

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript
With Cassie Stevens and Sara Lucero

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 Cassie Stevens who is an Inclusionary Practices Project Lead and Sara Lucero who is the principal of Olympic View Elementary School. Today, Cassie and Sara are going to share the shifts Olympic View Elementary made to move from thoroughly exclusive environments to an inclusive school.

Hi Cassie and Sara, how are you?

CASSIE:

Good morning. I'm doing great.

SARA:

Good morning. It's so lovely to join you today.

LOUI:

Thanks! Thanks! Can each of you share a bit about your education journey and how you came to know about UDL?

CASSIE:

Absolutely. I was a middle school teacher for about 15 years and then toward the end of my teaching, I was in building coach helping implement a literacy curriculum designed and advisory curriculum for middle schoolers and helped New to the profession teachers get the support that they needed as they were beginning their careers. So from there, I transitioned into this position at the ESD where I am now the inclusionary

practices coordinator and project lead. And although I had taken a UDL course as a middle school teacher, and I loved it because it was a way to organize so many of the best practices that I knew about, but I really have gotten into UDL since this project. And I just am so amazed with all the ways that UDL supports best practice is that way to think about both systems, the needs of adult learners and really serve the diverse needs of kids.

LOUI:

I absolutely agree. I think we're in the same boat there, Cassie. Sara, what about you?

SARA:

Well, I'm currently in my fourth year as an elementary school principal. I don't really feel that much school but prior to moving to Oak Harbor. I was an elementary school principal of two schools. In Montana. I taught third grade for eight years and I taught at the high school level as a title one teacher for two years. My journey of inclusion is one of I've always just thought that students should be included. It was always the goal. When I was a classroom teacher, I could never understand why I would send a student to somebody else to support their needs when I could do it within my own classroom in my own way with their peers. And so it's something that I've always just kind of done and felt as I transitioned from the role of a third grade teacher to a building principal. It was a really interesting shift. When I started in Montana, as much school principal, we didn't have resources to have a lot of different programs that put kids within a system and kept them there. That just wasn't what we had. We didn't have that support. So inclusion was always what we did. And our goal was and our challenge was how do we support students the best way possible in their general education setting with also giving those students who have some, maybe bigger needs that extra support outside of the classroom when needed. And so as I moved here, I was unprepared for the level of the siloed approach to providing students who qualify for specialized services their needs. So as I delved into what we were doing in one thing, few, I was notified of this opportunity to work with our local ESD on inclusionary practices and that is what has led me to partner with Cassie and then my jump into how do we shift practices view and

how do we look at this right UDL lens so we can support all learners?

LOUI:

Excellent. Thank you for giving that background Sara because your experiences with inclusive settings. So first of all, a mindset and that's such a driver, but then you have this experience and you brought that to Olympic Park and I think that's such a foundational piece. So thank you for sharing that. And I know we're gonna dig into a big story. And so, everybody knows this. We're going to switch this podcast into two podcasts because it is so big and it's so rich, and I wanted Sara and Cassie to have the time to do that. So let's get started Sara with the problem that you saw and that you were hoping to fix.

SARA:

It started at the very beginning, I interviewed for the job over zoom and was offered the job without ever coming to the district. And so about a month after I accepted I was able to come and take a tour of the school and come and see the district I was going to work in and that very first time I walked into the building, first of all it was set up where it has pods. So it's a very open concept school there are no hallways. And there was a pod called G pod. And when I got to G pod it was where our choices program was housed and I walked in, and it was an unhappy place. There were holes in the wall. It was rundown, that had not been repainted. The furniture was scuffed. And all I could think of was the students are in a place where it is not friendly or welcome or open. And that is the very first problem that I was like okay, we want students to come to this program and to feel like they are a part of our community. They need to feel like they matter and the place where they come matters. So that was the very first thing that I worked with. After that, I got the job. I started and I can see that our students were not a part of the larger school community. And then that was our next step. Like what do we do? Why is this happening? And so I had to learn about that and what we were going to have to do to shift those mindsets.

LOUI:

Excellent. One of the things that comes into my mind and we'll keep going with the story is that as we're telling the story, I want people to know that this is just one part of the hundreds of things you were thinking about, especially being a brand new principal, but that there was a driver for you and that was inclusion and I just want to point that out because I'm sure everybody who is at that leadership levels thinking, oh my gosh, there's so much else that goes on, but that you really took this focus. So it sounds like it was some deeply embedded exclusion. And you just talked about some first steps that you took with the painting and the furniture and making everybody feel welcome, then somewhat stop there and think that they've made this kind of safe place, a pretty place for students. And we all know that safety is a top concern. So let's talk about that mindset. And when you think about the safety of your learners, and what does that mean?

SARA:

I think that the central principle that I bring to education and that's always been my thoughts and philosophy is that all students have to walk into a place where they feel safe, that's physically and emotionally. They have to feel welcome accepted in love. And if our students don't feel that then they're not going to come here to learn, they're gonna come here and they're going to feel overwhelmed sadness, and some of them come from homes where they don't have that physical or emotional safety where they do not feel accepted or loved. And so it is our job to provide that for our students. And so that was kind of the philosophy that I brought into the classroom, but I definitely bring into my role as a principal. And so that was when I looked at what was happening within our traces program. I thought I have to shift this and I already had told the staff my viewpoint, and my philosophy is this, but also that every student is first and foremost a general education students, and that they have the right under the law to be able to be a part of that general education experience. So that was one of the first things that I had shared with them, and then it was just taking it from there.

