Why High School Must Go: An Interview with Leon Botstein

Does our culture protect teens from themselves, or does it create the very irresponsibility we are trying to protect them from? Mr. Epstein believes the latter and so decided to have a conversation with someone who has been saying that for years, Leon Botstein.

BY ROBERT EPSTEIN

WHENEVER THERE'S a new school shooting, journalists looking for experts dust off their copies of a book called *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture*, by Leon Botstein, longtime president of Bard College and music director and conductor of the American and Jerusalem symphony orchestras. Published in 1997 and thus predating the tragedies at Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Littleton, Colorado, this rambling collection of occasional lectures seems to help explain the carnage.

Botstein's views on teens are far from the mainstream. The public believes that the teen years are necessarily a time of "storm and stress" — a perspective etched into the American consciousness in 1904 by psychologist G. Stanley Hall in a book that defined, and perhaps even invented, modern adolescence. Teens, most people would insist, are inherently incompetent and irresponsible, desperately in need of protection and indoctrination. That's why part-time cashiering is practically the only work we let

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College; Leon Levy Professor in the Arts and Humanities; co-artistic director, Bard Music Festival; music director and conductor, American Symphony Orchestra and Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

Photo by Steve Pyke

ROBERT EPSTEIN is the former editor-in-chief of Psychology Today, *a contributing editor for* Scientific American Mind, *a visiting scholar at the University of California, San Diego, and the founder and director emeritus of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies. He is also the author of* The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen *(Quill Driver Books, 2007; additional information can be obtained at http://thecaseagainstadolescence.com). He lives in San Diego, Calif. ©Robert Epstein, 2007.*

them do, and that's why we force them to attend school even if they're not ready to learn. That's also why we don't let them sign contracts, own property, start businesses, marry, drink alcohol, or smoke cigarettes — or, in some states, visit malls without chaperones, get tattoos without parental permission, use cell phones while driving, or even enter tanning salons without a physician's prescription.

But Botstein says that teens are as capable as adults in many respects and that they are certainly capable of learning important and interesting things — as opposed to all that "crap" we learned in high school (to borrow singer Paul Simon's word, not Botstein's). High school should, in fact, Botstein says, be abolished. It demeans our young, wastes their time, traps them in the vacuous world of teen culture, turns them off to learning, and isolates them from and makes them hostile toward the very people they're about to become: adults.

Botstein knows whereof he speaks. The youngest college president in American history (Franconia College, age 23), he's a living reminder of the extraordinary capabilities of young people, and Bard College has further proved the point by recently creating a thriving college for high school-age teens in New York City, as well as by taking over and running another successful college for teens, Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

Jefferson's Children came to my attention in connection with survey research I was conducting with a doctoral student, Diane Dumas. We developed a wide-ranging test of adult competencies and compared the scores of adults and teens. To the surprise of many, there was little or no difference. Other research shows that teens are actually far superior to adults in some areas: memory, reasoning ability, reaction time, and sensory abilities, in particular. What's more, in countries where teens are integrated into adult society at an early age, there is no sign whatsoever of teen turmoil. Could it be, as Botstein suggested, that our culture was creating the horrendous problems of American teens — the high rates of depression, suicide, crime, drug abuse, and pregnancy — by infantilizing them? I eventually began working on a book, *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen*, summarizing the relevant psychological, historical, biological, and multicultural evidence to support this idea.

Unfortunately, Botstein's perspective garners media attention mainly while the blood is still wet, and it's almost never considered as part of the solution. Once a crisis is over, the view that teens are needy children prevails, and the typical response is not to reconnect teens with adults, or to give them more responsibility, or to treat them with greater respect, but rather to place more powerful metal detectors in the high school doorways and more video cameras in the hallways and bathrooms — in other words, to infantilize teens even more.

Somehow, Botstein remains optimistic about our ability to see teens in a more realistic and constructive light. Here are his current views about teens and high schools in America.

Epstein: Where did *Jefferson's Children* come from?

Botstein: One of the unattractive requirements of being a college president is that you have to say something in public and presumably about education. You end up developing unvarnished opinions without knowing much about a wide range of subjects, and usually those opinions are relatively bland. In my case, having been a college president for a long time and having been asked to say what I think about a variety of issues that I know nothing about, I ended up giving a variety of talks, and an enterprising editor heard one of these and approached me about putting all my unvarnished prejudices on the subject of education into one volume. But the book fell flat until the shootings at Columbine. Then the press began to look for people who had something to say about the Columbine event but who hadn't waited to say it until after the fact. After the shooting, everybody had an opinion. As my father, who was a great physician, used to say, the most important medical instrument is the "retro-spectroscope." But some journalists wanted more predictive wisdom.

Epstein: What did your book say that was so relevant to the Columbine shooting?

Botstein: There's a chapter which argues for the abolition of the high school and argues that the high school is an infantilizing structure. I wrote that we hadn't paid attention to adolescents properly as young adults and that we fail miserably when puberty meets education; we fail to nurture young people when they have the greatest capacity to learn. As a result, we fail to produce people with any real ambition to learn. College is too late, and the arrogance of college educators is unbelievable. Having criticized the high school environment as a way we treat adolescents, the book seemed to overlap with some of the observations about the Columbine event. A journalist asked to interview me about this, and then I did a couple of op-ed pieces for leading newspapers. Then Oprah Winfrey got wind of this, and the book suddenly had a magical revival from the moribund.

