UDL in 15 Minutes
With René Sanchez

LOUI: Hi everyone. Thanks for joining me for this episode of UDL in 15 Minutes. Instead of a photo montage, this episode includes a crosswalk tool that my guest describes and kindly made available. You can find that and another resources at theudlapproach.com/podcasts under episode 68. Happy listening! [Music begins] 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 René Sanchez, who is the superintendent of Champlain Valley School District, which serves five towns near Burlington, Vermont. Those five towns are Williston, St George, Shelburne, Hinesburg, and Charlotte. Today, René is going to share his experiences as a principal in Houston, Texas, who brought UDL to his high school. Hi René. Thanks so much for being a part of the podcast!

RENÉ: Hi Loui, I'm really excited to be here. [Music fades]

LOUI: Well, wonderful. So first off, could you share your education and teaching background?

RENÉ: Sure. So, I have my undergrad degree from the University of Notre Dame in political science and international relations. I have a law degree from Ohio State, my principal's degree, my master's degree, in education is from the University of Texas, and I'm currently working on my PhD with Indiana State. I'm currently a Sycamore. So, I began teaching right after I graduated from Notre Dame, started teaching English down in a small town of Weslaco Texas, and then that year or the following year I went back to law school and graduated and then ended up back home in Edinburg, Texas, taught there for a couple of years, and then moved to Austin, became a social studies teacher in the process, moved to a couple of schools within the Austin area, and became a college counselor, a coach, eventually, a person who oversaw the college readiness initiative there, so I helped students get into college and helped oversee all of the

college counselors and avid teachers and other folks associated with that department. Eventually I became an assistant principal, and then a principal, and found my way to different parts of Texas, most recently in Houston, and then just recently in the last couple of years, I was an assistant superintendent in South Bend, Indiana where I oversaw human resources, transportation, and the COVID response. And then currently, as of July 1 this year I became the superintendent of Champlain Valley.

LOUI: Okay you have more experiences than most! [laughter] That's incredible! And I'm so happy that you spent some of your time in my state Indiana. We've benefited from that, so thank you very much!

RENÉ: You're most welcome.

LOUI: So, what made you decide to bring UDL into your building, when you were in, in Houston? And what were your impressions in the beginning of universal design for learning?

RENÉ: So, when I arrived in Houston, we were looking at moving our special education instruction to the least restrictive environment. So, we wanted to make sure that we offered access and opportunities to our students who could be co-taught or who could be served by inclusion. And so, one of the opportunities that came up was a grant with the Educational Service Center Region 4 just outside of Houston, and they were offering a way to get coaching and provide training to the teachers in universal design for learning. And so, at that time, I was looking at universal design for learning purely as a way for supporting our inclusion, our co-teach classes. And so, we applied for the grant, and we're lucky enough to win it. And that became my first interface with universal design for learning.

LOUI: Okay. So then, how did that shift for you and what steps did you take in your own journey that shifted that thinking.

RENÉ: So, the first year was a little rocky, because the people who were administering or overseeing the grant, on the campus level, were still struggling to understand what it truly meant what it truly offered for students. So, during, during the, the second half of the year, as we were planning for the next year, the, the coaches that were provided by Region 4 and the consultant for Region 4 said, "\You know, you should really go see what it looks like." As a result, we sent teams to Bartholomew County and we sent a team to Baltimore County. I was too busy to go on some of these first trips so I went at the end of the year. And so, when I first saw what it truly meant to have universal design used to plan and to orient students on a regular basis, it's like the veil was lifted. And so, I began looking at classrooms, at planning, at just interactions with students in the hallways program offerings, master scheduling, I started looking at things very differently as a result of making sure that we were trying to serve all students from the get go, including those in the margins.

LOUI: So, what were some of the ideas that you brought back that were some of the most significant steps that you took that aligned with those significant steps that you took?

