

New concerns raised about a well-known digital learning platform

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Over the past five years, the Summit Learning Platform has become one of the best-known online platforms and is now used in hundreds of schools. The closure of schools this past spring because of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic suggests that it could gain wide prominence.

The platform was developed by the Summit charter school network with help from Facebook engineers, and grew with the backing of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a for-profit business that started with a focus on individualized online learning.

The Summit platform [markets itself on its website](#) as a “complete, customizable, standards-aligned curriculum for grades 4 -12 in core subjects” that “comes with hands-on projects, teaching and learning resources, as well as assessments — all of which are customizable by educators.”

In recent years, concerns about student data privacy have been raised, and there have been protests in multiple places by students and parents objecting to the digital learning culture that it fosters.

On Thursday, the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder released a research brief that critiques the Summit platform, titled “[Big Claims, Little Evidence, Lots of Money: The Reality Behind the Summit Learning Program and the Push to Adopt Digital Personalized Learning Programs.](#)”

The post below was written by Alex Molnar and Faith Boninger and is based on the new brief. Molnar is the publications director of the National Education Policy Center and a co-director of the center’s Commercialism in Education Research Unit. Boninger is also a co-director of that unit.

I asked Summit to respond to some questions raised in the research brief and its response follows the post.

By Alex Molnar and Faith Boninger

The covid-19 pandemic has intensified the focus on virtual education and digital technology in schools. Technology platforms are now being marketed as affordable solutions to the problems that have arisen as schools search for safe ways to provide high quality education programs.

The Summit Learning Program, including the digital Summit Learning Platform at its heart, is among the most prominent and widely promoted digital personalized learning packages in the United States. We have spent the past year studying Summit Public Schools and the Summit Learning Program (a/k/a “Summit Learning”) it created. Our findings offer a warning to communities, schools, and states currently exploring virtual learning, particularly in the form of “off-the-shelf” digital personalized learning programs.

We found no solid research evidence to support the claims Summit Public Schools makes related to the success of its whole-school digital personalized learning program. Instead, we found anecdotes and fragments of self-selected data served up by a Chan Zuckerberg Initiative-financed marketing program designed to “create the societal conditions” amenable to widespread adoption of personalized learning and to persuade potential and current “partner” school communities that “Summit Learning works.”

We also found a curriculum and assessment program that requires that massive amounts of student data be recorded by Summit’s proprietary digital platform. And finally, we found provisions in contracts with partner schools that provide for the transfer of the student data collected by its digital platform to Summit Learning and thereby also to its long-term technology partner, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, for their use in perpetuity.

Summit Public Schools, founded in 2003, currently operates 11 schools enrolling approximately 4,675 students in California and Washington State. In 2013-2014, there was no Summit Learning Program or “partner” schools. Things changed quickly after a 2014-2015 agreement between Summit and Facebook established the goals of enhancing Summit’s self-created software platform and collaborating on a marketing strategy for its nationwide adoption.

Since then, Summit Public Schools has received extensive technical support from Facebook and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and almost \$200 million in funding from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others.

Summit Public Schools claims that its educational program does an exceptional job of preparing students for college and that its graduates succeed in college. Its specific claims are that its students are “100 percent Eligible For 4-Year College,” that “98 percent [of its students are] accepted to four-year college,” and that its students graduate from college at “2X the national average.”

These claims are at the heart of the marketing pitch made to schools across the country by Summit Learning. Schools that agree to become “partner” schools agree to adopt Summit’s free off-the-shelf program, use its digital platform, and participate in the required staff trainings and Summit-organized

. . .

support activities.

“Partner” schools are told that, as a result, their students will be equipped with the skills that colleges and modern workplaces demand; that their teachers will be freed from mundane tasks so they can mentor students; and, that student achievement and life competence will improve. This marketing pitch has met with considerable success. By the 2018-2019 school year, nearly 400 schools nationwide, with nearly 3,800 educators and more than 72,000 students, were using the Summit Learning Program.

Summit Public Schools — and, since 2019, T.L.P. Education, an organization Summit Public Schools spun off to manage the Summit Learning Program — has persuaded schools to adopt a program based on largely unsupported claims of Summit Public Schools success, even as it gets millions of dollars of support from well-heeled backers.