Epstein: I understand that officials in New York took your ideas about teens quite seriously. What happened?

Botstein: The mayor of New York and then the gov-

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ernor of the state supported the idea of our creating an early college in the public sector, which would take young people out of the eighth grade and give them a real college education. By the time they finished the year that they would normally have received a high school diploma, they would have finished an AA degree. So we developed the Bard High School Early College, which is a public school on the Lower East Side of New York that mirrors the demography of the city. It's a fantastic success, and it proves the point. The Gates Foundation has now jumped in behind it and has put about $40 million into trying to replicate versions of this early college idea.

Epstein: In Chapter 3 of *Jefferson's Children*, you say, quite simply, that "the American high school is obsolete." What is the basis for this idea?

Botstein: There are two types of warriors: those trained at West Point and Annapolis, who know about war mainly by studying it, and those of us who rise through the ranks by having fought a lot of wars in the trenches. I discovered this idea through years of observing entering first-year college students — from observing what they thought education was, what they thought reading was, and what they thought interpretation was. Choose your poison. That, and the huge disparity between what they wanted to do or were motivated to do and what they were actually capable of doing. They were sexually active, they appeared to be adults, and they had mannerisms of adulthood, but they were horrifically at odds with their own adulthood when it came to the use of their minds. And this disparity cut across lines of race and class.

Epstein: But why did you notice these disparities when virtually no other prominent educators have expressed concern about them?

Botstein: When people go into a profession, they become socialized, and their training is internalized; it's self-replicating. If you become a teacher or an educational administrator, you are trained to adopt the norms, and you are rewarded to the extent to which you vindicate those norms. I have always been an outsider. I was never trained in those norms. And so I looked at the high school with a kind of shockingly simple-minded common sense.

Take curiosity. Every parent knows that a child wants to know things about the natural world. They're not worried about who Thomas Jefferson was. They're worried about why the sun rises, why it snows, why the stars glitter in the sky. Every child wants to know. Their most important question is why. But our worst pursuit in schooling is the teaching of science, even though it should be our most popular subject. This has to be because of the way science is institutionalized and transmitted. There isn't something in our development that shuts off our curiosity about the natural universe.

Epstein: You have 24 maxims in *Jefferson's Children*, one for each hour of the day. I find one of them particularly interesting. It is to "reflect on the exercise of authority." What does this mean?

Botstein: It's advice to parents, and it extends to school administrators as well. Authority is terribly important. Everybody wants to feel that they're in charge of their own lives. But if you observe patrons in a restaurant, you find that people like restaurants in part because they can order somebody around. Some people send the wine back; some people are upset about the service. Ask anyone who works for an airline or in the service professions, where someone has paid for the right to be the boss. Many, many people revel in being the boss. Parenting is often motivated by such desires. Some people have children in order to create pets whom they can order around.

Authority is legitimate when you're causing something to be done that is essential. Sometimes people — teachers, for example — exercise legitimate authority simply by knowing something. But the base of authority should be as transparent as possible, and students,

and even young children, should be able to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate authority. Sometimes the best thing you can do for a child is to tell the child you don't know something — to tell the child that you yourself are self-critical and that you don't wield authority arbitrarily. So if my son asks me a question and I don't know the answer, I say, "I really don't know. I've got to find out." He observes that I'm uncomfortable with not being able to answer his question, and I try to figure out the answer.

Epstein: You're talking about creating a kind of connection between adults and young people that is pretty rare these days. You're talking about creating a much more substantive type of connection.

Botstein: Yes, much more substantive. One of the reasons adults don't like adolescents — why adults are so hostile and seek to restrict adolescents so much — is that they are envious. We define adulthood in a way that is not actually true. We say adulthood is all about circumspection and self-denial and responsibility — all high-minded moral talk. It's not the way we actually behave, and in that sense we hold teens to impossible standards.

But one of the things that we do know — one area where we can truly help young people — is to teach them not to dissipate an enormously important part of their lives. This is the ideal time for them to learn, to shape their interests, to develop self-confidence and characteristics which we may not have developed adequately ourselves. Unfortunately, because we secretly envy adolescents, many of us — even educators — react terribly toward teens without realizing what we're doing. I'm always struck when I see how little entering college students appreciate the joy of their own youth — probably because of the way they've been treated by adults.

Epstein: Perhaps teens have no point of comparison. They know nothing about adulthood, after all. They've been completely isolated from it, and everything they've learned, they've learned from peers — probably the last people on Earth from whom they should be learning.

Botstein: Exactly right. This is the problem of age segregation. I'm strongly opposed to the institutionalization and segregation of young people, which is much worse now because we don't have extended families living together at home anymore. We don't introduce our children early enough to the real criteria by which life is measured, and we allow them to develop hothouse criteria of their own that turn out to be totally irrelevant in life. We don't teach them that the real rules of life are not the rules of Hollywood, not the rules of pop culture, and not the rules of high school. And we certainly don't teach them to develop their mental faculties.

