

BOOK ALERT

The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market, by Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane (Princeton University Press).

On the big screen, self-aware and insubordinate robots mount organized rebellions that are defeated only by grand acts of human heroism. In the real world, policy challenges posed by new technologies are less dramatic, but only slightly less daunting.

As economists Levy and Murnane explain, computers excel at tasks that

can be reduced to the application of a set of rules (if X, then do Y), but fall short when it comes to more complex tasks involving the recognition of patterns (this reminds me of the time . . .). The distinction, while hardly

clear-cut, is useful. For instance, it explains why the rise of computers has not led to mass unemployment, as early observers worried, but instead has increased demand for workers capable of nonroutine, expert thinking.

The authors embrace “standards-based reform” as a means of bolstering our flagging school system to meet this demand, wisely noting that proficiency in core academic subjects is a prerequisite for higher-order tasks. Unfortunately, they also deem improvement in education a “slow and difficult process” that “cannot reach everyone”—thoughts seemingly inconsistent with the sense of urgency that authentic reform will require.

Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap, by Richard Rothstein (Economic Policy Institute).

Nobody who followed Richard Rothstein’s columns in the *New York*

Times or his earlier work on education will be surprised that his new book ascribes most of the black-white achievement gap to social class and economics. In effect, he devotes this book to affirming James Coleman’s 1966 finding that school differences have far less impact on achievement differences than do family characteristics, the mightiest of which, Rothstein says, is socioeconomic status.

Rothstein insists that contemporary school reforms cannot overcome that influence and therefore urges (if the country is serious about the gap closing) that we focus on equalizing income, housing, health care, and such. Indeed, Rothstein states, “If the nation can’t close the gaps in income, health, and housing, there is little prospect of equalizing achievement.” He also tries to debunk some well-known examples of schools

and educators that succeed with disadvantaged minority youngsters. He deprecates claims made by, among others, the Heritage Foundation, the Education Trust, KIPP

Academies, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and Jaime Escalante’s biographers, insisting that the achievements don’t amount to much or couldn’t be replicated or that the schools engage in cream skimming. The book, therefore, seeks to throw ice water on just about every popular form of contemporary school-centered reform.

And he does not hesitate to gore left as well as right, warning, for example, that today’s spate of “adequacy lawsuits” (which seek to reshape school finance by having judges force states to spend “adequate” amounts of

money on schooling) runs a risk of overpromising.

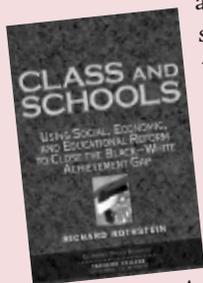
Is he right? Do we quit trying to fix the schools we’ve got while we wait for radical social changes to be made? Is this not a counsel of despair that plays right into the tendency of some educators to say, “We’re doing all that should be expected of us, given the kids we’re being sent from the homes they’re being sent from, so stop demanding more from us?”

Readers may also wish to read an important new essay by sociologist George Farkas, “The Black-White Test Score Gap” (*Contexts*, Spring 2004), which says that the racial rift is caused, more than any other thing, by divergent child-rearing practices (and preschool opportunities). Farkas doesn’t exactly contradict Rothstein, but he offers a more hopeful and actionable scenario instead of, in effect, suggesting that we sit on our hands until the Promised Land arrives.

Leaving No Child Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools, by Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn Jr., eds. (Palgrave).

If schools are found to be “failing” under *No Child Left Behind*, what happens to the children in them? According to the new law, after two years parents may choose another school in the same district and, one year later, they may obtain tutoring or other educational services.

But what happens in practice? Two years into the law’s implementation may be too soon to draw definitive conclusions, but this collection of essays, prepared under the direction of two of the editors of this journal, hints at a number of emerging



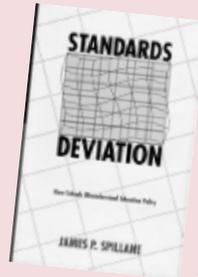
book review

problems: Choice is too limited, mechanisms to enforce compliance are lacking, and parents are not yet well informed.

If the material is at times excessively thick with factual detail, it is marvelously thin on ideological moralizing and full of practical suggestions for improving the law. One recommendation worth noting: Give parents more ready access to the popular tutoring option.

Standards Deviation: How Schools Misunderstand Education Policy, by James P. Spillane (Harvard University Press).

Spillane argues that problems in implementing education policy are



due primarily to insufficient attention to the “sense-making” needs of educators, by which he means the ability of teachers and administrators to understand the task assigned to them. He reaches this conclusion after interviewing administrators and surveying teachers about the implementation of new math and science curricula and other instructional material introduced in Michigan between 1989 and 1996.

The author makes sense when he notes that people find it easier to implement ideas with which they

are familiar and that they commonly interpret new policies through a lens conditioned by existing routines. But he ignores what previous studies have repeatedly shown: Local self-interests and perverse institutional incentives are the main obstacles to reform. The author instead takes the naive view that roadblocks are merely “cognitive” and can be overcome by more training and trust.

Unfortunately, Spillane does not sufficiently acknowledge that the lessons learned from Michigan are limited to just a few of the needed reforms. It is easier to change curricula than to alter administrative or teaching practice.

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