

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

With Carrie Wozniak

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. This episode kicks off a special series about UDL implementation at Fraser Public Schools. Today, I'm talking with Carrie Wozniak, who's the superintendent of Fraser Public Schools in Fraser, Michigan. Today, Carrie is going to share how UDL has shaped their Portrait of a Graduate and their Strategic Plan. Hi Carrie! It's wonderful to talk with you.

CARRIE: Thank you. I'm super excited to have this opportunity today.

LOUI: Oh, awesome. So, before we get going about this exciting topic, can you tell us a bit about your background and your own journey with UDL?

CARRIE: Absolutely. I'm very fortunate. I've been doing a lot of work with universal design for learning for many, many years. Before I became the superintendent in Fraser, which I'm going into my fourth year right now. I was the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the same district. And I had that position for seven years. And prior to that I worked at an ISD and that's really where I got my, I want to say my feet wet with UDL and really began to dig into this work. At our county ISD which was wonderful, I had a great team. And we did some initial professional development throughout the county and then when I went back to a local as the assistant superintendent, I really had an opportunity to do more of a systemic or strategic I want to say approach to implementing UDL.

LOUI: Nice. And since I've got listeners from all over the world, could you explain what ISD is?

CARRIE: Absolutely. In Macomb County, we have, and I'm in Michigan, it services 21 local districts. They all vary in size. Some are really large. We have one of the second largest school districts in our county and then some are rather small. And I had the opportunity to work with all 21 school districts with different initiatives. And one of the pieces we really focused in on was universal design for learning.

LOUI: Nice. Nice. So, the "I" stands for intermediate or intermediary?

CARRIE: Intermediate School District.

LOUI: Got it. Okay. So, when did UDL begin in Fraser and how did it get started?

CARRIE: Well, we were one of the first districts to go one-to-one. When I arrived there, we were planning for that and we really believed we needed a strong instructional framework to get that off the ground. So, as we began planning for that one-to-one implementation, we did a lot of work around the framework and obviously 11 years ago the framework was a lot different than it is today, but it really helped us talk about the importance of thinking and planning your instruction versus just relying so heavily on the technology. We wanted to make sure we were cognizant of it being a tool. And it was really all about good design. And this technology that we were bringing into our district wasn't going to drive everything we did, it was going to be really what we like to say, an enhancement. We wanted to make sure that the teacher and the student relationships were still at the center of our work. So, that really helped us to begin that work. And I really believe that all districts need an instructional framework that they, I like to say,

keep as their plate, and then you think about what you're putting on the plate after that. So, we always talk about UDL being our plate, and we try to work from that point.

LOUI: That gives it a focus. And like you were saying, a place to put things or a place, a location to center your thinking. So, I love that UDL is the plate. That's a great image. So, your district then has those two big directives that I talked about in the introduction. So, one is called Portrait of the Graduate and the other is the strategic plan. And both are shaped by UDL. So how has UDL come into play? What's, what's the background there?

CARRIE: Yeah, that's a great question. I always talk about the fact that when you're doing any kind of systematic implementation of anything, you really have to have structures and policies in place and a culture that supports that framework. So, two things that I feel are really important in our district is that we've been very strategic about those structures and policies that we've put in place and our culture is obviously very important as well. So, the Portrait of the Graduate, it's really been a movement around thinking about what does it take to get that handshake at graduation and what does it mean to be a student in Fraser Public Schools? So that really has centered our work. We think a lot about the students at the center and what do we want to be designing our learning environment for, and it's the students. So, when you take a look at our portrait of the graduate right underneath that we say, "Designing, learning for all." We're all about thinking about each learner and designing learning that meets the needs of all learners. We know there's no middle ground, or there's no average student. We always talk about and you really have to be intentional about the learning design and that really has become the center of our Portrait of the Graduate. We also talk a lot

about deeper learning competencies, which are, you know, critical thinking, communication, creativity, character, collaboration, and citizenship. And when you're designing your learning for those students, it's very important that you keep those deeper learning competencies in mind as you design your instruction. So that really has guided our work. Everyone in the district was a part of our portrait of the graduate conversation. We all spent a lot of time thinking about what we wanted our students to be able to know and do when they walked across that stage. And then from that point, we then moved into designing our strategic plan, which is really the guide that we use, or I always say it's the, you know, the framework that all of the work we do fits into. So, if it doesn't fit into that plan, you know, we don't want to be focusing in on that. And when we look at our strategic plan, you're going to see that Universal Design for Learning is really the focus of everything that we do. It's our teaching practices. It's how we think about our learning partnerships with students, with the community, with staff. It's how we design our learning environment. And it's how we build out our digital ecosystem. So, when we look at those four frames, we're always looking at it through the lens of Universal Design for Learning.

LOUI: Nice. Nice. You know, one thing I did not ask in the beginning and I should have, is what is the size of Fraser? So, student population and school number and all that.

CARRIE: Yeah, absolutely. I apologize. I should have probably shared that. And we're about 5000 students. One thing that's interesting is we're close to 40% school of choice. So many of our families choose to come to our district, and we're very proud of that fact. We have six elementaries, an early childhood center, one middle school, and one high

school. So, we're really a great size. I really believe that we're not too big, but we're also not too small. So we're able to offer a lot of opportunities for our students.

