



It's Not Just About the Model

Blended Learning, Innovation, and Year 2 at Summit Public Schools

Matt Wilka and Jeff Cohen



In 2012, FSG and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation published five in-depth case studies on leading blended learning practitioners across the country ([Blended Learning in Practice: Case Studies from Leading Schools](#)). A key question that emerged from this work was how schools can manage the rapid pace of change inherent in blended learning. This case study, a Year 2 follow up in the 2012-13 school year, examines how a rigorous, intentional process for innovation has enabled Summit Public Schools San Jose to continuously improve its blended and whole school learning model.

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Disclaimer

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Year 2 of Blended Learning at Summit San Jose (2012-13)

Walk into a math class at Summit Public Schools: Tahoma and Summit Public Schools: Rainier – known together as Summit San Jose – and you might think you’ve stumbled into the hip, buzzing student lounge of a local university. One hundred-odd students sit on low green couches, write on white boards, and cluster at tall tables around a big rectangle of a room. Most are glued to laptops, heads bobbing slightly to ubiquitous headphones. There’s a soft hum of conversation from the groups of students – math problems and homework tips punctuate the air, with occasional chats about weekend plans or Justin Bieber thrown in. Two adults circulate, checking on individual progress or tamping down the noise, and other teachers staff two “Tutoring Bars” where students line up for one-on-one assistance. Attached to the large rectangular room are four small rooms where classes of 25 work on projects or listen as teachers explain key concepts. After one hour the students in the large and smaller rooms switch, and the scene repeats.

Together, these two hours each day make up the high school math class for 200 9th and 10th graders at Summit San Jose. It’s a mix of self-directed online learning, project based work, and group tasks that has earned Summit national recognition in the emerging field of blended learning. But more important than Summit’s innovative *model* for blended learning is its *process* for getting there. Over the past two years, blended learning at Summit has changed dramatically. To manage and accelerate this change, Summit’s leaders have honed an approach to innovation that injects the DNA of a startup into the structure of a school – and that offers lessons for blended learning at other schools across the country.



Lessons Learned

Summit's success in blended learning relies on a deliberate process for innovation designed to optimize the school experience and strengthen student outcomes. Five lessons in particular stand out:

1 Innovation Is a Process

The most innovative aspect of Summit's work is not its blended learning model, but its process for constant improvement. By emphasizing a deliberate process for change, Summit has avoided fixating on the latest model or product in blended learning, and instead has used teacher input, student data, feedback, and ongoing reflection to push closer to the school's overarching vision.

2 Be Willing to Be Bold

Summit was a successful charter network before embarking on blended learning, and saw strong results with its Year 1 pilot yet redesigned the model in Year 2. In each case leaders took a calculated risk – guided by data and experience – that a significantly different approach was needed to realize their mission. In doing so Summit has eluded the “innovator's dilemma” that has held some schools back from bold reforms.

3 Change Management Is Key

Students, teachers, and parents each bring experiences and expectations for what “school” should look like. Because of this, each iteration of Summit's model has been accompanied by an equal degree of change management. Summit's leadership has adhered to a formal process for change management that involves dialogue about why adjustment is needed, evidence about the benefits of change, and transparency about areas for improvement.

4 Innovation Takes Everyone

In concert with change management, Summit's push toward innovation has succeeded because every stakeholder in the school community – from network leaders to principals to teachers to students to families – has somehow provided input and been involved in decisionmaking. This broad involvement not only builds ownership, but creates new sources for ideas for the future.

5 Blended Learning ≠ Innovation, But It Can Make Innovation Faster

Blended learning, in addition to shifting how students learn, makes rapid iteration possible across a whole school model. At Summit, implementing surveys, collecting data, and gleaning insight on a weekly basis would be prohibitive without technology. With blended learning, teachers and leaders can gather real-time data to make faster decisions and cycle more rapidly through the innovation process.

The Evolution of Summit's Blended Learning Model

In the fall of 2011, two high schools in San Jose, CA – Summit Tahoma and Summit Rainier – piloted a new approach to teaching math. The schools had just opened their doors as the latest members of the Summit Public Schools network. Since 2003, Summit had grown to operate two rigorous, highly supportive high schools that sent an impressive number of students to college. Summit won praise as a public education success story. But as the network's leaders began planning for the two new schools, they noticed something unexpected in the college data of their graduates. While practically all of Summit's high school grads had gone on to college, many were struggling once they got there, particularly in math. To live up to its mission of preparing *all* students for college success, Summit sought a new approach at Tahoma and Rainier.

