

UDL in 15 Minutes with George Van Horn

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 Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation in Columbus, Indiana. Today I'm talking with George Van Horn, the Director of Exceptional Learners for BCSC. George is going to talk about why BCSC adopted UDL and what the district has done to empower all educators, not just teachers, learn about and design with UDL. Hi George! Welcome!

GEORGE: Well, hi Loui. Thank you for inviting me. I'm looking forward to having this conversation.

LOUI: You're welcome. So first off, can you share a bit about your background in education and how you came to know UDL?

GEORGE: Sure! Um, well I always like to start out by letting folks know that I was born and raised in the Bronx in New York City because that actually has a very big impact on kind of how I do things and think about things. And then attended the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio and received my Bachelor's and Master's degree there. And then from there went to Indiana University in Bloomington and received my Doctorate in Education Administration and Curriculum. Over the course of my career, I always like to share my first teaching position was as a driver education teacher and that's enough said about that. And then moved from there into teaching students with emotional and behavior disorders in a day treatment program at a hospital in Dayton, Ohio and absolutely thoroughly enjoyed every moment of that experience. The students were so

much fun and so engaging and so challenging that you had to continue to learn and grow as an educator. Then I moved in to become a principal at a residential center in Springfield, Ohio. Then, I served as an Elementary Principal and a High School Principal and a Superintendent. Ah, but prior to those positions I was a Director of Special Education in northern Indiana and Warsaw and then in Illinois. And after being a Superintendent I realized that my true passion was back being a Director of Special Education. And I've been the Director of Special Education in BCSC for the last twenty-one years and really enjoy it here and feel we have a fabulous school district.

LOUI: Wow! All right? You've done it all. And that's that then that's why you're so good at what you do.

GEORGE: Well, I'm good at what I do because the people around me are great at what they do. The other question you asked me was how did I come to know about UDL. And actually, when I started working here in BCSC, Herschel Willey our Low Incidence Coordinator shared some information about UDL with me and a project called PATINS which is actually a state project in Indiana and PATINS was involved with UDL and this is back in 2002, I believe. So, I started some conversations with PATINS and over time we had an elementary school that was selected as a pilot school as part of their UDL program. And as the years went on, we had a few more pilot schools. And as I learned more about it I really felt like it was the appropriate framework for us to look at in terms of our learning environments to help our students with disabilities be more successful in inclusive settings. Our goal was to be a very inclusive district. So, kind of similar to CAST, we started thinking about UDL as it related to students with disabilities and very quickly realized it was a much larger framework that really applied to all students.

LOUI: Nice. Yeah. Yeah, you guys went there very quickly like pretty much instantly, right? As you rolled it out.

GEORGE: Well, we did. And part of how that happened was Karen Garrity was the Principal at Mount Healthy Elementary School and that was the first pilot school we had with PATINS. A couple years later, she became our Director of Elementary Education. So, she had some experience with UDL. And then Bill Jensen our Director of Secondary Education was learning about UDL because Northside Middle School was selected as a pilot school so he was learning about it. And one day Bill and I were talking and he had gotten done reading a book authored by David Rose, of course, and this framework looks like what we've been looking for to tie our work together. Well and not maybe a day or so later, Karen Garrity and I were meeting with a group of parents of students that were gifted and talented, and one of the parents asked us a really, really, really good question. "How do you meet the needs of all high ability students in every single classroom in the district?" And we were like, "Wow that's a great question!"

LOUI: mm, hmm.

GEORGE: Not sure we can answer it, but it's a great question! Um, so that really gave us a, a pause to think about, how are our learning environments in our classrooms working? So, Bill and Karen and I started to talk about that and quickly realized we were a good district and we were doing well, but with all the work we were doing, it didn't seem like we were making the progress we really felt we should be. And we started to realize that what we had going on were a lot of really good things but they were kind of random acts of improvement and they weren't coordinated and cohesive. So, we felt UDL was the framework that could tie all of those work together. We had teachers

working hard. We were implementing a research-based practices, but for somehow, they weren't linked as they should be. And UDL helped us bring that together and really moved very quickly about not being a special education thing but about an education thing. And became our framework here in the district for all curriculum and instructional decisions for all students. And has been our driving force for the last twenty years.

LOUI: Yeah, and in so, 20 years you guys have this incredible system around UDL. You have coordinators, you have coaches, you have teacher leaders, you have an annual UDL Institute that's always full and this is like, people sign up to come to this. Teachers, educators they sign up so and it's always full. Um, but all this has to be supported at the leadership level and so I'm just curious and I'm sure others are what does that look like? So, you talked about the initial conversations but like are there. UDL specific conversations at the cabinet level you know Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, in like the mission of the district, that kind of stuff.

