

Silicon Valley Came to Kansas Schools. That Started a Rebellion.

By **Nellie Bowles**

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WELLINGTON, Kan. — The seed of rebellion was planted in classrooms. It grew in kitchens and living rooms, in conversations between students and their parents.

It culminated when Collin Winter, 14, an eighth grader in McPherson, Kan., joined a classroom walkout in January. In the nearby town of Wellington, high schoolers staged a sit-in. Their parents organized in living rooms, at churches and in the back of machine repair shops. They showed up en masse to school board meetings. In neighborhoods with no political yard signs, homemade signs with dark red slash marks suddenly popped up.

Silicon Valley had come to small-town Kansas schools — and it was not going well.

“I want to just take my Chromebook back and tell them I’m not doing it anymore,” said Kallee Forslund, 16, a 10th grader in Wellington.

Eight months earlier, public schools near Wichita had rolled out a web-based platform and curriculum from Summit Learning. The Silicon Valley-based program promotes an educational approach called “personalized learning,” which uses online tools to customize education. The platform that Summit provides was developed by Facebook engineers. It is funded by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s chief executive, and his wife, Priscilla Chan, a pediatrician.

Many families in the Kansas towns, which have grappled with underfunded public schools and deteriorating test scores, initially embraced the change. Under Summit's program, students spend much of the day on their laptops and go online for lesson plans and quizzes, which they complete at their own pace. Teachers assist students with the work, hold mentoring sessions and lead special projects. The system is free to schools. The laptops are typically bought separately.

Then, students started coming home with headaches and hand cramps. Some said they felt more anxious. One child asked to bring her dad's hunting earmuffs to class to block out classmates because work was now done largely alone.

"We're allowing the computers to teach and the kids all looked like zombies," said Tyson Koenig, a factory supervisor in McPherson, who visited his son's fourth-grade class. In October, he pulled the 10-year-old out of the school.



Tom Henning, a Wellington resident, pulled his son Toby out of the public high school because of concerns about the Summit Learning program. Christopher Smith for The New York Times

In a school district survey of McPherson middle school parents released this month, 77 percent of respondents said they preferred their child not be in a classroom that uses Summit. More than 80 percent said their children had expressed concerns about the platform.

“Change rarely comes without some bumps in the road,” said Gordon Mohn, McPherson’s superintendent of schools. He added, “Students are becoming self-directed learners and are demonstrating greater ownership of their learning activities.”

John Buckendorf, Wellington High School’s principal, said the “vast majority of our parents are happy with the program.”

The resistance in Kansas is part of mounting nationwide opposition to Summit, which began trials of its system in public schools four years ago and is now in around 380 schools and used by 74,000 students. In Brooklyn, high school students walked out in November after their school started using Summit’s platform. In Indiana, Pa., after a survey by Indiana University of Pennsylvania found 70 percent of students wanted Summit dropped or made optional, the school board scaled it back and then voted this month to terminate it. And in Cheshire, Conn., the program was cut after protests in 2017.

“When there are frustrating situations, generally kids get over them, parents get over them, and they all move on,” said Mary Burnham, who has two grandchildren in Cheshire’s school district and started a petition to end Summit’s use. “Nobody got over this.”

Silicon Valley has tried to remake American education in its own image for years, even as many in tech eschew gadgets and software at home and flood into tech-free schools. Summit has been part of the leading edge of the movement, but the rebellion raises questions about a heavy reliance on tech in public schools.

For years, education experts have debated the merits of self-directed, online learning versus traditional teacher-led classrooms. Proponents argue that programs like Summit provide children, especially those in underserved towns, access to high-quality curriculums and teachers. Skeptics worry about screen time and argue that students miss out on important interpersonal lessons.



In neighborhoods with no political yard signs, homemade signs about Summit Learning suddenly popped up. Christopher Smith for The New York Times

John Pane, a senior scientist at the RAND Corporation who has studied programs that use digital tools to customize learning, said the field remains in its infancy. “There has not been enough research,” he said.

Diane Tavenner, a former teacher and Summit's chief executive, founded a series of public charter schools starting in 2003 called Summit Public Schools and began developing software to use in the classrooms so that students could "unlock the power within themselves." The resulting program, Summit Learning, is spinning out into a new nonprofit called T.L.P. Education. Ms. Tavenner said the Kansas protests were largely about nostalgia.

"There's people who don't want change. They like the schools the way they are," she said. "The same people who don't like Summit have been the sort of vocal opposition to change throughout the process."

Summit chose not to be part of a study after paying the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research to design one in 2016. Tom Kane, the Harvard professor preparing that assessment, said he was wary of speaking out against Summit because many education projects receive funding from Mr. Zuckerberg and Dr. Chan's philanthropic organization, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

Mr. Zuckerberg backed Summit in 2014 and assigned five Facebook engineers to develop the software. In 2015, he wrote that Summit's program would help "meet the student's individual needs and interests" and that technology "frees up time for teachers to do what they do best — mentor students." Since 2016, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative has committed \$99.1 million in grants to Summit.

