

The Dumbest Generation
Mark Bauerlein

Great ideas, once he finally gets rolling

I am old enough to know how to do mental arithmetic. Excluding the copious bibliography, this is a 236 page book that does not really get rolling until page 163. That's two-thirds of the way through. The first several chapters are a laborious accounting of all of the new generation's shortcomings. The chapter titles are "Knowledge Deficits", "The New Bibliophobes," "Screen Time," and "Online Learning And Not Learning." He marshals exhaustive documentation to demonstrate that today's kids do not read much and consequently do not have a very impressive vocabularies, knowledge of history, or familiarity with math and science.

In the last 10 years I have been a high school teacher and a grad student at the university. I would have granted these points rather readily. Moreover, most people who would dispute these points are not going to sit down and read a book that delights in exercising a postgraduate level vocabulary. My most poignant critique of this book would be that, excellent as it may be, the writing alone make it inaccessible to "The Dumbest Generation." If not them, who is Bauerlein trying to convince?

After he has successfully brushed off the dummies Bauerlein's last couple of chapters, which attempt to explain the phenomenon, make a series of very good points. We adults who are supposed to be in charge of our children's formation and education have abdicated our responsibilities. We have found it easier to cave in to them. To mistake a facile familiarity with the use of electronic gadgetry to socialize with deep understanding. To ascribe literary merit to their puerile Facebook blogs. To let them retreat for hours to their bedrooms surrounded by cell phones, telephones, computers, and every form of video and audio entertainment. To back away from engaging them in meaningful adult conversation about serious topics. They are growing up without adult guidance, only the now obligatory strokes to their self-esteem. The result is a disaster.

We allow our children to reject their cultural heritage in toto, not because they have examined it and found it wanting, but because it would be simply too much work to become familiar with it. Bauerlein cites young artists who have only contempt for the discipline that made Rembrandt and Picasso the great artists that they were. They proclaim that everything can be successfully invented ad novum, not on the basis of any evidence but on the conviction that it is not worth the effort to learn from what has been done previously. They are simply lazy and self-absorbed.

I am familiar with Bauerlein's geographical references in the Washington, DC area. He starts by talking about Walt Whitman high school, the subject of "The Overachievers," a chronicle of obsessive high school students. My daughter recently graduated from that school, and I would say that her peers put little premium on genuine learning. Some did study very hard to ace the standardized tests, but the passion for socializing certainly outweighed the passion for learning.

I could say the same for the elite private schools in which I taught. There is a minority, but it is a distinct minority, who relish discussing ideas. Even there, most kids seem to be caught up with the anti-intellectualism of our popular culture. There is a general disdain for hard work. Some of this disdain has its origins in the self-esteem movement. The schools want to avoid anything that will tend to highlight differences in innate ability among students. Even talented students are readily complicit in this game, because it means more time for their friends and other pursuits.

It was not much better at the University of Maryland, to which I return to pursue an advanced degree. Some of the older students in the College of Education seemed genuinely interested in the coursework. For most it was simply something to get out of the way so they can get on with their lives. The statistics Department was substantially better, but it is telling that out of a Department of 60 some graduate students, I was close to the only WASP male. The department was overwhelmingly Asian, and overseas Asians at that. Good students, but not a good reflection on American secondary education.

Bauerlein does not propose much in the way of remedies. I do not think that there are any. I live now in Kiev, where university level academics appear to have somewhat more rigor than in the United States, but the same pernicious effects are at work. The Internet cafés are so full of video game nuts that you can barely find the terminal to check your e-mail. No kid goes five minutes without initiating or receiving a call or an SMS on their cell phone.

Computer technologies in themselves are not bad. Word, Dragon Naturally Speaking, Excel and the Internet are Godsend for people who work with information. The question is getting kids to use them intelligently.

My own modest proposal would be to teach children how to use technology to do their schoolwork. It is a given that they all have computers. It is a tragedy that they do not know how to do anything useful with Excel, research a paper using the Internet to do much more than plagiarize, put together a PowerPoint presentation that is longer on substance than blinking whirligigs, or even use Microsoft Word to format the paper properly. I believe schools could teach this. I further believe that schools could use blocks to prevent rampant wasting of time cruising the Internet for material totally unrelated to school. I think that they could prevent the computer CD-ROM readers from being used to blare music during study halls. In a nutshell, I think that if we adults gave a damn about the future of the country, we might bestir ourselves to retake the control over our children and their education that we ceded in the 1960s. I'm not holding my breath.