RENÉ: So, the first thing that we did was we had a lot of different programs and a lot of different initiatives on the campus. And what I kept hearing from my teachers was, "You know, we're getting tired of one more thing." And so, as we moved into the second year and we knew that we wanted to phase into utilizing universal design for learning for all teachers was to go about it in a way where we started planning for the whole school, including the professional development, in a way that made it seem like we're planning from the beginning for everybody. So, what we did is we worked with a gentleman from Baltimore County, and he helped us align all of our initiatives based on the components of the initiatives. And once we aligned what the components really did, then we figured out, okay so let's put these six categories together and those six categories were things like environment and culture, rigor lesson design and delivery, student engagement, data driven decisions, and student choice and flexibility. We took those things together, and we realized that if we put all those things together, that would mean that, if we just

taught and planned and assessed correctly the first time, that it was going to end up serving a great deal more of our students. And so that approach became known as the Chavez Circle. And so, the idea was that UDL was going to allow us to provide effective first instruction for all students.

LOUI: And so, the way you're describing this is so different than a lot of people come into UDL with. They come into it as if it's just something that you do in an individual classroom, and affects lesson planning which we know it does. But it sounds like you really took hold of that concept that it's for the entire learning environment and then you, you even were really free and open with your definition of learning environment. So I I'd love to hear your take on that.

RENÉ: So, with regards to learning environment. One of the things that we were doing at Chavez is working really closely by providing second and third tier interventions for our students who had difficulty with attendance or difficulty with earning credits. And so our goal was to provide them with a way that they could do additional work from home. So, with Chavez already being a one-to-one school, we were able to provide hotspots for a great deal of our students, but we didn't have enough of them. So I had a dream that, well, what if there was a way that we could send a modem from the school or from the district out to the larger apartment complexes in a van or in a bus, so that that way they could hit that server, and be able to do their homework that was on our LMS, on the weekend or at night and they wouldn't have to worry about needing a hotspot or having to pay for internet. So, we were never able to reach that plan's fruition in, in Houston, but when I moved to South Bend, that was one of the first questions that was asked of me, "How would you improve transportation?'" So, I was there that I essentially answered, "Well, I would put Wi Fi on the buses." Because now you can serve students who have long bus rides on their way home, or to school. You can serve the athletes or others who are on field trips, who are either on their way to events, or let's say it's an event where they have to sit and wait like a tennis tournament or a track meet, they can get back on the bus and do the homework that they're missing. And then the, the other option is, we could also take it to parks to city parks we can take it to apartment

complexes and post them up there, so that that way students who don't have access to internet can use them. And so, the superintendent really liked that idea, we got it board approved, we were able to get everything purchased and installed, then we started putting them on the road in February 2020. And then, on March 17, 2020, we closed down because of COVID. But, thanks to our IT department able to get everybody Chromebooks that they could take home and use, we were able to deploy our 22 buses, essentially the second day of the close down, so that that way students could hit our LMS and they could do their assignments and turn them in. And so, we were able to send them out to 22 spots around the city, so that students could do their work.

LOUI: That's incredible. So just kind of going off a little bit, did you guys ever have pushback from anyone around having, oh, the Internet availability on the school buses and they thought, "Oh, the kids aren't going to use that appropriately"? And how did you work around that? And was there support given to the students on, you know how to how to use this as a way to be to work toward becoming an expert learner or however it was phrased, of course?

RENÉ: So, I would say that, because we, we started using them in such a fashion, and the superintendent had a great idea. We originally had a band on the Wi Fi that was purely tied to the Chromebook, so only Chromebooks could use the Wi Fi, but due to the emergency nature of the, the lockdown, we had to be able to allow parents and others to use it to be able to pay bills, to be able to check on the news, to be able to make doctor's appointments, so, we opened up a second band, a second band that, that parents and others could use with any devices that were within its reach. And as a result, to my knowledge, in the time that we were doing this that we never received any kind of, you know, "What if they do something wrong with it?"

LOUI: That's just an incredible level of community outreach. I'm glad it was showcased, I believe it was, and you could share that, but from where I'm sitting in my little seat, it's a brilliant outreach to the community and a partnership with a community and I can't help but believe that it created an additional level of goodwill that might not have been

there previously just because of the detachment that can come when a community isn't so well connected to a school district through having their kids there. So, but it was profiled, wasn't it?

