While math scores are bandied about in the modern era, how much do we really know about what they mean or what they can teach about practice and policy? In this dense but thought-provoking volume, Brookings scholar Tom Loveless and an impressive cast of international scholars make it their task to find out. Several decades of international data demonstrate that substantial variation exists among nations; that leading nations succeed with virtually all of their students; and that wealth, cultural support, and curricular content matter. Extending William Schmidt’s decade-old observation that the U.S. math curriculum is “a mile wide and an inch deep,” Schmidt and Richard Houang find evidence that coherence and focus have a substantial impact on math achievement. They recommend that nations focus on fewer math topics, approach those in a sequential manner, and focus on deep mastery. Contributors also challenge conventional nostrums in reporting no evidence that student achievement in math benefits from “reform-oriented” instructional practices championed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, smaller schools, or the use of technology in math classes. Ultimately, Loveless argues that we can learn much more from international tests than how the U.S. fares in the “horse race”—and this collection points the way.


Montgomery, a professor of communications at American University and founder of the Center for Media Education, examines how the new media landscape is changing the nature of childhood. Ranging from issues like lawsuits over illegal music file sharing to the programming of the Nickelodeon network to online politics, Montgomery charts the new world of the Internet and cable television. For policymakers, parents, and educators for whom the emerging communications landscape can be a blur—pocked by vaguely understood brands like MySpace and Facebook—Montgomery’s account provides an invaluable tour guide to the new terrain. She notes the eagerness of Madison Avenue to market to youth through emerging media, and hails the creation of “parental empowerment” tools like filtering software and rating systems, while noting their limits and sometimes tangled politics. Where the volume may disappoint is when it comes to conclusions or takeaways. In the final pages, the straight-shooting Montgomery lapses into calls for more multidisciplinary research, funding for research on the new media, and thinking about how we might use new media to promote political and civic engagement. Weak stuff, especially given her thoughtful and enlightening narrative. Still a volume well worth reading.


The best thing about this book is its title; unfortunately, its pages fail to fulfill the promise of its cover. Rather than offering actionable insights for
education leaders drawn from the corporate world, it provides a 250-page review of the literature on business turnarounds, with two education chapters stapled to the back. The whole is not greater than the sum of its parts. And its parts aren’t even that good. The literature review is mind-numbing and jargon-laden.

Do we really need scholars to tell us that there is “considerable support for the claim that ‘turnarounds may vary in nature’ and that ‘no two [turnaround firms] are alike’”? Meanwhile, the education chapters offer the not-so-stunning conclusion that there’s very little research to guide school turnaround efforts, though some evidence shows that the strategy can work, under the right conditions, with the right leadership. Perhaps the National Staff Development Council and the American Association of School Administrators, which helped to publish the volume, figured that their members could draw out clearer lessons for themselves. To which we say: good luck with that.

Not as Good as You Think: Why the Middle Class Needs School Choice. Lance T. Izumi, Vicki E. Murray, and Rachel S. Chaney (Pacific Research Institute).

This California-centric volume contends that many middle-class families live under the illusion that their kids’ schools are swell and that it’s only poor families whose children are trapped in bad schools and therefore need charters, vouchers, open enrollment plans, and other policies and programs designed to afford them access to better options. The Pacific Research Institute authors further contend that policymakers who confine school-choice programs to low-income youngsters are failing to solve America’s education quality and equity problems. Bottom line: just about everybody would benefit from school choice and lawmakers need to understand that.

No doubt that’s so. What weakens the argument in these pages is the elaborately anecdotal nature of most of the evidence that the authors present, more an imaginary tour of handpicked California schools and communities than any aggregate data or cogent generalizations. There’s no denying that a number of that state’s schools serving non-poor communities have weak academic performance records, that some are also mismanaged and fiscally wasteful and that plenty of families don’t realize this, and that more than a few real-estate agents benefit from their ignorance. Plenty of examples are provided. But the reader ends up with no clear sense of how widespread and generalizable those problems are—and much of the book consists of familiar rebuttals of hackneyed objections to school choice.