



What is Summit Learning and why should parents and students be concerned about its use?

Introduction: What is Summit Learning

Summit Public Schools are a chain of charter schools in California and now Washington State which first developed an online platform to collect student data and deliver instruction and assessments. Summit is run by Diane Tavenner, its CEO. Subsequently, the online platform was modified and operated by Facebook and then the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), the LLC run by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan. Starting the fall of 2019, the Summit Learning Platform is run by a separate non-profit called T.L.P, which publicly stands for *Teachers, Learners and Partners*, but inside the organization means *The Learning Platform*. T.L.P. is led by a three-person board of directors, chaired by Priscilla Chan.¹

Though in 2016, the operators of the Summit Learning platform [had as a goal](#) that it would be used in half of U.S. public schools by 2025, in recent years the number of schools implementing the online program has remained stalled at about 380, with funding and support from the Gates Foundation, Facebook, and in recent years, CZI. According to an analysis by [Chalkbeat](#), about 25% of schools that were using Summit in the fall of 2017 had abandoned it by the fall of 2018.

CZI has contributed over \$99 million to the program, while the Gates Foundation has contributed another \$37 million. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation has forwarded Summit [another \\$71 million](#) from unnamed donors. Together, more than \$200 million has been spent on developing this online program, promoting its use, and paying the travel expenses for teachers and administrators to attend training sessions around the country. In some cases, CZI has also bought laptops for schools that agree to implement the platform.²

Protests by parents and students

In at least 16 states, parents have protested against Summit Learning, because of the excessive screen time that it entails, with some students reporting that they are spending three or more hours per day on computers in class. Some parents have observed that their children suffer from health problems and high levels of anxiety as a result, that the curriculum is of poor quality, and that they are concerned about the voluminous amount of personal student data that is Summit collects and hands off to other corporations through the platform.

¹ <https://www.summitlearning.org/about-tlp>

² <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2017-12-20/school-online-learning-program-rejected-over-parent-backlash>

Though Summit claims that each student receives at least ten-minutes a week with a teacher “mentor,” many students say that they do not receive even that much individual time. Many parents have observed their children have become so bored and unhappy that they want to drop out of school, and in some cases, this has led families to transfer their children to private schools, homeschool them, or move out of the district as a result.³

Students and parents have rebelled against Summit Learning in [Boone County](#) and [Lincoln County](#) in Kentucky; [Fairview Park City School District](#) in Ohio; [Clearwater County in Idaho](#) ; [Peoria in Illinois](#); [Wellington in Kansas](#) , and elsewhere.⁴ Middle school students in [McPherson, Kansas](#) walked out of their schools to protest the program. Brooklyn students at the Secondary School of Journalism walked out of their school, and [wrote a letter to Zuckerberg](#) , saying “*We refuse to allow ourselves to be experimented on in this way.*”

Because of pervasive discontent, some districts have eliminated the use of the Summit platform altogether, including in [Cheshire, Connecticut](#), [Indiana Area School District PA](#), and Conner Middle School in Kentucky; others have made it optional, like McPherson in Kansas.⁵ Many parents at Summit schools say that their children receive insufficient feedback and support from their teachers and have fallen behind in their coursework and required assessments. By the end of the year, some students are forced to catch up by taking a series of multiple-choice exams in a row to receive credit for their courses and advance to the next grade.

One educator who worked with Summit said that “*near the end of the year ... 70 percent of students hadn’t advanced far enough to pass.*” Often, students say they skip the reading assignments and take their online assessments by guessing, as they can do without any penalty. Others say they simply open new tabs on their computers and look up the answers while answering the questions.

Parents have also observed that the Summit curriculum often link to random articles on unverified websites, newspaper tabloids, Wikipedia, SparkNotes or YouTube videos. One teacher who helped develop the platform admitted in an interview that the curriculum materials were “shoddy.”⁶

Surveys

According to a survey independently carried out by [Indiana University of Pennsylvania](#), 70% of Indiana Area PA students who used Summit said they believed the program should be dropped or made optional. Most said that they “*did not feel that SLP [Summit Learning Platform] helps students be creative, prepares them for future education or future careers, helps them think critically or problem solve, helps them socialize or prepare them for future social situations, or strengthens the school community.*” Indiana Area parents of Summit students were