In a statement, Abby Lunardini, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's chief communications officer, said, "We take the issues raised very seriously, and Summit has been working with school leaders and parents on the ground to address them." She added that many schools that used Summit "love and support the program."

Few places better illustrate the reaction to Summit than the central Kansas towns of Wellington (population 8,000) and McPherson (population 13,000). The towns are surrounded by wheat fields and factories. Residents work in farming, at a nearby oil refinery or at aircraft parts manufacturing plants.

Amy Jackson with her daughters, from left, Megan and Jordyn, and their friend Kallee Forslund, right. Megan, who has epilepsy, has had multiple seizures a day since her screen time at school increased as a result of the school using some of the same web-based tools used by the Summit program. Anna Petrow for The New York Times

In 2015, Kansas announced that it would support education “moon shots” like “personalized learning.” Two years later, it picked school district “astronauts,” including McPherson and Wellington. When parents received brochures promising “personalized learning,” many were thrilled. The school districts’ leaders selected Summit.

“We wanted to get every kid on an even playing field,” said Brian Kynaston, a dentist in McPherson and school board member, adding that it helped that Summit was free.

He said he liked Summit’s program. His daughter, Kelcie, 14, said she felt self-directed. “Everyone is judging it too quickly,” he said.

Mr. Koenig, the factory supervisor, said: “You want your kids to be innovators. You want them to be on the cutting edge of what’s next.”

[If you are a parent, teacher or administrator who has experience with the Summit learning platform and want to discuss it, reach us confidentially here.]

When this school year started, children got laptops to use Summit software and curriculums. In class, they sat at the computers working through subjects from math to English to history. Teachers told students that their role was now to be a mentor.

Parents of special-needs students, some enrolled in schools that were on the Summit platform and some at schools that used some of the same web-based learning tools, noticed problems immediately. Amy Jackson, a night-shift nurse in Wellington, has a daughter, Megan, 12, who has epilepsy and whose neurologist recommended she limit screen time to 30 minutes a day to reduce seizures. Since the school started using some of the web-based tools used by Summit, Megan has had seizures multiple times a day.

In September, some students stumbled onto questionable content while working in the Summit platform, which often directs them to click on links to the open web.

In one class covering Paleolithic history, Summit included a link to an article in The Daily Mail, the British newspaper, that showed racy ads with bikini-clad women. For a list of the Ten Commandments, two parents said their children were directed to a Christian conversion site.

Ms. Tavenner said building a curriculum from the open internet meant that a Daily Mail article was fair game for lesson plans. “The Daily Mail is written at a very low reading level,” she said, later adding that it was a bad link to include. She added that as far as she was aware, Summit’s curriculum did not send students to a Christian conversion site.

Around the country, teachers said they were split on Summit. Some said it freed them from making lesson plans and grading quizzes so they had more time for individual students. Others said it left them as bystanders. Some parents said they worried about their children’s data privacy.

“Summit demands an extraordinary amount of personal information about each student and plans to track them through college and beyond,” said Leonie Haimson, co-chairwoman of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, a national organization.

Summit says it complies with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

By winter, many McPherson and Wellington students were fed up. While Summit's program asks schools to commit to having students meet weekly in person with teachers for at least 10 minutes, some children said the sessions lasted around two minutes or did not happen.

Myriland French, 16, a student at Wellington's high school, said she had developed eye strain and missed talking to teachers and students in class. "Everyone is more stressed now," she said.

Collin Winter, the eighth grader in McPherson, said he had joined the January class walkout with about 50 other students. "I was scared a little bit," he said of participating. "But I still felt good to be doing something."

One recent evening in Wellington, a dozen parents and students held an organizing meeting in the back of a machine workshop owned by Tom Henning, a local parent. Chris Smalley, a machinist with two children, ages 13 and 16, attended. Mr. Smalley had put up bigger and bigger yard signs in front of his house, even though he knew Mr. Zuckerberg was unlikely to drive by and see them. They were red, with a slash across the word "Summit."

"It sounded great, what they sold us," Mr. Smalley said. "It was the worst lemon car that we've ever bought."

Deanna Garver, a church secretary whose sons are in second and eighth grades, had also made a yard sign. It read: "Don't Plummet With Summit."

After the fall semester last year, about a dozen parents in Wellington pulled their children out of public school, said Kevin Dodds, a city councilman. In McPherson, Mr. Koenig and his wife, Meggan, enrolled their two children in a Catholic school, using money saved for a kitchen remodel and vacation.

"We're not Catholic," Mrs. Koenig said. "But we just felt like it would be a lot easier to have a discussion over dinner about something that they might have heard in a religion class than Summit."

Nearly 40 more families plan on taking their children out of public school by this summer, Mr. Dodds said.

“We’re out in the middle of nowhere,” he said. “So we’re the guinea pigs.”