ADMINISTRATOR
EXPERIENCE
OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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School and central office leaders have been responsible for sustaining the vision of self-directed learning. As self-directed learning evolved and inevitable challenges arose, this has required an adaptive mindset for leadership. Instead of approaching self-directed learning as a fixed model or destination, Summit's leaders saw it as a design principle and goal. When different schools in the network implemented self-directed learning in slightly different ways, Summit's leaders encouraged this variation while maintaining overall fidelity to the vision. Summit has also set up systems for teachers and leaders from different schools in the network to share positive experiences and learn from one another. By driving toward a strongly-held vision while allowing the details of the approach to change, Summit has better been able to navigate the complexity of launching a new approach to learning across a diverse network of schools.

Self-Directed Learning As a Lens for Decisionmaking

As a result of the Khan Academy pilot, blended learning, and giving students greater agency over the past three years, Summit's leaders have come to see self-directed learning as a lens for making key decisions. For example, in designing how students interact with technology some schools have created algorithms that direct students to precise worksheets or activities at every point in the day. Summit considered this route of "instructor-directed" blended learning, yet ultimately chose to step back and create the space for *self*-directed blended learning. This decision has at times made for greater complexity and messiness as students learn how to learn, but Summit believes it will better help students acquire the skills to succeed in college and beyond.

1 : Create the environment for self-directed learning

2 : Don't panic

3 : Build supports and behaviors

A Sequence for Leaders of Self-Directed Schools

In reflecting on 2013-14, school and central office leaders at Summit point to three key elements of successful leadership in a self-directed setting, which together form a sequence for Summit's evolution across the school year.

1 : Create the environment for self-directed learning

A supportive environment for self-directed learning rests on a shared belief that a new approach to school is needed. By the start of its self-directed learning journey, Summit had come to believe that while its high-touch, high-support school model was effective at getting students *to* college, the degree of supports was an impediment to getting students *through* college. As a result, Summit's faculty knew they needed a dramatically different learning environment for students – one that provided much more agency for students to learn how to learn independently. From this starting point, Summit's leadership began building the basic structures and processes to launch a self-directed learning model.

2 : Don't panic

When a subset of students, teachers, and parents each struggled with self-directed learning at the beginning of the school year, Summit's leaders were tempted to rush in and reinstate all the traditional supports. But they held back, and reminded themselves why Summit believed so strongly in self-directed learning. They also accepted that some initial confusion is part of a change process – even while working to improve the model.

3 : Build supports & behaviors

As students and adults gradually got used to the self-directed model, Summit administrators settled into the long-term work of helping students to build the skills of self-direction, teachers to become facilitators and coaches, and parents to learn how to support their children in a new environment. This often entailed building in new structures as well – for example, structures to help teachers shift their practice to focus on cognitive skills.

Change Management is Key

As with any substantial change process, shifting to self-directed learning has necessitated careful attention to change management. In particular, Summit's leaders made consistent efforts at the beginning of the year to communicate the potential value of self-directed learning to parents and to teachers. In some instances Summit could have gone even further in these efforts – a lesson for the next school year. But the most important aspect of change management has been capturing success. With teachers, for example, seeing more and more of their students change their learning behaviors and start to progress even faster has been the most effective possible rational for self-direction. For Summit's leaders, finding ways to highlight these early signs of behavior change – whether through faculty conversations, cross-school practice sharing, or formative student data – have been critical to building buy-in and the culture to support self-direction.