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html>

⁴ <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2017/03/06/facebook-program-school-causes-controversy/97711414/> ; <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/remove-the-summit-personalized-learning-program> ; https://www.indianagazette.com/news/directors-vote-to-scale-back-summit-learning-program/article_b3bc086a-e4d1-11e7-8c95-57ffb928e16e.html ; <http://www.hutchnews.com/news/20180926/parents-question-new-learning-program-in-mcpherson-schools-redesign> ; http://www.clearwatertribune.com/news/top_stories/summit-learning-under-fire-gains-attention-and-lots-of-criticism/article_da14721a-74b2-11e8-8a35-33a44ea23f1d.html ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

⁵ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/lake-country/news/delafield/2018/07/19/kettle-moraine-school-district-allow-opt-out-summit-learning-program/792209002/>

⁶ <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/10/the-connecticut-resistance-to-zucks-summit-learning-program.html>

even more critical; 72% opposed the use of the Summit platform and “generally agreed that [it] does not encourage or helps students learn.”⁷

A survey carried out by [McPherson KS school district](#) found that 63% elementary school parents and 78% of middle school parents agreed with the following statement, “***If given the choice, I would prefer that my child not be in a classroom utilizing the Summit Learning curriculum.***”⁸

We made a public records request of Summit this summer, and received partial results from their own surveys of teachers, students and parents:

During the school year 2017-2018; 63% of teachers at Summit charter schools said the online platform was **not working well** for special education students; 64% said it wasn’t **working well** for English Language Learners; and 74% said it wasn’t **not working well** for students behind grade level.

Among all Summit charter teachers who responded, a higher percentage were “detractors”, i.e. they opposed the use of the Summit platform, compared to those who were “promoters” and supported its use, 30% vs. 23%, with the remainder “passive” or undecided at 47%.

Students were also overwhelmingly negative. Half of all of Summit charter students were “detractors” who opposed the use of the platform, compared to 15% who were “promoters”, with “passives” at 35%.

We also received partial survey responses from parents at the public schools that used Summit Learning in the fall of 2017, compared to parents at Summit charter schools:

Parents at the Summit Learning public schools “***recommended SL at a 61% lower rate than Summit [charter] parents***” and “***32% fewer SL parents feel that their student is learning the skills and knowledge necessary for success.***” Over all, fewer than half of parents at the Summit Learning public schools said they were “***satisfied with their students SL experience.***”

Johns Hopkins study

Governor Gina Raimondo of Rhode Island commissioned a study of Providence schools from the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy in the spring of 2019, after Providence students scored poorly on the state exams.⁹ Over twenty researchers spent several weeks visiting twelve Providence public schools and interviewing educators and students.

The [resulting report](#), released in June, was overwhelmingly critical, with the most devastating comments reserved for their observations of student use of the Summit Learning platform in several Providence schools. Here are a sample of their comments:

⁷ <https://4.files.edl.io/bfae/10/01/18/214825-4e140c9a-de36-40d2-9aed-7ba06a813b5b.pdf>

⁸ [https://go.boarddocs.com/ks/usd418/Board.nsf/files/BAU37H7A4692/\\$file/USD%20418%20Parent%20Survey%20Results%203.22.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ks/usd418/Board.nsf/files/BAU37H7A4692/$file/USD%20418%20Parent%20Survey%20Results%203.22.pdf)

⁹ <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20190423/raimondo-calls-for-comprehensive-state-review-of-providence-school-system>

When we observed students using Summit, they were not engaged with the software in optimal ways. Instead of watching videos or reading tutorial texts, students went straight to the exam and attempted to answer questions. When they answered incorrectly, corrective text popped up, which students did read; they then tried again with the next question. Even if students progressed according to plan, their learning would be limited to how to answer problems in the format presented by the Summit exam.

In one school, we did not observe a single Summit math teacher engage in whole-class or even small-group math instruction. Instead, teachers either completed work at their desks, and/or answered questions when students raised their hand. Finally, the lack of teacher surveillance of student progress in some Summit classrooms meant that students worked very slowly through the material.

Off-task student behavior was the same as, or worse than, in the more traditional classrooms, with some students observably working on assignments from other classes, viewing YouTube videos (or similar), queuing songs on playlists, toggling between Summit and entertainment websites, or pausing on work screens while chatting with neighbors.