The solution, after months of planning, was a blended learning math model where 9th graders spent part of each class working independently on Khan Academy, and part working in groups or receiving direct instruction from the teacher. On Khan, students set weekly goals and worked through online exercises matched to their individual learning level and the overall curriculum. Summit's teachers quickly noticed that Khan Academy was adept at imparting basic skills and plugging gaps in content knowledge. Teachers used this feedback to increasingly target offline time on projects, group work, and other strategies to build higher-order thinking. Over Year 1, Summit consistently fine-tuned the optimal dose and sequence of online, small-group, and teacher-directed learning within math. By the end of the year, the blended learning pilot showed early signs of success: teachers were enthusiastic, students seemed more engaged in their work, and test scores exceeded state and district averages.

Yet Summit wasn't satisfied. While students were learning online in individualized ways, a set 9th grade curriculum prevented them from truly progressing at their own pace. Summit's faculty were excited about blended learning, but felt they had only scratched the surface of its potential. And most importantly,

Summit at a Glance

Summit San Jose (2012-13)

Schools Profiled: Summit Public Schools: Tahoma and Summit Public Schools: Rainier – together referred to as Summit San Jose

Founded: 2011

Location: San Jose, CA

Students: ~400 9th – 10th grade students

Executive Director: David Richards

Blended Model: A blended learning model that aims to create a next-generation learning experience for each student through technology and other learning modalities and supports

Summit Public Schools

CMO Name: Summit Public Schools

Founded: 2003

Network: Six schools serving the Bay Area, CA

Founder & CEO: Diane Tavenner

Mission: To ensure that every student has the opportunity to not only attend, but succeed in, a four-year college or university

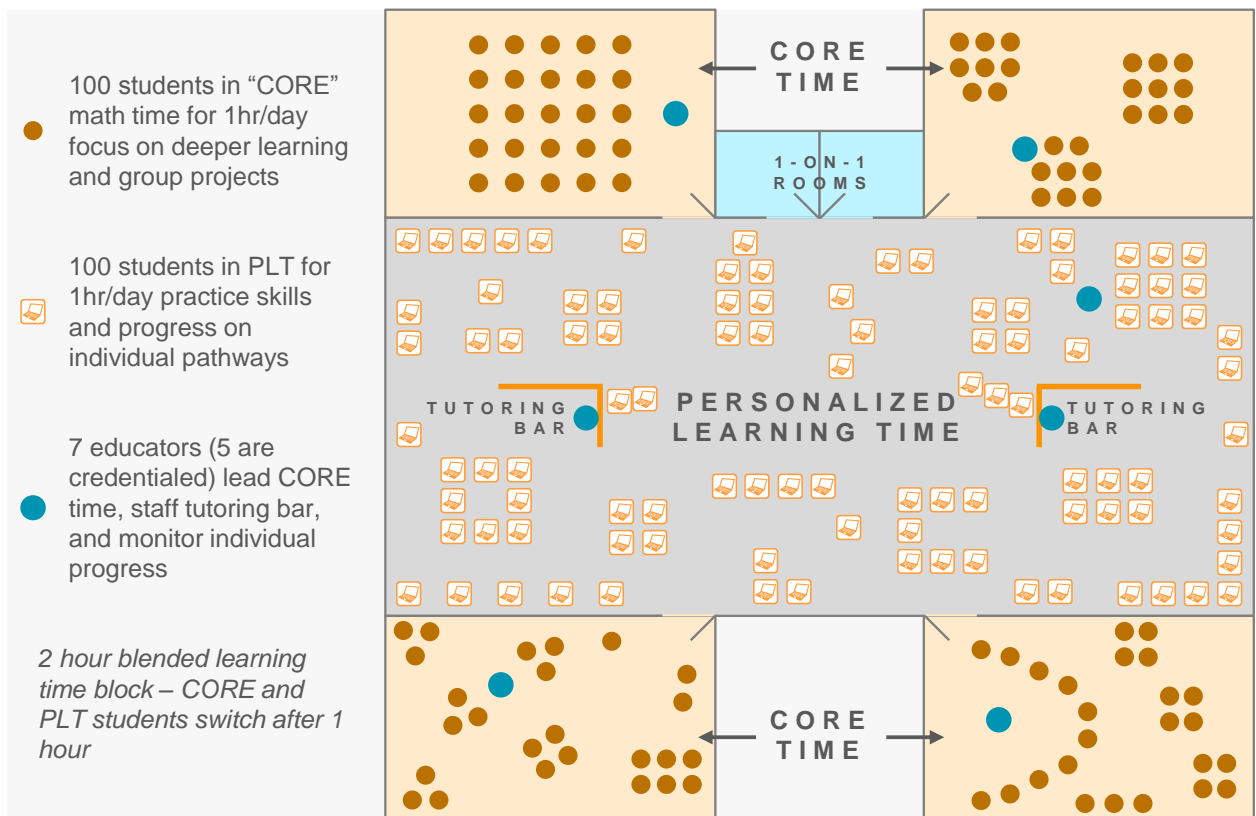
Growth: Two new schools opened in 2013; 14 schools serving 6,000 students planned over the coming decade