This may be the reason Summit Public Schools leadership maintains a careful public face and assiduously avoids providing more or different information than it has chosen to share as part of that public face. Our experience researching Summit Public Schools and Summit Learning mirrors the struggle of some district officials and parents who have tried, with limited if any success, to obtain information about their schools’ use of Summit Learning.

We found Summit Public Schools unwilling to provide basic information about the educational program and platform that it created and has aggressively promoted. When we requested information from Summit Public Schools related to its claims of success, its instructional program, its curriculum, and its digital platform, Summit staff were unfailingly polite, but nonresponsive. They declined our request for an interview.

When we submitted our questions via a California Public Records Act request on Nov. 5, 2019, Summit Public Schools’s lawyer claimed that the Summit Learning Program and Summit Learning Platform, created and used by Summit Public Schools, had nothing to do with the operation of Summit Public Schools.

He declined to answer questions about the Summit Learning Program and the Summit Learning Platform, including questions about data security and the procedures Summit Public Schools followed upon receiving a request from a partner school to destroy its students’ data.

As of June 25, Summit Public Schools has failed to provide any of the information we sought in our public records request. T.L.P. Education, the nonprofit organization that currently administers Summit Learning, never responded to our many inquiries and is not subject to California’s Public Records Act.

We were able to obtain copies of a few contracts between Summit Public Schools and “partner” schools. What we learned was troubling.

The Summit Learning Platform collects a lot of data about “partner” school students. It obtains some of

these data — such as English Language Learner information, school attendance information, state assessment data, and bus pickup and drop-off locations — from school data systems as part of Summit Learning’s contractually defined status as a “school official.”

It gets other data — such as project grades, student goals and mentoring notes — when teachers and students voluntarily enter them in the Summit Learning Platform. It collects still other data automatically as students work within the Summit Learning Platform. Among these are such details as students’ content assessment attempts and results, times and locations of activity, and IP addresses.

Particularly disturbing is the careful distinction the contracts make between personally identifiable “student data” and “de-identified data.” The contracts set limits only on the use of “student data,” and Summit’s privacy policy notes that it de-identifies “personal information” for uses including research and product improvement.

The 2018 contracts we examined allow Summit to retain and use “de-identified data” in perpetuity for any legal purpose. They also allow Summit to “destroy” the identifiable “student data” by de-identifying it. “De-identifying” student data does not “destroy” it in the sense that most people understand the term.

Nevertheless, the term “de-identified data” sounds reassuring. It seems to promise that anyone who possesses those data will not be able to identify individual students. This is, however, not the case. Computer scientists and data experts have known for more than a decade that so-called de-identified data can be easily reidentified.

The contracts we examined allow Summit to share de-identified data with third parties such as the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, its long-term technology partner. “Lawful” uses of those data may include analyzing it for insights about student learning and psychology using big data statistical methods, selling it to third parties or creating for-profit enterprises to exploit it — all of which may legally be done without the knowledge and consent of either students or their parents.

Given this context, it is concerning to note that compared to the 2017 contract we reviewed, the 2018 “partner” school contract we analyzed expanded Summit Learning’s (and thereby the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative’s) right to access and use de-identified student data.

Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook have taught the world that data are fungible and can mean big money. And, also that data can be very dangerous when controlled by an opaque organization immune to public oversight. Regardless of who is named the owner of student data in partner school contracts, as Summit Learning’s technology partner, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative has full access to the de-identified data and certainly has access to the technical expertise to re-identify it.

Though it is often thought of as a charity, it is important to note that the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative is neither a charity nor a philanthropic organization. It is a limited liability corporation. A business. As a result, although it may make charitable contributions, it may also make political contributions, engage in

political lobbying, and invest in for-profit companies.

Among the things the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative can gain from its collaboration with Summit Learning is access to significant amounts of student data that it can convert into a considerable amount of money.

The Summit Learning Program is a slickly marketed digital personalized learning program that has provided no solid evidence that it can or has delivered on its promise to provide a higher quality education with superior student outcomes in the schools that adopt it.

