

"The Competition is Intense"

How many times have you wondered what's going on inside your teenager's head? You know they're human beings -- though the state of their rooms might make you wonder -- but by the time they're in high school, they're speaking their own language, dressing in look-alike styles and leading, as they're quick to tell you, their own lives, which are their own business, thank you very much. We asked four teenagers to tell us their thoughts on topics ranging from the pressure to be popular to concerns about college. The teens were thoughtful, perceptive and articulate. Here's what's on their minds.

Greg Sanzone, 17 Hometown: Weston, Massachusetts **School:** Weston High School

There's a huge amount of pressure in my school to go to college. I'm personally not feeling it, but other kids, yes. We have a particularly high rate of kids who go to college, something like 98 percent. Mostly they go to top-tier schools -- Ivy League colleges and small liberal-arts schools in New England, like Colby or Bowdoin or Bates. Our school is pretty homogenous -- upper-middle-class white kids with more or less the same activities. We all know that there are only so many spaces in the colleges, and everyone is up against everyone else.

There's a real high level of competition. It's manifested in kids taking all honors and Advanced Placement courses, so they take on a ridiculous amount of academics and limit the fun electives they can take. I'm mostly an A-student, but I'm involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. For the past two years, I've been president of my class and was elected to be co-president this year of the student body. I play soccer and run track, I'm part of the theater company, I do the debate team, I'm co-president and co-founder of the Italian American Student Union, I do chorus. I also did a language program -- a homestay in Italy this summer.

The school organizes a lot of community-service opportunities. If you have community service on your transcript, the colleges like that. You need to do at least 24 hours of community service to graduate from high school anyway. For the past three years, my class has organized a special-needs basketball tournament. The entire school did a Habitat for Humanity project. Some kids do community service because they have to, but for the most part, they're pretty sincere.

Parents have a lot to do with the pressure to get into a good school. It's like whatever you're doing, they're not really satisfied; you have to do something bigger, better, or more of it. Most of the time, the kids comply or they just complain about it and live with it. Some parents add an extra incentive of giving \$20 or \$50 to go shopping if their kids get a higher grade for the quarter. There's one kid who has a special college advisor that his parents pay for. But nearly everyone in my class has an SAT tutor or has taken some kind of prep course outside of school. Me, too. I wasn't satisfied with my score on the PSAT, so I went for a little strategy refinement. Now I think my academics are solid. Like, they could be better, but I'm definitely satisfied with them. Our whole lives, we've been told that the track our life takes depends on where we go to school. If you don't go to this or that school, you will never amount to anything. No one ever stops to

question it.

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