

Summit Public Schools





Introduction

The vast disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic prompted states and school networks to pause standardized tests and ask hard questions about the role and influence of traditional, once-a-year exams. This amounted to an opportunity to reimagine and redefine K-12 assessment and accountability alongside the students, families, teachers, and school leaders most familiar with the possibilities and pitfalls of our current approach.

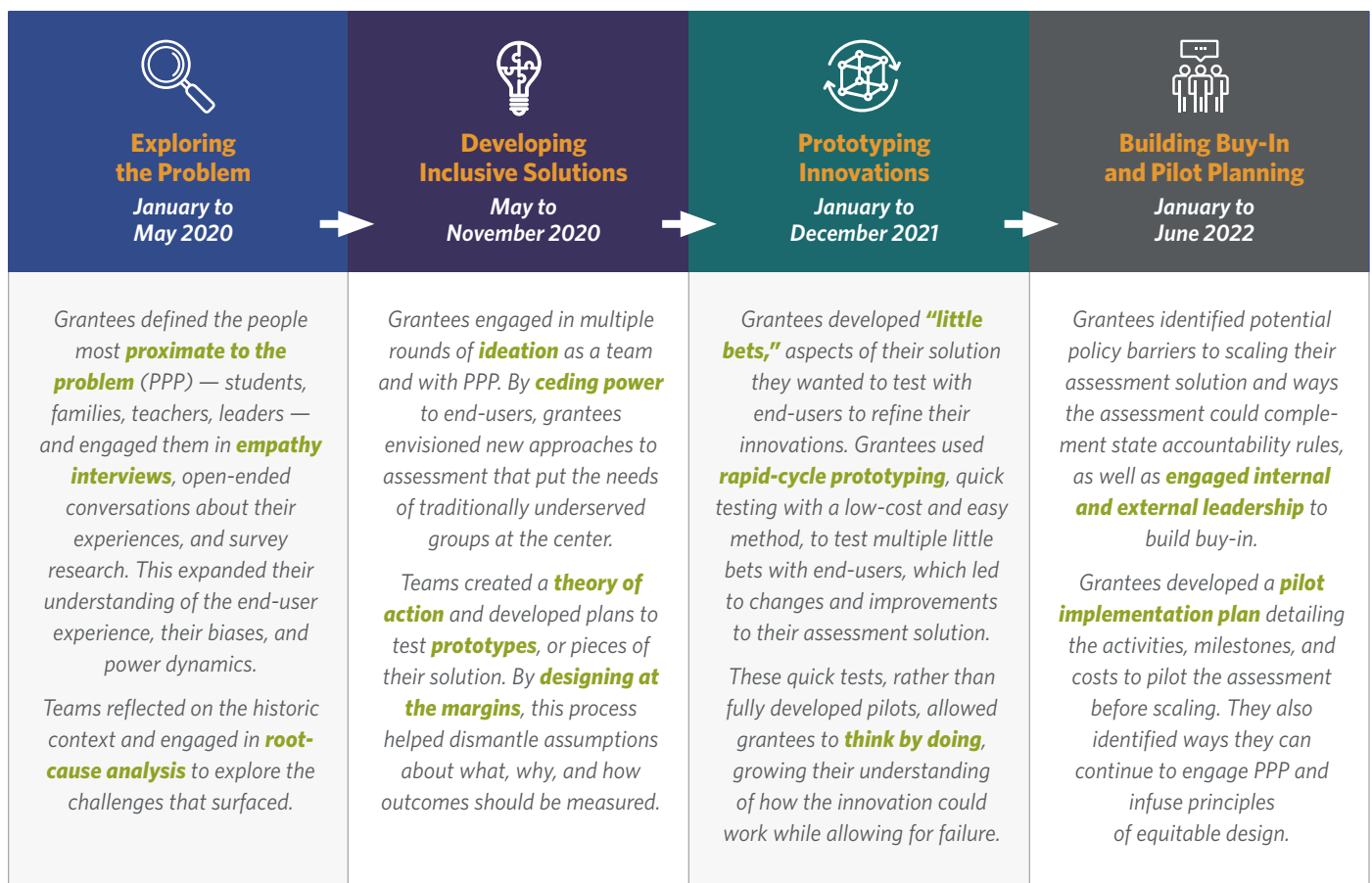
The Innovations in Assessment and New Measure Grant Program, founded in 2020 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Education First, was developed to support this work.