Moreover, aside from any valid education purpose, its approach to assessment and collection of information about students through the Summit Learning Platform, coupled with enabling contract language, opens the door to the transfer of large amounts of student data to third parties without oversight or accountability. These concerns are compounded by the overall lack of organizational transparency of Summit Public Schools and now also of T.L.P. Education.

The rapid spread of the Summit Learning Program since 2015, despite the lack of convincing evidence that it can deliver on its promises, provides a powerful example of how schools, their leaders, and their communities have been outgunned and outplayed by a well-financed push to get them to adopt digital personalized learning programs.

There is now an urgent need for policymakers to move quickly to protect the public interest by establishing regulatory oversight and accountability mechanisms related to digital platforms and personalized learning programs.

Based on [our research](#), we have made a number of recommendations to state policymakers. For example, we recommend that states create an independent government entity to evaluate and publicly report on the pedagogical approaches, assessment, and data collection embedded in digital personalized learning products before determining whether they may be used by public schools.

To avoid creating privacy threats to student data and undermining their pedagogical program we recommend that before state, district and school-level officials consider digital personalized learning programs they first define their values, goals, and practices and clarify how a proposed digital personalized learning approach would advance those values, goals and practices.

Establishing state oversight and conducting the kind of rigorous review we recommend is more complicated and more difficult than quickly adopting a slickly marketed, turnkey digital personalized learning program.

Summit submitted a lengthy response and posted it on its website. Here is an edited version, followed by a response from the authors of the piece above:

From Summit Learning:

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC) recently published a brief mentioning our program. It is

important that we provide clarity on the assumptions and claims made in this brief, in order to ensure our partners have factual and reliable information on the Summit Learning program.

Student privacy is our top priority.

TLP Education has one of the toughest privacy policies in the field. Protecting student privacy is our top priority, and data is solely used for educational purposes and never sold. There are no exceptions to this, and we share our privacy policy on our website in our dedicated Privacy Center for full transparency. Common Sense Media — one of the most trusted and objective independent evaluators — gave Summit Learning one of the highest possible scores in a recent evaluation. You can find their evaluation of the Summit Learning program on its website here.

In addition to having one of the highest possible privacy scores, we also go above compliance to ensure student information is safe. On top of our compliance with federal privacy laws like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), we voluntarily comply with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and are committed to the Software & Information Industry Association and Future of Privacy Forum’s Student Privacy Pledge.

Educators know what their students need, and they choose to join the Summit Learning community to drive change.

Schools and districts across the country seek out our program — offered at no cost to those who meet requirements — in part due to our adaptable curriculum that helps students build skills and habits that will prepare them for the rest of their lives. When we partner with educators, schools and districts, we commit to helping them in their efforts to improve education in their communities, and in turn, they commit to providing open and honest feedback on how to improve our program. It is a journey we take together to drive positive change forward.

Across the country, Summit Learning students are thriving — even under the most challenging circumstances.

We’re proud of the progress and positive data we are seeing in our partner schools across the country. Schools and districts across the country using Summit Learning have reported positive impacts of the program, including higher test scores, increased student engagement, stronger attendance rates, and improvements in student behavior. In a 2019 survey of more than 1,700 Summit Learning teachers, 95 percent said that Summit Learning positively impacted their students and 94 percent said Summit Learning made them better teachers. Many of our partners expressed how much better prepared they were to navigate COVID-19 school closures because they had been using the Summit Learning program. From New Jersey, to Colorado, to Ohio, to Arkansas, educators were able to keep students engaged and learning despite the challenging circumstances.

Here are several more examples of the ways students are thriving using Summit Learning.

- The University of Michigan’s School of Education found that Dexter Community Schools students who participated in the Summit Learning program earned significantly higher standardized test scores in Reading and Math when compared to students who weren’t in the Summit Learning program. Students using the program also reported more positive classroom experiences, felt content was more relevant to their lives, and felt more accepted at school. You can read the report [here](#).

Farmington High School, located in Davis Utah, reported the highest average ACT composite score of any high school in the school district after just one year in the program.

- The local news covered Summit’s role [here](#).

Greeley educators noted that the Summit Learning program helped them make an easier transition to remote learning during at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis while ensuring rigor

- remained high. The school leaders detailed Summit Learning’s impact in the [Greeley Tribune](#).

