book review

If the World Is Flat
Why Does American Education Go in Circles?

The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century.
By Thomas L. Friedman.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, $27.50; 488 pages.

Reviewed by Michael J. Petrilli

Thomas Friedman’s The World Is Flat could have been the most influential prod to education reform since A Nation at Risk. The elements are all there: a growing foreign challenge (then, Japan; now, China and India); a new world of opportunity and competition (then, for American companies; now, thanks to the Internet, for individual Americans); and an inadequate response on our part (then, “a rising tide of mediocrity”; now, a grave shortage of math and science graduates). Again and again, Friedman hints at the need for bold education reform as he makes his case for greater competition in the marketplace, fewer labor restrictions, and lower barriers to trade. But after spending 300 pages hinting at a bold education-reform plan, he never pulls the trigger. Like the foreign aid efforts he criticizes, when it comes to education, he’s all promise, no delivery.

The book is not, of course, explicitly about education, but about globalization. According to Friedman, the convergence of advanced technologies, new ways of doing business, the removal of economic and political obstructions, and the rapid introduction of millions of young Chinese, Indian, and East European professionals into the world economy has dramatically leveled, or “flattened,” the global playing field. Overwhelmingly, Friedman finds this to be a positive development, opening up opportunities for billions more people to tap their full potential, boost their prosperity, and live their dreams, while creating an explosion of inventions and innovations that will benefit us all. Americans with the knowledge, skills, and adaptability to compete in this newly flattened world can look forward to a utopian future, full of interesting work and a rising standard of living.

Can We Get Ahead by Standing Still?
But what about Americans without a command of higher-level skills, or those whose work can be easily digitized? Just as many good-paying manufacturing jobs went offshore in the 1970s and 1980s, so too will many professional jobs head overseas in the years to come, if they aren’t eliminated altogether by technology. From calculating taxes and evaluating insurance claims to reading CAT scans and providing PowerPoint help to busy executives, work is heading to India, China, Poland, and other countries where labor is cheaper and, perhaps most unsettling, quality is often higher.

Americans, Friedman argues, cannot assume that we will maintain our comfortable lifestyle while standing still. He describes Bill Gates’s thoughts on the “ovarian lottery”: 30 years ago, if you had a choice between being born a genius in Bombay or average in Poughkeepsie, you would have chosen Poughkeepsie, because your chances of enjoying a decent life were greater there. Now, in the new plugged-in, interconnected, flat world of 2005, Gates says, “I would rather be a genius born in China than an average guy born in Poughkeepsie.” Microsoft and other companies will search the globe for talent, and wherever they find it—China, or India, or anywhere else—high-paying, challenging jobs will follow. The Indian company Infosys, for example, one of the primary beneficiaries of off-shoring, received one million applications last year for 9,000 technology jobs. Meanwhile, a Microsoft executive explains, “Remember, in China when you are one in a million, there are 1,300 other people just like you.” As Friedman says, “Have a nice day.”

How can we ensure that our children are ready to compete and succeed in this new flat world? Obviously, education is key, and Friedman says as much. He tells his own daughters, “Girls, when I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, ‘Tom, finish your dinner—people in China and India are starving.’ My advice to you is: Girls, finish your homework—people in China and India are starving.” His advice to you is: Girls, finish your homework—people in China and India are starving for your jobs.” He lays out the stark numbers to document our education gap: the U.S. now ranks 17th in the number of students receiving science degrees, down from 3rd three decades ago.
Forgetting the Punch Line

At this point, my inner school reformer was screaming, “Yes, yes, sock it to ’em, Tom!” After all, this is a book written by a Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist for the world’s most influential newspaper, guaranteed a wide and careful reading by millions, including the rich and powerful, and he is about to make a compelling case for urgent and radical school reform. Surely, I thought, he is going to argue that real competition, in the form of charters or maybe even vouchers, would have the same positive, transformative effects on our education system that the liberalization of India’s economy has had on its development. Without a doubt, I was convinced, he will make community college affordable for everyone; and scold parents into doing a better job. Well, his finger wagging at parents is persuasive: “The sense of entitlement, the sense that because we once dominated global commerce and geopolitics … we always will, the sense that delayed gratification is a punishment worse than a spanking, the sense that our kids have to be swaddled in cotton wool so that nothing bad or disappointing or stressful ever happens to them at school is, quite simply, a growing cancer on American society. And if we don’t start to reverse it, our kids are going to be in for a huge and socially disruptive shock.”

But Friedman describes a national crisis, then places responsibility in the home, shielding the education system itself from blame. His solutions are sorely inadequate and massively underwhelming. He even quotes Lou Gerstner, former CEO of IBM: “Transformation of an enterprise begins with a sense of crisis or urgency. No institution will go through fundamental change unless it believes it is in deep trouble and needs to do something different to survive.” To which Friedman adds, “It is impossible to ignore the parallel with America as a whole in the early twenty-first century.”

But Friedman does ignore the parallel with the education system, and his otherwise masterful book suffers greatly for its failure to address the crisis in schooling. It will be up to others to pick up where he left off, to explain to the nation that our education system, as it is currently configured, is incapable of helping enough of our children develop the high-level knowledge and skills that they need to succeed in today’s flat world. Friedman missed a perfect opportunity to connect the dots that he so perfectly draws: remove barriers to competition, inject accountability for results, and eliminate work rules that impede innovation and achievement. If it’s good enough for business and for the economic well-being of our country, as Friedman suggests, why not for our education system? Isn’t this exactly what our children and grandchildren need in order to have a shot at the good life so many of us have come to take for granted? Indeed, the world is getting flatter. Unfortunately, Thomas Friedman would let our education system fall off the edge.