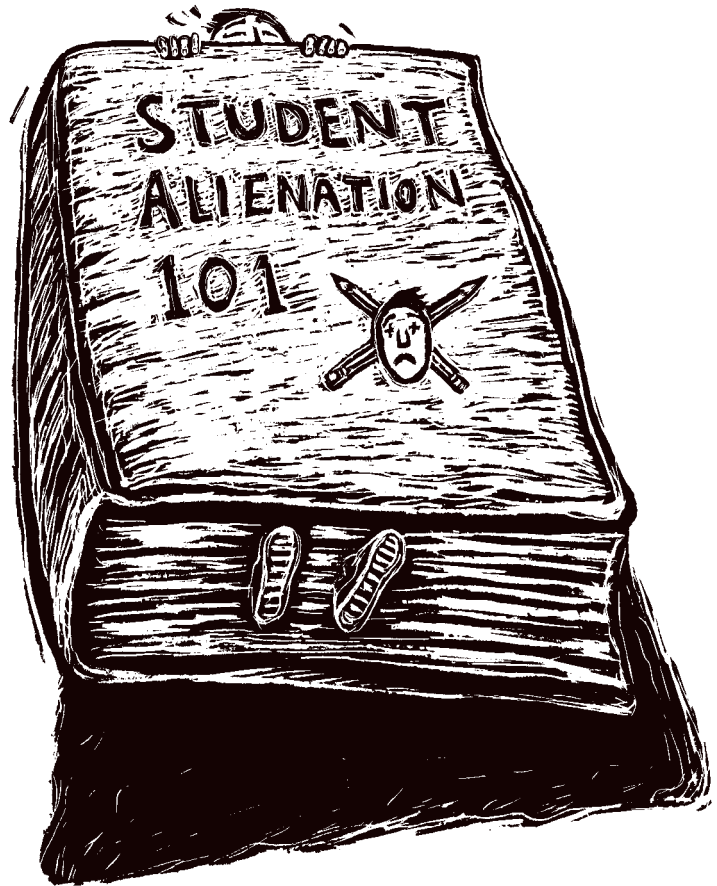
### Standards-based Ennui

The two adjectives students most commonly used to describe their daily routines were "boring" (seventy-nine times) and "stupid" (sixty-three times). Although legitimate research cannot base generalized conclusions about student angst on fifty-two journal entries, we nevertheless feel compelled to offer a few observations. Both the journals and conversations with teachers revealed that "the test" exerts tremendous influence on what teachers teach and how they teach. Indeed, in informal conversations, these students' teachers spoke only of "teaching to the standards" and "striving to improve test scores"—certainly worthwhile goals, but not what we had in mind when we posed the question "How do you know you have had a positive effect on a student?" Surprisingly, not a single teacher mentioned engaging student interest or helping a student develop a positive attitude toward learning.

These teachers seemed smart, hard-working, and dedicated, but they were also under obvious pressure. One teacher mentioned an older student who had been terrorizing several of the smaller boys in her class for weeks. "Frank is a felon who has twenty-two zeros this term; he hasn't turned in a single assignment. One day, Frank came into class obviously drunk and began shouting expletives at the boys at the top of his lungs. I sent him to the office and they sent him home for a few days. On the day that he came back, we had the state exam. Now, I am held accountable for Frank's academic achievement."

A social studies teacher told us she is a published author who also moonlights as a singer in a hip-hop band. When we asked her if she ever used music in her social studies class, she responded, "That would be fun. But, if I want to keep my job, I have to keep to the script. The principal and chair of the department insist we have to cover certain material. If it's not on the test, we can't cover it."

Such frustrations are hardly new to education. Writing about American schools in 1938, Douglass commented, "The secondary schools have not . . . made the adjustments urged by the group of reformers who desire less dependence



upon the classics, more attention to the modern subjects, and more flexibility in arranging courses and curriculums to meet the abilities and interests of various groups of pupils and the demands of a modern economic and social order" (p. 765).

It is an adjustment we have yet to make, and one we ignore at our peril.

### Overseas Models

While the United States continues to move toward a standardized curriculum, German and Japanese educational institutions, which have traditionally used standardized exams, are boldly moving the other way. For example, the German system encourages teacher autonomy and expertise, and students receive a real set of options that fit their interests, goals, and talents. German education reform centers on coordinating academic objectives with social and affective goals. For German schools, "Individuals must be able to participate in the changes in work and business and to innovate. General education has tended not to connect early enough with working life. Nor have entrepreneurship and the development of

work-relevant competencies been accorded sufficient priority" (Van Aalst 2001, p. 164).

In the United States, when test scores decline, school districts usually eliminate electives and extracurricular activities. In contrast, German educational reformers recommend devoting at least 40 percent of every school day to extracurricular activities and electives.

Even in test-happy Japan, reformers are de-emphasizing the core curriculum to provide teachers with more autonomy and students with more "room to grow." An expanded core curriculum includes aspects that are difficult or impossible to measure—culture and respect for foreign cultures, foreign languages, logical and scientific thinking, the significance of family and social life, sensitivity toward art, and consideration for the needs of others (Van Aalst, p. 167).

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In America, the test has become the sole criterion upon which educational reform is based. For example, in the midst of a budget shortfall approaching a billion dollars, the governor of Colorado recently refused to cut any testing programs. His grounds? Testing is a tool "that has significantly improved students' performance" (Ames 2003). Although Colorado students still took several other standardized exams over the course of the year, the governor (mis)perceived that eliminating a non-mandatory state exam and the ACT exam for all high school juniors would hamper student achievement. Yet an exam does not instruct; it merely measures.

Nevertheless, in such an environment it is upon the test that teachers must build their curriculum and instruction. It is upon the test that students will be assessed, schools will be evaluated, and teachers will be rewarded or punished. While schools in Germany and Japan begin to encourage teacher empowerment and spontane-

ity, the powers behind the accountability movement in America seem determined to maintain a prefabricated curriculum, irrespective of the knowledge and dispositions of the teachers and students who actually inhabit the classroom.

## Conclusions

We were not sure what to expect when we asked high school students to express their real feelings about school. We learned that these fifty-two students, an eclectic group of gifted, regular, and remedial students, uniformly viewed school as irrelevant, sterile, dull, or worse. What students despised most were unenthusiastic teachers teaching uninteresting lessons straight from textbooks.

There are many ways to remedy disengagement and loathing in high school: allowing teachers the freedom to teach to their talents; encouraging teachers to heed the gifts and needs of their students; and resurrecting the idea that a student must first be engaged before he or she can learn. None of these "innovations" costs money. Yet the prospect is dim for re-focusing public schools on learning rather than testing. Over the past few decades, the most common bureaucratic response to the problems of public education has been more testing and stronger accountability. Neither, as our student writers demonstrate, will address the problems of disengagement and loathing in high school.

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