The grant program supports new assessments that measure learning across multiple domains and capture student readiness for college or career, while continuing to provide the detailed data that an equitable approach to accountability requires. The grant program also supports a new strategy to create assessments: one that uses human-centered design principles, to more broadly share planning and decision-making power and build on the expertise of the people most proximate to the problem.

Five grantees are developing new measures to assess student learning across multiple domains. In contrast to traditional, top-down program design, these grantees are engaged with this work at the grassroots level, with a particular focus on how institutional, systemic, or ideological biases influence the experiences of some individuals and groups. These grantees are using **human-centered equitable design**, which builds on the expertise and experiences of students, families, and educators (informed by [Christine Ortiz's methodology](#)¹).

The experiences of these grantees can inform assessments that more fully meet the needs of students, families, teachers, and school leaders. While no one test will perfectly assess all that we need to know about student learning, a richer menu of options and base of knowledge rooted in the direct experiences of the people most proximate to the problem can support the high-quality measures of learning that all students and educators deserve. Such measures can capture the breadth of student achievement, with explicit connections to the broad range of knowledge and skills that nurture thriving adults across diverse cultures and communities.

Equitable Design in Action



¹Ortiz Guzman, Christine M., *Just Design, The equityXdesign Book*.

A Shift from Grades to Goals: Integrating Preparation for College and Career

Consider this vision of a high-school local wilderness class. First, students participate in day trips in nature and reflect on those experiences, including by studying the indigenous Blackfoot Nation’s model of collective care and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Then they prepare and lead a three-day adventure. Students create a budget and packing list, plan for meals, activities, and transportation, and guide their classmates to camp in the wild. When they return, they and their teachers reflect on how these experiences affected their sense of self-direction, curiosity, and purpose, and how their strategic planning and ability to care for others contributed to community well-being.

This is just one example of the Expeditions program at Summit Public Schools, a charter-school network serving more than 4,500 students in 14 campuses in California and Washington State. Summit students in grades 6-12 spend eight weeks of each school year in the career-focused experiential learning program. While individual experiences vary, from independent study and advanced coursework to community-based projects and internships, their potential to focus and

transform students’ lives is constant and central to the network’s vision: Every student is equipped to lead a fulfilled life—one with purpose, financial independence, community, strong relationships, and health.

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“Summit’s Concrete Next Step is valued equally alongside a more traditional mix of academic and social and emotional learning goals.”

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This focus on the future is codified in Summit’s “Concrete Next Step” as a credible path after high school that translates students’ sense of purpose—an understanding of their interests, values, and skills—into a life of well-being.” It is valued equally alongside a more traditional mix of academic and social and emotional learning goals.

The network is working to connect Expeditions more fully to other parts of the Summit model, including by developing new postsecondary readiness measures that would apply to these experiences and capture

students’ preparedness for college and career. A recent survey of alumni highlighted the positive impact and potential for Expeditions learning to shape post-secondary paths. But currently, unlike academic courses that conclude with traditional letter grades, Expeditions coursework is not always assessed. As a result, students and teachers have often viewed these critical learning opportunities as “breaks” from real coursework.

While such “readiness” can include a wide-ranging constellation of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that support postsecondary success, Summit is focused first on defining and measuring a set of professional skills that complement its holistic model and are rooted in its professional expectations for educators. Through authentic learning experiences and robust opportunities for feedback and self-reflection, Summit students will be able to explore the world and themselves as a key part of post-secondary preparation. In addition, teachers will have the tools they need to assess and present evidence of professional skills growth outside of traditional grades.

