American Association of School Administrators

THE SCHOOL Administrator

February 2008

Features

Tom Friedman on Education in the 'Flat World'

A discussion with author Daniel Pink on curiosity, passion and the politics of school reform in the global marketplace

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set out to demonstrate that the world was round. Five hundred plus years later, Thomas Friedman set his sights on explaining that the real new world had a different shape. In his book *The World Is Flat*, Friedman describes how 10 forces are "flattening" the 21st century — making it easier for people in India, China and around the world to compete with Americans and others who had triumphed the century before.

The book has become a huge best-seller in the United States and abroad. And a phrase that once suggested cluelessness — the world is flat — became a marker of sophistication. Educators across America read the work, discussed its arguments and reflected on what it meant for their schools. Meanwhile, Friedman, whose day job is penning a foreign affairs column for *The New York Times*, began hearing from readers who urged him to expand the book. And what readers most wanted to hear about was education, something that Friedman, whose wife is a long-time public school teacher in suburban Maryland and whose daughter is a first-year teacher in Washington, D.C, was all too happy to explore.

Version 2.0, as he calls it, came out in 2006. The paperback edition, Version 3.0, was published in the past year. Today, even as Friedman works on a new book — about environmental technology, economics and geopolitics — *The World Is Flat* continues to reverberate in education circles. It remains a staple in the bedside reading piles of many superintendents.

We sent Daniel Pink — himself the author of another best-selling book that's been embraced by educators, *A Whole New Mind* — to talk with Friedman in his office at the *Times*' Washington bureau. What followed was a wide-ranging conversation about schools, parents, mash-ups, horizontal thinking and the value of "yes, but" teaching.

Daniel Pink: Tom, in the newest editions of *The World Is Flat*, most of the additions have to do with education. Why is that?

Thomas Friedman: That's the question I was asked the most. "Okay, Tom. I'll buy that the world is flat. What do I tell my kids?"

Pink: So what's the answer? What should we be telling our kids?

Friedman: It's really several things. In the latest edition, I added a whole section on why liberal arts are more important than ever. It's not that I don't think math and science are important. They still are. But more than ever our secret sauce comes from our ability to integrate art, science, music and literature with the hard sciences. That's what produces an iPod revolution or a Google.

Pink: It's the combination of the left brain and the right brain. Left-brain thinking — rule-based, linear, SAT-style thinking — used to be enough. Now right-brain thinking — artistry, empathy, narrative, synthesis — is the big differentiator.

Friedman: Exactly. You know, I just came back from China and they're always proud of how many engineers they're educating. They are and bless them for it. But they're not educating rounded engineers. I hope we are.

Pink: You write in *The World Is Flat* about Georgia Tech emphasizing art and music for engineers. Is that the right approach?

Friedman: Yes. The Georgia Tech model says your job is most likely not going to be a pure engineering job. Let's say you work for CNN as a computer specialist. It's very likely you will be asked to integrate different kinds of content with different kinds of technology platforms. If schools can actually produce people who are good synthesizers, they're going to be more effective and innovative workers.
Pink: What are some other additions you've made as you've thought more about education and learning?

Friedman: The need for navigation skills.

Pink: What do you mean by that?

Friedman: My friend Joel Cawley from IBM was telling me that his daughter, who was in junior high, came home one day and said, "Dad, my teacher has banned Wikipedia. She says that we cannot cite Wikipedia in any papers because it's unreliable." Joel said he thought that was a real mistake, that kids should be forced to learn how to navigate, how to judge what's in Wikipedia. They should be taught to triangulate it with what's in the Encyclopaedia Britannica and what's in other sources. One of the scary things to me about the Internet is that it's an open sewer of untreated, unfiltered information. If kids don't know how to navigate — to know if something is really true and not just to grab the latest thing off Wikipedia — they're going to have a problem in life.

Pink: Once again, it goes back to integration. Or what I've called symphony, which is the ability to fit the pieces together.

Friedman: Absolutely. My friend Rob Watson — a great environmentalist who founded the LEED building concept — Rob likes to say that integration is the new specialty. The generalist is really going to come back. The great generalist — someone who has a renaissance view of the world — is more likely to spark an innovation than the pure engineer.

Pink: Let's take this to the people who are reading this interview — school

superintendents and administrators. Right now we frog-march kids from math to science to English — and too rarely make the connections among the disciplines. In your travels have you seen any examples of a smarter approach?

Friedman: I'll give you one of my favorite examples: Rainforest Math. There's so much one can learn from the laws of nature — not just biology, but Einstein, Newton, physics. And you drive both environmentalism and you drive math. So it's those kinds of intersections that are going to produce the most innovative students.

Pink: So how do we bring that into the system? There's team teaching, integrating the arts into the curriculum, writing across subject areas. What else?

Friedman: I think you've got to force it a little like Georgia Tech did and say: "You are going to study computing, and you are going to study screenwriting." Then the assignment in the class is: Write an online play with what you've learned.

Pink: That makes sense. Instruction in the subject matter areas, but then leave the execution to the students. And give them a fair amount of autonomy along the way.