We are an independent organization of educators.

As a note of clarification, [TLP Education](#) (the independent nonprofit that operates the Summit Learning program) is an entirely separate organization and should not be conflated with Summit Public Schools. TLP Education was launched on June 1, 2019 to operate the Summit Learning program, including its platform. As such, Summit Learning is not under the operation of Summit Public Schools. We are proud of our partners and the work they are doing for their students.

And here are comments about Summit’s response from the authors, Faith Boninger and Alex Molnar, along with Christopher M. Saldaña, a graduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder School of Education:

The [response](#) to our brief released by T.L.P. Education (a/k/a “Summit Learning”) is at least consistent. Just as Summit has done throughout its history, it has turned to rhetoric and sleight of hand, evading challenges rather than directly presenting facts to support its claims. In this case, T.L.P. claims that its response demonstrates “[unequivocally false claims](#)” in our brief, but the response never even addresses the core concerns we raised in the brief. Below, we examine each of T.L.P.’s points, regarding student privacy, the lack of independent research evidence on the educational effectiveness of Summit Learning, and the relationship between Summit Public Schools and T.L.P. Education.

Student Privacy

In *Big Claims, Little Evidence, Lots of Money: The Reality Behind the Summit Learning Program and the Push to Adopt Digital Personalized Learning Platforms*, we noted that Summit partner school contracts set limits on the use of personally identifiable “student data” only, and not on the use of what the contracts refer to as “de-identified data.” As the brief acknowledges, the 2018 partner school

contracts set limits on the use of personally identifiable “student data” only, and not on the use of what the contracts refer to as “de-identified data.” As the brief acknowledges, the 2018 partner school contracts we examined do, indeed, contain protections for “student data.” However, “de-identified” data are simply student data that have had direct and indirect student identifiers removed. We noted in our brief that such de-identified data are easily re-identified. Moreover, if partner schools ask T.L.P. to destroy “student data,” the contracts provide for T.L.P. to do so by de-identifying those data – not actually by destroying them. Not only do the contracts allow T.L.P. to use the de-identified student data, in perpetuity, for any lawful purpose, but the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, as T.L.P.’s long-term technology partner, also has access those data to use for its purposes and access to the technological expertise to re-identify those student data. In other words, Summit Learning students’ data is at risk.

In our Public Records Act request to Summit Public Schools (SPS), we asked for records explaining the security measures undertaken to protect de-identified data and to ensure that those data could not be re-identified. Summit Public Schools has not provided the requested records. T.L.P. has not responded to our concerns in its response to our brief. Instead, the response simply proclaims T.L.P.’s transparency and compliance with industry self-regulation and with federal regulation that is widely acknowledged to be insufficient. The Student Privacy Pledge, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) do not protect de-identified student data.

Until such time as Summit Public Schools and/or T.L.P. publicly provides dispositive evidence to the contrary, we stand by accuracy of the facts we have presented and by our conclusions.

Lack of Independent Research Evidence on the Educational Effectiveness of Summit Learning

Our brief stated that “While Summit has offered positive anecdotes and some selected data, there is no solid evidence that ‘partner’ schools are experiencing the promised success.”

In its response, T.L.P. offered exactly that: positive anecdotes and some selected data.

It is easy to cherry pick information and provide anecdotes as Summit does. We could, for example, select data from the very same University of Michigan evaluation that was cited by Summit as evidence of its success in its response to our research brief. Here is a quote from that evaluation: “[Dexter Community Schools] students’ PSAT scores were higher than median national scores, regardless of their participation in Summit” (p. 42). We could point out that Dexter students participating in the Summit program had lower median scores on the PSAT than Dexter students that did not participate in the Summit program (p. 42). We could pull out the quote of a parent of a student participating in the Summit program: “Sometimes it’s more about passing the test than it is about learning” (p. 38). We could also note that the majority of students in the program surveyed did not answer in the affirmative when asked several key questions: if they enjoyed learning through Summit Learning; if they were building strong relationships with teachers and other students; if Summit met their needs as learners; or if Summit pushed them to do their best (pp. 23-24). What we are illustrating here is that the evaluation of students’ performance in the Dexter Community Schools in no way presents the picture of resound-

ing success of Summit Learning implied by the cherry-picked finding T.L.P. cited in its response to us. Nor does the University of Michigan evaluation provide evidence of the overall efficacy of the Summit Learning Program. It was not designed to do so.

