PART I

HIGH SCHOOLS AS CONTEXTS
OF DEVELOPMENT

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Pressures on Teenagers and Their Schools

These are definitely not the glory days of the American educational system. Schools have been stung by a steady stream of testing data showing a large achievement gap between American students and teenagers in other countries. Demographic changes have led to the proliferation of overcrowded classrooms and increased demand for special services for many new and expanding segments of the student population. No Child Left Behind and other educational policies have ratcheted up accountability standards and imposed a series of increasingly harsh sanctions all the way up to school closing. Simultaneously, funding has been cut to the point that many school districts face major budget shortfalls. Against this backdrop, bemoaning the state of American education and, in particular, criticizing teachers have become major discussion points in electoral politics and media debates. Such challenges have placed enormous pressures on schools and fueled a sense of pessimism – some of it warranted, some of it not – in the public at large.[1]

In the face of these major financial, curricular, and organizational pressures on the educational system as a whole, the everyday pressures

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[1] For more in-depth discussions of the challenges facing American education and the debates surrounding these challenges, see the landmark 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a more recent report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* (2007), by the National Academy of Sciences, the results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Schmidt et al., 2001), or a 2008 edited volume by Hess.

that teenagers encounter as they navigate the social worlds of American high schools seem far less important. Indeed, in the minds of many, helping teenagers cope with the social ups and downs of high school life does not rise to the level of pressing task when compared to the larger-scale challenges of raising school performance and effectively educating a new generation for entry into the global economy. This is often true even among those who readily acknowledge how much such social experiences matter to any one teenager.

Over the last decade, I came to accept this conventional wisdom, that the problems teenagers have on the social side of high school pale in comparison to the systemic academic problems faced by high schools across the board. Early in my dual career as a social demographer and developmental psychologist, I devoted much attention to the ways in which the adjustment and functioning of American teenagers are both served and undermined by friendships, dating, and other peer dynamics in their high schools. My work was often met by criticism that it had no policy relevance. Peer dynamics, the criticism went, cannot be manipulated by policy intervention on a large scale and, therefore, do not represent a useful or practical venue for improving schools.[2] Eventually, this criticism – coupled with my sincere interest in policy solutions to educational crises – turned me away from the social experiences of teenagers in high schools. Instead, I focused on more established levers of policy action, such as coursework offerings, teacher credentials, school structure and composition, and other institutional factors that are already connected to extant policy initiatives aimed at raising school performance levels or reducing major group disparities in academic performance within and across schools.

Recently, however, spending a year in a large public high school (I call it Lamar) as part of a mixed-methods study on pathways to college made me change my mind on this issue once again. Looking

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[2] James Coleman discussed the debate about the policy utility of social dynamics in schools in his 1990 book *Foundations of Social Theory*.

into national patterns of educational attainment and then seeing how these patterns played out in Lamar, I realized that, because social experiences in high school have such demonstrable effects on academic progress and college going, the *social* concerns of teenagers are *educational* concerns for schools in ways that cannot be so easily dismissed. Figuring out how to translate this knowledge into action is a challenge, but it is a worthwhile one.

As my time at Lamar made me reconsider what I thought I knew as a social scientist, I was reminded of a lesson that I and many other adults learned when we were teenagers, the same lesson that many teenagers are learning right now. High school can put you in your place.

THE MOTIVATION FOR THE BOOK

An Argument about Teenagers and Their High Schools

This book is concerned with the interplay of the academic and social sides of secondary education in the United States, how this interplay factors into the educational challenges and goals of today, and how it can be practically leveraged to meet those challenges and advance those goals. On the individual level, this interplay involves the intertwining of teenagers' social development with their scholastic pathways within schools. On the institutional level, it involves the feedback loop between schools' peer cultures and their curricular structures.

On both levels, this interplay between the academic and social sides of high school has been the subject of much attention from social and behavioral scientists for quite a long time. As some prominent examples, the sociologist James Coleman detailed the inversion of high school peer values relative to "conventional" adult norms, the psychiatrist Michael Rutter and his colleagues (Maughan, Mortimer, and Ouston) revealed how not taking a full accounting of the social processes of education led to an underestimation of school effectiveness, developmental psychologists such as Barber and Eccles

and economists such as Akerlof and Kranton have mapped out the identity-based norms of major peer crowds within schools, and multidisciplinary teams (e.g., Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown) have systematically analyzed how schools and larger social structures organize peer groups by race/ethnicity and social class that come with different kinds of messages and influences (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimer, & Ouston, 1979; Coleman, 1961). Such work is part of a larger body of accumulated evidence that peer norms and values about academic achievement, risky behavior, and sexual activity both promote and disrupt academic progress.