LOUI:

Excellent. So then with that mindset you set into motion an inclusive community, I think

started with the teachers, right. You didn't move students yet. And so I'm curious about what you started with with the teachers and then how did you fit UDL into that plan?

SARA:

Well, it was the 2020 school year. And so as I learned more about the program, that was the first thing I did was I was like, Okay, what are the parameters around? How does a student get placed in the program? There was only two elementary programs in our district and one of them was at our buildings. So how does the student end up in the CHOICES program? But then also what are the like the parameters around what a day looks like? When I started there was a level of system in the program and I had to learn more about what that level system meant and what its impact on students. And one of the things that we looked at was that students, one of the first things they had to do their first level was 10 days, and they had to have a certain number of daily points for 10 days before they can move to level two. Well, if they can move to level two, and they didn't have any blips on the radar, then they would get to that level and that level was 20 days long. And so as we went smooth students through the level system, it seemed like oh, yeah, okay, this would be great. But what happened is we have students that they don't feel success, they self sabotage. And then as students were, if they were ever able to work themselves out to being with their general education, peers, they didn't have relationships that they did not know their general education teachers. And so we had to really work that in to say, Okay, how are we going to shift this process and what does that look like for our students and for our teachers? So from the beginning, I talked about the need for students to be with their general education peers across all service platforms, so that doesn't matter if a student qualifies for some extra services in the traces program or the life skills program, whatever that looks like. So then we had to go back and say, What about our program is not working. And then we had COVID and COVID kind of put a pause on everything and stop the world, but to completely rewrite what the program look like, and take down some of those barriers, so we did away with the level system. We did away with some of those things that I knew were standing in the way of students I worked with our Director of Special Education Program and said, What can we do what can we change? So we went away from the level system and the

next year when we came back the 2122 school year, where we did not have to have students and pods and distance from each other. We decided students would be able to go out to their general education classrooms where they felt the best prepared, and they could be with their peers that way, and from there, we learned that that also wasn't the best shift, so we had to grow even more. How does UDL fit into all of that UDL fits in because I've worked with Cassie closely with an inclusionary practices team at our school and our kind of broad philosophy is we go with the goers and we see the spread of what we can do. We've seen incredible results and it's just kind of inclusion has just kind of seeped out. And it's just the way that we're doing things and so our work with Cassie to uncover tier one practices that give an entry point for all students provides us with just that increased capacity for teachers to serve the needs of all students.

LOUI:

Excellent. So Cassie, would you share what kind of support was offered? To the teachers that with this IPP team?

CASSIE:

Yes, I'm over here like nodding my head as Sara's talking. So that was the really excited thing. When I was seeking schools who wanted to engage in the inclusionary practices project. Sara and I have been connected since the very beginning. And what was so exciting is Sara's vision for inclusion and the changes that she wanted to make were so clear. I mean, she's been leading from her heart and leading with a very clear vision from the beginning. So when I met the UDL leadership team, this is during the pandemic, and so students are you know, not all students are at school. That was a different year for everyone. But this team was so excited to be a part of the work and so just leaning into the lead learners felt like such an awesome place to start. We did a lot of professional learning the first year so you know, kind of digging into learner variability, barriers to learning, and then an introduction to UDL. And then from there, I got to continue to meet with their team and process more during leadership team meetings as they were trying things. So they were coming to me with their own energy and their own excitement and you know, sometimes a few questions that we would all sort of

troubleshoot together. But I really have truly been a partner and with a Olympic View, just trying to keep up with them all because the passion and the excitement around inclusion. What it meant for them, what it meant for their students has, just like Sara said, sort of taken off in a really incredible way, headless.

LOUI:

So meanwhile, were teachers receiving in time support to shift their instructional design?

CASSIE:

Well, and I was just going to add this year, Sara and I have designed some experiences where the math coordinator from our ESD as well as myself are going to be on site of the Olympic View for four days over the course of this spring. And we are available to leave classroom observations. Were available to plan with folks and then at the end of that day, we're leading some PD where grade level teams can think about how they can increase Universal Supports and access to learning. So sort of that idea of let's think about the individual supports that you might be offering and how we can grow that to the collective and in turn strengthen tier one. Sara, you might have something to add as well.

SARA:

I think that our work that we've done together has been really pivotal because I have had to learn more about UDL. It was not something that I was familiar with before. Cassie and so understanding how we can shift practices in a way that makes everything more accessible for all students is really really important. So some of the report that we are currently doing for teachers and that we have been working on is to our MTS s work and so we've been able to tie what we've been working on through our inclusionary practices and that understanding of UDL in now with just overall tier one instructional practices that are best for all students. And so as we make this shift, and as we continue to learn and grow through the process, we're able to truly support the needs of our teachers, but it's not without its bumps and it's blips on the radar, and there's always

more that we can do. But this partnership has made it so teachers don't feel so overwhelmed already with our first day that we spent with Cassia Tina, we were able to give teachers a list of supports that they saw already happening in the classroom that serve as a foundation for us to build and grow upon as entry points for all learners.

LOUI:

That well you guys have given a great basis for us to jump into the second episode of this two part. Sara and Cassie interview so thank you so much for that and I think people will be really excited to hear about some specific student outcomes and experiences that have come from this and and some more conversation about what teachers are doing. So thanks to you both.

CASSIE

Thank you

SARA:

Thank you for having us.

LOUI:

You're welcome. 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. 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 in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.