



PARENT COALITION FOR STUDENT PRIVACY

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

Summit is a chain of charter schools in California which uses an online platform to collect student data and deliver instruction and assessments. The platform was further developed with the financial and technical support of Facebook, and is now being run with the help of a group of software designers at the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, a for-profit LLC headquartered in California, founded by billionaire Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan.

Since the 2015-2016 school year, the use of the Summit online program or PLP (for personalized learning platform) has expanded into about 300 public schools, with the help and support of the Gates Foundation and Mark Zuckerberg, who have spent millions to promote it and pay for teachers and administrators to travel and attend training sessions. Zuckerberg and the organizations he funds have also paid for laptops to operate the system at some schools.¹

Parents and student critiques

In at least 16 states, parents have pushed back because of the excessive screen time that the adoption of the Summit PLP has imposed on their children, with students spending three hours or more a day staring at computers. They have also reported that the curriculum is inadequate, and are concerned about all the personal student data flowing to private, corporate hands. Though Summit claims that each student receives at least ten minutes a week with a teacher “mentor,” many students have reported that they do not receive even that much individual time with their teachers, and feel completely at sea. Some students become so bored and disengaged that they say they want to drop out of school.

Parents have rebelled against Summit Learning in [Boone County, in Kentucky](#); [Fairview Park City School District](#) in Ohio; [Indiana Area School District](#) in Pennsylvania; [Clearwater County in Idaho](#); [McPherson in Kansas](#) and elsewhere.² Because of growing parent and student discontent, some districts have completely eliminated the use of the Summit platform, including in Cheshire, Connecticut; several others have rolled back the implementation of the program or made it optional for students and parents, including in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.³ Summit itself has reported that about seven percent of schools that have tried the platform have now dropped it, meaning at least 23 schools.⁴ Yet the actual figure cannot be confirmed, since Summit refuses to

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2017-12-20/school-online-learning-program-rejected-over-parent-backlash>

² <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

³ <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2017-12-20-connecticut-school-district-suspends-use-of-summit-learning-platform>

⁴ http://www.wellington.cc/public_files/FAQ-RedesignSummit.pdf

disclose which schools are using it and have offered inconsistent numbers over time about the extent of its reach.⁵

Many parents at Summit schools say that their children receive insufficient feedback and support from their teachers, and have fallen far behind in their coursework and required assessments. By the end of the year, some students are forced to catch up by taking multiple choice exams in a row in order to gain credit for the course and advance to the next grade. Other students skip the reading assignments, and just take the exams by guessing, as they are allowed to do repeatedly without any penalty. Other students say they simply open up new tabs on their computers and look up the answers while taking tests.

Parents have also observed that the curriculum that Summit assigns links to content that is educationally substandard, such as encyclopedias, SparkNotes or YouTube videos. Some of the educators who originally developed the platform have admitted in interviews that the curriculum materials were “shoddy” and “we were just throwing things in there, that, at least from a Google search, looked reputable.” An educator who worked with Summit early on said that “near the end of the year ... 70 percent of students hadn’t advanced far enough to pass.”⁶

According to a survey, 70% of students in the Indiana Area PA district said Summit should be dropped or made optional. Most also 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.” Parents were even more critical; 72 percent opposed the use of the platform and according to the researchers, “generally agreed that SLP does not encourage or helps students learn.”⁷

Student data collection and privacy concerns

Summit claims the right to collect an extraordinary amount of personal student information. Among the data points that they collect, according to their website, include student and parent names and their email addresses; student ID numbers, attendance, suspension and expulsion records, disabilities, their gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, their date of birth, teacher observations of their behavior, their grade promotion or retention, test scores, college admissions, survey responses, homework assignments, and any extracurricular activities they engage in. Summit also plans to track students after graduation from high school, including college attendance and careers.⁸

For the first few years, parents were allowed to opt out of Summit data collection, but shortly after CZI took over the operation of the online platform in March 2017, they announced that parents would no longer have that right.⁹

⁵ For example, in 2017-2017, the Summit Learning website listed 145 schools using the platform on its website, and yet the same year they claimed that as many as 330 schools had implemented it. One recent job posting said the Summit program is currently used in “more than 330 schools” across the country, on their website it says 380 schools, and another job posting claims it is “utilized in nearly 400 schools.”

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

⁷ Results of this independent survey carried out by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Research Lab, are posted here: https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Parent_Guardian-Perceptions-of-the-Summit-Learning-Platform.pdf Summit refuses to release the results of their own surveys.

⁸ <https://help.summitlearning.org/hc/en-us/articles/360000806087-Summit-Learning-Platform-Privacy-Policy> An unspecified amount of personal data of teachers is also collected, “including, but not limited to, name and years of experience.”

⁹ <http://web.archive.org/web/20170612022452/https://help.summitlearning.org/hc/en-us/articles/115005163168-Do-parents-need-to-provide-consent-for-their-children-to-use-the-Summit-Learning-Platform->

Summit shares this data to as many as 19 corporate “partners” including the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, to run their services, do research and help them improve their “product.” In addition, several of the websites that students are assigned through the Summit platform track student data for marketing and advertising purposes, including YouTube. There is no independent oversight of Summit or its partner companies to ensure that they are using the data appropriately or securing it from breaches.

