



Rounding out our future workforce

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By Jamie Gass

IT MAY BE a modern heresy to take issue with Thomas Friedman's best-selling book on globalization, "The World Is Flat," but Columbus's voyages washed away forever any notions of a level earth. These days, when we consider the competitiveness of US public schools and international trade concerns, we see again that the contour of our world is still very much round.

Nowhere does America's anxiety over global competition collide more dramatically with our natural optimism than with regard to the state of public schools. These schools need to be the wellspring of our future citizenship and ability to compete. The decline of American manufacturing and job losses due to outsourcing are exacerbated by the lack of academic excellence and the inequality of opportunity in too many school districts.

Despite the fact that Bay State students are the nation's best in terms of SAT and National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, serious work lies ahead. These aggregate test results conceal the chronic low performance in urban school districts. In 2005, 63 schools in Boston, 23 in Worcester, and 29 in Springfield were placed on the federal No Child Left Behind "watch" list. Yet the state has not declared any of these school districts "underperforming," which would be the first step toward greater accountability and competitive turnaround.

In American education, where 90 cents of every tax dollar is still spent by state and local governments, legislators should be mindful of the educational protectionism of school superintendents, school committees, and teachers' unions. These special-interest groups have sheltered their constituencies from competitive forces by opposing public charter schools, district accountability, and school choice. With China annually producing five times as many engineers as the United States, the relationship between public education and the global economy is not flat, but dynamically interrelated.

According to the World Factbook, the size of the global economy is about \$55.5 trillion, of which the US economy comprises \$11.7 trillion; the European Union, \$11.6 trillion; China, \$7.2 trillion; Japan, \$3.7 trillion; and India, \$3.3 trillion. Nevertheless, authors like Friedman, Ted Fishman, and Clyde Prestowitz tell us that, because of the 3 billion new capitalists in the world from China, India, and the former Soviet Union, competition is growing exponentially. By 2050, China's economy is projected to be 75 percent larger than ours.

These global forecasts should startle us from our complacency. After all, in 1945, the United States was the world's largest manufacturer and creditor. We produced two-thirds of the earth's oil and more than half its electricity, and were responsible for half of the world's total economic output and trade. In the prosperous 60 years since World War II ended, no nation has done more to spread the ideals of free-trade globalism than the United States. Moreover, as the economic historian John Steele Gordon wrote, "Free trade has proven the greatest engine of economic growth the world has ever known."

While the United States embraces free trade, global competitors like China and India are catching up, and are rapidly doing so by ignoring free-market principles. Since China and India initiated their quasi-capitalist reforms, they have employed high protective tariffs averaging about 17 percent and 25

percent, respectively. The realities of foreign workers earning less than a dollar an hour, America running \$700 billion in annual trade deficits, and China serving as the epicenter of the world's \$650-billion-per-year counterfeit intellectual property industry chart the shifting financial tides of globalization. In order for Americans to navigate this radically interconnected new world, it is crucial that public schools generate educated, economically literate, and technologically innovative students.

For 21st-century America, the protectionism of both our economic rivals and powerful teachers' labor unions must be opened to competitive forces. Then, China and India might not seem so ominous, and our educators would be compelled to teach our children the knowledge and skills they need to survive in the global economy. Until true competition materializes in both spheres, Americans will continue worrying superstitiously about sailing off the face of the earth.

Jamie Gass is the director of education research and programs for Pioneer Institute.