

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript
With Evan Burton

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 Evan Burton, the principal of Northside Middle School. Evan is going to talk about the role UDL has played in helping them include students with significant disabilities in the general education classroom. Hi, Evan! Welcome!

EVAN: Hi, good morning. Thank you for including me this morning.

LOUI: Oh, you're very welcome. Thank you. Thank you for coming on. So can you share a bit about your background and education and how you came to know UDL?

EVAN: Sure, so this upcoming school year will be your 16th for me in education. I started as a middle school science teacher and then made my way into the administration world. Shortly after that I worked in inclusive environments and maybe not so inclusive environments before. When coming to BCSC and Northside that's when UDL first became something that I was aware of. And that was going on my eighth year here at Northside.

LOUI: All right, wonderful. So then can you paint us a picture of Northside Middle School?

EVAN: Sure. So we're a seventh and eighth grade middle school and we think we're a true middle school and that we teach on six academic teaching teams and so approximately 140 students rotate between six core teachers throughout the day. Our student makeup, we're in the high 40 percentages of free and reduced lunch students. Our diversity, we're a pretty diverse middle school for being located in southern Indiana.

Our major diversity category, we're about 20% Hispanic, and the majority of our students are Caucasian, and everywhere else in between. And we have about 20% of our students fall in the special education or high ability category.

LOUI: All right. Wonderful. Thank you. You've been at Northside for a while, like you said eight years. And have you seen instructional shifts as more teachers have adopted UDL? Can you talk about that impetus for that shift and how you supported that as an administrator?

EVAN: Sure. UDL was in place in BCSC and at Northside before I came here, and it has been in place here for over a decade at this point in time. So we've had some years to practice and to adjust and I think that's important to remember when talking about UDL. It's never perfect, but always kind of looking at ways to move and shift if needed. Again, a little over a decade, the state of Indiana decided to change their teacher evaluation rubric, and BCSC decided to place huge importance on UDL for our Certified staff and that equaled 50% of our teacher evaluation is UDL based. So in our teacher evaluation, it has words like addressing barriers, presenting content and skills and various ways, student's being engaged in relevant and meaningful learning opportunities, having a chance to interact and demonstrate comprehension in multiple ways as well.

LOUI: So then, with the teachers having that evaluation system, the language that's supporting that, what additional steps have you guys taken to help them really adjust to that evaluation system?

EVAN: Each summer, the school district puts on a UDL Institute, which depending on the summer can be two to three full days. Teachers volunteer their time to be there and understand the importance of having UDL in their framework, and it is generally right before school gets started. So it's one of those good jumpstart opportunities. Northside typically has a very nicely represented teacher group there with 20 or more teachers there every year, that I've been here, the last couple of years COVID related have been

virtual. And so I'm not sure if those numbers have held steady but I know with in-person numbers, those numbers have been pretty good. And then throughout the year, we have a UDL coach that supports both middle schools here in Columbus and so she splits her time between your side and the other middle school. And two Thursdays a month, every other Thursday a month, she will present on one of the UDL guiding principles and provide tips and tools, technology tools for our teachers that they can take right away from those and go and start to implement in their classroom.

LOUI: Wonderful. That base is just so crucial. And I really appreciate you talking through that because just like you mentioned, providing that time for teachers to better understand the framework and get used to what's in there and thinking about how they can use it in their classroom has created a wonderful base. And so I also want to make sure that everyone in the audience understands, you know, UDL was adopted by BCSC to create avenues for all learners. Every single learner within the district. The district leadership saw this framework as providing that kind of opportunity. For this podcast series, I was really hoping and interested in talking with you all about the inclusion of kids with significant disabilities, because that seems to be a barrier for some. And I know that there are a number of students with significant disabilities that are included at greater levels in your building, and that's been shifting over time. So, can you talk about that shift and how you've supported that shift?

EVAN: So from my memory when I first came to Northside, and our students with those significant disabilities weren't necessarily excluded, but there wasn't focus on including them either. And so we have two teachers here that service those students with significant disabilities. And they came to me after my first summer and we're proposing different avenues, different ways to include students in the general education setting and so it really was teacher driven. And all of those inclusion opportunities are case conferences based with input from the teachers, with input from the administrators, guidance counselor's and the parents on what is appropriate for the students. And a lot of times we try to maybe advocate for more inclusion with the option to maybe draw back if need be, whether it's overwhelming for the students or whether it's just not the

right time. Like I said, it is teacher driven, is how it got started. And again, to be frank about it, there was a little bit of apprehension from the general education teachers because it was new. And as I think we all know, when things feel new in education, there can be a little bit of, you know, well, I'm not sure if I can do that or I'm not sure if that's something I'm comfortable with. And so there was a fair amount of scaffolding and conversations that took place in order to help the general education classroom teachers understand that they could do it and they were ready for it. And we're lucky here at Northside with our support staff, as well as our classified staff and teaching assistants, that they are very competent and work very hard, and can go into the classrooms with students with significant disabilities. And they're a great resource for those general education teachers.