Friedman: Right. The assignment can be: "Mash these two together."

Pink: And these kids get mash-ups.

Friedman: Oh, they get mash-ups. They do it naturally. And today, he who mashes best will mash most and be wealthiest.

Pink: Which country is the best masher on the planet?

Friedman: Oh, we are still. It's not even close. But that's why we have to keep our country open. You know, Dan, I've been saying to people: "I used to be a free trader. I'm not anymore. Now, I'm a radical free trader."
Pink: Why?

Friedman: Because if we live in a flat world where whatever can be done will be done, guess who's going to win? People who get the signals first, who do it before it's done to them.

Pink: Okay. Integration. Right-brain thinking. Getting signals first. What else should schools be thinking about?

Friedman: I've added something I got from my friend Ramalinga Raju from Satyam, the Indian company. We decided that the greatest economic competition in the world going forward is not going to be between countries and countries. And it's not going to be between companies and companies. The greatest economic competition going forward is going to be between you and your own imagination. Your ability to act on your imagination is going to be so decisive in driving your future and the standard of living in your country. So the school, the state, the country that empowers, nurtures, enables imagination among its students and citizens, that's who's going to be the winner.

Pink: What's your take on how that is going in the U.S. schools compared with

education systems in other countries?

Friedman: What's happening, I believe in the world, is a global convergence. China's trying to get more innovative. And we're trying to get more rigorous. But I'd rather have our problem than theirs because I think this right-brain stuff is very culture-bound and often hard to teach.

Pink: Let's go to math and science for a moment. I find that in conversations about education, math and science is a showstopper. It's a trump card. You slap it down — "But what about math and science?" — and then all of sudden any discussion about the arts or synthesis or empathy just ceases. Your thoughts?

Friedman: My favorite story is about [Apple CEO] Steve Jobs' speech at Stanford's graduation. He says, "You know, I dropped out of Reed College and had nothing to do so I took a course in calligraphy. And it all went into the Mac keyboard!" That was not an algorithm. That was a question of style and it helped define Apple's niche. Now, that's not to put down algorithms. Apple needed those algorithms to enable it all to happen. It's just you've got to have both. It's about integrating the two.

Pink: Right. What's needed, some might say, is a whole new mind

Friedman (laughing): Yeah, exactly.

Pink: Let's go back to Steve Jobs because I think it's an interesting example. He took that course in calligraphy because he was curious about it. How are we doing on that dimension, on putting kids in contexts that allow them both to be curious and allow them to get the benefits of curiosity?

Friedman: We could be doing better.

As you know, my equation is CQ + PQ > IQ. Curiosity Quotient plus Passion Quotient is more important than Intelligence Quotient.

Pink: Amen. You show me a curious, intrinsically motivated kid — and I'll show you someone who'll leave the kid who merely complies with the rules and studies for the SAT in the dust.

Friedman: I didn't even get 600 on my math SATs. But I'm a really lateral thinker and I really get energized by people who think laterally because I think that's where the breakthroughs are. This way of thinking is partly innate, but also something that can be acquired. But it's got to be taught. Do you know what the hardest word in journalism is?

Pink: What?

Friedman: Yes.

Pink: Yes? What do you mean?

Friedman: Some editors say, "No, that's not a story, that's no good." But others say, "Yes, but you might want to just formulate it over there or put these two things

together. Yes, that's a great idea, go for it." You empower someone that way. They'll get the right answer. But "no" — just that one less letter — it seems to come off the lips so much easier for people. "No, that doesn't work. No, you shouldn't do that." Whereas "Yes, Timmy, that's a beautiful idea, but why don't you bring a little bit of the science into it now and bring it together with the English?" That kid will go back and surprise you.

Pink: Great point. I think we need a lot more "yes, but" teaching. You've also made a very strong and compelling argument that what might be most important is learning how to learn. How can schools equip more kids with this capacity?

Friedman: Ultimately that almost becomes a psychologist's question: How do you stimulate curiosity? I will learn how to learn if I'm curious.

Pink: But if there's a curiosity deficit, that's peculiar. Kids seem hardwired to explore and investigate. Something happens to them along the way.

Friedman: We beat it out of them.

Pink: When you say "we," whom do you mean? Teachers? Principals? Parents?

Friedman: Well, the system. I don't want to blame anyone. Because of the walls and the silos we've built in, to be curious that means you've got to cut across them. Curiosity is all horizontal, but specialties are vertical. And specialties protect themselves. So if I can't move horizontally to take me where my curiosity is taking me, I have got a real problem.

Pink: If you look at it in a systemic way, it doesn't make any sense at all. Human beings are naturally curious, I think. Curiosity is probably an evolutionary adaptation. It has to be. You're more likely to survive if you're curious about whether there's a saber-toothed tiger around the corner. The guy who's not curious becomes lunch. So we have these innately curious little humans. They hit a system that suffocates the curiosity. And now we're saying, "Oh, by the way, now that you're 18 or 19, time to be curious again."

Friedman: Exactly.

Pink: It seems at best misaligned, at worst insane.