So many data breaches of student information has occurred in recent years that the FBI recently released a Public Service Announcement, warning parents that the “widespread collection of sensitive information by EdTech could present unique exploitation opportunities for criminals.”¹⁰ Mark Zuckerberg himself has faced multiple lawsuits and legal complaints about Facebook’s repeated privacy violations. In September, nearly 50 million Facebook users had their accounts hacked.¹¹ In early November, hackers claimed they had successfully stolen the private messages of some 120 million Facebook users, and the messages from at least 80,000 users have already been published.¹²

No evidence or empirical data to show that Summit works

There is no independent peer-reviewed research to show that Summit works to improve learning. Instead there is growing evidence that it does not. One study showed that Summit charter schools in California had a significantly negative impact on math test scores, and an insignificantly positive achievement on reading.¹³ John Pane, the lead author of a RAND study of “Next Generation Learning Schools” of which Summit is a prominent member, has concluded “*the evidence base [for these schools] is very weak at this point.*”¹⁴

In October 2018, Diane Taverner, the CEO of Summit charter schools, announced that the Summit online program would split off from the Summit charter school network, and would be run by a separate non-profit corporation, as yet unnamed. Taverner said “the organization doesn’t plan to expand the program, but rather, the new nonprofit will focus on meeting current demand.”¹⁵ She also said that she expected her own charter schools to be “the most demanding customers” of the Summit platform, and that she wanted to “have room to experiment on fresh ideas.”¹⁶ These comments suggest that even the originator of the Summit program may no longer be satisfied with the program or learning outcomes at her schools.

Questions parents and students should ask

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

- Where is the independent peer-reviewed research that Summit works educationally and helps students learn?
- How many hours are students going to spend in front of a computer and how much teacher feedback will receive? How much opportunity will students have to ask questions and engage in classroom discussion and debate?

¹⁰ <https://www.ic3.gov/media/2018/180913.aspx>

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

¹² <https://thinkprogress.org/facebook-security-private-message-hack-88c0d39b1105/>

¹³ <https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CMO%20FINAL.pdf>, p. 91.

¹⁴ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/11/08/6-key-insights-rand-corp-researchers-talk.html>

¹⁵ Its corporate board will include four members, including Zuckerberg’s wife, Priscilla Chan, and the Chief Financial Officer of CZI. <https://www.the74million.org/summit-is-spinning-off-its-popular-personalized-learning-platform-creating-new-nonprofit-to-take-the-helm/>

¹⁶ <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-10-12-summit-schools-to-spin-out-learning-program>

- 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? [Summit [admits that it not yet aligned](#) with the Common Core standards in English and math; and that they are working to align their social studies curriculum with the California History Standards; so it is unlikely it is aligned with your state’s standards.]
- Was the program adopted with the full knowledge and consent of parents, teachers and/or district leadership?
- Does the school have a written contract with Summit, and if so, does the contract fully comply with state and federal student privacy laws?
- Were parents informed of their right to opt out of their children’s Directory Information (name, email address, etc.) being disclosed to Summit? and their right to delete the data once it has been? (see below).
- What oversight is being employed by the school or district to ensure that your data and that of your children is not breached or abused, as much of the user information on Facebook has been?

Ask to have your child’s data deleted

If any of these questions are not answered to your satisfaction, you should immediately demand the deletion of your child’s data from the online program, as Summit says is your right in their [Privacy Center](#):

“Summit does not own your personal information. Students and their families can request deletion of their personal information from their schools at any time and we will honor the school's request.”

Also, immediately opt out of Directory Information (student name, email, address etc.) from being disclosed to Summit, according to Summit’s [Data Privacy Addendum](#):

“If Partner School provides Education Records to Summit...Partner School represents, warrants, and covenants to Summit that it shall not provide information to Summit from any student or parent/legal guardian that has opted out of the disclosure of Directory Information. Summit depends on Partner School to ensure that the Partner School is complying with the FERPA provisions regarding the disclosure of any student information that will be shared with Summit.”

Here is a sample message to send your school:

Dear Principal [name],

I hereby demand that all the data of my child [name] in the [grade] be immediately deleted from the Summit online system, as is my right according to the Summit [Privacy Center](#). I also want to make it clear that from now on, I opt out of [his or her] directory information provided to Summit, including name, address, student ID number, email address, etc. This is my right according to the Summit [Data Privacy Addendum](#). Please respond as soon as possible to let me know that you have understood and complied with my request.

Name, address, email

Please share this fact sheet with other parents, and join with them to press for the Summit program to be eliminated from your school. Our Parent Toolkit for Student Privacy has advocacy tips at <https://bitly.com/ParentToolkitStudentPrivacy>.

Selected references on Summit:

[Facebook Takes a Step Into Education Software](#), NY Times, Sept. 3, 2015

[Facebook-backed school software shows promise and raises privacy concerns](#), Washington Post, Oct. 11, 2016

[Parents rebel against Summit learning platform](#), Student Privacy Matters, Aug. 31, 2017

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

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

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

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

[Parent/Guardian Perceptions of the Summit Learning Platform](#)m, Indiana University of PA, February 2018.

[Perceptions of the Summit Learning Platform](#), Indiana University of PA, Feb. 2018.

[Online Learning: What Every Parent Should Know](#), Network for Public Education, March 2018

[Mark Zuckerberg Is Trying to Transform Education. This Town Fought Back](#), NY Magazine, Oct. 11, 2018.

[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

[Brooklyn Students Are Protesting Silicon Valley's Favorite Education Program](#), NY Magazine, Nov. 14, 2018.

[Zuckerberg-backed Summit Learning faces scrutiny](#), Fast Company, Nov. 19, 2018

[Students protest Zuckerberg-backed digital learning program and ask him: 'What gives you this right?'](#)
Washington Post, Nov. 17, 2018.

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