Summit realized that while students were more engaged in math, many still lacked the non-cognitive skills – like grit, teamwork, communication, and self-direction – to navigate the unstructured world of college. Instead of a teacher-led model, perhaps students needed more experience directing learning themselves.

As Year 1 of the pilot drew to a close, Summit pivoted toward a new model that would preserve the mix of online and offline learning along with rapid feedback, but that would promote greater student ownership as well as a competency-based progression. The result, Summit hoped, would support each student's progress toward college-level math and build their capacity to persevere and succeed independently. To kick off this process, Summit's leadership organized a 48-hour, organization-wide "Innovation Summit" to apply the principles of user-centered design to re-imagining the school experience. The ideas generated from the event, combined with extensive planning by Summit's team, informed the Year 2 blended learning math model that Tahoma and Rainier launched the following fall.

In place of traditional classrooms, Summit has knocked down walls to create a 7,000-square-foot, open-architecture facility that takes up half of Tahoma and Rainier's 9th and 10th grade campus. Each day, cohorts of 200 9th and 10th graders spend two hours in a blended learning math block that is divided into two segments. In "Personalized Learning Time" (PLT), 100 students spend one hour in a large open room

Summit San Jose – Year 2 Blended Learning Setup



on a competency-based, online math curriculum. Students set learning goals based on their point of progression, and use teacher-curated, online “playlists” to select a range of learning resources (videos, articles, games, etc.) that will help them master successive lessons. Students can seek assistance from peers or from a teacher at the room’s “Tutoring Bars” – like an Apple Genius Bar for school – and two non-credentialed “learning coaches” circulate to help students stay on track. After an hour, the students in the large room switch with 100 other students in four adjoining classrooms. During “CORE” time, mixed-level classes of 25 students – each with one teacher – apply what they learned in PLT through project-based, small-group work along with lessons designed to foster deeper thinking and higher order skills.

Two years into blended learning, Summit’s mix of self-directed online work and project-based group learning is nearly unrecognizable from the pilot that launched on Day 1. Summit’s journey – from using Khan for part of math class to removing walls and rethinking the entire school experience – started organically, but over time gathered purpose and speed. After observing how quickly its model shifted in Year 1, Summit set out to create a formal process for managing and accelerating this change in Year 2. Along the way blended learning has enabled innovation and has been a key piece of Summit’s evolution, but innovation at Summit extends beyond blended learning. It includes aspects of culture, student and teacher engagement, and more. Understanding the elements of Summit’s process for innovation, as well as how they fit together, is integral to understanding Summit’s success in blended learning across multiple iterations of its model. This framework also holds lessons for all schools looking to grow and thrive in the changing field of blended learning.

Blended Learning + Innovation

Blended learning has sparked tremendous excitement in the education field. Yet blended learning by itself does not equate to an “innovative” school. Putting technology in classrooms is a starting place, but unless it alters behavior among students and adults and ultimately improves learning, technology falls short of its promise.

However, blended learning done well can be a tremendous *accelerator* of innovation and school improvement:

- Technology can make **data more available and feedback more rapid** – both leading to quicker cycles of learning and improvement.
- Technology can better **capture and systematize** the week-to-week and year-to-year **improvements** that teachers already make to their lesson plans and approaches to instruction.
- Blended learning breaks apart many of the traditional pieces of a school model (pieces such as teacher roles, fixed use of time, age-based progression, just to name a few). Schools are now **re-assembling the pieces of this puzzle in different, evolving ways**.

