

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript
with Janelle Bersch, Emily Wilgus, and Heidi Schroeder

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 District's (AESD) Inclusionary Practices Project. Where 9 Coordinators', one in each region of the state work closely with 140 school leadership teams to implement UDL and improve and increase inclusionary practice.

Today I'm talking with Janelle Bersch, the implementation coach from the North Central Educational Service District and Emily Wilgus, the preschool education program coordinator along with Heidi Schroeder the pre-school instructional coach from Castlerock Early Childhood Learning Center. Janelle, Emily and Heidi are going to talk about how UDL and this project have helped them grow their inclusive early childhood education model. Hello to the three of you! Welcome!

JANELLE:

Hi there!

EMILY:

Hello!

HEIDI:

Hello. Thanks for having me.

LOUI:

You're welcome. So, can each of you share a bit about your background and education and how you came to know UDL?

JANELLE:

My name is Janelle Bersch. And I am the managing director of Early Learning here at the North Central Educational Services District and we provide technical assistance to preschool special education programs as well as early intervention programs and community early learning programs. And my experience has always been in the early learning field. I've been in the field for about 28 years. I've worked in counseling and social work in urban schools in Texas, as well as Head Start, ECEAP and child care programs incorporating Family Services. My primary work has been with the early intervention program, the past 20 years in Cheyenne, Douglas and Grant counties and currently, my title is Implementation Specialist with Inclusion Grants through OSPI. And I am the system's level coach. I have the pleasure of training the implementation of the pyramid model framework throughout our region, which dives really deeply into UDL.

LOUI:

Excellent, and who's next?

EMILY:

Hi, I'm Emily Wilgus, and I am the Early Childhood Coordinator for Wenatchee School District and my background and experience has come a little bit of a non-conventional or unconventional way. I actually had no experience in the field of education to start with. I was part of the 2004 cohort for Teach for America. It was placed in a classroom in Brownsville, Texas. That was my introduction to teaching and at that time I taught in a life skills self-contained classroom. I started work in Washington four years later, that was when I first started pushing into the general ed classroom still working with students on IEP s. That was my first introduction and then when I went into the Wenatchee School District in 2010. I worked at a dual language program and there was a combination of resource room and we were transitioning into more of an inclusion model and co teaching with a couple of classrooms. I'd always heard about Castle Rock in their work in the developmental preschool and inclusion and had always been interested in that and I had the opportunity to join their team last year as a preschool teacher implementing pyramid model and continuing on with some inclusionary practices through the UDL work that we had started. And then throughout my time in between the time I was teaching in the dual language program, and now I was part of the special education cadre through the special ed services center, which eventually transitioned into the inclusionary practices project. And so, we did a lot of work around early childhood education so now I'm the coordinator for the preschool and getting to see all of that in a different capacity in a system wide way and practicing and training teachers and supporting teachers through the pyramid model framework.

LOUI:

Excellent. And then Heidi.

HEIDI:

Hello, I have a really traditional teaching background almost all in special education with some general education still all of it in the early childhood rounds. So, I have a master's in exceptional children. I have endorsements in special education Gen Ed, early childhood and early childhood special education. My most extensive professional development and training outside of my degrees is in the area of autism. So, I've worked with students that are institutionalized. I've taught in the K five resource room I taught kindergarten and first grade I've taught a K-5 self-contained classroom and then for the bulk of my years the love of my life. I've taught preschool and special education combined. So currently, I'm the instructional coach for the Wenatchee school district preschool and our TK program. I work also in that professional development part of the inclusionary practices project through our W E A. M there I develop and create content around inclusionary practices and then I train educators on the content that we've created and developed and through that inclusionary practices work there is that heavy focus on UDL. And we know that preschool is naturally grounded in UDL, but this helped us to give a name to it and for us to dig in a lot deeper. So, that's kind of how I came back around to UDL.

LOUI:

That's great. You guys are a brain trust of yourselves. It's awesome. So Heidi, why don't you share where Castle Rock was and why you wanted to get involved with the inclusionary practices project.

HEIDI:

So, for me and for a lot of the teachers that are in our preschool department, this has been like I said, the majority of my career I've been in education for 30 plus years and the majority of the last 23 years has been here in Wenatchee in the preschool, and 23 years ago. We knew we wanted full inclusion we were unclear how to get to where we are now. But we've wanted that full inclusion. So, we continue to make changes over time our changes were well thought out. They were intentional. They were creative. They were innovative. And so, through those changes that we made, we've made some theoretical changes and that our theoretical changes have transformed us from a system that was doing good work and even great work to a system that's doing the right work. And I say that that's like a burden lifted off of my shoulders because once you head into the right work everything else makes sense. We've moved away from finding value in a system that runs smoothly. You know, those classrooms that you go into and all day long the system is keeping the students into conformity it's running super smoothly. They go home at the end of the day, and everybody feels great about that. And we've moved towards finding value in our students. And that's really our focus. That's really the key concepts and the joint shared understanding that we've come from and this as you know, it's messy. It's not always smooth every single time we do it because we're really looking at our students and how every student has an access point to what we're doing in the classroom. It is honorable and I have seen the honor in it every single week that I've been here doing this. We have our fee briefings on Friday afternoons, and we probably one to two times a month do Friday celebrations. And that's just a time I thought in the beginning it was kind of for the teachers to be able to brag and say this is what I did. That was cool in my classroom. It's never been that it has always been the teachers and the rest of the staff, celebrating the students celebrating what they've seen the students to do in class celebrating where they've seen the students come from and where they're going. And the beauty of that is the rest of us know those students now. And when we see them in the classrooms, we have that connection already built, we already are prepared. We know what they're what those kiddos are about. It's super cool. Practically. We have moved from focusing on academics who has strong focus on academics to focusing on the social emotional well-being of our students and our staff. We've moved from working in isolation, where teachers come in, they go in their classrooms, they teach for the day and they come out the end of the day. And they go home to working in a collaborative manner. We will collaborate any way we need to because our focus is on the students. So that's collaborating with bus drivers that's collaborating in our own teams that's collaborating in the classrooms that's collaborating on a vertical level looking what where the kids are going or where they've come from. It's any way we can work with other colleagues to figure out how we can assist our students to grow and make progress. We have also moved from where we created those varied segregated classroom settings and student groupings, which really limited access for some of our students. If they didn't fit into

those molds, then they didn't get access to what we were doing in those classrooms, settings or the groupings to where we're now creating classrooms where all students have access to all period. So, in essence, we've come to this I call it a collective shared understanding that UDL is a basic right for all at the end of the day. That's what it comes down to. And so, through these changes and our new learnings we needed a system that supported us that supported where we've come from, and where we want to go. And there's always growth, right. So, we turn to IPP or the inclusionary practices project because they're able to support us in this right work that we're doing in this work. That is we know it's right, we know we're working in the right direction. And so, they've been able to support us by being systematic, structured, supportive, and inclusive of us we feel like we belong to and are connected to a greater understanding. So, we have the capacity to pass that on to our students

LOUI:

have Aeolus that's wonderful. And I think there's going to be some definitely tweetable pieces in there as we're sharing this podcast, just even from a system that runs smoothly to of focusing on finding value in students. I mean, right there, just the heart of what you're talking about. So awesome!

HEIDI:

That's our Emily, that's the leader that we now have for preschool.

LOUI:

Oh, that's awesome. Well, and we're just going to shift to Emily. So you had your focus on leaders, and how was that translated in the classroom?

EMILY:

So, I love everything that Heidi said, because I think all of that actually has a huge impact on the student level as well. All of our that history of how we came to where we are as the leadership in how we play a part in all of this. I think our varied experiences definitely play a huge part in knowing historically when we look back, what are the things that have worked well? What are the things that we wouldn't repeat, and what are the things we want to find too, so I think the three of us working together in this bigger picture are varied experiences play a huge part in that. For me, just being in the classroom for most of my career, and then transitioning into more of a system gives me a perspective that is not only big picture, but what boots on the ground perspective. So, I think each of us has that variety in our careers to be able to speak to both sides. And then I think as the leadership team, one thing that we're really focusing on is that piece where the contribution of the family is huge in all of this. We want to make sure that we are communicating to families, the work that we're doing and getting their buy in not only their buy in but their perspective and their values and we are meeting monthly to collaborate on how do we provide access to families that maybe previously didn't have that or connecting with our communities or populations within our community that were hard to connect with in the past and so we have done a lot of outside of the box thinking as far as how to connect with those groups that are so valuable to this work. Because when we look at our students, and we connect them with their family and values, then

we're going to just have that much more impact. And so, we've done a lot of collaborating around that. And then the focus being on that value for the student and saying, we acknowledge your family values, your cultural values, we examine our own implicit biases to make sure that we're providing the best access to information for all students and then, at another level, we want to make sure that our teachers are equipped with ongoing coaching, and collaboration, and staff support actual human bodies to support the work, provide ways to have feedback in celebration, and then keeping the main goal in mind which Heidi alluded to as well. Our goal is to have positive impact on students. And the best way that we can do that is through the exclusionary practices project. What Heidi mentioned that about it being systematic, and supportive and inclusive for all so they are working hand in hand with the leadership having that goal in mind, knowing that what we need in order to provide support to teachers and ultimately having a positive impact on students and their families and then our community.

LOUI:

Oh, that's excellent Emily, I love all of those layers that you're just discussing in especially this connection with the families. My background, that's my background is families and disability policy. And so, my heart lies there and it really sounds like you guys are digging in and doing just the excellent work of doing that. And then supporting your teachers in such explicit ways to help them adopt these maybe possibly new models of co teaching and collaboration, but doing it in a way that makes them feel safe. So that's just fabulous. So, we've definitely filled our time for this first part of this podcast. So, I want to thank you all for participating and I can't wait to talk to you for the second part of this podcast. 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 www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts. 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.