LOUI: Yeah, so with a student population that size and then the number of staff that you have to support and I'm thinking about having a strategic plan, and then your Portrait of a Graduate the time that has been spent. We'll just start with the Portrait of a Graduate. When did that start and what's, kind of, the district vision to see that fully just embraced by everyone because we all know that change takes a while and we all kind of have to have realistic expectations? So, what has been the expectation around Portrait of a Graduate and then I guess that would be laid out in your strategic plan?

CARRIE: Correct. I think that's a very fair question. This is my third strategic plan for Frasier. When I got here, 11 years ago, we were working through one and then I was part of the second strategic plan. And this is actually the third iteration. And I think having that stability and being a participant in all of that work has been very helpful. And I think that is an issue sometimes in other districts is that consistency of leadership. And I like to think that the strategic plan is that roadmap so whoever comes in or whoever transitions in and out of our district, they can take a look at the work that we're doing. And I think that's really important right now, especially as we come out of COVID with so much transition that's happened, having this document is really important to our district because we look back at it all the time. So, when we were starting off the school year, this year, for instance, we really focused in on our learning partnerships and our teaching practice. We were very intentional about the relationships we were building with our students and really focusing in on the UDL framework as far as our teaching practices were concerned, you know. And we talked a lot about student engagement.

So again, having that strategic plan and the UDL framework as that underpinning helps us keep our focus very intentional. So right now, you can go online, if you go to Frasier Public schools do just Google that you'll see our strategic plan there and you'll see that those two goal areas are very much being highlighted right now in the work that we're doing as we're coming out of COVID. Not to say that the digital ecosystem isn't critical to the work we're doing, it just hasn't been as amplified as some of those other areas. So, what I tried to do is every summer kind of look at where we're at with those goals and reevaluate what we need to be working on for the next school year.

LOUI: Yeah. And I think how you were describing that and putting that with the question that I was asking, and I think the bigger point here for everyone to understand is that there is no end point with universal design for learning as there shouldn't be actually with education. We know that it's just like a consistent growth mindset. Not there yet! And always trying to benefit our learners in the best way we know and so I think it's actually good when we don't say in our plans, "Oh, in year five will be done. We will know all we need to know about UDL!" Sorry!

CARRIE: I always say it's about the journey...

LOUI:P Yeah...

CARRIE: ...and the process that you're going through. There are certain things though, that I do believe are systematic. Our digital ecosystem is very solid, you know, the learning management system, the infrastructure, the technology tools that we use are very consistent. I think that's where the equity piece, and when we talk about UDL equity is such a priority, that when I look at the digital ecosystem, I feel that that's where you have to be equitable. Everyone has to have equal access to Wi Fi. Everyone has to

have access to that device or that tool that you're using. And we're very proud of the fact in our district that we've been able to do that through the support of our community. We've had excellent support for our bonds, so we do have an incredible infrastructure and very high-quality technology. At our secondary level, everybody has a MacBook Pro, the elementaries all have iPads. And they can take them home. And it has made a lot of the challenges of COVID a little bit easier for district like us, because we've been, you know, working in a digital ecosystem that was pretty robust prior to COVID.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. So, I have probably a last question, because I'm sure you're going to have quite a bit to say about this, but we have focused obviously, on the instructional side of your work, which is incredibly important as a superintendent, but you also have a business side of your world. And would you be willing to share the relationship between UDL which is you know, highly instructionally focused, but then so important to talk about on the business side. How do you support that journey, and the business end of your work?

CARRIE: Yeah, that's a very good question. I think you have to have a really strong central office team, especially when you're talking about school districts. I have an incredible business manager. My own director, my chief technology officer, those business people are crucial to making the system work. I can't even begin to tell you how instrumental they are to the team and they often go unnoticed because they're kind of in the background. And I think what's been very interesting on the kind of the business end of things, when you think about UDL, and you think about classroom redesign, that's going into furniture, and you know, purchasing and redesigning classrooms, and that gets really expensive. And we've done a lot with being kind of

intentional with co-horting things. So, we've recently redesigned all of our elementaries K-6 with flexible furniture and making sure all the classrooms really have just redesigned. It's been kind of like one of those extreme makeover experiences in our elementaries but we did it in a cohort model. So, next year will be year four. And it's taken us four years to really transition all of those buildings. And that's the important piece, is staying the course having a plan and financially planning for each cohort. And it allowed us to do that in a very responsible way. So, when you look at school, and the limited finances we often see ourselves with, you have to be really strategic about things and you don't always do them all at one time. It requires some planning, and it also requires the patience to follow through on that work.

LOUI: Nice. And I think you're exactly right. The central office folks don't always get seen or their efforts aren't known in the midst of this framework and they are so crucial. So, thank you, thank you, thank you for pointing that out. I really appreciate it. And thank you so much for being a guest on UDL in 15 minutes. This has been, I think, really enlightening for people and I can't wait to share the resources. So, I know you said Google, I'm just going to put specific links to them on the website with your podcast so people could just get right there. They don't have to worry about it. But again, thank you so much, Carrie.

CARRIE: Absolutely. 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. Finally, if you have a story to share about UDL

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And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.