

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

TELEVISION

High School Confidential

A documentary series about a year in the life of a high school offers a refreshingly real view of 'reality'

BY MARC PEYSER

MORGAN MOSS GETS THE first line in the new Fox TV show "American High," and it's a doozy. "These are the years that you're supposed to go f---ing wild, blame it all on your parents or society, not have to suffer consequences, have unprotected sex, go do drugs, smoke cigarettes,

drink alcohol, watch pornos, rent porno movies, get porno magazines. Porno, porno, porno!" Think that sounds scary? Morgan, 18, isn't an actor. He's a real kid.

"American High" (debuting Aug. 2) follows 14 students from Highland Park High School in Illinois through one academic year. Their basic story lines—the sensitive football player, the girl whose parents are divorcing, the gay guy—aren't all that different from those of the kids we've seen on "Party of Five" or "Dawson's Creek." But what "American High" lacks in picture-perfect performers it more than makes up for with the kind of nuanced, compelling dramas that you'd never see on a scripted show. After Morgan's initial outburst, he stumbles into teaching gymnastics to mentally handicapped kids. By the end of the second half-hour episode, he's started to understand what it's like to work with people who act out and don't follow directions—rebellious souls, just like him. As he talks about the gymnastics class, you can almost see Morgan growing up before your eyes. "It's kind of opened up a whole new door for me," he says. "It actually made me think about pursuing a teaching career. Who knows? One day I might become one of those people that I dread: a teacher."

Stories like this don't just materialize overnight. R. J. Cutler (who also produced "The War Room") and his team of filmmakers recorded more than 2,000 hours of video in Highland Park. The students added 800 hours of video diaries. "Sometimes we turned off the cameras, but by the end of the process we got to the point where we were seeing everything," says Cutler. In this summer of "Survivor" and "Big Brother," Cutler says he's not worried that "American High" will be dwarfed by the reality-TV craze. "I don't see any connection between a show that puts real people into some fabricated situation and what we do," he says. "The lives of the people in our show are happening whether we're there to film it or not." In other words, "American High" is the real deal. ■

Making the grade: *Life at Highland Park High, featuring Morgan (bottom left)*

