

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

With Cassie Stevens and Sara Lucero – Part 2

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. Welcome back, Cassie and Sara. How are you?

CASSIE:

We're doing well. Thank you so much for allowing us to share a few more details about the incredible work that's happening at Olympic View.

SARA:

Yes. Good morning. Thank you so much for providing us a space to share stories about our inclusionary journey and to be able to learn from one another as educators.

LOUI:

You're so welcome. And for listeners, if you haven't listened to the first episode yet, be sure to pull up episode 97. During the first episode, we dug into the adult side kind of what the adults needed to do for the shifts, the mindset, the planning, and the decisions. And so, for this episode, we're going to focus on the students and what were some of the student perspectives on being in a separate space.

SARA:

You know, this was a really interesting thing for me as I joined the school community and got to know what was called the CHOICES program, and it still is called the CHOICES program, but I like to think of it as like the choices of old. As I learned about what was going on in the program, I started to get to know students, and my philosophy in education is you have to build relationships with kiddos to be able to connect with them. And so, I tried to get to know them as little humans and kind of see what was going on in the program. And honestly, it was just not a very positive environment. The students there was two classrooms in what was called G pod. And it was all students who qualified for the CHOICES programming within these two classrooms, and they were with each other all day long. And so, if one student was struggling, it began to then

kind of have a popcorn effect of behavior. And that struggle turned into two students struggling, which turned into three students struggling. And so there were days that the students, they didn't really feel successful that it didn't feel like they had good days. It was kind of a noisy place to be. It just wasn't a very happy place to be. And a lot of the students didn't even know that there was a part of a larger community that they were missing out on within the school. And so, it was definitely an excluded portion. The students were allowed to only go to specialists with each other, and so that meant that they would go to PE, but they went as a whole group, they would go to art, but they would go as a whole group. And so, if there was behavior, if there was anything going on, it kind of just was like the domino effect of behavior and things that did not go well. And it was not a very motivating environment or someplace where students really felt welcomed and supported.

LOUI:

Yeah, I'm always amazed that anyone would think that another human doesn't know when they're being excluded. And that's an emotion and one I wish no one would ever have to feel. Thank you for giving us such a clear picture of where everything started. And so, then you took some steps with your colleagues to help those students feel that they were a part of Olympic View Elementary families. So, what were those steps, and how did UDL fit into that?

SARA:

Well, it was an interesting journey. So, I started to just try to understand the perspective of the program and why the program was created the way it was created. What that looked like there was a step program so students had to earn so many days at a certain level before they can move to the next level. And they couldn't move out to be with their general education peers until they got within a certain level of the program. So first, I had to start understanding the why behind that. And so, as I was doing that COVID hit, and it was like, oh okay, well, we're going to take a step back from everything. So as we came back from COVID, and we again came back to hybrid education, we looked at, what were the ways that we are going to be able to redo the program. So we did away with the step system or the level system. So students no longer had to earn access to their peers. So, we had to kind of shift that thought process and say that, of course, everybody deserves access to their general education classroom. So that was our first step. Within that, then, we really looked at how that went. We still had students that were really struggling with the idea of we looked at first going out for specialist classes, and then students were able to say like, this is the subject, or this is the area that I like the most, and I want to learn about the most. So, we tried to get their input to be able to say, okay, let's go out for those classes, work to get you access to your education peers. Well, we found that that also didn't work. And so, we went back, and we're like,

okay, what is holding us back? And it was honestly that students didn't feel a part of their classroom community from the beginning. They weren't a part of their everyday happenings in the classroom all of the time. And so as we rewrote the program, and as we stand right now, we've gotten to where every student goes to their general education classroom all day long with the amount of support that they need. So there's tiered support happening across the school, and then when they need a break, or they need the opportunity to take a step back and to refocus or to problem solve, then they have a space to go. They have people that they trust to do that with. Otherwise, they're with their general education peers all day long. And that is really what is driving our inclusionary practices and what's driving our program right now. UDL fits into this idea in that we have to look at access points, and we have to make sure that we have access points for students. All of our students or learners that have variability, and so we have to make sure that as we're planning for their learning that we're looking at the whole picture. What are the supports they're going to need to help them within the general education classroom and build them up? Some students need different levels of that support. And that might include behavioral support, it might include here at work, it might include access to a tool. So as we do this, we're just kind of looking at that and that's where Cassie comes in. And her help with that learner variability and making sure that our tier-one instructional practices are starting to really meet the needs of those varying needs of students.

LOUI:

Beautiful. So, I love that you were touching on that concept of belonging that the students needed to feel that they belonged in that environment. They were valued in that environment was new to them. And as you were all working toward that goal of full inclusion, that this emotional connection was so key! So key. So, I know you have some other students' specific stories to share. And can you offer one or two of those?

SARA:

Absolutely. My first year before COVID hit, a student got here really early in the morning, and he was a member of the CHOICES program. And we were walking around school one morning, and he was asking me like, where are we? What are these classrooms? And at the time, this student was a first grader, and I walked into a first-grade classroom, and I said, "Well, this is your general education classroom," and he was blown away that a classroom existed beyond the CHOICES classroom, which was in a place called G pod at the time. That was something that was mind-blowing to him that there was a teacher that he did not even know that he would have had access to had he worked up in the level system to be able to be out in that classroom. And so that has completely shifted. This student is now a fully included part of the general education classroom and has access to his peers from the beginning of the day, every single day.

