

UDL in 15 Minutes with Karlene Warns

Transcript

LOUI: Hello and welcome to UDL in 15 minutes where educators discuss their experiences with UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader. Today I'm talking with Karlene Warns, who's a kindergarten teacher at Pretty Boy Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland. She's also Teacher of the Year for Pretty Boy. Karlene is going to share how she focuses on self-regulation to help her students improve their executive functioning. Hi, Karlene, how are you?

KARLENE: Hi, I'm happy to be here today talking with you.

LOUI: Oh, thank you so much, and thank you so much for being a guest. Let's just jump in! How, share with us how long you've been teaching and how long you've been at Pretty Boy?

KARLENE: I've been teaching 27 years and all at Pretty Boy. Um, most of my...

LOUI: Wow!!

KARLENE: I know! Exciting! It's a great place to be! Most of my experience is in kindergarten and first grade. I've been the kindergarten teacher leader for the past 6 years, and I've been at Pretty Boy so long that now my students are saying, "You taught my mom!" "You taught my dad!" [laughter] Yes! Our new kindergarten assistant this year was also one of my students which is very cool.

LOUI: Oh, that is! That's a...oh, that's the wonderful cycle of teaching. Yeah, great story. That's incredible. So, talk about the makeup of your classroom at Pretty Boy.

KARLENE: So, this year I have 19 students in my class, which is a nice, nice number. Nice small number. I have 11 boys and eight girls. I have some students that receive some speech and language services. But other than that, they're a wonderful, energetic group of students. [laughter]

LOUI: Well, and they're kindergarten so there are going to be so energetic, that's awesome.

KARLENE: Yes, yes.

LOUI: Your school does a wonderful job of reaching out to the community and parents, not based on like students' specific need, but because it's just the smart and right thing to do. Would you share some of the examples about how you guys do your parent outreach?

KARLENE: Sure, absolutely. Pretty Boy does a great job reaching out to the community. For instance, this month we'll be having our kindergarten roundup for incoming kindergarten students, where we will meet with the parents and the students and we'll start right away building those relationships, and hopefully getting them excited for kindergarten and school. They'll be making friends, and some other functions and things that we do at Pretty Boy, we have sneak-a-peek-at-your-seat into the fall, where they, children come in and they can see their classroom and meet their teacher, and that's always packed. Back to School night. And I'd say in my classroom, and most classrooms, all children are represented, and parents or grandparents are there to learn about, you know, their year. We have academic night, which is connected to our school progress plan. Many things. My favorite thing, though, is our kindergarten celebration. At the end of the year where we invite all the families and siblings that can make it and grandparents, and the children, the kindergarten students perform songs and they share what they've learned in kindergarten. And of course, we have our little teary slideshow to get everybody, you know, remembering the year with all those great little faces.

LOUI: Oh, yeah. Oh, that sounds wonderful. And I have to say this sneak-a-peek-at-your-seat somebody else is going to steal that as soon as they hear that. That is a way fun name! [laughter]

KARLENE: It's awesome. It's awesome. I always say that's a great start to the school year because the kids feel like they've seen where their classroom, their locker, and they just it makes them feel comfortable. So, it a great thing.

LOUI: Well, absolutely. I mean, it's right there in engagement. It's a basis of our access level, so they feel safe and lowering those threats and distractions. "I know where I'm going. I know what it's going to look like." So, right off the bat, you guys are flowing with the framework.

KARLENE: Absolutely, absolutely.

LOUI: Yeah! So, let's dig a little bit more into that UDL part. So, when you started with UDL you focused on representation, but then a few years ago you decided to focus on self-regulation. Why was that? And then what did you do?

KARLENE: Most K students come into kindergarten needing practice in self-regulation. And I'm not sure if there's a rise in anxiety and trauma in children or if as an educator maybe I'm just more aware, but I just wanted to help children learn how to manage their emotions and their stress, you know, self-regulate, so that they could have access to learning. Kindergarten is such an important year for building those foundational skills, and I wanted to just give them more strategies and tools that they could use. They could problem solve and get to that executive state.

LOUI: Yeah, so do you use a specific curriculum or are you putting together strategies and practices or a little bit of both?

KARLENE: A little bit of both. Two years ago, our school system introduced Conscious Discipline which is a self-regulation program that integrates social and emotional learning, school culture, and discipline and the focus is on creating environments where children feel safe and connected, so that they can have, be in the optimal learning state, the executive state, and problem solve, goal achievement, have choice. So, I always knew that it was important to build that safety and connection, but now having this a part of my curriculum and, and being able to explicitly teach and practice these skills. It's wonderful.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, within that curriculum and other structures, especially with kindergarteners it's not like you could just talk about these things. You have to represent them in a lot of different ways so that they can understand and you have to look for different ways for them to kind of show what they know. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

KARLENE: Sure. Well, to start off every day, we do activities to connect and unite as a school family. So, in the morning when they come into school, they, they greet each other. Of course, they greet me as well. And in the beginning of the year, I start off with modeling and doing the greeting, you know, greeting the students, and saying good morning. And we have cute little fist bumps and butterfly handshakes and all these fun little visuals for them, then they take that job over and they love it. And then they still come in and connect with me in the morning as well. So we do activities to connect and unite. We sing songs that are playful that include eye contact, touch, and presence. All these things to make them feel safe at school. Another thing we do every day is we do activities to disengage stress, so I teach them and model how to do breathing. We have some fun different breathings. We do balloon breathing and we do the drain. We do the pretzel, and we have visuals and we have many different ones and they like to choose which ones that we do. That was just a few. We do a lot of yoga, brain breaks, or brain boosts if you will. We play a lot of, a lot of games where we start and stop like freeze dance and loud and soft games. So that's a, that's a part of our day every day. And we do activities to commit. So when they come in in the morning, they commit to keeping it safe. Safe for each other, safe for learning. They commit to following our rules, and we call them "commitment." Imagine that. [laughter]

LOUI: That's logical! That's good!