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Epstein: You mentioned the early college program that you've established with the city of New York, and since 1979 Bard has also run Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts, which is a college program for young people. What happens when you provide higher education for young people? Does it work?

Botstein: Yes, quite well. We made our share of mistakes, particularly during the early years of Simon's Rock, but we've learned a great deal. We've learned that young people — ages 14 and 15 — are capable of an enormous amount of absorption of and response to serious information. They're ready to be taught serious science, serious mathematics, serious history, serious reading, as well as philosophy, literature, foreign languages, and mathematics.

And it's not only the gifted. It's hypocritical, in my view, to reserve such experiences for the elite. Adulthood has the potential to begin much earlier than we think, and it cuts across everyone, not just those we call gifted. The young people who drop out of the inner-city schools are doing the right thing because there's

nothing there for them to learn, and the curriculum that is mandated by the state is ridiculous and trivial in terms of what a young person can do. We've learned that people right in the middle of the proverbial bell-shaped curve respond very well to college material, and their expectations and performance rates change beyond predicted patterns — if they're treated properly. However, we also learned that you need a new kind of teacher, a kind of cross between the college teacher and the high school teacher. The college teacher brings real love of subject and real competence in the subject area and membership in a community that's defined by liking to do certain things.

Epstein: But perhaps not competence in teaching?

Botstein: Yes, teaching is not necessarily where they excel; they may like teaching, but only because they like the subject and they're active in their subject area. High school teachers, on the other hand, tend to enjoy both teaching and teens. Consequently, you can't simply throw young people into what we now know as college. You have to create a different kind of environment in which you combine the best of college, which is intellectual ambition and competence, with a willingness to spend time with young people and deal with the age group with the kind of attention and caring that's sometimes characteristic of high school teachers.

Epstein: Can we really abolish the American high school?

Botstein: Absolutely. In fact, there's a tremendous upward pressure from below to do so, from both ends of the spectrum of students. Good students who are college-bound are restless and bored, and there's a huge dropout rate at the bottom end — the people who are least well served. We don't have a clue how to deal with them, and they can't wait to get out of the system that doesn't serve them. And they're right.

Epstein: There are more than half a million dropouts a year right now, and in some minority groups in major cities, the dropout rate is about 50%.

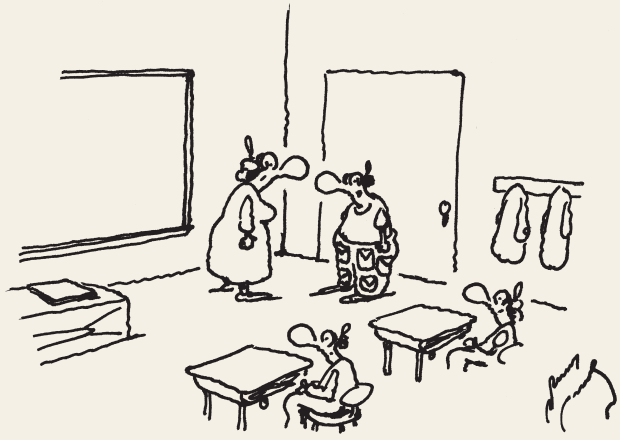
Botstein: Because the system is broken. No one would keep a fleet flying if half of the planes crashed. So, the country is derelict, the President is derelict, his predecessor Mr. Clinton was derelict, the Congress is derelict, the state legislators are derelict, and the education establishment is routinely committing a kind of crime.

The solution is simple, and it's a solution which should appeal to both the conservative and the liberal. The conservative will like that fact that you can get more done in fewer years with less cost, and the liberal will like the fact that young people will have fewer problems and more opportunities. We need a compulsory education system from K through 10, with two levels, elementary and secondary; we can get rid of the middle school entirely. The middle school is nothing but a reflection of the American puritanical discomfort with early puberty. We wanted to separate the early adolescents from the children and the grown adolescents. So we created the middle school, which is to me an idiotic notion. It's idiotic because, again, it increases age segregation. Younger and older role models are absent. We need a two-level system that ends in the 10th grade, after which we can offer a variety of interesting options: work, national service, education in specialty areas, and, of course, college.

To make this happen, colleges will have to adapt. The real resistance to making this practical is not the high school or the legislature or the public; the public can be sold on the idea. Real resistance will come from the colleges. It's disappointing how few colleges have stepped up to take over the responsibility for secondary education, which is in their interest, actually. And the reason is that college faculty members have gotten used to having no responsibility for the well-being of students.

Epstein: Is there hope for our colleges?

Botstein: The quality of teaching in undergraduate colleges — universities particularly — is not high. We've created a kind of sink-or-swim situation where faculty members are much more concerned about their professional status and their graduate students than about undergraduates. We have a bizarre hierarchy in our education system by which the most rewarded person ends up at the Institute for Advanced Studies and doesn't have to do any teaching at all. In my view, that is the undoing of real scholarship. ◼



"As a matter of fact, I do *have enough gum for the whole class."*