

SUMMIT LeARNING Blog

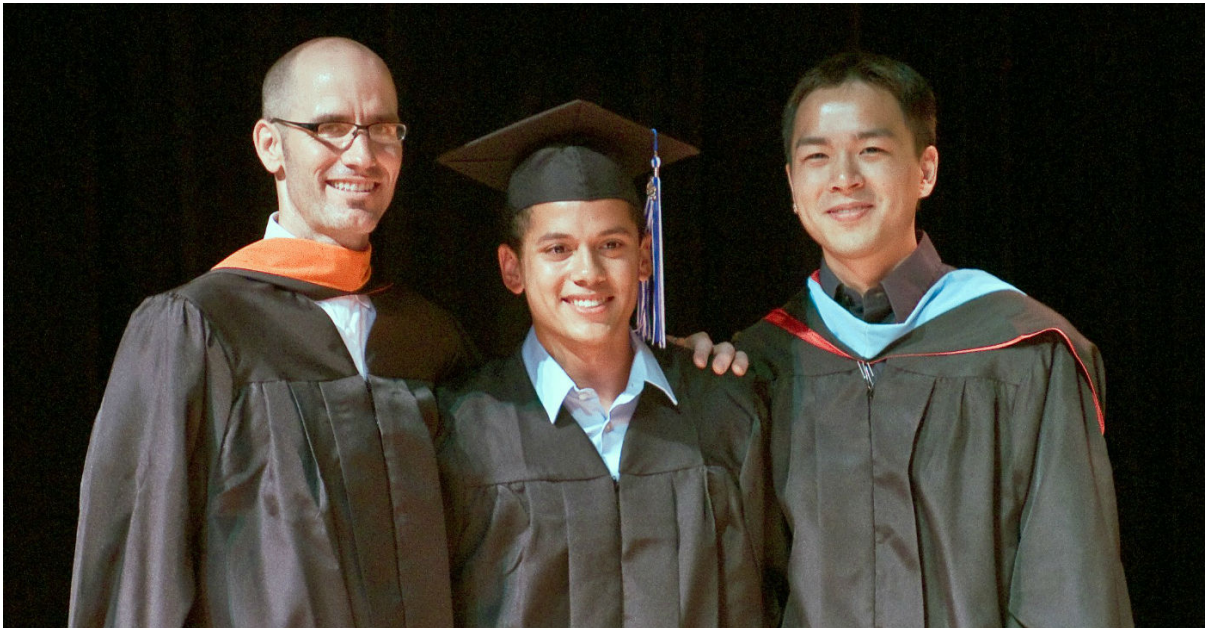
INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

From Paper to Platform: Summit's Educational Technology Story

October 10, 2017



Katie McNeil



Jimmy Zuniga (center) standing with his mentor, Howard Shen (right), and principal, Todd Dickson (left), at the Summit Prep graduation in 2008.

When [Jimmy Zuniga](#)'s parents immigrated from Nicaragua to the US in the 80s, they had one goal in mind: to provide a better life for their children. When Zuniga enrolled at Summit's flagship school, [Summit Preparatory Charter High School](#), in 2004, he set himself on that track to success.

"I wanted to go to Summit because of the world class education and the world class faculty and the amazing mission to get me to college," Zuniga says.

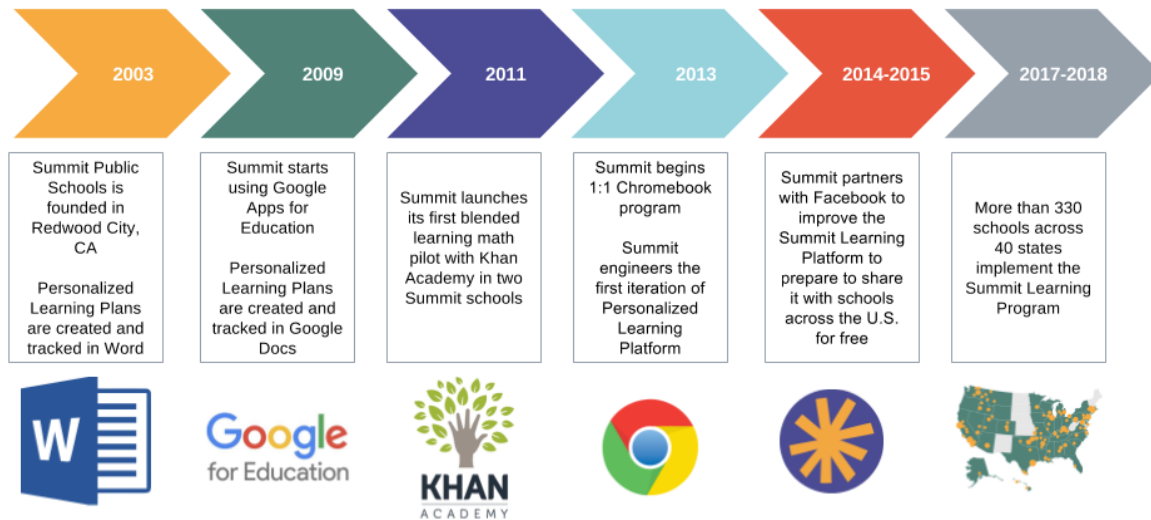
Mission accomplished. In 2014, Zuniga [earned a master's degree](#) in education from Stanford University. Zuniga credits the [Summit model](#) — with its emphasis on self-directed learning, real-world skills development, and mentorship — for his success in life. Now Zuniga teaches AP English at [Summit Everest](#) in Redwood City, California, and carries on the tradition of personalized learning for his students.

