



TOPIC: Education

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Big man on campus

Author Jeremy Iversen went undercover as a high school student. The experience taught him about text messaging and steroids -- and the failures of U.S. education policy.

BY DAVID KENT RANDALL [Like](#) [Confirm](#)

For most adults, the thought of going back to the algebra- and angst-ridden days of high school sounds like a punishment. But to Jeremy Iversen, a 24-year-old Stanford graduate, the prospect of masquerading as a 17-year-old and enrolling in a suburban high school seemed like the chance to fulfill a dream: to live the life of a John Hughes movie.

Iversen didn't have a chance to be a part of any [breakfast clubs](#) the first time around. After attending one of the nation's most prestigious boarding schools and glimpsing a future pointed straight to a corporate boardroom, Iversen started to feel like he was becoming trapped by the adult world, without any real adolescence to look back on. So shortly after graduating from college, he began meeting with assorted school boards and principals -- and soon found himself enrolled in a public high school in Southern California with a fake name (Jeremy Hughes), pretending to be a senior transfer student while taking notes for the book that became "High School Confidential." Only the principal knew that he was an impostor. And he was bound by only two rules: He would initiate no illegal activity, and he would have no intimate contact with any student.

While at first glance "High School Confidential" might seem like a knockoff of Cameron Crowe's "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" -- the 1981 book in which the then-Rolling Stone writer went incognito at a high school in San Diego -- Iversen sets himself apart from his predecessor by writing not just about teen drug use and parties but also about the far weightier issue of American education policy. From the inside, he casts a critical eye on the pressures and hurdles facing his peers, and tries to initiate a tough discussion about why schools still fail to produce passionate learners. Salon talked with Iversen about the trials of becoming a teenager again and the lessons he learned the second time around.

What was your first -- real -- high school experience like?

I started off going to a combination high school/junior high school in New York City, Hunter High School. That was a very urban experience. We had things like crushed crack vials in the playground. When I was 14, I went to Phillips Exeter Academy, which was a completely different experience. We wore ties, and had class on Saturday. But neither time, did I have a "typical" American high school experience.

For your research, you had to impersonate someone six years your

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junior. How did you make yourself seem younger?

A lot of it was acting. One of the main differences is just attitude. Most high schoolers don't have the same self-confidence that adults have. They sort of slump over a little bit, with this "Oh God, what's the world going to do to me now?" sort of attitude.

How did you report this book? Did you act like you were taking notes in biology class while you were really writing down what other students said?

The irony is that I would have liked to sit there and pretend to take notes and take down what everybody was saying -- but the problem was that nobody else was taking notes so I would have stood out as the only human being writing something down. I had a couple methods: The first was that I would take out my French book and pretend I was doing my French homework so I'd write down numbered questions, and for the supposed answers, I'd write down what everybody was saying. Sometimes a teacher would say, "Mr. Hughes, put away the French book, what class are you in?" So then I'd have to doodle a picture, and write really tiny in the margins little keywords on what people were saying. And then every night, I'd take notes for two or three hours on what people were saying while it was still fresh in my mind.

When you were at parties and saw student sex or drug use, did you ever feel the duty to stop people from what they were doing?

I did. But pretty quickly, once I had a role in the community, it stopped making sense -- like, "Why is the 17-year-old new kid suddenly trying to stop us from hooking up?" I tried a few times as far as I could. One of my best friends was 15, and he was interested in using steroids. I had to say things like, "No, dude, don't do it, your dick will drop off." I couldn't give a great speech like in the movies when a person pops up on the table and yells, "Stop, what you're doing is wrong!" I think there were other students who felt things were wrong, too, but felt almost impotent to do anything.

Most people think high school drug use involves beer and pot, and maybe cocaine if it's a wealthier area. But in your book, one of the biggest drug issues is steroids.

I was very surprised by the steroids. That was something we didn't have at boarding school. And the school year after I did this project, the big drug was speed.

With text messaging so popular now, it seems like students are writing more than ever, but not necessarily in a substantive way. Did you see an effect of that casual writing style in students' work?

"Talk to you later" becomes "t2ul" -- that's the way people communicate with each other, in that type of abbreviated language. And it doesn't translate over into structuring an essay. That's where you start to see the failures. It's not that this generation can't think, it's just that when no one is ever asking you to defend an argument or anything like that, you're going to develop a weakness.

In your book, you blame teachers for that weakness.

Absolutely. We were never assigned to write a paper longer than a page, we were never asked to find a source beyond the textbook. No one ever said, "Find an opinion and defend it with proof." The best you got was, "Regurgitate the textbook in full sentences." And what ends up happening is that you get people who aren't able to ask challenging questions or find independent answers, so they just repeat what they hear around them with increasing conviction.

Do you think that there's anything educators can do to make the learning experience more effective?

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After [I finished the book] I talked to teachers and I asked them what they saw as the problem. They said, "It's absolutely the students; they're not prepared, they don't want to learn." But as a student, I have to say, you wonder why a teacher sits in the corner of the classroom talking about her weekend with four kids while everyone else sits around and text messages each other. Why don't they care whether anyone is learning, why aren't they making sure people are engaged, involved and up to the task? I think that there's no accountability in the classroom. Once the teacher is there, they get tenure after two years -- at which point you really can't fire them. So what's going to make them teach?

Education is spoken of as the great equalizer, the system that allows upward class mobility. Does that notion seem ludicrous to you now?

I saw basically two types of students -- Path 1 students and Path 2. Path 1 students were marked as going to a four-year college or beyond, and getting a competitive professional job in the global economy; Path 2 students were marked for a local service job where they drifted in and out of community college for a little while before they gave up. It was as though when they arrived freshman year, everybody was marked.

Education is supposed to be the great leveler, but what I saw just perpetuated destinies. The teachers didn't seem to care, the system didn't seem to care, nobody ever tried to intervene and say, "Hey, your parents are on welfare but you don't have to be. Let's get you motivated and excited and introduce some wonderful opportunities." That never happened, ever. Instead it was just, "This is a bad kid, let me kick him out of the room." Teachers rarely bothered to intervene to get Path 2 people onto Path 1. The counselors didn't either -- they were vastly overworked -- and everyone generally acted like kids had simply chosen not to succeed. And it broke down almost entirely along class lines.

Despite those criticisms, you still seem to sympathize with school administrators.

People don't give them personhood a lot of the time. But the students are doing the exact same thing to the administration. I was with 2,000 kids who hated the administration and saw them only as people placed there to torment them. Meanwhile, the administration saw the students as this big bored herd of statistics that had to be funneled through the system endlessly. Of course, the reality -- on both sides -- is more complex.

Did your immersion in high school make you see your private school experience in a different way? Did you wonder, "If I had gone here, how would I have ended up?"

I wondered that very much. I appreciated the education I got at my boarding school -- it took people of all different stripes, put them through the meat grinder and turned out bright-eyed young professionals. But we didn't really have very much fun.

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