



# BIG CLAIMS, LITTLE EVIDENCE, LOTS OF MONEY: THE REALITY BEHIND THE SUMMIT LEARNING PROGRAM AND THE PUSH TO ADOPT DIGITAL PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLATFORMS

Faith Boninger, Alex Molnar, and Christopher M. Saldaña  
University of Colorado Boulder

June 2020

---

## Executive Summary

Virtual learning and personalized learning have been at the forefront of education reform discussions for over a decade. Backed by almost \$200 million philanthropic dollars from the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, the Gates Foundation, and others, Summit Public Schools has aggressively marketed its Summit Learning Platform to schools across the United States since 2015. As a result, the Summit Learning Program is now one of the most prominent digital personalized learning programs in the United States.

Summit Public Schools, an 11-school charter network operating in California and Washington, promotes its proprietary Summit Learning Program to potential “partner” schools as a free, off-the-shelf, personalized learning program.<sup>1</sup> Summit’s marketing message trades on the alleged success of its schools. It claims to have developed a “science-based” personalized learning model of teaching and learning that results in all of its students being academically prepared for college. It further claims that its students succeed in college and are prepared to lead successful, fulfilled lives. These successes, it claims, are the result of its unique approach to personalized learning and the use of the digital platform at the heart of that approach.

None of the claims made by Summit Public Schools have been confirmed by independent evaluators. Other than scant bits of self-selected information provided by Summit Public Schools itself, we found no evidence in the public record that confirms its claims. Summit Public Schools has not provided the information related to its claims that we requested in a California public records request.

Despite the lack of evidence to support the claims made by Summit Public Schools, the Summit Learning Program has been adopted by nearly 400 schools across the country.<sup>2</sup> While Summit has offered positive anecdotes and some selected data, there is no solid evidence that “partner” schools are experiencing the promised success. There are, however, a number of reports in the press that detail problems and dissatisfaction with the Summit Learning Program in partner schools and among students and parents.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a Johns Hopkins University evaluation of partner school classrooms in Providence, RI, found students were left to teach themselves with minimal guidance from teachers and aides.<sup>4</sup> Reviewers described students engaged in extensive off-task behavior and progressing slowly and ineffectively through their assigned work.

Our review of Summit partner school contracts suggests that student data collected by the Summit Learning Platform under the terms of those contracts presents a potentially significant risk to student privacy and opens the door to the exploitation of those data by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and possibly by unknown third parties—for purposes that have nothing to do with improving the quality of those students’ educations.

Virtual education and personalized learning are at the top of the education reform agenda in large measure because of hundreds of millions of dollars in funding and advocacy by philanthropic organizations (e.g., the Gates Foundation), large digital platforms (e.g., Facebook and Google), and venture capitalists anxious to access the school market.<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has turbo-charged these efforts, as schools across the country are struggling to find safe ways to educate their students.

The rapid spread of the Summit Learning Program—despite a lack of transparency and the absence of convincing evidence that it can deliver on its promises—provides a powerful example of how policymakers are challenged when faced with a well-financed and self-interested push for schools to adopt digital personalized learning programs. There is now an urgent need for policymakers to move quickly to protect the public interest by establishing oversight and accountability mechanisms related to digital platforms and personalized learning programs.

We recommend that state departments of education establish an independent governmental entity responsible for implementing and enforcing the following recommendations to ensure the quality of digital personalized learning in public schools and to adequately protect the privacy of student data. Specifically, such an entity should:

- Require that the digital personalized learning programs be externally reviewed and approved by independent third-party education experts. As part of these program evaluations, the evaluators should review and approve the program curricular materials, the pedagogical approaches as applied to the intended student populations, the validity of the assessment instruments, and the programmatic usefulness of data generated;
- Require that the assumptions and programming of all algorithms associated with personalized learning materials be audited for bias and other possible risks to students *before* the algorithms are implemented; and

- Develop a standard data security agreement that protects the privacy and limits the use of all data, including de-identified data, collected by schools through personalized learning materials and related software platforms.

## Notes and References

---

- 1 In 2019, Summit Public Schools transferred the administration and marketing of the Summit Learning Program to T.L.P. Education, an ostensibly independent nonprofit organization that it created in 2018.

Summit Learning (n.d.). Who is T.L.P. Education (aka “Summit Learning”)? [webpage]. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from <https://help.summitlearning.org/hc/en-us/articles/360021179053-Who-is-T-L-P-Education-aka-Summit-Learning->

Summit Learning (2019, April 4). Andrew Goldin named executive director of T.L.P. Education [webpage]. *Cision PR Newswire*. Retrieved May 31, 2020, from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/andrew-goldin-named-executive-director-of-tlp-education-300824991.html>
- 2 Barnum, M. (2019, May 23). Summit Learning, the Zuckerberg-backed platform, says 10% of schools quit using it each year. The real figure is higher. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved February 9, 2020, from <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2019/05/23/summit-learning-the-zuckerberg-backed-platform-says-10-of-schools-quit-using-it-each-year-the-real-figure-is-higher/>
- 3 Bowles, N. (2019, April 21). Silicon Valley came to Kansas schools. That started a rebellion. *New York Times*. Retrieved October 31, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html>

Genota, L. (2018, November 13). Brooklyn students protest use of online learning platform designed by summit learning. *Education Week*. Retrieved November 24, 2019, from [https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2018/11/brooklyn\\_new\\_york\\_city\\_students\\_protest\\_facebook\\_summit\\_learning\\_program.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2018/11/brooklyn_new_york_city_students_protest_facebook_summit_learning_program.html)

Tabor, N. (2018, October 11). Mark Zuckerberg is trying to transform education. This town fought back. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved June 4, 2020, from <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/10/the-connecticut-resistance-to-zucks-summit-learning-program.html>
- 4 Johns Hopkins University School of Education Institute for Education Policy (2019, June). *Providence public school district: A review* (pp. 31-32). Retrieved June 4, 2020, from <https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PPSD-REVISED-FINAL.pdf>
- 5 Boninger, F., Molnar, A., & Saldaña, C.M. (2019). *Personalized learning and the digital privatization of curriculum and teaching* (pp. 17-19, 45-48). Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved June 12, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/personalized-learning>

Karzunina, D., West, J., Moran, J., & Philippou, G. (2017). *EdTech investment and venture capital*. QS Intelligence Unit. Retrieved June 12, 2020, from [https://www.reimagine-education.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RE\\_White-Paper\\_EdTech-Investment-Venture-Capital-2.pdf](https://www.reimagine-education.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RE_White-Paper_EdTech-Investment-Venture-Capital-2.pdf)