Key Facts



Who:

Summit Public Schools

What:

Enhance and expand the impact of Expeditions, a career-focused experiential learning program that is a core part of the Summit model in grades 6-12, to more concretely support diverse students’ building professional skills, including by developing:

- Structured opportunities for students to explore the world and themselves through active learning experiences that reveal their unique talents, skills, and assets.
- Cycles of teacher and student feedback and reflection on professional skills related to self-direction, curiosity, and sense of purpose—the three pillars of Summit’s Habits of Success—to inform a Concrete Next Step, or focused path for the future.

Why:

The Summit Public Schools charter network has long included community-based career preparation as part of student learning. But these experiences are informally treated by faculty and viewed by students as a “break” from the core work of academics, even though they develop the critical professional and social skills and competencies that support career and post-secondary success. After a survey of alumni underscored just how critical these learning experiences are in shaping future paths, the network elevated Concrete Next Step to a core target outcome. As part of that shift, Summit also is creating a more integrated model of assessment that values a dynamic mix of knowledge and competencies to support individual students’ personal goals for college and career. Such preparation can connect students with robust opportunities to explore the world, identify their talents and assets, and develop a focused vision and path to their future.

How:

Initially, Summit put forth a broad vision of creating new integrated college and career-readiness measures to transform its schools and influence the field. Then, in talking with the stakeholders who would be most immediately affected by new measures, including students, families, teachers, and employers, the network opted to narrow its scope in two ways: prioritize Summit needs and focus on developing students’ professional skills, defined in terms of their curiosity, self-direction, and sense of purpose. Through cycles of feedback, new tools to assess individual development toward long-range goals, and culminating experiences where students share their progress and Concrete Next Step with trusted peers and adults, Summit aims to prepare all students from diverse backgrounds to navigate dominant culture, participate authentically in the workplace, and graduate high school with a clear path to their futures.

Building on a Holistic Vision

Since its founding in 2003, the Summit Public Schools charter network has grown to 14 middle and high schools in California and Washington State. It enrolls more than 4,500 students, including 82 percent BIPOC students, 15 percent English-language learners, and 45 percent from families experiencing



poverty. Some 96 percent of Summit graduates are accepted to four-year colleges, and 55 percent of alumni from the classes of 2007-14 have earned an undergraduate degree. In addition to its schools, Summit has served as a launchpad for two related organizations: Marshall Street, which partners with districts and organizations to scale innovations initially developed by the Summit network, such as teacher and school leader training; and Summit Learning, an online teaching and

learning platform operated by an independent nonprofit agency, Gradient Learning.

Education at Summit Public Schools is designed to foster self-direction, personalized learning, and community connections among students. Each student is assigned a teacher mentor for the duration of their school career and school schedules build in regular “community time” meetings with mentors and peers for coaching, college counseling, and general support. Academics are rooted in project-based learning with real-world applications, coached by teachers and mentors. Achievement is determined by students demonstrating content mastery, which is the culmination of a self-directed learning cycle. In each cycle, students set a learning goal, decide, learn according to that plan, demonstrate their learning, and reflect. Schools use the “SMART”

system for goal setting, which prompts students to set goals that are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timebound.

The network prizes students’ independence and defines success along four major outcomes. These include developing Cognitive Skills for lifelong learning, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration; Content Knowledge, which students amass through personalized academic learning cycles and by demonstrating proficiency; Habits of Success, which include a range of social and emotional competencies that are summarized as self-direction, curiosity, and sense of purpose; and a Concrete Next Step, or focused and practical plan for the future after high-school graduation.

Each student in grades 6-12 participates in the Expeditions program, which stands apart from core academic study. These

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“Expeditions was one thing that I enjoyed throughout all my four years; it gave me so many life experiences that I would’ve never had had I gone to a normal high school.”

- Summit Prep Alum, Class of 2015

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experiences occur over eight weeks each year, or 25 percent of students' total time in school. They can include advanced academics or other courses as well as community—and workplace-based internships designed to inform students' plans for the future. In Summit's description, Expeditions ensures that "all students have diverse opportunities to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and the

world around them, developing the knowledge and skills to thrive in career, education, and personal life."

