

Flattening the Great Education Myth

- David Sirota

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(12-04) 04:00 PST Helena, Mont. -- HELENA IS NOT the kind of place that top government officials, business leaders or Washington pundits usually think of when they discuss international trade policy. That's too bad, because had they attended the community meeting in this mountain hamlet last month, they would have seen firsthand how powerless middle America is in what has become a vacuum of national leadership on globalization.

The meeting was entitled "A Flattened World Hits Home" and billed as an effort to apply the lessons of author Thomas Friedman's free-trade bible, "The World Is Flat," to the rural outpost of Montana. Friedman himself could not be there, the panel moderator told us - the town couldn't afford his \$75,000-a-speech fee and first-class plane ticket. But we would just watch a video of a recent lecture the author had given.

I surveyed the scene as Friedman's happy talk about globalization and job outsourcing echoed through the wood-paneled Montana Club -- the gathering spot for the town's old guard -- where the meeting was taking place. The crowd was a mix of businesspeople, state government workers, school teachers, and in the back, high-school students.

As the New York Times columnist rattled off the wonders of technology - "Isn't Linux great?" "Wireless is the steroids of the flat world" - the group was dead silent as it listened to an enthusiastic and joyful Friedman telling the story of how, thanks to a "flat" world brought on by America's "free" trade policy, our country's workers and small businesses must now compete with slave labor and desperate conditions in places like China and Bangladesh.

Then it was time for panel discussion. How would our community deal with the "flat world" that Friedman gushed about?

"We need to increase educational opportunity," said Tyler Trevor, an aide to Montana's commissioner of higher education. "We have to create our own educational capital here."

"We don't invest in good teaching practices," said Bruce Messinger, Helena's superintendent of schools. "We have to make sure our teachers are using the best methods."

All said exactly what Friedman said at the end of his videotape: "Kids need to learn how to learn" in order to compete in the "flat world."

Sadly, the hard data tells us that, as comforting as this Great Education Myth is, we cannot school our way out of the problems accompanying a national trade policy devoid of wage, environmental and human-rights protections.

As Fortune Magazine reported last year, "The skill premium, the extra value of higher education, must have declined after three decades of growing." Citing the U.S. government's Economic Report of the President, the magazine noted that "real annual earnings of college graduates actually declined" between 2000 and 2004. The magazine also noted that new studies "show companies massively shifting high-skilled work -- research, development, engineering, even corporate finance -- from the United States to low-cost countries like India and China."

It's not that workers in these other countries are smarter, says Sheldon Steinbach of the American Council on Education. "One could be educationally competitive and easily lose out in the global economic marketplace," he told the Los Angeles Times. Why? "Because of significantly lower wages being paid elsewhere."

Pundits, such as Friedman and the Washington policymakers who follow him, see the data and understand this reality, and yet continue preaching their "free" trade fundamentalism to the delight of corporate lobbyists whose clients' profits are expanding under the status quo.

But while the Beltway elite can be blamed for this calculated trickery, community leaders similar to those at the Helena meeting have no choice but to keep faith in the Great Education Myth. Local leaders, earnestly trying to do good, must force themselves to think that if only they work harder to make their schools and colleges better, they can avoid the harsh consequences of lobbyist-written federal trade, tax and economic policies that reward job outsourcing.

It all highlights one simple truth: Unless communities demand their congressional representatives add protections to our national trade policy to make sure our workers are not forced to compete with slave labor, middle America will not benefit from the "flat" world, but rather will be flattened altogether.

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