

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Gahlya Auel and Liza Sejkora
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 the Association of Educational Service Districts Inclusionary Practice Project where nine coordinators, one each region of the state, worked closely with 140 school leadership teams to implement UDL and improve and increase inclusionary practice. Today, I'm talking with Gahlya Auel, who's the Inclusionary Practices Coordinator with the Southwest Educational Service District, and Dr. Liza Sejkora from the Ocean Beach School District in Long Beach, Washington. Today, Gahlya and Liza are going to share the steps Ocean Beach School District has taken during this first three years of UDL implementation. Hi, Gahlya and Liza! How are you?

GAHLYA:

Oh, I'm so good. And I'm so happy to be here with you today. I'm actually coming off of a high because yesterday I was out at Ocean Beach School District with Liza and a team doing some classroom observations. So, great day that we had. I'm doing great.

LOUI:

Wonderful.

LIZA:

I as well, am doing great. It's always great to get to see Gahlya in person. Our partnership began during COVID. So for a long time we were square friends on the zoom. So when we get to see her in person, it's wonderful. And just spending time with teacher leaders as they observed UDL in action. That's what we went looking for.

GAHLYA:

And we found it. We found it!

LOUI:

That's awesome.

LIZA:

We did find it. We did.

LOUI:

And I love square friends like the Brady Bunch squares.

LIZA:

Yes, exactly.

LOUI:

So could you both tell us about your teaching background and your connection to UDL?

GAHLYA:

Yeah, so I actually was not a teacher. My background is in School Psychology. So that's what I started my educational career doing. And was doing that for about 12 years before I became an inclusionary practices coordinator but didn't realize that really my entire time as a school psychologist, that's really what I was doing was an inclusionary practices coordinator and trying to build the general education setting to be as inclusive and accessible as possible. So coming from that special education lens, that's how I came to Universal Design for Learning and have become so passionate about this and teaching it to leaders and teachers.

LOUI:

Perfect. Thank you. And what about you, Liza?

LIZA:

Well, I come from a very traditional trajectory into this work. So I spent 14 years as a classroom teacher. Eleven in high school, where I taught both AP level courses, as well as co-taught an inclusion model courses. And then I entered about 12 years ago into educational leadership and I spent all of those years serving in high schools and then in 2017, I moved to the Washington area. And that's where I was introduced to Universal Design for Learning by a special educator that I supervised who was working around co-teaching. And really got a visual, a different representation of inclusion and what it could look like and how it could be in all classrooms on a campus not just in the traditionally pullout or resource model classrooms.

LOUI:

So Liza, I love the example you just gave and I think you're my first guest to say that as an administrator, your introduction to it was to see a fellow educator in the classroom model and utilize UDL for full inclusion. So thank you so much. That's just awesome. So can you share some of Ocean Beach School Districts demographics with us?

LIZA:

Ocean Beach school district is situated on the Long Beach peninsula, which is just in the very southwest corner of the state of Washington. We're a smaller rural district that includes just over 1000 students from birth to 12th grade. We include five brick and mortar schools, a preschool, a K-2, a 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12 as well as an Options Academy that has both in person and virtual learning. It's a very close knit community that has a lot of wraparound support for our students and families. Our superintendent began her career here about 30 years ago and has only served this school district. She's raised five kids through the district and both she and her husband serve students by working in the schools. We have about 65% free and reduced lunch qualifiers. About 6% of our students are multilingual learners. About 3% of our students are served by our migrant education program. About 21% of our students qualify for specialized Student Services.

And our programs, our categorically funded programs, are what I oversee. So I am the director of special ed as well as the program managers for those programs.

LOUI:

Awesome. Thank you. Very thorough and very helpful. And that is really impressive about the superintendent. Thank you for putting that in there. What a story! I understand that you focused on leadership development early on in this process and in this project. So what did that look like?

LIZA:

So prior to my arrival in Ocean Beach School District three summers ago, my superintendent had a very clear vision of how she wanted to serve students. And so she implemented multi-tiered systems of support teams in every building and then when I arrived, that was our theoretical learning year. So we worked with those teams, as well as that's when I met Gahlya, through a ESD networking, teaching and learning meeting. And she asked who wants to work to increase inclusionary practices. So we began partnering with her that year. Last year was more aligned with our district goals. Last year, we also with our community, stakeholders, partners and students got together and did a really extensive review of what we want a portrait of a student to look like. And so that has become part of the district's strategic plan, as well as an explicit expectation that we will have inclusive practices as part of that plan. This year, we're looking at fidelity and how do we ensure equity across our campuses and across the supports that kids receive?

GAHLYA:

On my end, what we did was we started an administrative PLC. So that includes the superintendent, Liza as the director of student support services, as well as all of the principals in the district. And so that admin PLC was really trying to establish the principles as the lead learners coming together to be a part of the work and not only lead the work. And so that first year that theoretical learning year, each principal chose a small leadership team in their school and they engaged in at least 16 hours of professional development with myself that had to do with topics such as implementation science, data literacy, equity, just in general what is that inclusive practices? What does that mean compared to inclusion? An introduction into Universal Design for Learning? What is learner variability? What are barriers to learning? And so we've continued that admin PLC through the years, like Liza said with last year sort of being more of the experiential year, and this year really focusing on the coaching aspect where the leaders how to coach this work.

LOUI:

I love that the project was so well defined to have the 16 hours of the PD and I know that there was huge amounts of flexibility within it. And what it ended up being because of COVID, but to give that time, and so you could introduce these topics and just start wading into them. Beautiful. So in what ways were the leadership then coached to support staff?