Expeditions connects most clearly to Summit's vision of students' Sense of Purpose, which network research describes as involving "self-knowledge, the ability to set and meet goals, and the critical skill of persisting in the face of inevitable challenges." It is designed to be an opportunity for students to apply the

knowledge, skills, and habits of success that they have developed during the core part of the school day. In 12th grade, students marry their experiences in Expeditions with the Concrete Next Step program, through which they investigate possible pathways, enlist a three-member advisory board of trusted adults to review and help shape their plans, and commit to a pathway after graduation.



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While rates of college readiness and admission are key indicators of success, the network also has tracked measures of personal fulfillment among alumni, in keeping with its holistic mission. In a recent survey, nearly 72 percent of alumni reported high levels of overall well-being. However, that survey also revealed that some of those college-bound graduates struggled once they arrived on campus, accrued debt, and were disconnected from a concrete, purposeful pathway after college.

“Many of our alumni were just not being well served by colleges,” said Adam Black, chief information officer at Summit. “We also specifically heard that many of our alumni had had really great experiences through Expeditions that helped them find a path that was aligned to their sense of purpose. That really helped us refocus as an organization around Concrete Next Step and Expeditions as an area of our program where we needed to invest.”

When Summit received the alumni survey results, it also was in the early stages of reconsidering how to measure postsecondary readiness and success through the Innovations in Assessment grant. The insights from the alumni responses, as well as detailed

conversations with Summit students about what they wanted to gain from Expeditions, would shift the network’s focus to assessing a critical component of Concrete Next Step: professional skills.

“It’s been a challenge between prioritizing the kinds of traditional academic outcomes that we’ve always had to focus on and these other less defined and newer kinds of learning,” said Black. “We also think they are really important, but they don’t yet have the same kind of historical weight to them.”



Co-Designing With Communities

Defining the Problem: Empathy Interviews

The project team began the first phase of its work by interviewing people proximate to the problem, with a focus on the experiences of young adults of color from families experiencing poverty. Its initial problem statement and theory of action was broad and intended to advance an integrated understanding of college and career readiness at Summit and at schools, districts, and networks across the United States.

Those early conversations included Summit alumni who had struggled to transition to a career, employers, and postsecondary institutions and training programs that work with young adults in living-wage jobs that do not require a four-year college degree. They highlighted the need to name racism and classicism as systemic barriers and broadened the types of skills, assets, and training a postsecondary readiness assessment package would need to reflect. For example, assessments should be designed to reflect students' career exposure and exploration, and targeted professional skills should prepare students with the tools to navigate dominant workplace cultures, while also equipping them

with the knowledge, skills, and experience to foster more inclusive workplace cultures.

In this broad vision, Concrete Next Step would include a host of career and college readiness constructs that Summit could measure and report in a summative assessment tool. This would provide individual information about student preparedness while also creating a base of evidence that such outcomes are measurable and shareable tool for other schools. Ultimately, the thinking went, this work would prepare more students of color across the United States for successful transitions to the workplace, both by enhancing their skills and supporting more workplaces to be inclusive of diverse hires. The network has been a leading designer and disseminator of teacher training, online instruction, and other innovations, which it has developed

and shared to spark change inside and outside its schools. This planned trajectory was in keeping with those earlier experiences.

"The broad goals are still there at the end of the day," Black said. "But we realized that we needed to do a lot more thoughtful work internally before any of that external sharing could be effective. . . My hope is that what we do in Expeditions and everything we learn from that over the next couple of years becomes something that can be shared with the world.

We had this feeling that, in order to matter and be relevant, we had to keep pushing super far out into the world on all of the work we do," said Black. "But I think that's a mistake. We now know that we have to focus on ourselves first, and do what we do really well."



Continued conversations during the second phase of the work, including with current Summit students, redefined the scope of the effort and prompted the team to develop a Summit-specific assessment approach that models, develops, and measures the skills students will need for college and career.



**Revising Scope:
A Focus on Equity and
Immediate Student Needs**

The shift came after the Summit team engaged in another round of detailed conversations with people most proximate to the problem. In this second phase, the team surveyed students, families, teachers, and school leaders. It also worked with a Student Design Crew that had been convened to review the Expeditions program.