Many aspects of the Summit student experience haven't changed from Zuniga's high school days — his students receive [1:1 mentoring support](#) and spend most of the school day challenged by [real-world projects](#). But one significant change — using the Summit Learning Platform — enables teachers like Zuniga to further accelerate learning outcomes for their students.

Tools Change, Learning Philosophy Doesn't

Technology has transformed every teacher's toolkit. But despite the shift from No. 2 pencils to keyboards and college-ruled paper to Google Docs, the need for effective teaching remains constant. Over the past 15 years, Summit Public Schools' tech tools have also evolved, but our usage is consistently tied to our commitment to student learning outcomes to equip students to lead fulfilled lives.

Summit's Tech Story: Different Tools, Same Goal



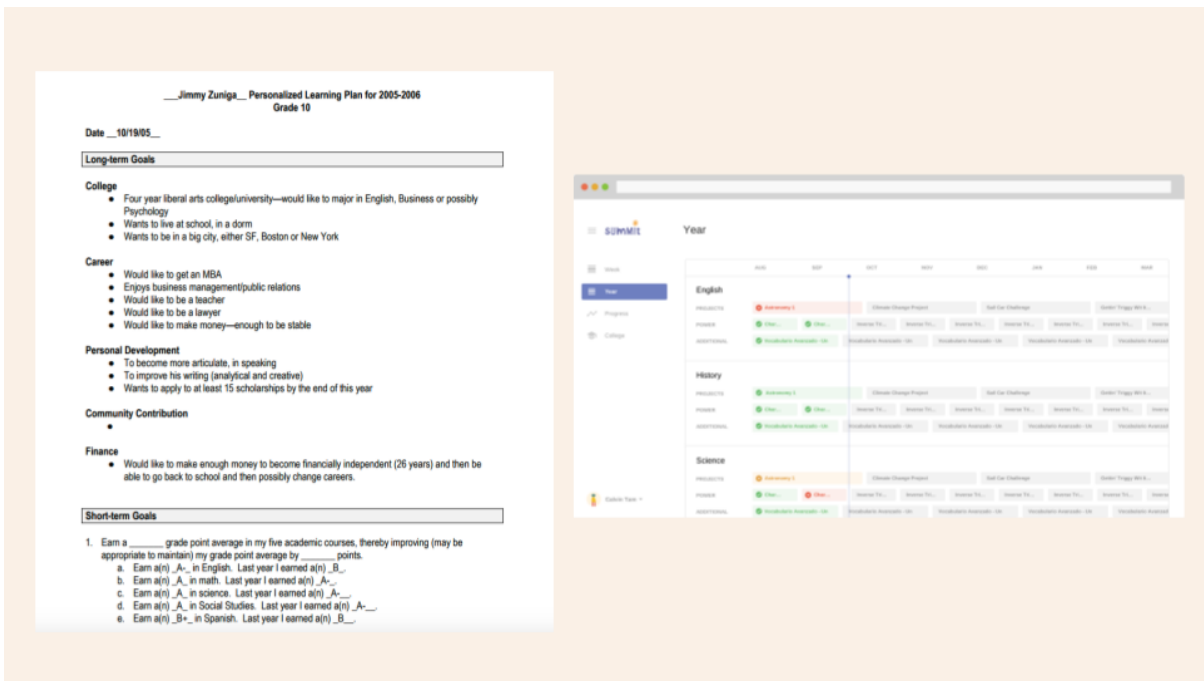
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As one of the first students at [Summit Prep](#) in 2005, Zuniga recalls filling out his Personalized Learning Plan, where he set and tracked his goals with his mentor, later hanging it on his fridge. Now, as Zuniga mentors 19 Summit Everest students, together they can track goals digitally 24/7 through the Summit Learning Platform.

The Platform enables students to track progress towards their short- and long-term goals, learn content at their own pace, apply that content knowledge in real-world projects, and reflect on their learning with their mentor.

