American kids, dumber than dirt / Warning: The next generation might just be the biggest pile of idiots in U.S. history

By Mark Morford, SF Gate Columnist **Published 4:00 am, Wednesday, October 24, 2007**

I have this ongoing discussion with a longtime reader who also just so happens to be a longtime Oakland high school teacher, a wonderful guy who's seen generations of teens come and generations go and who has a delightful poetic sensibility and quirky outlook on his life and his family and his beloved teaching career.

And he often writes to me in response to something I might've written about the youth of today, anything where I comment on the various nefarious factors shaping their minds and their perspectives and whether or not, say, EMFs and junk food and cell phones are melting their brains and what can be done and just how bad it might all be.

His response: It is not bad at all. It's absolutely horrifying.

My friend often summarizes for me what he sees, firsthand, every day and every month, year in and year out, in his classroom. He speaks not merely of the sad decline in overall intellectual acumen among students over the years, not merely of the astonishing spread of lazy slackerhood, or the fact that cell phones and iPods and excess TV exposure are, absolutely and without reservation, short-circuiting the minds of the upcoming generations. Of this, he says, there is zero doubt.

Nor does he speak merely of the notion that kids these days are [overprotected and wussified](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/19/DDB9SQVJ3.DTL) and [don't spend enough time outdoors](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/22/MN15SJ64U.DTL) and don't get any real exercise and therefore can't, say, identify basic plants, or handle a tool, or build, well, anything at all. Again, these things are a given. Widely reported, tragically ignored, nothing new.

No, my friend takes it all a full step — or rather, leap — further. It is not merely a sad slide. It is not just a general dumbing down. It is far uglier than that.

We are, as far as urban public [education](http://www.sfgate.com/education-guide/) is concerned, essentially at rock bottom. We are now at a point where we are essentially churning out ignorant teens who are becoming ignorant adults and society as a whole will pay dearly, very soon, and if you think the hordes of easily terrified, mindless fundamentalist evangelical Christian lemmings have been bad for the soul of this country, just wait.

It's gotten so bad that, as my friend nears retirement, he says he is very seriously considering moving out of the country so as to escape what he sees will be the surefire collapse of functioning American society in the next handful of years due to the absolutely irrefutable destruction, the shocking — and nearly hopeless — dumb-ification of the American brain. It is just that bad.

Now, you may think he's merely a curmudgeon, a tired old teacher who stopped caring long ago. Not true. Teaching is his life. He says he loves his students, loves education and learning and watching young minds awaken. Problem is, he is seeing much less of it. It's a bit like the melting of the polar ice caps. Sure, there's been alarmist data about it for years, but until you see it for yourself, the deep visceral dread doesn't really hit home.

He cites studies, reports, hard data, from the appalling effects of television on child brain development (i.e.; any TV exposure before 6 years old and your kid's basic cognitive wiring and spatial perceptions are pretty much scrambled for life), to the fact that, because of all the insidious mandatory testing teachers are now forced to incorporate into the curriculum, of the 182 school days in a year, there are 110 when such testing is going on somewhere at Oakland High. As one of his colleagues put it, "It's like weighing a calf twice a day, but never feeding it."

But most of all, he simply observes his students, year to year, noting all the obvious evidence of teens' decreasing abilities when confronted with even the most basic intellectual tasks, from understanding simple history to working through moderately complex ideas to even (in a couple recent examples that particularly distressed him) being able to define the words "agriculture," or even "democracy." Not a single student could do it.

It gets worse. My friend cites the fact that, of the 6,000 high school students he estimates he's taught over the span of his career, only a small fraction now make it to his grade with a functioning understanding of written English. They do not know how to form a sentence. They cannot write an intelligible paragraph. Recently, after giving an assignment that required drawing lines, he realized that not a single student actually knew how to use a ruler.

It is, in short, nothing less than a tidal wave of dumb, with once-passionate, increasingly exasperated teachers like my friend nearly powerless to stop it. The worst part: It's not the kids' fault. They're merely the victims of a horribly failed educational system.

Then our discussion often turns to the meat of it, the bigger picture, the ugly and unavoidable truism about the lack of need among the government and the power elite in this nation to create a truly effective educational system, one that actually generates intelligent, thoughtful, articulate citizens.

Hell, why should they? After all, the dumber the populace, the easier it is to rule and control and launch unwinnable wars and pass laws telling them that sex is bad and TV is good and God knows all, so just pipe down and eat your Taco Bell Double-Supremo Burrito and be glad we don't arrest you for posting dirty pictures on your cute little blog.

This is about when I try to offer counterevidence, a bit of optimism. For one thing, I've argued [generational relativity](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2007/02/28/notes022807.DTL) in this space before, suggesting maybe kids are no scarier or dumber or more dangerous than they've ever been, and that maybe some of the problem is merely the same old awkward generation gap, with every current generation absolutely convinced the subsequent one is terrifically stupid and malicious and will be the end of society as a whole. Just the way it always seems.

I also point out how, despite all the evidence of total public-education meltdown, I keep being surprised, keep hearing from/about teens and youth movements and actions that impress the hell out of me. Damn kids made the Internet what it is today, fer chrissakes. Revolutionized media. Broke all the rules. Still are.

Hell, some of the best designers, writers, artists, poets, chefs, and so on that I meet are in their early to mid-20s. And the nation's top universities are still managing, despite a factory-churning mentality, to crank out young minds of astonishing ability and acumen. How did these kids do it? How did they escape the horrible public school system? How did they avoid the great dumbing down of America? Did they never see a TV show until they hit puberty? Were they all born and raised elsewhere, in India and Asia and Russia? Did they all go to Waldorf or Montessori and eat whole-grain breads and play with firecrackers and take long walks in wild nature? Are these kids flukes? Exceptions? Just lucky?

My friend would say, well, yes, that's precisely what most of them are. Lucky, wealthy, foreign-born, private-schooled ... and increasingly rare. Most affluent parents in America — and many more who aren't — now put their kids in private schools from day one, and the smart ones give their kids no TV and minimal junk food and no video games. (Of course, this in no way guarantees a smart, attuned kid, but compared to the odds of success in the public school system, it sure seems to help). This covers about, what, 3 percent of the populace?

As for the rest, well, the dystopian evidence seems overwhelming indeed, to the point where it might be no stretch at all to say the biggest threat facing America is perhaps not global warming, not perpetual warmongering, not garbage food or low-level radiation or way too much Lindsay Lohan, but a populace far too ignorant to know how to properly manage any of it, much less change it all for the better.

What, too fatalistic? Don't worry. Soon enough, no one will know what the word even means.

<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/morford/article/American-kids-dumber-than-dirt-Warning-The-3237239.php>