Those insights made the priority for students clear. Students needed a set of experiences that would allow them to “explore and understand the world and themselves,” the team said, rather than a summative assessment designed to measure the outcomes of those experiences. While the broad

problem did not change, in ceding decisive power to the people most proximate to the problem, the scope and solution did.

The team reflected:

“Getting feedback through authentic experiences, breaking down those experiences through reflection, and synthesizing those reflections into a robust, asset-focused worldview: this is our new vision for what innovative professional skills assessment should look like.”

The team developed and revised prototypes based on Summit’s Outdoor Education Expeditions class. These prototypes were specific to the topic, designed to be folded into Summit’s existing program, and based on the network’s existing Educator Skills rubric. They included essential questions and skills for students and teachers to consider, a prompt for students to assess their preparedness to independently complete the tasks ahead, and a two-way reflection tool for students and teachers to share their observations about how self direction, curiosity, and sense of purpose contributed to the Expeditions experience.

Feedback and revisions were based on input from several groups of stakeholders, including students, mentor teachers, school leaders,

and Community Share, a nonprofit that connects schools with employers and organizations to support real-world learning. This process followed a “little bets” approach, with stakeholders reviewing and discussing draft ideas, and revealed the importance of building out a mentoring role for teachers as well as setting expectations for students early in the school year, before the Expeditions program begins.

Overall, stakeholders initially struggled with moving away from grades and wanted to see more specifics in terms of what and how this type of assessment could work. As the project team refined the specific Outdoor Education example, they also shifted some of the terminology used to describe this type of active, ongoing assessment: typical terms like “evaluating” and “measuring” gave way to “reflection” and “gathering evidence.”

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Looking Ahead

This shift in Summit’s work was more fully reflective of the team’s equity goals and better met the needs that students and teachers identified as most pressing. It also supported developing prototypes that featured asset-based framing and were designed as safe and welcoming opportunities for students to explore and reflect on their development.

“Initially, we all thought that we were going to do something that looked a lot more like traditional assessment, with a rubric or a defined set of skills,” Black said. “But the equity push really kept us from doing that—in a positive way. We have realized that even if we work with students and families to define those things, and then we say, now we’re going to hold you accountable to it, it breaks equality, it breaks the possibility of a back-and-forth which, from an equity perspective, is fundamentally what we believe is necessary.”

The network also is engaging its community partners in new ways to shape Expeditions internships and independent study experiences that serve as rich learning opportunities, create a sense of belonging for BIPOC students, and reflect student diversity. A new Project Quality Rubric will establish criteria for high-quality

Expeditions opportunities, and Deans of Expeditions, who are selected based in part on their community connections, can apply this rubric to assess potential experiences. These deans also will screen local partners and craft new internships that foster inclusive workplaces and meet the needs of BIPOC students, in partnership with [CommunityShare](#).



“It’s not for the sake of the educators. It’s really for the sake of the children and their development.”



For example, multilingual students could work as interns at a small, BIPOC-owned business focused on Spanish-language content marketing. Students would build on language assets, learn transferable skills, and grow their networks.

These learning opportunities, including the two-way reflection tool, will form the basis of culminating experiences that connect Expeditions with Concrete Next Step. At the end of every school year, students of all ages will demonstrate their growth and development from Expeditions

experiences in a Celebration of Learning in front of their teachers, families, and other community members. Older students will share their plans for their Concrete Next Step with a personal advisory board of trusted peers and adults.

As the work continues, Summit plans to test out pieces of this model in small pilots organized at the course level. Letting go of grades is a major challenge for many stakeholders—teachers are worried students won’t have an incentive to work hard, and parents are concerned that they won’t understand whether students are learning without a summative letter or score. So upcoming pilots will be heavy on details, to ensure that assessments can be understood and communicated externally and serve as specific examples of this type of assessment to ensure students, teachers, families, and other stakeholders understand how they work. “Our approach is much more about creating opportunities for true dialogue between educators and children,” which will ultimately help students develop the target professional development skills, said Black. “It’s not for the sake of the educators. It’s really for the sake of the children and their development.”