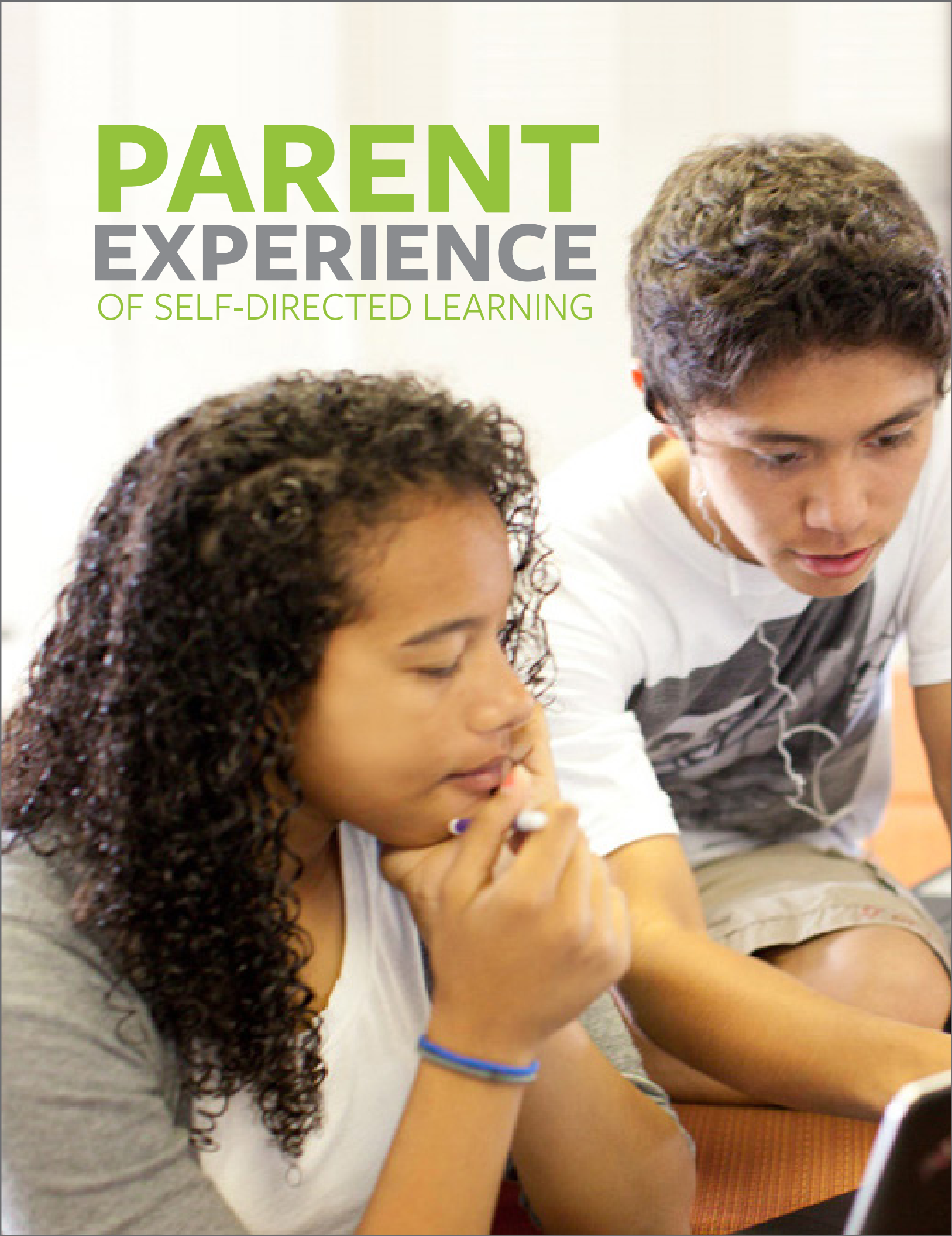


PARENT EXPERIENCE

OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING



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As parents prepare to send children off to college, they invariably worry about how they will fare in a new environment. Parents may not use the language of “noncognitive skills” to describe their child’s ability to persist, seek challenges, or ask for help, yet these skills are often on parents’ minds. This basic alignment between parents and educators can help engage parents around self-directed learning. And yet, self-directed learning is a very different approach to schooling than most parents have experienced themselves. Effectively communicating with parents about *why* self-directed learning will lead to better college outcomes has been a challenge and intense focus for Summit in 2013-14.

A New Type of School

For many parents, Summit's self-directed learning model looks quite different from their personal experiences with school. From students learning on computers to a de-emphasis of teacher lectures to assessments based on cognitive skills, multiple elements of Summit's model understandably feel new. For some parents, this divergence between Summit's model and their own experiences with school may be a good

thing. Like their children, some parents at Summit have been enthusiastic about self-directed learning from Day 1. But for other parents, the novelty of Summit's self-directed model raised immediate questions about its effectiveness. These questions were exacerbated by technical issues – the online dashboard that Summit built for parents to track their child's progress, for example, was initially hard to interpret and parents had difficulty knowing what was happening in school. Together, the newness of the model, the technical difficulties, and the struggles that some students initially experienced with self-directed learning raised significant concerns among the Summit parent community.

Bringing Parents Onboard

In response, Summit took several approaches that, over time, have led to a greater degree of trust and partnership between parents and the schools. First, and most importantly, Summit launched an effort to get as many parents as possible to visit and experience the self-directed model themselves. They found that attending a class, participating in an interactive parent-teacher night, or simply spending time in the building

greatly allayed concerns about self-direction among parents.

Second, Summit focused on communication. As lifelong educators, Summit staff understood the value of parent communication and had redoubled early outreach efforts in anticipation of the new model. But they still underestimated how unfamiliar self-directed learning would feel for parents. Furthermore, while parents do want to know *what* changes are happening in a self-directed model, they particularly want to know *why* these changes are occurring and why a new approach to school will be more effective for their children. Articulating clearly the value of cognitive skills, noncognitive skills, and self-directed learning in general remains a priority for Summit.

Supporting Your Child in Self-Directed Learning

As more and more parents had a chance to experience Summit's self-directed model, the

conversation shifted to how parents should best support their children in this new learning environment. When Summit students come home from school they seldom have traditional homework – Summit dedicates an extra eight hours a week to Personalized Learning Time after school where students complete assignments and study for assessments. Instead of traditional homework, however, students will be thinking about projects that bring out cognitive skills. For many parents, this shift away from homework has changed how they relate to their children after school. In place of dinner table conversations about finishing assignments, parents, like teachers, have started asking questions about cognitive skills or what their children are learning through their projects. As with other aspects of parent involvement in self-directed learning, learning how to have these conversations has been a gradual process for parents, and has meant a new mindset for talking with their children about their progress in school.