Having experienced the shift from paper to Platform, Zuniga offers a unique perspective on Summit Public Schools' instructional technology story.

"Culturally, we've always valued the same things about what it takes for a kid to be ready for success in college," Zuniga says. "The only thing that has changed are the tools that we use to get there."



Before the Summit Learning Platform, Summit Schools drafted Personalized Learning Plans in Microsoft Word (left). Today, the Platform (right) provides 24/7 access to curriculum and real-time information on learning progress and goal-tracking. Although tech tools have changed, Summit Public Schools' commitment to student learning outcomes has always played the central role.

Bryant Wong, Summit's Chief Technology Officer, joined in 2007, when classrooms housed limited technology.

“We were still using the personalized learning model, but instead of using laptops, students tracked their progress on paper,” Wong says. “Over the course of time, our model grew from being tech-lite to tech-adept. Now every single student gets a Chromebook so they can explore content in the way they know best. Ultimately technology is simply another tool that accelerates student learning.”

Whether on Word Docs tacked to kitchen fridges or through dynamic data in the Summit Learning Platform, teachers and students use tools to support learning. The timeline of Summit Public School's technology use is, unsurprisingly, largely reflective of the changing landscape of educational technology.

Mentoring + Technology — A Powerful Combination

All teachers know that technology alone does not guarantee student learning. The true magic in the **Summit Learning** approach happens when the power of 1:1 mentoring is combined with the support of the Platform — and the content, projects, and assessments it holds.



A middle school teacher in Pasadena, Texas, meets with a student for 1:1 mentoring. In the Summit Learning approach, students meet with their mentor weekly to track short- and long-term goals.

Throughout his Summit high school career, Zuniga met with his mentor, [Howard Shen](#), to track short-term goals — such as, what grade he wanted in English — and long-term goals — including where he wanted to go to college and even when he wanted to be financially independent.

Goals were recorded in the paper plan the same way Zuniga’s mentees record their goals in the digital Platform today. Shen ensured Zuniga’s daily actions aligned to those long-term visions and today, Zuniga does the same for his mentees.

“Four years in a row, my mom came to school for a meeting with my mentor and me,” Zuniga recalls. “When we talked about goals, we talked about what was the path to get there. I would have never had any of those conversations with my mom, let alone with my teacher if it hadn’t been for Summit.”

Today he prides himself on his goal-setting ability. “If you ask me what I want to do in 10 years, I will tell you my plan,” he says.

Now a mentor himself, Zuniga tracks the learning and goals of 19 students within the Platform. The digital advantage comes with increased accountability compared with the paper learning plan.

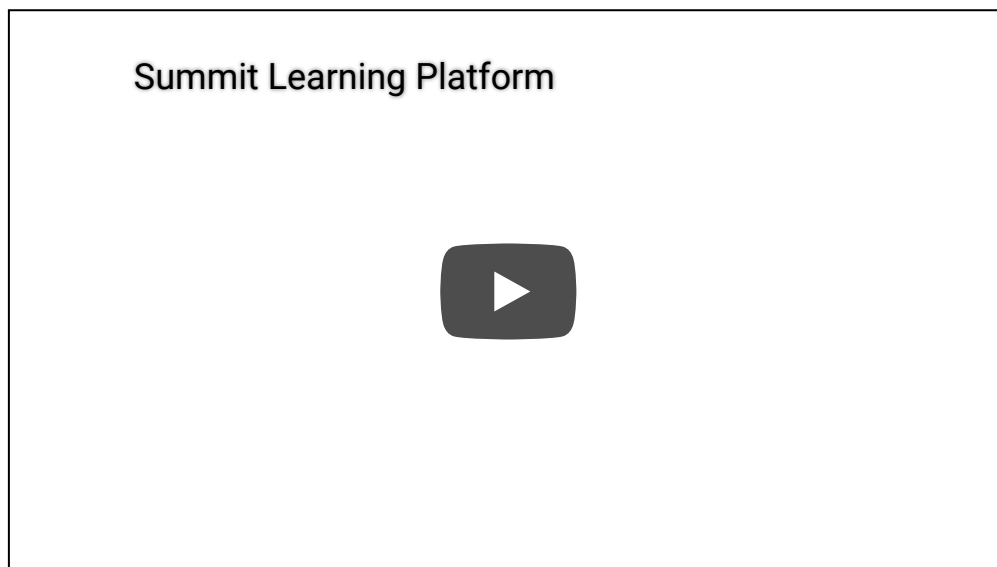
“Platform data helps me make the most of the conversations with my mentees,” Zuniga says. “I can look at their weekly progress in relation to their long-term goals.”

