



## The Longest Snipe Hunt in History

Will we ever bag the beast of student performance? 5 steps for making a solid attempt—and not getting lost in the woods.

---

**Recently, my 16-year old** daughter and her friends were on a camping trip when they fell victim to one of the oldest scams in the book: *Snipe hunting*. For those uninitiated city folk, this usually involves a brilliantly executed scam relying on:

1. Trust in authority figures
2. Unknown terrain and
3. Being in the dark.

Children (and some adult victims) are told by older children and adult authority figures about cute, furry "Snipe" creatures that can be captured by using sacks and by making certain noises. After fruitless hours of searching the woods—egged on by my stories of heroic past snipe captures—the children come up empty, frustrated with their unfruitful efforts. Sometimes the disappointment lasts into adulthood (I hope that's not you), until finally—in one unsettling moment—they realize that there



were no such things as "Snipes". This is followed by a personal crisis of who-to-trust and questions of what other held-true paradigms were also all-along false.

Public education has fell victim to one of the longest Snipe hunts in history. The education Snipe hunt is a belief system: just get the right pieces in place—the "silver bullets" (longer school day, different curriculum, technology, more money, smaller class sizes, block scheduling, project-based learning, better standards, better test, more assessments, better data

systems—the list goes on and on) and you will bag the beast of student performance. But something isn't right.

Some schools get more money, but do worse. Others have longer school days and smaller class sizes, yet aren't successful. Performance varies tremendously between schools using the same curriculum, standards, assessments and tests. Worse: we discover that standards weren't really high enough—like with what recently happened in New York. And if there indeed *were* some magic combination of all the right components, then we shouldn't see a bell curve in performance, yet we do. Are we all caught up in a Snipe hunt?

Well, many of these things *do* help. For example, more money and a solid assessment system are very desirable, just as if you were playing pro ball—a hoop, court and good shoes all help. However, the game

## Imagine FedEx proudly stating, “We’ve only lost 25 percent of our packages this year!”

---

is actually won or lost based on health, capabilities, balance and — most importantly—the mindset and belief of the people—the *team*. The shoes or the ball aren't ultimately the deciding factors.

In the game of education, kids' lives are at stake. We aren't playing with a few-point margin when we continue to produce students lacking vital college or workforce survival skills. Imagine FedEx proudly stating, "We've only lost 25 percent of our packages this year!"

The next few years are certain to bring some amazing learning technologies we can't yet fathom. They will address real needs and have huge potential in helping kids—much like an improved package-tracking technology—but it will

surely be useless in an out-of-balance organization with the wrong mindset.

The highest-performing organizations, including the best schools and school districts—will be those focused on creating and replicating a culture of near-perfect performance and the most superb leadership. Losing even one package? Totally unacceptable. Only with this mindset can we implement the right solutions, tools and processes. Anything less is like outfitting a squad of chimps with Air Jordans and expecting a win.

To thrive in the 21st century, what can you do? There are several workable actions that any school leader can take starting right now:

**Rub Elbows With Success.**

Talk to and visit with successful, innovative organizations in both the workforce as well as top universities. See how they work, observe their culture. What do they look for in recruitment to create the most successful team? Keep in mind your ultimate goal of producing students who have exactly what is needed.

**Develop a No-fail**

**Mindset.** From your school board, administrators, teachers and parents all the way to every last student, know that failure is not an option, but also provide a clear picture of what success looks like.

**Design an Experience.**

Create an end-to-end student experience that supports this goal of success. Routinely eliminate practices or tools that get in the way while strengthening or newly adopting those that actually help.

**Measure how successful students are, and be direct and honest about what's working and what's not.**

---

**Reinforce a Culture of Leadership.** You may need to partner up with outside help. This is an important part of keeping things fresh, moving things forward from the present into the future.

**Get What You Measure.** If you're not getting it, you're likely not keeping track. Measure how successful students are, and be direct and honest about what's working and what's not. Rapidly confront and remedy deficiencies as they arise.

A final bit of advice? *Avoid Snipe hunting!*

---

*Ted Fujimoto helps communities and school districts create and support 21st-century schools. As an entrepreneur and consultant, he has helped develop business strategies for Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools, Big Picture Learning,*

*Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, Partnership for Uplifting Communities, Linking Education & Economic Development, California Charter Schools Association and the New York Charter Schools Association. His work represents more than \$150 million in funding. He was instrumental in designing and founding Napa New Technology High School and the New Technology Foundation that now comprises 41 schools nationwide, with 27 new schools opening by Fall 2010. Write to: [tedf@consultLandmark.org](mailto:tedf@consultLandmark.org)*