Within this general consensus, however, are some areas left open for debate. First, to what extent has recent societal change, both local and global, altered the consequences of and mechanisms underlying the link between peer dynamics and academic considerations identified by past research? Second, does the experience of navigating school-based value systems and normative structures have academic consequences regardless of the actual substance of those values and norms? Third, how can the link between the academic and social sides of secondary schooling be made more amenable to policy intervention?

In this book, I extend an already rich body of scientific knowledge by directly addressing each of these three areas of debate. My argument is that

- Dramatic changes in the demography of the U.S. youth population, the reorganization of the American educational system, the revolution in communication/information technology, and the restructuring of the national and global economy have intensified the long-standing consequences of the social side of schooling for teenagers' futures.
- The process of adapting to the systems of norms and values within a school can disrupt teenagers' long-term educational pathways, *regardless* of whether those values and norms are proacademic,

antiacademic, or neutral, if such adaptation becomes a time-consuming enterprise or if a lack of adaptation exerts a generalized spoiling effect on teenagers' orientation to their schools.

- The future consequences of teenagers' adaptation (or maladaptation) to high school peer cultures can be addressed through policies that expand the stated mission of high schools beyond instructional and vocational services, extend the notion of academically "at-risk" groups beyond demographic terms, and target the specific curricular points at which nonacademic experiences affect academic decision making.

A False Dichotomy

As context for this argument, consider some of the major national debates about high schools in recent years. At the top of the list is No Child Left Behind,[3] with its twin pillars of standardized testing and school accountability. Also important are a series of court decisions curtailing the scope of school desegregation, efforts to create small learning communities in schools, dueling strategies for the classroom instruction of English language learners, calls to increase investment in preschool education, and initiatives to reduce "leakage" from the math/science pipeline (Gamoran, 2007; Schneider, 2007; Heckman, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Kahlenberg, 2001). Implicit in these debates and policy activities is the notion that the academically measurable outputs of education – test scores, grades, graduation and college-going rates – set the true benchmarks of student and school success and that alterations to the institutional organization and pedagogical arrangements of schools provide the best means for meeting such benchmarks.

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[3] The actual No Child Left Behind legislation (the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) can be found at http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html.

To a certain extent, I agree with this characterization of education. The problem is that this characterization prioritizes one role of high schools in the United States – the high school as a formal organization that delivers instruction and curricula to students in order to increase the economic productivity of the nation. Even if this role serves as the primary standard of evaluation for the educational system, it de-emphasizes another role of high schools that is important in its own right and that also contributes to and subtracts from the organizational role.

That *other* role of high schools concerns what Coleman long ago referred to as adolescent society.[4] As romanticized and demonized in movies (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Heathers*, *Mean Girls*), television shows (*21 Jump Street*, *90210*, *Glee*), and books (*Sweet Valley High*, *Gossip Girl*) across generations, adolescent society refers to the rules, rituals, and customs that arise organically when large numbers of young people come together within high schools for long periods of time nearly every day of the week over a number of years. In this way, the hallways, classrooms, lunch rooms, and playing fields of high schools become fertile ground for the emergence and evolution of a youth culture that both is influenced by and contributes to the larger popular culture. Of course, high schools contain many adolescent societies, not just one, and these adolescent societies differ markedly from school to school and from community to community. Still, adolescent society, in all its forms, has been an undeniable product of the American educational system for some time.

As two young women at Lamar who came from different family backgrounds and were members of different peer crowds explained to me when I asked them to describe what going to high school was all about:

> Like when you go to school, it is not like oh let me get this paper done that is due tomorrow. It is like, well how can I change myself

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[4] The name of Coleman's book is *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education* (1961).

> to be accepted by others. Because adults can sit here and say that school is important and that is what you are *supposed* to go to school for, but you are affected by these teenagers daily. And that is who you spend your day with.
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> It is just a struggle for popularity and strength … that is it, it is everything school is not *supposed* to be.