Innovation can occur without blended learning, but blended learning can make innovation much faster and more effective. For Summit, balancing new technology with a strong strategic focus on student achievement and a deliberate process for improvement holds the key.

Four Key Drivers of Innovation at Summit

Innovation at Summit starts with a common mission: preparing all students for college and to be thoughtful, contributing members of society. This has been the True North for Summit’s blended learning work, and a reality check that any changes to its model should improve outcomes and solve real problems for teachers and kids. At Summit, innovation as a means to this end has evolved from a culture of encouraging good ideas to an intentional, data-driven process – that captures and learns from new approaches at the student, teacher, and school-wide levels. This innovation process includes elements of design thinking, startup strategy, and change management, but is rooted in Summit’s experience of operating successful schools. In examining Summit’s approach to innovation, four elements in particular stand out. They have been integral to Summit’s success in blended learning, and hold lessons for other educators as well.

Four Key Drivers of Innovation

1. A **Framework** for Innovation
2. **Data** from Users to Drive Learning and Improvement
3. Outside **Partnerships** to Spark Ideas and Co-Generate Solutions
4. A **Culture** that Supports Innovation and Change

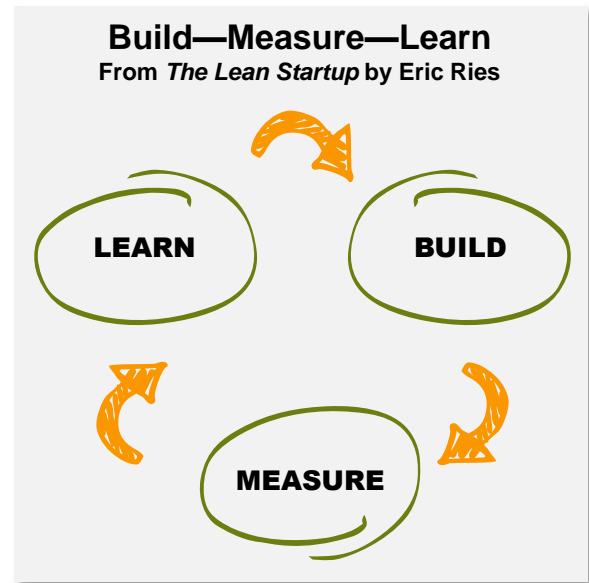
1. A Framework for Innovation

When Summit decided to shift its blended model to increase student ownership, they needed new ideas and a common language to proceed. With the help of design experts from Google, school leaders created a 48-hour, all-staff “Innovation Summit” focused on the precepts of user-centered design. Teachers, leaders, and staff spent two days empathizing, iterating, prototyping, and refining the answers to a common question: “*What is the optimal learning environment to prepare students for success in college and to become thoughtful, contributing members of society?*” After two days, Summit’s faculty had a long list of ideas for the new model. But more importantly, they had a common way to talk about school change that placed the needs, perspectives, and experiences of students at the heart of the re-design process. As a result, user-centered design has become a habit for Summit San Jose. Teachers and leaders increasingly start with the student experience when planning adjustments to the model, and have sought new ways to capture student feedback to continually improve.

While user-centered design helped create the mindset for a more student-directed learning model, a second framework has helped to accelerate Summit’s ongoing evolution. Build—Measure—Learn, from *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries, has become the new mantra of product development among Silicon Valley startups. *Build* refers to launching, as quickly as possible, a “minimum viable product” for users. *Measure* means testing that product to ascertain what’s working and what is not. And *Learn* is about reflecting on whether to stay the course or pivot in a new direction. The point is to cycle rapidly through this process, creating successive improvements with each revolution that help a company advance its product and adapt to changing circumstances.

At Summit, teachers and leaders have turned Build—Measure—Learn into a shared framework for school improvement. Starting in Year 2, Summit San Jose measured the impact of each new element through student perceptual and performance data, with adjustments weighed on a weekly basis. This process, Summit’s leaders explain, is rooted in the type of reflection and adjustment that happens in many high performing schools. What’s different is a common framework across the entire faculty, the rigor of multiple metrics collected on a weekly basis, and the speed at which Summit cycles through the process.

Instead of adjusting its instructional model on a semester or annual basis, in Year 2 Summit San Jose completed each Build—Measure—Learn cycle in 1-2 weeks – a pace of iteration that enabled much faster improvement than the school had ever experienced before.