GEORGE: Um, yes, and I do want to jump back to our UDL Institute because I really feel like I need to give our staff, I mean our teachers and our teaching assistants and all the other staff, an amazing pat on the back because our Institute, we hold it every summer, about a week and a half before school starts and teachers are not paid to attend. So teachers participate in this institute as we say 'on their own time and on their own dime'. And we have a large turnout every year so I really have to congratulate our staff for embracing the learning opportunity of the UDL Institute. In terms of the district, yes, UDL is embraced from the school board on down. And I guess the best example I can give of the utilization of the framework, when our prior Superintendent, Dr. Quick retired after I think 13 years or so, when the board was conducting a search, part of

their criteria for the search was asking candidates about UDL and about what they thought about it. So, our school board really set the tone for our Superintendent search. And then Dr. Roberts came in six years ago having some background in UDL, but knowing that that was a core belief of our school board and our school community and a driving force in our school culture. So, he obviously knew that that was something that was important and has accepted it. And yes, we work as a cabinet as decisions are being made really thinking about how does this support the principles and guidelines of UDL? And does this make sense? And how does this improve the learning environment? So, it is embraced from school board, superintendent, cabinet all the way through teachers and I don't want to say down the line because quite frankly, a lot of times, it's our teachers reminding us of how valuable the framework is to our work.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah So, this question's going to sound like I'm stepping away from BCSC, but I'm not. You have actively partnered with CAST who created UDL, for those listening and don't know that history. And you've partnered with the UDL-IRN, which is an arm of CAST and not a lot of districts do that. And so how is that partnership benefited BCSC and would you recommend that other district leaders look for ways to partner with the organizations?

GEORGE: Anytime I do a presentation or have a conversation about UDL I always start with, "Everything I'm going to say, talk about, know and do, related to UDL, we learned from CAST." That's my sort of mic drop when I start out. Yes, our relationship with CAST is extremely important and has been extremely valuable. And having the opportunity to work with David Rose, words can't even describe how valuable that is, and Grace Meo, and Tracy Hall and the other folks at CAST has been invaluable. They

allowed me to sort of become buddies with them and I participated in a lot of conversations and a lot of group work. I was an original member of the UDL Cadre, so really learned a lot from them that allowed us to bring it back. And then they went above and beyond in supporting us. I mean Dr. Rose came and gave a keynote address at our Institute one year. Tracy Hall came and did a keynote, so they were always willing to help us whether we went there, they came here, we had phone conversations, we did trainings together. We held some regional workshops together that were housed here but CAST put them on. So, we have just been partners with them from day one and hopefully they'll allow that to continue as we go forward. Lindsay the new CEO and I happen to know each other from many moons ago when she was with Council for Exceptional Children. So, we really feel that relationship's going forward and the work with the UDL-IRN which is now a part of CAST, has been also invaluable. Working particularly with Jamie Basham and McKenzie has been very helpful. So, the partnerships have been priceless and I would suggest to anybody who's thinking about this, it's not a journey you want to take by yourself. You don't want to be the guy in the row boat out in the middle of the ocean hoping things work out. Partner with another district. Partner with CAST. Partner with the UDL-IRN. Partner with Loui. Reach out because the great thing about the UDL community is that we all help each other and we're all willing to work. As Loui mentioned, our UDL Institute, we kind of some of us jokingly also call it our "UDL Summer Camp" because many of us who've been involved with UDL for a lot of years have an opportunity to get back together and do the work during the day and sort of play during the evening and, and have fun with each other. So, it really is a community that embraces new folks and embraces helping each other.

LOUI: Yeah, it is. That's a huge part of our community. And I think the other thing that that you have done that other districts maybe aren't as willing as, you've hopped into research. You've been clear and said, "Ok show me how this is going to benefit", but gosh, I mean with CAST and IRN but with IU, you've opened your doors. So, like in just our little short time, could you just talk about that really quickly. Just how you've participated, why you've participated in research.

GEORGE: Yeah, we've had the opportunity to work with Dr. Sandy Cole from IU and Sean Smith from Kansas and James McLeskey from Florida, all coming in to do some research about UDL implementation and the impact on student learning and what teachers needed to be doing. And the reason we did that was, (1) we wanted somebody to come in who was objective because we could say we're great, but that doesn't mean a whole lot.

LOUI: Ha-ha, yeah.

GEORGE: So, we wanted an outside objective view of how are things going. Do you think we're on the right path! Are our results kind of showing that we're on the right path? And we were able to get that information. So, for us, it was a way to get feedback that helped us get better. And then also for us, it was an opportunity to help the researchers gather information that they could share to help others get moving on this path. So again, it's back to the partnerships and helping each other out. And it's kind of endless in terms of what you can do to reach out and get help and also reach out and give help and that you know the work with CAST, the work with IRN, the work at the universities, is all about improving the learning outcomes for kids and helping students become expert learners and helping all learning environments get better.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah, totally agree. Well, I'm sorry we've reached our 15 minutes. I knew it was going to be fast, but um.

GEORGE: I could, I could talk for another hour and fifteen minutes if we like!

LOUI: Sure, and we could and just so everybody knows and I'll be honest, so I had the incredible opportunity to work in BCSC. Um I'm a blip on their screen with UDL, but I'm so proud of that work to have been part of that district and I got to know you George through that, and have continued to build that collegiality and friendship and I'm really appreciative of it. So, thank you for agreeing to come on to the podcast, too.

GEORGE: Well, thank you and we appreciate the work you've done for us. Um, if it wasn't for you, we probably wouldn't be where we are because you got us started.

LOUI: Thank you. 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 <http://theUDLapproach.com/podcasts> and finally if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 Minutes contact me through the <http://UDLapproach.com> and thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.