

Teacher Statements on our Partnership with Summit Learning

In the letters below, we have outlined the reasoning behind our decisions to implement Summit Learning and the reasons we have decided to continue and improve its implementation.

We truly believe that if we all work positively together, your children will benefit from their experiences here. We ask that you take the time to read our letters.

CCI Teachers

Letter written by Mrs. Terri Bell, 5th Grade Teacher

To whom it may concern:

The reasons I chose to become a teacher were to make a difference in students' lives and to help them become lifelong learners. A couple of weeks ago, when discussing with my students the many different career options for them, one of my students asked me, "Doesn't it get boring being a teacher since you teach the same things every year?" I laughed and could honestly say that teaching is anything but boring! Every year brings new faces, new personalities, and new learning styles which require new ways of teaching. There have been times during my twenty-plus years of teaching that I have faced frustrations and struggles that have caused me to wonder if I was in the right profession. However, each time I pondered this issue, I could not imagine doing anything but teaching. I know that if I was not teaching, I would miss the daily interaction with kids and the chance to see them grow and learn.

Despite the fact that I cannot imagine doing any other job, the most recent years of teaching have become even more challenging, and at times, disheartening. Students are not the same as they were twenty years ago, ten years ago, or even five years ago. More and more students are experiencing difficult home life situations and/or are exposed to worldly influences like television, movies, smart phones, Internet, social media, etc. These influences are huge distractions and seem to create larger ranges of abilities and/or performance within the classroom. In addition, the standards and expectations of students continue to rise. We teachers are faced with the challenges of competing with those outside influences and meeting the needs of a wide range of students and abilities.

When I first heard about Summit Learning and what it had to offer, my hope for overcoming these challenges was renewed. I became excited about teaching again. This first year of implementing Summit Learning has not been without its own challenges, however. In many ways, I felt like a first-year teacher again. Much work has been put into learning the platform, the grading system, and the methodology of Summit. Continuous reflection about what has worked and what has not has been necessary in order to plan and revise lessons, projects, and assessments. Communicating with parents about expectations and progress of their students has not always been completely well-received, and we have been criticized for the decisions we have made even though we have always had our students' best interests at heart.

Even though these challenges have been present, I feel that the benefits of implementing Summit have far outweighed the challenges. I also believe that we can overcome the challenges by continuing to revise our strategies of implementation. I have willingly put in the work and will continue to do so because I sincerely believe that it has been benefiting my students.

Some of the benefits that I have witnessed and experienced this year have been through the mentoring component. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning website, studies have shown that social and emotional learning, "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions," leads to increased academic success and improved behavior. Through the mentoring component of the Summit Learning program, we try to foster Habits of Success which align with Social and Emotional Learning. Never before was I able to manage meeting individually with each of my students on an almost weekly basis. This year, however, because of Summit Learning implementation, I have been able to connect with my students on a personal level like I never could

before. These connections have allowed me to foster personalized goal-setting and organizational skills, better develop relationships with my students, and encourage responsible decision-making. These skills cannot be taught via one-time lessons; they must be continually fostered on a regular basis as mentoring sessions do allow. I have seen great growth in these areas this year. Students who were completely lost and had no self-direction at the beginning of the year can now prioritize and tell me their plans each week. Students who are uncomfortable asking questions in a whole-group setting bring their questions with them and verbalize them during our mentoring sessions.

Mentoring with students individually would not be possible without Personalized Learning Time (PLT). While PLT allows for mentoring, it also benefits the students in many ways. It allows them to make choices about their learning and fosters independence and responsibility. With the guidance of goal-setting during mentoring, students are free to choose which subjects they work on each day and which resources they are going to use to learn the content. We have found that students still need some study guides to help them take notes from the resources. However, depending what the content is, students are sometimes expected to take their own notes and most are now capable of doing this. Because the students are still kids, there are occasions when they still need to be reminded to use time wisely, but most often my students are diligently working during this personalized learning time. They are truly learning to become more independent. Students and parents have indicated that there is less homework this year. I attribute this to students using PLT effectively.

Another huge benefit of PLT is that students can work at their own pace. They all have the same goal of mastering the content by a certain date, but those who are ready can keep moving to the next Focus Area; they don't have to wait for others or be forced to sit through re-teachings of content that they have already mastered. Those who need more time, can have more time. I sense a huge appreciation of this from most of my students.

I also like that students are held accountable for learning the content. If they do not pass a content assessment, they have more than one opportunity to attempt to pass. Without PLT and the Summit Platform, it would be impossible to manage multiple retakes of tests until students pass. Prior to using Summit, I often had students who did not care to study and did not care to ask for help when they needed it. Test day would come, and they would fail. Students would have to move on to the next chapter or lesson whether they had mastered the previous lesson or not. With PLT, students have found out that in most cases, they do have to take notes, and they do have to study. If they don't, they most often do not pass. When a student has not passed after more than one attempt, then I know that he or she needs more guidance or more instruction, and I can form workshops for those students who need them and give them direct instruction. This year, more than any other year, students seek me for help when needed because they want the help that they need. Not only do they seek me for help, they also seek me out to report their accomplishments. They are proud of their work. This is another positive difference that I have noticed this year.