Here, the key distinction is between what high school is supposed to be in theory and what actually goes on in high school in reality. In other words, high school is, in theory, about attaining an education but, in reality, is often far more about navigating a social terrain that may or may not place value on education and academic achievement. These two contemporary high school students are voicing the same sentiment expressed by the Midwestern teenagers that Coleman surveyed back in the 1950s. They claimed that being popular was more important than being a good student.

Both then and now, long-term academic considerations certainly matter to young people, but they are often obscured by more immediate social considerations. The main output of this side of high schools is more developmental than educational – it concerns social well-being, emotional and psychological health, engagement in risky or conventional behaviors – and, as such, is often viewed as external to the narrowly defined official educational mission of schools and outside the purview of educational policy. Consequently, although its significance is easily recognized in discussions of nonacademic problems facing high schools, such as in the national debate over school violence in the wake of the 1999 Columbine massacre, it is far less likely to be highlighted in discussions of how to address the academic problems of high schools.

Yet, the official mission of the American educational system is not so narrow, and the separation between the social side of high school and teenagers' development on one hand and the academic side of high school and students' scholastic progress on the other is not so clear. Along these same lines, the scope of educational policy is not confined to coursework, curriculum, and funding. In fact, a long-standing aim

of public education has been to promote social stability and produce an educated, healthy civic populace. At the same time, the social side of high school can affect academic benchmarks just as it affects the health and well-being of students. Indeed, educational policies that target the academic functions of high school without attention to the potentially undercutting role of the social dynamics of high school will never realize their full returns (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996; Cremin, 1957). Going back to those major contemporary debates about education mentioned in the first paragraph of this section, each one touches on social dynamics – girls and minority students feeling frozen out of high-level math and science classes so valuable in the new economy being just one example (Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Hyde & Kling, 2001) – and, therefore, calls for responses that address the phenomena's social underpinnings as well as their academic consequences.

Beyond issues of school performance and educational policy, recognizing the significance of the social side of high school and its implications for the academic side is also an issue for individual teenagers and the adults in their lives. Far removed from the daily rhythm of high school, adults may be understandably tempted to dismiss or downplay the social challenges of high school as a rite of passage, growing pains, or something that teenagers will live through and eventually forget. From the perspective of adulthood, they may consider the social lives of teenagers as *secondary* distractions to their *primary* academic responsibilities. Yet, the social problems that many teenagers face in their high schools are implicated in depression, suicide, substance use, sexual behavior, eating disorders, and other behaviors and conditions that affect mental health and general well-being in the present and that have consequences for adjustment and functioning well into the future (Crosnoe, Frank, & Mueller, 2008; Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002; Bearman & Bruckner, 2001). At the same time, by affecting academic decisions and actions in the present, social problems can disrupt trajectories into higher education that have major ramifications for socioeconomic attainment in the long run. Thus,

parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and other adults need to be cognizant of how current social problems can pose risks to short-term and long-term trajectories across domains of development and be attendant to these risks as they guide teenagers through high school and demand service and support from high schools.

THE GOALS OF THE BOOK

My goal in conducting this research and writing this book, therefore, is to demonstrate how teenagers' navigation of the stratified, digitized peer cultures of today's high schools affects their navigation of the curricular structures of these schools, how the connection between these pathways now differentiates their future life chances in the modern era, and how families, school personnel, and policy makers can use this information to promote the success of teenagers and their high schools. To advance this goal, I have focused on a subset of students at risk for poor (or poorer than expected) post–high school educational outcomes, not because of their intelligence, skill levels, family backgrounds, or demographic profiles but instead because of their positions in the social structures of their high schools.

Specifically, teenagers who do not fit in socially in their high schools are who interest me. To be more exact, I am interested in teenagers who *believe* that they do not fit in socially. I set out to determine the extent to which such feelings of social marginalization within a high school could engender short-term coping mechanisms that, by interfering with the accrual of valued academic credentials in high school, could reduce their chances of attending college after high school. In other words, I began looking to specify a pathway by which a high school social position unrelated to academic status or academic values could have long-lasting effects on the life course after high school is over by disrupting academic progress during a critical period. Although studying all teenagers who perceive themselves to be socially marginalized, I pay special attention to two subsets of the teenage population