The Flickering Mind: Saving Education from the False Promise of Technology

Todd Oppenheimer

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The Flickering Mind, by National Magazine Award winner Todd Oppenheimer, is a landmark account of the failure of technology to improve our schools and a call for renewed emphasis on what really works.

American education faces an unusual moment of crisis. For decades, our schools have been beaten down by a series of curriculum fads, empty crusades for reform, and stingy funding. Now education and political leaders have offered their biggest and most expensive promise ever—the miracle of computers and the Internet—at a cost of approximately $70 billion just during the decade of the 1990s. Computer technology has become so prevalent that it is transforming nearly every corner of the academic world, from our efforts to close the gap between rich and poor, to our hopes for school reform, to our basic methods of developing the human imagination. Technology is also recasting the relationships that schools strike with the business community, changing public beliefs about the demands of tomorrow's working world, and reframing the nation's systems for researching, testing, and evaluating achievement.

All this change has led to a culture of the flickering mind, and a generation teetering between two possible futures. In one, youngsters have a chance to become confident masters of the tools of their day, to better address the problems of tomorrow. Alternatively, they can become victims of commercial novelties and narrow measures of ability, underscored by misplaced faith in standardized testing.

At this point, America's students can't even make a fair choice. They are an increasingly distracted lot. Their ability to reason, to listen, to feel empathy, is quite literally flickering. Computers and their attendant technologies did not cause all these problems, but they are quietly accelerating them. In this authoritative and impassioned account of the state of education in America, Todd Oppenheimer shows why it does not have to be this way.

Oppenheimer visited dozens of schools nationwide—public and private, urban and rural—to present the compelling tales that frame this book. He consulted with experts, read volumes of studies, and came to strong and persuasive conclusions: that the essentials of learning have been gradually forgotten and that they matter much more than the novelties of technology. He argues that every time we computerize a science class or shut down a music program to pay for new hardware, we lose sight of what our priority should be: "enlightened basics." Broad in scope and investigative in treatment, The Flickering Mind will not only contribute to a vital public conversation about what our schools can and should be—it will define the debate.

From the Hardcover edition.

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