The interviews also revealed that most students detested the program:

“ Students almost universally disliked the Summit program. They told the team that they were burned-out through the overuse of screen time, and bored. Some claimed that students actively left school as a result of the platform. ... in most cases, students were just staring at the screens, totally disengaged... Large numbers of students seem to be chronically absent. Because of the way the Summit is set up, one student missed about half of the school year and still earned a B...”

In general, students observed how the program isolated them from teachers and each other; and allowed them to gain course credits with little actual learning:

“ Many students had a negative view: in one school, all students reported disliking Summit. “I don’t like the projects because it takes away from teachers teaching.” Another said: “With Summit you can basically finish in one week and then coast.”

Student data collection and privacy concerns

There are seven different Summit documents dealing with data privacy and security, linked to from the Summit [Privacy Center](#), often lengthy and confusing. In addition, a separate document deals with Summit privacy on the CZI website, entitled [Statement of Privacy Principles](#).

Summit claims the right to collect an extraordinary amount of personal student information. Among the data collected by Summit and now T.L.P. include: student and parent names and email addresses; student ID numbers, attendance, suspension and expulsion records; their disabilities, gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status; their date of birth, teacher observations, their communications with teachers; their grade promotion or retention, test scores, college admissions, survey responses, homework assignments, and extracurricular activities they participate in. Summit plans to track students even after they graduate from high school, including their college attendance and eventual careers.¹⁰

¹⁰ https://cdn.summitlearning.org/marketing/privacy_center/privacy_policy.pdf

Summit shares this data with as many as [20 corporate “partners”](#) including CZI and Google, which they say helps them run their “services”, and with at least four “embedded content providers” including YouTube. Indeed, many students say that YouTube videos are commonly assigned as part of curriculum.

While Summit claims that they use YouTube in a “[privacy enhanced mode](#),” which means it does not track viewing behavior, YouTube adds that “*The Privacy Enhanced Mode only relates to tracking of viewer behavior, not ads-serving behavior.*” In any case, Summit writes that “*This list of Summit Learning Platform embedded content providers is not intended to be a comprehensive list.*”

Summit officials have revised their privacy policies at least three times. Originally, they required that schools [obtain parental consent](#) before their children could use the platform and their personal data collected. A copy of the [original consent form from October 2016 is here](#). But subsequently this right to consent was eliminated.

Currently, the Summit [Data Privacy Addendum](#) specifies that schools must allow parents to opt out of data collection, and that “*Partner School represents, warrants, and covenants to Summit Learning that it shall not provide information to Summit Learning from any student or parent/legal guardian that has opted out of the disclosure of Directory Information,*” which includes a student’s name, address, grade level, etc.

And yet parents in at least three states who have asked to opt out of this data collection have had their requests routinely ignored by their schools and by Summit’s CEO.

A separate CZI [Statement of Privacy Principles](#) includes this principle: ***Right to Access and Delete Data:*** *We will support access to, correction, and deletion of student personal information by the student, their parent or authorized guardian, including by assisting the school in meeting its requirements for access, correction, and deletion.*

But another document on the Summit website contradicts this claim. The [Summit Learning Privacy Policy](#) states that data deletion will occur only “*if the Partner School determines that the request should be implemented.*” If that occurs and the school agrees, “*the Partner School may either make the change themselves or ask us to make such change,*” which would appear to rule out the deletion of data already collected by Summit.

In any case, there is no independent oversight of Summit or its partner companies to ensure that they are using the immense amount of personal student data appropriately or securing it from breaches. Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook have faced multiple lawsuits and complaints about repeated privacy violations. Last September, nearly 50 million Facebook users had their accounts hacked. ¹¹

In a recent report by the British Parliament, Facebook was accused of “intentionally and knowingly” violating data privacy laws and was called a “digital gangster.”¹² The NY Times has reported that Facebook is currently under criminal investigation by the US Attorney’s office for the Eastern District of New York.¹³ And on July 24, 2019, the FTC fined Facebook an [unprecedented five billion dollars for violations of user privacy](#) – a fine that many

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/technology/facebook-hack-data-breach.html>

¹² <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/18/facebook-is-a-digital-gangster-that-needs-more-regulation-uk-report.html>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/technology/facebook-data-deals-investigation.html>

[elected officials and privacy advocates](#) dismissed as insufficient considering the illegal behavior that Zuckerberg had repeatedly engaged in.