And now he feels like a part of his classroom community. And that's a really, really big deal. Before I got here, I have never heard of a student who's ever graduated from our programming. And that was something that I was like, I don't understand how we can get into a program, but we can't get out of a program. That doesn't make any sense to me. It should be like a stopping point along the way. It should be literally an intervention because that's what special education is supposed to be as an intervention to be able to help us move from one area to the next area. We offer the right amount of support. We get kids the tools that they need to be successful. No matter if that is behaviorally, socially, emotionally, academically, whatever that may be. Adaptively, executive function-wise, we tried to give them those levels of support. And that was something that we were missing. And so the other student is a student who we are currently working on rebalancing because the only way to be able to move the student from the program is to go through a reevaluation process. And as we look at what the student has had, we have looked at the minimum amount of support to help make this student possible. And so, as we looked at the reading intervention that this student needs, the student does not need reading intervention within a special education environment. So they're truly a part of our school community, and they're getting that tier-two support instead of any specialized instruction in that area. When they came to our school, the student would come to school and did not feel like they fit anywhere. And now, this student is a fully ingrained part of his classroom, and we're so excited. I mean, we obviously can't predetermine anything, but we're reevaluating at the end of this year to see if a better placement fits this student as they move on to a new school and a new place to be because we know that the level of support that the student needs is not through the most exclusive environment at this point. They are so successful. And it's so exciting to think that we can graduate students from a program like this and that it's about the level of support and giving them the tools they need to be successful, not about setting them into a program that's going to follow them from location to location to location.

LOUI:

Those are such powerful examples. Thank you so much. So yeah, for a student to walk through a school and be like, what, I didn't even know this existed and that I can participate there. Then to provide that access and then also the fact that you all are willing to look at a system, our special education system can feel prohibitive, what the steps that have to be taken. But instead of looking at as prohibitive, you're looking at it as an opportunity and doing that reevaluation and looking to see how you can use that process alongside these other shifts that you've made to help discover where that student can be included even more. Brilliant. Brilliant. Brilliant. So what are plans to help sustain this? Has inclusion become an ingrained part of the school? Do the parents expect it?

SARA:

Honestly, I feel like in order to sustain this, we're continuing to work to build adult capacity. And that means that we're working on our tier one. And what that looks like through the MTSS model. And I feel like that's where we have to spend a lot of our time because we are not going to be able to intervene our way out of any kind of a tier one issue. And I know that that's like the thing that everybody's talking about right now. But we're working on really, really solidifying our tier-one practices to be able to make sure that we're planning for that learner variability across the road. And with that, we're doing some really, really exciting work with Cassie and our inclusionary practices pilot. And she is spending a ton of time at our school, helping to build that capacity. In fact, tomorrow, we're going to do a PD that really allows us to look at what students need, and Cassie can tell you more about that. But the other thing that we're going to do is we need to really work on building a sense of belonging with all of our students. And I feel like that's something that we're really good at, but how can we increase that? So we've been working with Shelley Moore through the AWSP and doing inclusionary work there. And what that looks like is looking at how we can use some binders which give us learner snapshots. And what drives students? What do they feel like they're good at? What do they feel like they need support with? And really looking at that student voice to help us better understand the needs of our students, where they come from their backgrounds, where they feel like their strengths are, where they feel like they have growth opportunities to be able to make sure that our sense of belonging here really fits the needs of everybody that we're looking for. And as we do that, we're sending out parent surveys. I'm talking to parents when they come in and building relationships with parents too because we really, really recognize that a parent's educational journey that they had, greatly impacts the educational journey that their child's going to have, and maybe some of those viewpoints and those, how they think about school and so really working on building that sense of community across the board I guess, within our school is really, really important. Cassie, what do you have?

CASSIE:

I am just so excited to continue to partner with Sara and her staff at Olympic View Elementary. As she shared, I'm going to be there tomorrow, and I get to participate in some classroom observations where people are really looking to understand like how is UDL showing up in my classroom. What are my supports looking like? Where could I push myself a little bit more? And then also doing some planning with teachers who are asking about specific supports that they might bring into their classroom. So we plan to continue that through this year. And then also just keep thinking and partnering together. It's such a partnership about how can we keep moving the, you know, inclusive education forward. What do you need next? And so, as you could probably tell

by listening to Sara, I get to partner with and follow a group of really powerful leaders at Olympic View. I'm just excited to continue to support the incredible work that's happening there.

LOUI:

This has been so incredible. I really appreciate you guys doing this, the back-to-back to talk about that adult side and then to talk about the students who experienced because this is such a bigger story than even two 15-minute podcasts can touch on. So, thank you for helping everyone get introduced to your story, and hopefully, we'll get to continue to follow that story in some way. You guys have done fabulous changes. So, from those inclusion-driven people everywhere, we thank you, and I want to thank you both for being on this podcast.

SARA:

Oh, thank you so much for the opportunity to talk about what we're doing but just for giving space for people to learn from one another. I think that's a huge thing because I couldn't do this without learning from others. So, thank you for that opportunity.

CASSIE

Yes, and thank you! Something I'm thinking about right now is there's always more to do. And so to have this opportunity to sort of stop and celebrate and pause and reflect on the incredible work that's happened at Olympic View is just a gift. So thank you so much, Loui.

LOUI

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