

UDL in 15 Minutes with Keith Tonn

The 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. This episode is part of a special series about UDL implementation at Fraser Public Schools. Today I'm talking with Keith Tonn, who's the principal of Eisenhower Elementary School in the Fraser Public Schools. Today, Keith is going to share the structures they put together to implement UDL. Hi, Keith, it's wonderful to talk to you.

KEITH: Thanks for having me today, Loui. Excited to be here.

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome! So, let's get started with your background in education and with UDL.

KEITH: I'm year 24-25 here in education. I spent 13 years as a classroom teacher, both fourth and fifth grade. 11 years as principals are both the middle school and elementary level. Probably seven or eight years ago when I was at the middle school, our ISD had started to introduce UDL so we did have some exposure at that time. And 4 years ago, I made the move over to Fraser Public Schools and specifically Eisenhower Elementary, and I gotta tell you, the very first time I met my staff was at a UDL meeting at our ISD Training Center.

LOUI: Oh my gosh! That's so cool!

KEITH: So, it was nice that I already had the relationships with our trainers from the ISD and a great, great time to meet them and dig in with my staff.

LOUI: Oh, absolutely. So, tell us a bit about Eisenhower. You know, like how many students, demographics, that kind of stuff.

KEITH: Okay, we're a K-6 school in the suburban Detroit area. We serve 381 students. We are a Title I school-wide building which means 54% of our populations qualify for free or reduced lunch, 16 classroom teachers, two resource room teachers, full time social worker, speech pat(hology), Title I Lead, and six interventionists just take care of our kid's needs.

LOUI: Wow! That sounds like a nice population of adults to help support your students.

KEITH: It's a wonderful group. I mean, we couldn't do what we do without our Eisenhower family and I can't say enough about them.

LOUI: That's awesome. Oh, that's great. So, you guys got started with UDL a few years ago, like you were saying. And that's been linked to your strategic plan. I don't know what the timing was there, if you're already learning about it, and then you guys did strategic plan at the district level or you can tell me about that. I'm curious about what your first steps were and how you got into UDL.

KEITH: Well, we did start small. We used a cohort model. At Eisenhower, we started with grades K and 2 and into in our 21st Century Coach. Our 21st Century Coach is just that, now when they teach technology courses to kids, but they support teachers and they've been a key player throughout the UDL implementation phase meeting with our teachers weekly and supporting. But as we dug into this year one, again that cohort one model started working with our MISD trainers, they participated in regular training like the Great Lakes UDL Conference. While we were there, we looked at things like space design, executive function, culturally responsive design, these are some of the things

that we were first exposed to. One of the things, as a building principal, I made sure to do is that during our regular staff meetings, we had our cohort members come back and report out on the things they were learning with the rest of the staff. So really started, you know, create a common language starting to expose everybody to it. So, it was it was a huge help. And also, during that first year, I mean we introduced staff to the UDL framework. PLCs started to look at lessons. Lessons they've been using for years in ways to recruit interest, to sustain effort and persistence, and to work on self-regulation. So those became regular topics in just about all of our staff meetings for the first year. By mid-year, things that really started to take hold, and we were starting to see things like choice boards, visual direction showing up in classroom. Staff members were also starting to think about their classroom spaces, removing background clutter or visual distractions. So, those were just some of the moving parts the first year. We made sure to have regular celebrations along the way. We also started with our cohort as the building principal and I was going into new observations, I'd be making comments in my notes regarding things that we saw. So, these were just a few of the things that were happening in the first year.

LOUI: Excellent. Some of the structures that I just heard about was the teachers reporting out and that there was an expectation, it sounds like, that UDL was discussed during the PLCs. And it sounds like that everyone was really focused in on engagement, as well as space design, but really focusing in on engagement. So those structures definitely feel like they helped your staff. Did you have conversations about which structures you were going to put in place? How did you make that decision?

KEITH: You know what, I think a lot of it evolved from the training they were getting at the MISD. Our consultants we were working with their sort of set the tone so what was brought back started to take root in almost a natural way. So much so I know, earlier you asked about the strategic plan, but the strategic plan really started to develop toward the end of our first year. And at that point, one of the things we really looked at, we created, was our Portrait of a Graduate. And what came out of there were a number of areas but the overarching thing was learning for all which really does coincide with UDL and its principles. And in that way, we decided we were going to be focusing on our teaching practices, our learning partnerships, our learning environments, and our digital ecosystems. So, between UDL and our strategic plan, we had a very tight fit. The other thing I really like dimension is we were, prior to implementation here, our district had benefitted from a very generous bond from our community. So, with each cohort as we went through, we were rolling out the flexible furniture. So, space design was a huge focus throughout this process.