Friedman: And that's why the Steve Jobses and the Bill Gateses drop out. What does it tell you when two of our greatest innovators are both college dropouts? Something's not quite right about the system.

Pink: Does this call into question the concept of the "school" as we typically think of it? In a world where information was scarce, schools operated as kind of a repository of that precious resource. But now information is abundant. A school doesn't have to harvest and distribute this scarce resource. It has to serve some other kind of function.

Friedman: Right. When information is really abundant, when we can literally pluck it out of the air, you need people to sift it, sort it and connect it.

Pink: Sifters, sorters, connectors, "yes but-ers." That's a nice way to describe a teacher's role today. Now let me ask you a question that's tinged a little bit with politics. Neither one of us are educators. But we've both had the good fortune to talk to lots of teachers, principals and superintendents over the last year. I suspect that being a sifter, a sorter and a yes but-er in a world of No Child Left Behind is pretty difficult.

Friedman: It is, although it's not impossible. My wife teaches 1st-grade reading and is under the strictures of No Child Left Behind. She's got her handheld device that she's always going around with testing and whatnot. But I know from her staying up late doing lessons that she's trying to stimulate all those other parts of kids' minds. So again, you don't want to go to either extreme here. You can't be a really good connector if you don't know algorithms and calculus. But you can't be a connector if you only know algorithms and calculus. So it's really striking a balance. And the question is, in the last decade, have we gotten out of balance?

Pink: I think the answer is yes. You've got schools moving ever more toward routines, right answers, and standardization — at precisely the moment that the wider world is moving toward novelty, nuance and customization. It's scary. And it's not the fault of teachers, principals and superintendents. In fact, the more time I spend in schools, the more I realize how heroic the work they're doing really is.

Friedman: Absolutely.

Pink: It's such a massively screwed-up system that it's inspiring that they're willing to show up every day to push the boulder a little further up the mountain. But that leads me to another question — one that I don't think is asked often enough: Are we asking too much of schools?

Friedman: Absolutely. My wife and I talk about this a lot. Someone asked her the other day if she were to write a book on education what would it be about? And she said: It would be a book on parenting. So many parents are sending their kids to these schools to be parented, to be taught some really basic attitudinal things and behavioral things. We're not going to get better educators and better schools without better parents. There's no way.

Pink: How do you move in that direction? I feel like schools have become the receptacle of all our unmet social needs and social problems.

Friedman: Right. And then we blame the teachers. We blame the teachers union.

Pink: We've got hungry kids? Feed them in school. We've got kids who don't have a sound moral sensibility? Time for character education. We've got kids who don't know the birds and the bees? We require sex education. Is there a way to arrest that and say that schools should be about education and learning — and not these other problems?

Friedman: I think it comes back to parenting. And parenting is so much about role models. My wife is a parent a lot like her mother was. She's a parent a lot like her grandmother was. I can see that. I have a feeling my daughters will be parents just like my wife was. So the question is: How do you get those role models out there — especially in disadvantaged communities? It's a real problem, a real challenge.

Pink: You've got two daughters. One is a college sophomore and the other is a new

teacher with Teach for America. As a parent, what did you do to encourage the sorts of behaviors and attitudes that you think are important?

Friedman: First of all, I never told my kids what they should study. My parents didn't. That's how I ended up studying Arabic at the University of Minnesota in 1975. So I'm a real big believer that you should do what you love and follow your nose. That's No. 1. My youngest daughter is interested in multiculturalism, black-Jewish understanding issues, minority understanding issues and how to break down barriers between groups. I don't know anything about that, but I am just her total backer in that. My oldest daughter is interested in fashion design. She started a fashion magazine at Yale, the first student fashion magazine. She was also interested in urban design, and she got interested in India through that. Whatever they wanted to do. My only stricture was do it well.

Pink: What else is in the Friedman parenting plan?

Friedman: I've always encouraged them to write. You can be the smartest, most capable person, but if you can't express yourself in words on paper, you'll have a real liability in competing.

Pink: Let's go to a couple of more questions before we wrap up. Think about the daunting job of being a school superintendent. Having traveled the world and having a keen sense of how the economy works, what advice would you give to superintendents about how they can move the rock a little bit up the hill?

Friedman: You know, I have great respect for the superintendent of schools here in Montgomery County, Md., Jerry Weast. I think superintendents have a hard job because they have so many different constituencies — teachers, parents, students …

Pink: Who are never happy at the same time.

Friedman: Exactly. Maybe the most important piece of advice is: Know what you believe and stick with it. Don't let people knock you off your game, because it's so easy to do in this world. The teachers and administrators I remember most and respected best were people who were real pillars of integrity, rectitude and toughness. You've got to stand your ground.

Pink: Good advice. One more question. Education reform is in the air. It's something that we have a sense in our gut is important for this country. How much does whom we elect as president in November matter in that regard?

Friedman: A great deal. The president has to be someone who inspires on the big issues, one who can lay out projects that really stimulate education all the way down the line. Today, the president's got to be our chief education officer.

Pink: Chief education officer. I love it. From your lips to the candidates' ears.