RENÉ: Yes, and thanks to the profiling in the national and even international media. Initially our Foundation gave us some money for 10 more units, and then we match that. So, at the start of the second year at the start of the 2021 year, we had 42 buses, and then thanks to the governor's Gears Grants, and a partnership with the City of South Bend, we were able to put it into the grant. And so now South Bend has all 200 of their buses outfitted with Wi Fi.

LOUI: That's incredible. All right, well I took us down that rabbit hole and I don't regret it even though so for those listening I know we are getting close to 15 minutes, but I have something else that I want to ask her René so I know that there were lots of tools and trainings that were created ultimately in your years as principal down there at Cesar Chavez. But what tool really stood out to you that you would want to share with others.

RENÉ: So, Loui I think as we became further trained and began to further understand what the guidelines meant for, for our students, and as we may Java's into a better learning environment for all students, we began to realize that there was a way for us to crosswalk the universal design for learning guidelines, the International Baccalaureate framework, and then the positive behavior intervention and support framework so that that way our teachers could understand, again, even more so that we were still trying to make sure that our effective first teach, our effective first instruction was the most important thing that we were trying to do. Because with the International Baccalaureate, we were able to serve, not just the students who were going for the diploma, but we also created a pathway for our students to get their career program diploma. And then also, we enabled students who were going to be able to do well on the, the language tests, they were able to take, learn the framework, not only through UDL but also through the International Baccalaureate framework. And then with the positive behavior intervention and supports framework, it's recognizing that some students need

additional help, additional support throughout the learning process whether that takes place in the classroom, it takes place in the hallway, or even in some cases across the street in the Food-A-Rama parking lot. So it's just a matter of making sure that UDL, with its basis in equity and inclusivity and bringing all of these pieces together, putting that in a way that educators and students and parents could understand, was very critical in our success. So, making sure that everybody understood this is what we're trying to accomplish, and this is the framework from which we are trying to lead the students down this path of success.

LOUI: Nice. So, is that an artifact that we could maybe post on the website for people to see?

RENÉ: I have the Chavez Circle that I can share with you. I'll just need to find the framework.

LOUI: Okay. Oh, that'd be fabulous. Okay I am going to ask one last question…

RENÉ: Sure!

LOUI: …because now you have this role as superintendent, and I'm sure you have visions of bringing in, and supporting others in their learning about UDL. What structures are in place that are going to help you bring UDL to CVSD?

RENÉ: So, Vermont is a wonderful state in which to be a superintendent or an instructional leader or a parent, as I've got three kids in my school district. And so, Vermont is very forward looking. They are offering things like personalized learning, proficiency-based learning, social emotional learning, and multi-tiered systems of support. So, unlike other places where these are recommended opportunities that districts can have for their students, these opportunities are codified into state law. So, for us, we need to make sure that as a district that we're working towards successfully implementing these pieces. The second piece is that as part of the personalized

learning and proficiency-based learning is that high school students in particular are offered these flexible pathways where they can choose how they are going to graduate from high school with the requisite number of credits and the requisite number of learnings that they need in order to in order to graduate. So, having these options available as a starting point, makes me really excited as a superintendent that Vermont is already talking the language about flexibility, and personalized learning, and making sure that we create these expert learners that are purposeful and motivated, and that they have the strategies and the goals needed for them to be successful. And as a parent, I'm fired up about having these available for my own children.

LOUI: Oh yeah! I bet you are! That, that is wonderful to move into a place and go, "Oh my gosh! This is already in place!" And to know that others have been benefiting from that for years and so it's, it is in place. That's just fabulous. Well, René thank you so much for your time I've kept you over but you kept giving us more so I really appreciate that. Thank you so much.

RENÉ: Loui it's been an absolute pleasure and when you get me started talking about UDL or leadership, I'm going to just keep talking.

LOUI: [Laughter] Well, that's great! We all benefit!

RENÉ: All right. Thank you.

LOUI: So, for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, which is www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. And finally, [music begins] if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes, 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. [music fades]