No evidence or empirical data to show that Summit works

Although Summit Learning officials [often publicly claim](#) that their system “is based on more than 100 years of established learning science”, there is NO independent peer-reviewed research to show that their program works to improve learning. While Harvard researchers were [paid](#) to design an evaluation of the program’s results, Summit’s CEO ultimately refused to allow the evaluation to go forward. In an [internal January 2019 report](#) to CZI, obtained by Chalkbeat, Summit’s own claims were far more modest: *“On average, Summit Learning students achieved an academic year’s worth of growth in math and reading.”*

Why haven’t more educators and academics criticized Summit, given the many bombastic and unverified claims in support of its use? As Tom Kane of Harvard admitted [in the NY Times](#) , *“he was wary of speaking out against Summit because many education projects receive funding”* from CZI.

Questions parents and students should ask

Here are some questions parents and students should ask their school or district if it is considering or has already adopted the Summit system:

- Why should you consider implementing a program with so much negative evidence about its failings, and without any peer-reviewed research to back it up?
- How many hours will students spend at computers and how much teacher feedback will they receive? How much opportunity will they have to ask questions and engage in live classroom discussion and debate?
- Was any analysis done to see if the Summit curriculum is aligned with the state’s learning standards, and if so, where is this analysis available? [Summit [admits that it not yet fully aligned](#) with the Common Core standards in English and math; and that they are still working to align it to the Next Generation Science Standards.] What sort of public process and consultation with parents, teachers and other stakeholder groups was undertaken prior to its adoption?
- Does the school have a written contract with Summit, and if so, does the contract fully comply with state and federal student privacy laws?
- Will parents be allowed to opt out of their children’s Directory Information (name, email address, etc.) disclosed to Summit and its 24 corporate “partners” , as the Summit [Data Privacy Addendum says](#)? With they be able to delete the data once it has been collected, in accordance to the CZI [Statement of Privacy Principles](#)?
- What oversight has been employed by school or district personnel to ensure that student data will not be breached or abused, as much of the personal information on Facebook has been?

The Parent Coalition for Student Privacy has published a [Parent Toolkit for Student Privacy](#), along with the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, with additional advocacy tips for parents concerned about protecting their children's data privacy.

Please share this fact sheet and our Toolkit with other parents, and join with them to ask the questions listed above. If the answers you receive are not satisfactory, urge your school board to eliminate the Summit program from your school.

*Updated 10.29.19 by Leonie Haimson of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy
For more information please email info@studentprivacymatters.org*

Selected references on Summit Learning:

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[Parents cite student privacy concerns with popular online education platform](#), WA Post, Sept. 5, 2017:

[Update on Summit Schools including my visit to a Summit school](#), Student Privacy Matters, Dec. 6, 2017

[Connecticut School District Suspends Use of Summit Learning Platform](#), Edsurge, Dec 20, 2017

[Two Districts Roll Back Summit Personalized Learning Program](#), Ed Week, Dec. 22, 2017

[Zuckerberg and the parent pushback vs Summit schools](#); Student Privacy Matters, Feb. 2, 2018

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[Summit Schools to Spin Out Learning Program](#), Edsurge, October 12, 2018

[What Just Happened to Summit?](#), Curmudgucation, October 14, 2018

[Brooklyn students hold walkout in protest of Facebook-designed online program](#), NY Post, Nov. 1, 2018

[After rapid growth, Zuckerberg-backed school program faces scrutiny over effectiveness, data privacy](#), Fast Company, Nov. 19, 2018.

[Why parents and students are protesting an online learning program backed by Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook](#), Washington Post, Dec. 20, 2018

[Summit Learning declined to be studied, then cited collaboration with Harvard researchers anyway](#), Chalkbeat, January 17, 2019

[School board pulls plug on Summit Learning](#), Indiana Gazette, April 9, 2019

[Silicon Valley Came to Kansas Schools. That Started a Rebellion](#). NY Times, April 21, 2019

[Providence Public School District in Review](#), Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, June 2019

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[Summit Grant reports to CZI](#), 2016-2019; as obtained by Chalkbeat.