LOUI: I think that makes a big difference to give that kind of fresh sense of space in the midst of that so you're really fortunate. I would definitely say you're really fortunate to have had that big bond!

KEITH: I would not argue with that! We are completing cohort four right now and by the end of this year, every classroom in our building will have been transformed.

LOUI: Wow. Okay! So now, by the end of this year, everybody will have been through as cohorts. Do you have ideas for what next steps are for kind of that continuing ed that would take place with UDL?

KEITH: Well, we do actually. You know, by the time year two had rolled around, one of the things that we completed was the UDL School Certification Self-Assessment. At that time, it was pre-COVID and we identified some key areas as a building. And, maybe I should frame this as one of the things we established was a UDL level team consisting of my our first cohort members and some of our second ones. And what we did is we used this self-assessment and we'd looked at school culture and environment, teaching and learning, leadership and management, professional learning. And we looked at, check in and check out systems to support kids, behavioral interventions. Working on monthly behavior and academic goals. Again, to support executive function.

Instructional rounds was a big push for us at that time. So, these are some of the things that we garnered from the self-assessment at that time. Obviously COVID Put a little bit of a twist on some of these things. We haven't got to all of them. But we are going to be completing that assessment again in the next couple of months and that's gonna drive our building perspective for the next year.

LOUI: Very nice. When you guys have done your instructional rounds, has it been the focus of everybody agrees what the question is going to be or what the Look For's are, or are those individually decided? How do you run your instructional rounds?

KEITH: So far, at this point, they've been primarily handled by our MISD Consultants, myself, or our 21st Century Teacher, who will meet with the teacher beforehand, help develop lessons, and then we will push it to give that feedback. You know, in a perfect model, or perfect model of where we want to go is that our UDL team is going to be push in into classrooms regularly observing lessons, giving teachers take away from that. So, I mean, that's the direction we're headed. I've got to admit with COVID, one of

the first times we did that this year, two teachers got quarantined, so it was It wasn't perfect, right? So that's definitely going to be one of the one of the things we're looking for.

LOUI: So as a part of this series, I've also interviewed Kelly Zombo, who I know is your 21st Century teacher and Coach. And I know that she is integral to all of this as you have pointed out. I'm curious about how you and she work together and what your partnership looks like to help support her in her role as the UDL Coach. Can you talk about that for a second?

KEITH: One of the things she does is meet with teachers regularly to see how they're doing. Each of our teachers, yearly, is expected to develop a data goal and what we call a stretch goal. One of the things that has evolved over the last two to three years here is that stretch goal has become primarily UDL focused, things they want to work in the classroom. Kelly has, to the way her schedule is built, she does service classrooms as a specials teacher, but the rest of her time is split up where she has time to reschedule where she meets with grade levels or teachers individually regarding those goals. So, she ensures that they are on track. Her and I meet weekly to see where we're at to see what supports teachers to see how we can again, make sure everybody's getting what they need at that time.

LOUI: Lovely, that's wonderful. That's wonderful.

KEITH: You know, I will say, one of the things that just crossed my mind is the teachers, we wanted our community to become aware of UDL and what was going on. Kelly worked with the teachers and we made sure to have, in each newsletter each month,

we made sure to feature something. So again, it became degraded ingrained in the culture in the community. So, the community became aware of it, too.

LOUI: Nice. So, one last question. Do your students have a sense of UDL? Do they have a sense of that things are done a little differently at Eisenhower? What's that communication like or is there any communication with the learners?

KEITH: You know, I'll admit I'm not sure as they're aware of as all, things that regular features, so like goal setting, I think has been a part of their lives as long as they've been here. Even before we implemented UDL, goal setting was part of the culture. When I look at it now, not only are we doing every trimester, but some of our teachers have weekly behavior and academic goals. So, I mean, those are some of the things that are happening regularly. We have things such as student led conferences where the kids are taking ownership of their learning. Some of these have just become ingrained. I don't think you would hear the kids necessarily refer to it as a universal design for learning, but I think they would say that things are kind of a little different. Especially if they're new to the school.

LOUI: Yeah. I am in love with student led conferences. Well, I'm in love with anything that leads to self-determination and autonomy. But yeah [laughter]. Keith, this has been wonderful. I really appreciate you giving your time as a busy, busy principal. and sharing Eisenhower's journey with UDL from the point of view of a principal. This is gonna be so valuable to listeners. Thank you so much.

KEITH: Well thanks for the invitation today. I feel like there's so much more that we've done but I'm glad I could share this snippet.

LOUI: Yeah! Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. 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, 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.