

LETTERS

Debate Over a Tech-Based Teaching Model

Summit Learning fans promote it as “personalized learning,” while detractors view it as focusing on technology rather than teachers.

April 28, 2019

To the Editor:

Re “Silicon Valley Came to Kansas. It Didn’t Go Well” (front page, April 21):

My experience with Summit Learning as a teacher couldn’t be more different than the experiences highlighted in your article.

The Central Valley of California suffers from extreme poverty. At Aspen Valley Prep, we adopted the Summit Learning approach because of its focus on project-based learning, mentoring and the self-directed learning skills students need in today’s world.

We are in our third year of using Summit Learning, and it has revolutionized my teaching. I am teaching more effectively than ever before. I have been a middle-school teacher for 12 years, and while I’d attempted to personalize learning for my students, I lacked an efficient way to manage it. The Summit Learning Platform has been an incredible tool, helping me know what to teach and to whom.

Additionally, our state test scores have greatly increased since we adopted Summit Learning. Even better, students don’t have to wait for me, and as a result, I’ve seen them take ownership of their learning. I’m no longer the only keeper of knowledge; they know they have the power to access it themselves. I can’t think of a better way of sending students into the adult world than with a passion for lifelong learning.

Hilary Witts

Fresno, Calif.

The writer is director of Summit Learning for Aspen Public Schools in Fresno.

To the Editor:

As a New York City public-school teacher, I was heartbroken to read about the adverse impacts of the Summit Learning program on children’s learning in Kansas. So-called “personalized learning” is anything but real learning. Research shows that learning is a social experience that requires interaction, meaningful relationships and collaboration. That’s what I see in my classroom every day.

Programs like Summit are at worst a scam to sell technology to school districts and at best a paternalistic tool of self-promotion courtesy of billionaires who know nothing about teaching or learning.

It was especially alarming to learn that this program that robs students of their privacy and makes them guinea pigs for the tech industry is already being used in some New York City public schools. Chancellor Richard Carranza should seriously reconsider the use of a program with no evidence to support its efficacy and that runs counter to everything we know about how learning works.

Liat Olenick
Brooklyn

To the Editor:

The recent criticisms of Summit Learning show that technology without a focus on relationships will fail in education. There are already great concerns about the amount of screen time children are exposed to — an average of seven hours a day. If it is out of control in the home, how are we supposed to accept students sitting in front of their screens as a “personalized” learning experience?

Summit Learning is not the only organization getting involved in the lives of the 56 million students in the United States. Google, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple are all heavily investing in education.

High-quality personalized learning happens when students have strong relationships with engaged mentors and teachers. People — not programs — are the ones who need to know every child in the classroom to help them learn and thrive.

In that context, technology is very useful and will most likely outperform traditional strategies. Getting the right balance between humans and artificial intelligence in education will require research, exploration and debate, not arrogance and decree.

Gil Noam
Boston

The writer is the founder and director of The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience at Harvard University and McLean Hospital.