LIZA:

So this is really what continues on today, and remains kind of the current focus of that admin PLC. So we're learning to look at data to determine first of all, you know, wade through it, what does it mean? And then how can we, and I always put myself on their team. I'm part of their team, but how can we use the data for actionable steps? So we talked about a lot of ways to model the practices from that leadership stance. During the PLC sometimes what we'll do is we'll utilize scenarios, we talk about how to use the teacher evaluation tool to guide coaching conversations with teachers. We focus on power standards at times, mastery grading, grading practices in general. So this is really where we're focusing this year, trying to first get their understanding of Universal Design for Learning and inclusionary practices sort of well established with the foundation. And now how can they feel confident enough to go and have a conversation with staff members about it.

GAHLYA:

I think one of the additional moves that really had an impact at each school is last year, every school had a continuous improvement plan goal around student belonging. That goal was firm across our district and it looked different in each school about how they increased student belonging, how they gathered data around student belonging. And we've adopted that goal again across our district this year. I think data is really important when you're coaching leaders. It gives us a story and for our school principals, of course, there is a ton of quantitative data. You can get state testing scores, we have a universal screener that provides progress monitoring for all students K through 10th grade in math and ELA but I also want to let you know we worked with the Center for Educational Excellence that gave us stakeholder data. So we heard from families. We heard from students and we heard from staff. We had two new principals this year, and they had the CE data on teacher readiness for change. So it's that, us versus them. Like I am ready to change and my colleagues are ready to change. So each school used that a little bit differently. I also want to emphasize the power that stories of our students have in this work. Oftentimes, you might not have a number that shows the story of a student and one of the examples last fall was a student I've worked closely with and I was helping him get his schedule on his first day of high school. And he said, did you know special ed kids get to be in regular classes? And so for him, he recognized that he had a place in the broader school setting and making sure we share those stories because qualitative data is just as important as quantitative.

LOUI:

Absolutely. Those are great. So I also understand that your district has experienced some really significant growth in your data points. So can you talk about which data and what you attribute that to and what you're doing to maintain that trajectory?

LIZA:

Certainly. So the inclusive practices grant funds the work Gahlya does but there are other agencies in our state who also partner that. And they are looking specifically at LRE data. Least restrictive environment data. And when we began our work about 55% of our students spent 80 to 100% of their time in general ed. And our most recent data, I

think Gahlya will talk specifically about it, but it vacillates between high 70% to 85% depending on when the data was drawn. And so the state really made a clear outcome of educating students with known learning barriers alongside their typical peers. And so that was a foundation for us to stand upon as we began to dig deeper into this work. We also know that teachers and our principals encourage the focus on student growth data. So is a student growing in a year's growth over a school year, those individual stories we have of kids who really have thrived when their barriers were planned for in learning environments. But we also look at attendance data and discipline data, and how those are indicators of if students feel like they are belonging in a classroom and are being supported with their individual needs.

GAHLYA:

And I think that from the outsider perspective, a little bit of what that can be attributed to and how that's being maintained, is really that strong superintendent vision.

LOUI:

Lovely.

GAHLYA:

I've been working with many superintendents and many leaders through this work and the commitment that the superintendent has and the boldness of some of her leadership moves. Just case in point, she actually hired Liza to lead this work. Yes, of course, she runs all the federal programs and special education, but that was very much a priority for the superintendent. Saying this is really important to me. I need to prioritize funds and time and man hours to do this where I know that I'm not going to be able to do it from my position as a superintendent. I will need support and having those district aligned school improvement goals. That was something that came out of the admin PLC, and that's gonna only continue to maintain this trajectory because the focus is just clear, and it continues to be on this work. And then, of course, there's going to be some things that will be attributed to state level decisions made along the way. The legislature has indicated that this is a priority for them as well. So I think the data that Liza talked about, but the strong superintendent vision is really what it can be attributed to, and it will maintain it.

LIZA:

I just wanted to add to that. So my superintendents name is Amy Huntley. As I shared, she spent all of her time here. In all those years, she got a new superintendent on average, every two and a half years. She didn't really have any aspirations of being superintendent, but she also didn't want a new superintendent every two and a half years. So she took on this job, so as to create consistent leadership. And she walks the talk. And the last year which was our second year of implementing Universal Design for Learning and inclusionary practices. We call it the messy middle because it was the hard part where it felt really different to teachers. It felt maybe principals were used to coaching instruction differently. And the messy middle is the hard part. Amy never wavered. We are not going backwards. We are going forwards. We have clear outcomes for our students. We know what portrait of a graduate looks like. And it is

really that clear vision from her as a superintendent. The work she did with our school board around our strategic plan. And then the intentional selection of two principals this year, that are inclusive minded. That have experience in inclusionary practices or in MTSS. They have those experiences. And so it's getting, you know, the right people on the bus at the right time and sit top down when your superintendent has a clear vision. It's really easy to follow along and do the hard work, especially when you're in the messy middle of something when it all feels new.

LOUI:

Absolutely such good points. Such good points. Well Liza and Gahlya, thank you so much. This has been such a fast conversation. I knew it was gonna go quickly. And I know there's a bigger story to tell but I really appreciate you sharing the steps that Ocean Beach School District has taken within these first three years of UDL implementation. And I appreciate it and I hope that everything just continues to before but it sounds like with Amy Huntley at the helm, it is! It's all going to keep just going on. So thank you so much for this work.

LIZA:

Thanks, Loui.

GAHLYA:

Thank you so much, Loui. This was such a great time to talk with you.

LOUI:

Oh, you're very 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 www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes, you can contact me through www.theUDLapproach.com. And thanks to everyone for your work and revolutionizing education for UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.