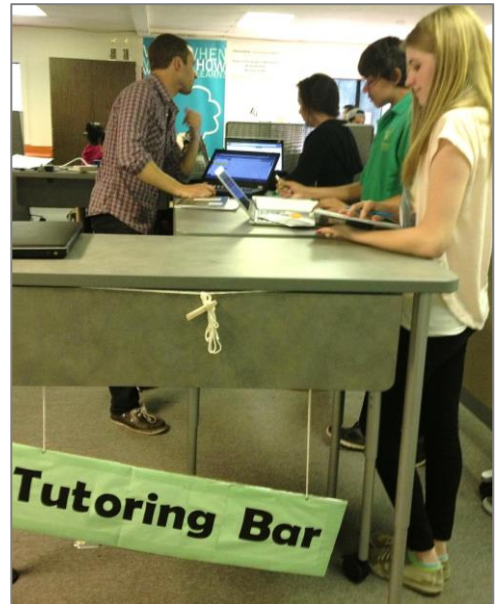
2. Data from Users to Drive Learning and Improvement

Quality student data, gathered and acted upon at frequent intervals, is the fuel for Summit’s innovation process. As Summit San Jose refined its blended learning model, school leaders wanted to know how results were changing with each iteration. The team started with an array of periodic, summative assessments, but soon realized they needed much more granular data to create a rapid feedback loop for how their new model should evolve. By the end of Year 2, Summit zeroed in on three principal streams of data – collected at weekly intervals – to drive its improvement cycle:

1. **Student Survey Data:** Once a week, the 200 students in Summit’s blended math program take a brief online survey to assess progress in self-directed learning behaviors, growth in content and cognitive skills, and overall user satisfaction. Some questions stay constant, but over time Summit has shifted from asking more evaluative questions (e.g., “Do you feel prepared for college?”) to more iterative questions (e.g., “Where did you sit this week and why?”) in order to capture how students experience the blended model and how that experience could be improved.
2. **Student Focus Group Data:** To complement survey data, Summit San Jose holds weekly, 35-minute focus groups with a changing mix of 4-8 students. These conversations are informal, often involve snacks, and elicit deeper conversations about student emotions and perceptions regarding their learning experience.
3. **Student Performance Data:** Through a mix of teacher-designed “content assessments” and data generated from online programs, Summit San Jose tracks a short list of metrics that provide a weekly snapshot of aggregate and individual student performance.

Together, these data streams show both *what* students are learning and *how* they are experiencing the model. Both types of data are important for iteration, and once a week a cross-functional team of Summit teachers and leaders meets to analyze the data and discuss what they've learned and what could be improved. Some improvements will be made on a weekly basis, while in other cases Summit will monitor certain data points over weeks or months before making any changes.

Summit San Jose's "Tutoring Bar" – where students go for individual assistance – exemplifies this rapid process of building, measuring, and learning over the course of a semester. At the beginning of Year 2, there was no Tutoring Bar. Instead, students could use part of their blended learning math block to attend one of many elective, teacher-led "seminars" based on their learning needs. Yet data quickly showed something was amiss. Performance metrics over several weeks indicated that attending a seminar made no difference on learning. Surveys and focus groups reported that students were unhappy with the seminars, and increasingly students opted not to attend them at all. Summit's leaders tweaked the seminars over several weekly cycles, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, when only a handful of students were attending each seminar, student satisfaction and performance went up. When Summit probed deeper, students said that they had missed the teacher-student relationship in the large seminars; but when the seminars shrank it felt like teachers were tutoring them. Using this feedback, Summit's blended learning team – including all the math teachers – met and agreed to try dropping seminars altogether for one week and replacing them with tutoring stations. The approach worked. Student satisfaction returned, performance improved, and teachers and leaders agreed to instate the Tutoring Bar as a core part of Summit's model.



The Tutoring Bar is just one example of how real-time data affects the entire school. Students feel greater ownership when they see their feedback reflected in changes to their education, teachers gain frequent and low-stakes data to improve, and leaders see what elements of the overall model are working and when a pivot might be needed.

