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The inadequacies and inequities in public education that persist today, five decades after the Civil Rights Movement, are the source of the decline of the United States as a world super-power. The high school graduation rate is stuck at approximately 70%, and the 30% of students who do not graduate, primarily African Americans and other students of color, are unlikely to find successful employment. Most of them will end up on public assistance, and of those, 1 in 10 will end up in prison, the ultimate, and most costly, form of public assistance (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Linda Darling-Hammond gives a sobering and extremely well-documented account of the United States’ continuing national tolerance of an unjust

educational system and our self-destructive resistance to comprehensive reform.

As other nations adapt to the needs of their school children in relation to the demands of the global economy, the United States is mired in a downward spiral which is not only devastating the lives of millions of children and their families, but which is also destroying our national standing in the world and threatening our national security. Darling-Hammond issues a call for “a thoughtful, well-organized, and well-supported set of policies that will enable students to learn how to learn, create, and invent the new world they are entering” (p. 3). She maintains that we must “finally make good on the unmet American promise that education will be available to all on equal terms, so that every member of this society can realize a productive life and contribute to the greater welfare” (p. 3).

Darling-Hammond explains that the public school system’s failure to thrive is situated within a larger societal and governmental context, stating that, “In other developed countries, schools can focus primarily on providing education, rather than on having to provide breakfasts and lunches, help families find housing and health care, and deal with the constant mobility due to evictions, the effects of untreated physical and mental illness, and the large gaps in children’s readiness that exist upon entry to school” (p. 33). She points out that schools that are predominantly African American are more segregated today than they were 25 years ago and less adequately resourced (p. 16).

In Chapter One, Darling Hammond outlines how we got to where we are in terms of educational dysfunction, and she makes recommendations for action, in both practice and policy. In Chapter Two, she outlines how the “opportunity gap,” which is a more accurate term than “achievement gap,” has been allowed to persist. In Chapters Three and Four, she discusses the roadblocks to achieving educational adequacy and equity through standards reform and finance reform, explaining that, whereas civil rights advocates have supported NCLB for its “emphasis on improving scores for students of color and those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities” (p. 67), the low-quality tests have “driven a narrow curriculum disconnected from the higher-order
skills needed in today’s world” (p. 67). Chapters Five and Six examine how several states and other nations have developed higher-performing and more responsive systems by strategically investing in sound reform. She argues that high-quality teaching, based on high-quality teacher preparation and staff development, are essential for student success in Chapter Seven, that strong organization leadership must be in place, in Chapter Eight, and that educational policy at the district, state, and national levels must align with best practice, in Chapter Nine (p. 26).

*The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future* is an authoritative wake-up call that reads loud and clear. Darling Hammond explains the highly complicated, extremely political, and ever-varied “system” of public education in a way that professional educators can recognize and lay people can understand.

One of Darling-Hammond’s absolute strengths is her ability to invite her readers inside, to view the problems in public schools from multiple perspectives. She allows her readers to “visit” the inside of crumbling, filthy, unsafe, and demoralizing school buildings and introduces readers to many of our most vulnerable young charges, quoting their straightforward and often profound insights into how the system fails to meet their needs. Darling-Hammond shifts seamlessly from the classroom view to a picture of the national landscape - from the tapestry of state and local policy to a wide lens panoramic world view of competition, complete with winners and losers. After building an extremely strong case for intelligent reform, she clearly outlines her recommendations for change.

Because this book calls for action, its merit will be determined by the change it affects in the real world. Practitioners are challenged to operationalize the change, working in concert with others in their districts, states, and throughout the nation. However, even leaders who are unambiguously committed to social justice and equity can get lost in the sheer scope of the task at hand. A problem of this magnitude and that has persisted for so long requires extremely strong, multi-level organizational leadership. A more detailed and specific, sequential list of action steps would strengthen the text and increase the possibility of positive, lasting improvement. This would,
in effect, take us from understanding what needs to happen to how to make it happen.

*The Flat World of Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* is a must-read book for educators and policy makers. It should be included in university and alternative teacher preparation classes and graduate programs which prepare K-12 and higher education leaders. It should be read by school administrations, school board members, and government officials, particularly legislators. These groups must share a common understanding of the problems with school adequacy and equity and of the exponential consequences of continuing to neglect this obligation. Educators must work together to build a system of high-achieving and equitable schools which ensure the right of every child to learn. As Darling-Hammond states,

> It is not only possible but imperative that America close the achievement gap among its children by addressing the yawning achievement that denies these fundamental rights. . . . If No Child Left Behind is to be anything more than empty rhetoric, we will need a policy strategy that creates a 21st century curriculum for students and supports it with thoughtful assessments, access to knowledgeable, well-supported teachers, and equal access to school resources (p. 327).