KARLENE: Yes, yes. I do a lot of role playing and modeling. A lot of self-talk through all this, especially in the beginning of the year. The first six weeks, but I continue, you

know, I say to them, "I'm going to breathe so that I can calm down." "I'm going to put my book on the table so that I'm prepared for my lesson," so I do a lot of modeling. I use a lot of visuals and practice, practice, practice, I call that MAP – model, add visuals, and practice.

LOUI: Nice!

KARLENE: So that's a big part of our day, every day.

LOUI: Now, I'm positive that I'm going to have some listeners that are going to say, "But wait! We are really pressured to dig into the academics in my school. I've got kindergarteners but we got standards and we got to get to the academics, and that's what I told!" And they're going to be listening to you and how much time it sounds like you're spending on these things, so do you weave some of this into the academics? How do you find that time?

KARLENE: So, we definitely take the time the first six weeks of school to make sure that this is all in place for them. And if they feel safe and connected, and we do these activities, it does take time, and it does, you know, we set up our morning meetings and we talk about our feelings and, we, we use our big voice and they learn to say, "Stop. I don't like it when you touch my hair, please keep your hands to yourself." All that is important to do so they feel safe and connected, and then they'll have access to that learning that executive state. Paying attention, organizing, planning, prioritizing. It's so important to do this in order to get to that. And then as the year goes on, they have these tools that they use, and of course we model. We do these things daily, but it doesn't take much time out of your day and it actually is very helpful.

LOUI: What is so great about what you just described, when you look at the UDL Guidelines, you guys are starting at that access level and just hooking them in with the recruiting interest and of course, like I said at the beginning, minimizing those threats and distractions, but you're also finding ways to communicate with them and represent the information to them in ways that, just meet their needs under perception. Then you're definitely moving down into the line where it talks about building, because we talk about the language and the symbols and you're making the language accessible to them because they're starting to practice. Just those very phrases of saying things like, "Could you please stop? I don't like it when you touch my hair." Or, "These are the things that I do like." And, just building on that language so that then they can internalize these things, and the rest of your school year is moving forward and they do become more self-regulated and they're able to use those executive functions, and they're probably better set to comprehend all this information because you're setting them up, but just a great example of how you all are walking, literally from the top of the

framework down kind of in a meta way, in a big way, over the course of the year. It's just beautiful.

KARLENE: Absolutely, yes. We have a place in our classroom, too, that I want to definitely talk about. It's called the safe place, and it's a self-regulation center. And there are steps that they go through when they go to the safe place. They start off in the beginning of the year and, of course, I do a lot of modeling. They get to the safe place and they, they say, if they had a trigger how they're feeling. They say, you know, I'm feeling angry or I'm sad, you know. My mother left for work without giving me a kiss and sometimes it's more serious. You know, something, "My grandma's in the hospital." So, we'll go to the safe place, and I teach them how to calm, so they'll do some breathing. And they talk about their feelings, how they're feeling. And then there's activities there to help them self-regulate. There's squishy toys and there's a wheel that they get to pick how they want to calm down. Maybe it's read a book, or maybe it's write a note to a friend, or draw picture, a journal if they want to journal and write and draw. And there's feeling books. There's lots of things there for them to help them calm. And then, it depends what they want. Sometimes they want to go by themselves, somethings they want a friend. Sometimes they want me. But then I'll always touch base at some point and, you know, try to help them come up with the solution. And sometimes you can't solve all the problems, but you can help them calm down. You can help them have tools that they can, they say that, you know, I'm okay. I'm safe. And I can do this.

LOUI: Yeah. So once again, it's just this great representation all the way across the guidelines. So, lots of different ways for them to express how they're feeling so between the journaling, and then being able to maybe talk to a friend, but then there's also these things that they can manipulate. The squishy things, the kind of fidget-type things, and even interacting with a book to help them calm down so they are working on all these skill sets to take them toward becoming those expert learners! And so they can regain their motivation to come back into the learning environment, their understanding how to be resourceful for their own needs when they've got some social emotional needs. And then they're figuring out how to be strategic in moving through those needs and how to really understand their own goal. This is...it's just a wonderful setup and it's just so exciting to hear about. I really appreciate it.

KARLENE: Thank you. It's a great program. It's helped me as an as an adult learner to learn to say that everything doesn't always have to be perfect and I'm not going to control my kids but I'm going to help them learn how to control their emotions and their feelings. It's a great place to be in my classroom right now.

LOUI: Oh, that's wonderful! [overtalking]

KARLENE: And always, I hope.

LOUI: Well, I'm pretty sure that after these 27 years and the fact you have kids say, "Hey! My parents were in your classroom." There are some really good memories there.

KARLENE: Absolutely. [overtalking]

LOUI: This is awesome! Well, thank you so much for coming on to the podcast today, Karlene. Thank you. [overtalking]

KARLENE: Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

LOUI: Thank you so much. So, for those who are listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, and a transcript, and an associated blog at my website which is www.theUDLapproach.com/media. And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL and 15 minutes, you can contact me through www.theUDLapproach.com, and thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.