3. Outside Partnerships to Spark Ideas and Co-Generate Solutions

When Summit San Jose opened its doors in 2011, it partnered with a small nonprofit called Khan Academy. 9th graders used the program in their blended math class, and over the course of the year Summit became a laboratory for how Khan's online content could integrate with a brick and mortar school. Developers from Khan met weekly with Summit's teachers to analyze student data, collect feedback, and co-develop new online exercises that matched Summit's math curriculum. By the end of the year, Khan had built a deeper and more connected library of online content, and Summit had refined the role of online programs within its blended learning model.

In Year 2 Summit has deepened its work with Khan, but has also used this relationship as a blueprint for how partnerships can speed innovation across a school. For Summit, the strongest partners provide more than products or expertise; they bring a willingness to test new ideas, iterate quickly, and evolve their solutions. These partners share Summit's belief in innovation as a process – a mindset that has helped Summit stay nimble in the shifting field of blended learning, and that allows both school and vendor to grow together in complementary ways.

The notion of schools and vendors developing new solutions much faster together than they could alone is exemplified by Summit's partnership with Illuminate Education. In Year 1, Summit San Jose contracted Illuminate for a new student information system. Their work together soon expanded to include online assessments and data analysis. In Year 2, Summit and Illuminate, along with the Girard Foundation, began collaborating on a platform through which students could access a variety of online playlists with content matched to their learning style and progression through the curriculum. Illuminate visited Summit regularly to observe how students were using the new product, look at data, and talk about improvements. In August 2013, Summit, Illuminate, and Girard released the new platform – called Activate Instruction – as a free online resource for other schools and teachers. All three partners will continue to iterate and improve on the platform in coming years.

4. A Culture that Supports Innovation and Change

For all of Summit's partnerships, data, and processes for improvement, "innovation" would fall flat without a culture to support it. A culture of innovation starts with leadership, but takes the whole school to sustain. Summit's leader, founder and CEO Diane Tavenner, has championed ideas that will upend Summit's existing model, but has held focus on its larger goal – preparing all students to succeed in college and beyond. Tavenner's work to establish processes for innovation while managing the adoption of new changes throughout the organization has been critical; but innovation at Summit extends beyond her leadership. School leaders and operations staff are responsible for managing instructional changes that occur with each Build—Measure—Learn cycle. Teachers often originate new ideas, provide a gauge for what's feasible, and take part in key decisions (for instance, 7 of the 15 members of the project team overseeing Summit's Year 2 blended learning work are teachers). And students offer constant feedback through surveys and focus groups and often see their advice reflected in new facets of the model. In sum, a culture of innovation stems from innovation as a shared responsibility, with different stakeholders – from CEO to student – each responsible for decisions that influence the overall model.

While Summit's approach to innovation hinges on distributed ownership, Summit has also created structures intended to accelerate innovation. For instance, the Year 1 Innovation Summit instilled a common language for talking about innovation throughout the organization. In 2012, Summit's leadership had created an "Innovation Fund" to source new ideas from faculty. Set up as an internal venture fund, The Innovation Fund lets any employee propose how to better meet Summit's goals of optimizing learning. In Year 2, four projects received funding – with ideas ranging from better hardware to online tutoring. Each winner receives coaching from Summit's leadership, and the project is refined through the same Build—Measure—Learn cycle that characterizes Summit's broader approach to innovation.

Blended Learning, Innovation, and the Future of Summit

In the fall of 2013 Summit opened two new schools – Summit Denali in Sunnyvale, California, and Summit Shasta in Daly City, California. Both schools will build on the next-generation blended learning model developed at Summit San Jose over the past two years. Students will direct key aspects of their own learning through online and offline modalities, teachers will oversee project-based learning to inculcate deeper skills, and both schools will have a strong focus on real-world learning through eight weeks of immersive “expeditions” over the course of the year.

In addition, the process for innovation that Summit developed at the school level will become a model for how Summit as a charter network can constantly improve. All six schools across Summit’s network will be using all or part of the blended learning model, user-centered design, and Build—Measure—Learn as tools for iteration in the coming year. Leaders from these schools will form a network-wide innovation team focused on sharing ideas and exploring hypotheses with peers. Each school will pilot new learning approaches throughout the year, and each school’s model will be measured and evolved as the year unfolds. Summit’s hope is that by coordinating the problems to be answered, valid student data, and rapid feedback loops across a six-school cohort, progress will be much more rapid than one school could achieve on its own. Like Summit’s past approaches to blended learning, this network model for iteration is an experiment – but the outcome could very well set the standard for how to accelerate blended learning to improve student achievement in other school networks across the country.





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