We could also point to a 2019 Johns Hopkins review of Providence schools that found Summit Learning left students to teach themselves with minimal guidance from teachers and aides. They described Summit Learning students engaged in extensive off-task behavior and progressing slowly and ineffectively through their assigned work.

Summit Public Schools declined to allow its program (now marketed by T.L.P.) to be the subject of a rigorous research study. What Summit Public Schools did and what T.L.P. continues to do is promote the Summit Learning Program with anecdotes and selected information from a smattering of evaluations. These are in no way a substitute for solid independent research evidence of the efficacy of the program. If there is such evidence and we have missed it, we encourage Summit Public Schools and/or T.L.P. to release it for public examination.

Until such time as Summit Public Schools and/or T.L.P. publicly provides dispositive evidence to the contrary, we stand by accuracy of the facts we have presented and by our conclusions.

Relationship between Summit Public Schools and T.L.P.

In its recently published response to our research brief, T.L.P. claimed that it “is an entirely separate organization and should not be conflated with Summit Public Schools. T.L.P. Education was launched on June 1, 2019 to operate the Summit Learning program, including its platform. As such, Summit Learning is not under the operation of Summit Public Schools.” As we explain in our brief, it is indeed true that T.L.P. is an independent non-profit organization. However, the organizations share a close history and lineage and, in fact, still are interlocked in important ways. Summit Public Schools created the Summit Learning Program and the Summit Learning Platform, and it created T.L.P. Until the 2019-2020 school year, all partner schools contracted with Summit Public Schools. Summit Public Schools created T.L.P. to administer its Summit Learning Program. Diane Tavenner, CEO of Summit Public Schools, sits on the three-person board of T.L.P., along with Priscilla Chan (co-founder and co-CEO of Summit Public Schools’ long-time major funder, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative) and Alex Hernandez (Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at the University of Virginia). In other words, Summit Public Schools’ CEO and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative’s co-CEO effectively control the T.L.P. board

We made every effort to learn from T.L.P. about its current administration of the Summit Learning Program. We wrote to info@summitlearning.org, the address provided by T.L.P. on the Summit Learning website, and asked to speak to someone about the Summit Learning Program on October 18, October 23, November 4, November 16, November 22, December 5, December 11, December 30, January 9, January

24, January 31, and February 7. We also wrote to the land address indicated on the Summit Learning website (which is also the address of the law office that represents Summit Public Schools) on January 27, 2020 and February 14, 2020. We received no reply to any of our inquiries. We requested to interview someone at Summit Public Schools and were declined.

Because Summit Public Schools is subject to the California Public Records Act (whereas T.L.P. is shielded from such public transparency), and because Summit Public Schools created the Summit Learning Program, launched it (as “Summit Basecamp”) in 2015, and recruited “partner schools” to it through the 2018-2019 school year, we submitted a Public Records Act request to Summit Public Schools in order to obtain answers to our questions. Not only has Summit Public Schools not provided any of the records we requested, but its lawyer argued that it does not have to answer any questions about the Summit Learning Platform or the Summit Learning Program that are not explicitly related to the operation of Summit Public Schools’ eleven schools. If this is true, it would mean that no organization is legally responsible for providing the public with answers to the very significant questions about the reliability and validity of Summit Learning’s assessment protocol and about the privacy and security of student data—including de-identified student data. For these reasons, it is hard to escape the conclusion that T.L.P. was created by Summit Public Schools at least in part for the express purpose of avoiding public scrutiny. Until such time as Summit Public Schools and/or T.L.P. publicly provides dispositive evidence to the contrary, we stand by accuracy of the facts we have presented and by our conclusions.

We have at every point in our contact with Summit Public Schools expressed our interest in hearing what Summit has to say in response to our questions. Had T.L.P. responded to our requests to talk with their representative we would have made that clear to T.L.P. as well.

T.L.P.’s response to our brief headlines its “commitment to transparency and accuracy.” Unfortunately, we have yet to see it demonstrate either.