Our project time is how we spend the majority of our day. This is the time when we deliver whole-group or small-group instruction. We deliver instruction through a variety of mediums including textbooks, paper-pencil activities, and technology. This is also a time when we can model note-taking skills. Then, students develop cognitive skills, such as organizing writing and research, integrating evidence from reading passages, and creating presentations by working on projects. While Summit Learning has a curriculum available for us to use, we have the freedom to use our own curriculum. Most of our fifth-grade English Language Arts and social studies curriculum has been our own. We have been able to use curriculum that has worked well for us in the past and make it even better through the use of checkpoints and feedback. The platform allows us to more efficiently give feedback to students all in one place where they can refer to it before submitting their final products for a grade. Based on the checkpoints, we can group students according to their needs which allows us to differentiate instruction.

I have already mentioned a few ways that the platform makes teaching and assessing more efficient. The platform also allows me to easily share resources with students. Sometimes, I use a resource with the class during direct instruction, such as a text passage, a website or a video that students may need to view again. I might also model a skill for the students in class and record it as a video which I can easily share on the platform for students who are absent or for

students who need the instruction again. So often in the past, I would find multiple resources for topics of instruction, but there was not enough time during class to use them all. With the platform, I can easily share them either in a focus area that students use during PLT or as a resource for a project. While textbooks still serve a purpose in my classroom, textbooks cannot be revised for mistakes and/or questionable content, nor can they be modified for students who need modifications. Technology does allow us to revise and modify content. By making these resources available to the students, I hope that I am encouraging them to further their learning outside the classroom. I am not throwing technology at my students as a type of life preserver allowing them to either “sink or swim.” I am still teaching my students and using technology to enhance their learning experiences.

Another reason that I think the Summit Learning platform is beneficial is that it gives much more detailed information about students’ progress. It clearly shows when students are behind in focus areas and specific learning objectives that have not been met or have not completed projects on time. In addition to letter grades, it shows strengths and weaknesses in cognitive skills.

In summary, teaching can be done without Summit Learning. However, I prefer to teach with it because of the many benefits and positive outcomes that I have witnessed this year. My only regret is that I did not have this tool earlier in my career and that we have not yet found a way to communicate the benefits in a way that all parents can understand. I sincerely invite all parents - those in support and those who are critical - to please visit my classroom before forming an opinion. I want to equip all parents to have an informed opinion based on observation. If you are skeptical and have never been to one of our classrooms, please join us so that you can become more informed about how we teach our students. I am so glad that my daughter was able to reap the benefits of the Summit Learning program for one year at least. I wish my two older sons and my former students could have experienced it as well.

Terri Bell, CCI 5th Grade Teacher

Works Cited

“What Is SEL?” *Casel*, casel.org/what-is-sel/.

Letter written by Mrs. Kyla Lueken, 6th Grade Teacher

To Whom it may concern:

The way that I taught/learned 10 years ago is very different than today. The way that I will teach/learn will be very different 10 years from now. If that wasn’t the case, what a disappointment for my students, your children, our future. One thing that remains the same is that I didn’t come into this profession because it was easy, it paid well, or because I go in at 8:00 leave at 3:00 and get the summers off. I chose to be a teacher because I had great teachers along the way, I had a corporation that provided great opportunities for its students, and a community that supported the school systems. I chose to be a teacher because it was the only profession that I ever had an interest in. I knew that I wanted to work with children of all abilities. I wanted to share my passion for learning and in return see the successes of our future unfold before me...sometimes after failures first. I still choose to be a teacher today in spite of the cuts, the demands, and the pushback.

This year has been a very trying year but with many eye-opening experiences and successes for me as an educator. Outlined below I will touch on the many positive experiences that I have seen from the learning style that I was able to implement with my students.

- Admittedly, this year I have spent more time working with my students in small groups or on an individual basis
 - This has allowed me to get to know them better on a personal level
 - This has allowed me to get to know their individual academic needs, skills, and gaps better
- More than ever, I’ve been able to offer students curriculum at a level that they are ready for

- Students can self-pace (with a guidance) so that they can work ahead on skills that challenge them
- In Math, all students have the opportunity to be introduced to a concept initiated by themselves through resources and then reintroduced to it through the concept unit itself.
 - This allows students to take ownership in their own learning. They work on a concept through a focus area and then again when we cover it in more depth during class
- I have utilized curriculum that is designed to mimic real-world situations and have been able to point out to students the importance of specific skills needed to prepare them for real world situations.
 - All the while, I have the autonomy to pull in resources as I want--I am not solely using the resources available through the program
- Students are no longer given an assessment piece (big or small) that shows them a score and moved on whether they are ready or not
 - Students are working harder on their own, with a teacher/assistant, or even with peers to fix what they don't have a deep understanding of. We are not just pushing them along and leaving large gaps behind.
- Student to student collaboration
 - I love that they are learning how to work with others even if it does not include the best of circumstances for all learners--that is just reality!
- Failure!
 - Rarely in life do we get something on the first attempt--we have to make adjustments by trying something different, relearning, or reaching out for help!
- Knowing what my homeroom students are doing in other content areas as well--not just the content I teach
 - I have a much better understanding of what my students are working on in the other core subjects and an opportunity to help them with that
- Celebrations with success after hard work
 - Students are setting goals (even if some of them are not always putting them "down on paper") and when they pass a content assessment, finish a project, complete notes on an objective they are excited to share the accomplishment. EVERY STUDENT in my room has shared multiple successes when we celebrate our success together at the end of the day or on an individual basis.
- Accountability
 - Students have been held accountable to the work they do/do not do. Grades are a TRUE reflection of what a child can do. We do not take grades on work completed outside of the school day that they may have gotten help with. This can be difficult for some parents to let go of. As parents, we can not control how our child's scores except for continuing to play an important role in a student's learning by providing encouragement and reinforcing good study habits.

Kyla Lueken, CCI 6th Grade Teacher