At any time, he can also see what concepts his students are mastering or struggling with and offer targeted support. During yearly meetings with parents and students, this wealth of information, and synthesis of it, helps students set attainable goals.

In essence, Zuniga uses the same personalized learning methods his teachers used with him 10 years ago.

“Our tools at Summit have always changed,” Zuniga says. “We don’t rest on our laurels. We are innovative. We respond to feedback. The Platform is simply another way to achieve our vision.”

Why We Built The Summit Learning Platform



“Our goal has always been to empower students to be equipped to lead a fulfilled life, and technology is a tool for us to achieve this vision,” says [Bryant Wong](#), Chief Technology Officer at Summit Public Schools.

Summit’s ambitious goals — reaching every student, empowering them to drive their own learning whether in the classroom or not, supporting that learning with real-time coaching and mentoring — simply could not be done with static tools like pen and paper and fixed classroom time.

“No tech tool on the market at the time was quite right,” Wong says.

So Summit hired our own engineer, [Sam Strasser](#), in 2013, to take the original static Personalized Learning Plan and transform it into a dynamic tool. The Platform would enable us to centralize all curriculum, projects, and personalized learning plans in one place for students and parents to access 24/7.

Accelerating Learning for 54,000+ Students

Located so close to Silicon Valley, home to some of the world's best engineers, we were fortunate to receive an offer of free support in helping build the Platform. In 2014, we [partnered with a small group of engineers from Facebook](#), who operated independently, for the sole purpose of improving the Platform to eventually enable us to share it with other schools, for free. Our team would take the lead on pedagogy and curriculum. Engineers would take feedback from educators and students to find ways to better meet their needs.

At the same time we were building the Platform, thousands of educators were visiting Summit Schools, interested in our personalized approach to teaching and learning. Committed to transparency in our work, we shared curriculum resources and materials with our peers through email and Google Docs. But we longed for a more efficient, centralized process to support educators.

In the 2015-16 school year, that [goal became a reality](#) and the [Summit Learning Program](#) launched with 19 partner schools across the country. Schools received not only access to the Platform and its curriculum, assessments and projects, but also ongoing support and training from Summit.

This school year, the Summit Learning Program has grown to include [more than 330 schools across 40 states](#). Having met the goal of making the Platform accessible to schools outside of Summit, for free, we knew it was time to find a long-term engineering partner to continue to meet educators' growing demand.

Today, the Platform is continually refined and improved through a long-term engineering partnership with the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#). The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, with a mission of advancing human potential and promoting equal opportunities, is committed to personalized learning and pairing world-class engineers with innovative leaders in science and education.

Supporting, Not Replacing, Teachers

As powerful as the Platform is, Summit CEO and Co-Founder [Diane Tavenner](#) reiterates that it is only one piece of the puzzle. Instead of wedging a piece of technology into an existing model of education, Summit rethinks the entire model itself, then thoughtfully layers in the appropriate tools.

“What Summit has done well is gone back to really explore the purpose of education. We have really spent the last 15 years building an aligned and coherent school model,” Tavenner said on the [Education Exchange podcast](#) last month.

What does that model look like? It looks like students immersed in [real-world projects](#) for a majority of the school day. It looks like teachers making deeper [1:1 connections through mentoring](#). It looks like students learning in a style, a place and a time that [works best for them](#). The Platform is simply the tool that powers this school model.

Although the Summit Learning Platform enables self-directed learning, a skill all students need for success in college and career, Zuniga says it [doesn't replace teachers](#) or face-to-face instruction. It supports them.

“This model is impossible without a teacher serving as a coach and a guide,” Zuniga says.

With the Platform, teachers have unparalleled access to see how their students are performing on a daily basis and use that data to personalize instruction and provide additional support through [mentoring](#) and coaching. In short, it's much more effective than Zuniga's lo-fi printed learning plan.

“Using the Summit Learning Platform is a paradigm shift in education,” Zuniga says. “It's taking the tools and resources housed within a teacher's brain and puts them front and center for a kid to explore. It cultivates self-directedness in students. It frees the teacher from being the center of a kid's learning universe to strategically working with kids who need support.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katie McNeil

Katie is a storyteller at Summit Public Schools, shining a spotlight on inspirational stories from the Summit Learning community. She started her career in journalism, covering K-12 education in the Bronx. Katie won a feature writing award from the Education Writers Association for her higher ed coverage in Utah. Before arriving at Summit, she earned

a master's degree in educational technology from Teachers College, Columbia University and a New York State teaching certification.

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MENTORING

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Summit Learning is a personalized approach to teaching and learning inspired by our mission to help every student lead a fulfilled life.

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The logo for Summit Learning, featuring a small orange starburst icon above the word "SUMMIT" in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by "LEARNING" in a slightly lighter weight of the same font.

