



268 Miles Per Hour to Nowhere

Getting your school district on the fast track to success may mean having a closer look at staying on the rails.

At a cost of over a billion dollars, the Chinese Government built a state of the art magnetic train (Shanghai Maglev) capable of carrying up to 600 passengers. The train can reach speeds of 220 miles per hour in two minutes and then thereafter reach full normal operating speed of 268 miles per hour. The train operates on an 19 mile track that on one end connects to the Pudong International Airport in Shanghai. Problem is, the other end of the track connects to a station travelers complain is in the middle of nowhere. It requires another 20-minute slow train ride (or longer taxi cab ride) to reach the center of Shanghai. This has resulted in embarrassing low ridership. The project was pegged by journalists as an “image” project to make the government look good in its prowess with technology and good things to come.

On the other side of the world in Western Europe, another train service has transported over a billion people—the TGV



CREDIT: Amtrak

(*Train à Grande Vitesse*). This service runs on conventional tracks significantly modified to accommodate high speeds with specially banked curves, elimination of railroad crossings, and completely fenced off tracks. These trains offer service to the centers of hundreds of cities in France, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Luxemburg and Spain. They can average nearly 200 miles per hour; a specially modified train under test conditions ran at 357 miles per hour—the record.

In the U.S., we actually have a TGV train. It's called the Acela Express, is run by Amtrak and connects Baltimore, DC, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston—a 470 mile journey. Unfortunately, even though the train is capable of running at 165 miles per hour, average speed is about half that—80 miles per hour. It has problems with: the track, too many sharp curves in the track, rail crossings, shared tracks with other trains and parallel tracks that are too close—with clearance between trains being only 10 inches.

In education, 21st-century skills is like speed and passengers. We want to get many of them (our students) there. We may even have some teachers, principals, and innovative 21st-century school models (the trains) that we want to support, models capable of transporting our kids into the 21st century effectively. Problem is, how are

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districts to support 21st-century schools? Here are three different scenarios of school districts attempting to support 21st century schools:

1. Some districts, embark on “Image” projects—that sound and look good. Fancy policies, ambitious plans, fancy “pilots”, sexy programs within a school—but in the end, it's a train that goes nowhere. The destination is not good enough for most of the students. Those programs and classrooms look great—and kids seem to be enjoying it—but just like the passengers on the Shanghai Maglev, it drops them off in the middle of nowhere and requires students to revert back to 19th- and 20th-century learning for the majority of their journey.

2. Some districts, manage to adopt a good 21st-century school model but fail to make the organization changes needed to support it—like the Acela express. These school may serve a number of kids well, but are really running at half speed because of all the things that the district gets in their way. Many of the things that get in the way are “well-intentioned” and may even be research-based. However, throwing a bunch of research based components doesn't make a good model—just like buying a bunch of best car parts doesn't make a great car.

3. Very few districts take the approach of TGV. They have the right train technology capable of breaking all world records and support really high performance school models. However, they take what

they have (standard tracks) and make *drastic* changes to fit the needs of the train to enable high speed and passenger comfort. They understand that *all* passengers must be able to get there quickly and conveniently. All students are not just capable of learning. Instead, all students *will* learn. They keep making micro adjustments to their tracks to enable faster and smoother rides—continuous improvement.

Bottom line? To support 21st-century schools and learning, you must become a 21st-century organization. It's a mindset and involves a way of behaving. There is a clear destination. This is *more* than throwing a fast train on your regular tracks with little tweaks. One must be willing to make those *drastic* mindset changes to not just accommodate but support the needs of 21st-century schools and 21st-century learning. This is more than

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creating a state-of-the-art school pilot, part-day program that doesn't change the whole experience for the student. What major track changes do you need to make?

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