LOUI: That's awesome. So, things that I heard, I love that you started off with saying there needed to be conversations about inclusion, they just maybe hadn't happened yet, or it became a specific conversation and I think that's a really important piece. And then advocating for more time but starting off with, let's go with inclusion and then where we need to draw back we can but let's, for the students we have, presume competence. We need to acknowledge that these students can be successful. As adults, we're just figuring out how to help them be successful. And I think it's a fabulous, fabulous message. So I know that you also do specific 20 minute rotations at the beginning of the year, but just talk about those and how that helps support your general educators and the special educators to kind of get themselves primed for this during the school year.

EVAN: Sure. So probably un-unique to Northside and probably something most schools do when they get the school year started, on our first teacher day, we have teachers kind of go to their classrooms and get themselves set up to get ready for the first student day. We have kind of a welcome back, you know, introduce new teachers and talk about summer and the excitement for the upcoming school year. And then part of that includes a couple of 20 minute rotations where the teachers are broken up into three or four different groups and things that we might want to talk about to set the tone for the school year or new things that we want them to be aware of. Whether it's a new

student processing system or new learning management system. In this case, I have for probably three or four of my seven summers here, I have done different variations of what inclusion looks like at Northside. And so just like you said, that first conversation was very basic, and I tried very hard to not overwhelm everybody and just to kind of introduce concepts more than being specific. One of the conversations that I had, I showed a graphic. I had them imagine it was the cafeteria. And you know, you walk into the cafeteria and you've got kind of the bulk of your students all sitting at all different tables. And then off to the side, you've got your students with significant disabilities sitting at a table by themselves. The next picture showed, kind of what integration might look like where they are sitting in the cafeteria, but they're still, maybe they're right in the middle of all the tables, but they're at a table, just that group, just that specific group. And then the next visual was full on inclusion, where they are intermixed completely with everybody in the cafeteria. It's not a designated, significant disabilities table, if you will. And that was really kind of the first visual conversation that we had and I ended, you know, that 20-minute session with, we're trying to move away from having the general education teacher say, "well, those are your kids," to the special education teacher. The idea to shift to, well these are all my kids and so the idea is that all teachers are serving all students. So that was the first year and really what it's come down to is this, the most recent example is I went through and broke down the differences in accommodations versus modifications, showed examples and gave examples to the teachers of what that might look like and how non-overwhelming that is. And we hear from teachers often, that's just one extra thing to do, or, you know, that's going to be this much more work. So, trying to show them again, like you can do this and you're probably already doing some of it. So how do we make it more intentional in doing that? So just trying to give them examples for meeting the needs of all of their learners. Again, all the way down to just a slightly modified, to a modified, to a greatly modified example and letting them take that back with them. So again, those are just how we've used those rotations to kind of get the year jump started, kind of, starting from the basics. And then all the way to this year really getting down to specific examples.

LOUI: Excellent, excellent examples. So I love the idea, the intro to the cafeteria, and giving the visual of that and knowing even though you didn't articulate this, but you know showing physical placement, we of course we know that inclusion isn't a physical placement but that because you all are using the UDL framework, there were additional conversations about that social emotional inclusion. That's that full deep inclusion. So that's brilliant and why I know that came along is because you were helping them move away from the "your kids", to it's everybody's students. As a former special education teacher, I'm just so excited about these conversations that you're having. And then the fact that you've led staff through these conversations about the difference between accommodation and modification and then also seeing where these things can just naturally evolve and take place. Especially when we are designing with that universality mindset. We're creating this at the base of everything we do through the UDL framework, and so the avenues are there. It's brilliant Evan. Thank you so much. I'm so excited that you shared this. It's clear that you're helping your staff understand that this is a necessary piece, and that it's really important that we're including all of our students in these general education environments. Thank you for taking the time today. I really, really appreciate it.

EVAN: Yeah, thank you again for the opportunity. I enjoyed myself and again, I appreciate being included. So thank you.

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome. 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 the 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.