From Concept to Scale: One District's Plan for Implementation

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Abstract
Chardon School District, in Northeast Ohio, began implementation of UDL with data review, operational change, and professional development. Balancing staff feedback with attention to strategic planning and support from the Ohio Department of Education, the district designed for multi-year implementation of UDL. With emergent teacher leadership, mission-driven administrators, and regional support from the department of education, the district mapped out professional learning, practice, and supports for staff as they developed understanding of UDL and implemented it their classrooms.

Keywords
Implementation, distributed leadership

INTRODUCTION
In *Romeo & Juliet*, as Romeo races from Friar Lawrence's cell, the priest calls out "Wisely and slowly, they stumble that run fast." (II, ii, 100-101) The same counsel applies not only to Shakespearian tragedy, but also to designing and implementing a plan for pedagogical change throughout school district.

The essential elements of implementing a change process include resource allocations (specifically time, but also systemic support) and communication of purpose. When either of those elements are poorly designed or missing, the endeavor may fail (Alvy, 2017).

Within one school district, a multi-year, multi-phase implementation plan was designed and implemented, overcame initial missteps, and encouraged the distribution of leadership beyond the traditional bureaucratic hierarchy.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE
Chardon Local School District is a suburban-rural school district located 45 minutes from Cleveland, Ohio. The district is comprised of one pre-school, two elementary schools (K-3), one middle school (grades 4-7), and one high school (grades 8-12). As the district designed an implementation plan for UDL, it also reconfigured its use of school buildings and redistributed grade-levels, moving 8th grade students to the high school, and 4th and 5th grade stu-dents from separate elementary schools to the centralized middle school (closing two elementary schools).

The district has an average daily enrollment of 2,800 students, 97% of whom are identified as Caucasian. Approximately 16% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and approximately 15% of students are identified with disabilities.

ESTABLISHING PURPOSE
Focusing on the essential work of an organization is key to affirming organizational excellence (Collins, 2001).

The district's affirmed mission is "High Achievement for All Students, Where Learning is the Most Important Work." Implementing UDL ensures high achievement as the goal for *all* students.

Academic Performance
Reviewing annual data regarding performance of students and sub-groups on each of the state indicators, administrators noted consistent underachievement across sub-groups, but especially amongst those identified with disabilities in specific subject areas.

The data reflected a decrease in grade-level proficiency on the standards as students transitioned from middle grades to secondary courses.

In order to address the problem, administration reviewed the methods and practices of high performing school districts. While all districts shared a commitment to high academic standards, no one program or practice could be identified that met the needs of the Chardon School District.

Course Enrollment
Additionally, analysis of course scheduling at the secondary level found nearly all students identified with disabilities enrolled in the lowest-recognized track of courses.

The lack of classroom contact between upper-level college-preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement students and students with disabilities, reinforced disproportionate educational opportunities.

Future Readiness

Concurrently, the district analyzed matriculation and retention data of students enrolled in post-secondary programs. The district observed that over 70% of graduating students went on to college or university. Less than 60% of them completed a degree within six years. From this, the district committed to developing curricular programming to ensure high achievement for all students, and to helping every student identify and develop a purpose.

The district ascribes to developing the 4E's for all students: education, enlistment, employment, and entrepreneurship. As with academic standards, the district committed to extending those pathways to all students.

LEADERSHIP & ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The continuum of leadership styles transects organizational needs, allowing for allocation of direction and influences. From this continuum, the organization and the members within the organization choose their response, presumably to meet their desired outcome (Klein, 2014).
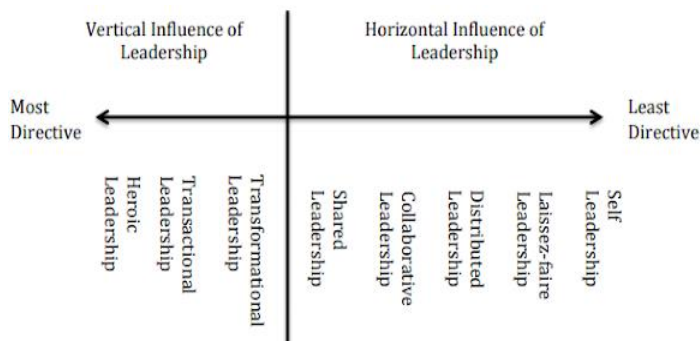

Figure 1. Continuum of Leadership Styles (Klein, 2014)

Self-organizing individuals are considered the most efficient organizational actors, and heroic formal leadership the least efficient organizational design. However, when making leadership and organizational design decisions, "follower maturity" must be considered when responding to change factors (Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, 2012). The choices of individuals effect the whole system.

"Change – even organizational change – happens one person at a time" (Zigarmi & Hoekstra, 2008, p. 3). As organizations and formal leaders contend with change factors from within and without the system, the ability to affect positive and negative change efforts calls for distribution amongst organizational actors.

PEDAGOGY & STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Effective schools demonstrate three consistent elements:

- Focus on what is taught,
- Focus on how it is taught,
- Focus on authentic literacy.

"A content-rich curriculum – *not* skills-based test preparation – is the key to achievement levels and intellectual development" (Schmoker, 2018, p. 21). Similarly, preparation for future readiness – education, employment, entrepreneurship, and/or enlistment – is needed by all students.

It is the responsibility of the school to advocate for, and ensure equity for all students. This is achieved through a coherent and focused curriculum (Alvy, 2017).

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Focusing on its organizational mission to affirm the purpose of strategic activities, the district established a three-fold approach to continuous improvement:

- Align instructional strategies with content standards.
- Observe, reflect on, and refine the academic system.
- Purposefully manage the academic system (including logistics, resources, and processes).

The outcome of this effort was recognition of the need for sustained implementation of UDL.

Grounded in data-driven planning, and aligned to strategic planning, a five-phase implementation plan evolved.

Phase I – Missteps

The first phase achieved success after some initial stumbles, but only with the sustained efforts of all stakeholders.

After review of student performance data, administration eliminated the lowest level (referred to as "General" level) courses. Teachers expressed their concerns, and requested professional development and systematic logistical and operational support.

The district, in collaboration with regional support from the department of education, retained a local consultant and arranged UDL professional development.

However, initial efforts failed because the district wide communication of goals was inadequate.

Phase II - incubation

Reflecting on the effect of unilateral change and the need for sustained improvement, the district recommitted to implementation of UDL. Opportunity for learning and implementing UDL on a small-scale was made possible with a grant from the department of education.

The district identified eight teachers across content areas at the high school to engage with learning about UDL over the course of the year.

These eight teachers were selected because of their desire to develop their pedagogical skills for the benefit of all students, rather than leadership skills, years of experience, or content expertise.

Phase III - Pioneering

The teachers received in-depth professional development and observed UDL in practice in classrooms. They formed themselves into a support network, and, encouraged by administration, began including the principles and guidelines of UDL into their own lesson planning.

Though the teachers participated in ongoing professional development, their informal support network improved practice, the sharing of resources, and supported positive change.

The teachers improved pedagogy with a refined and reaffirmed commitment to high academic standards, and a commitment to high achievement by all students.

The implementation of UDL was summarized by participants as a purposeful and intentional elimination of barriers to learning. To paraphrase one teacher, UDL is not one more thing; it is *the thing*.

Phase IV – Distributed Leadership

Administration granted release time for attending other, structured learning opportunities. But the teacher's support for one another served to promote both the sustainability and durability of UDL implementation

The teachers influenced their colleagues as to the power and efficacy of UDL. Their desire for systemic change resonated within their professional learning communities as they shared understanding, and encouraged colleagues to join in implementation.

Phase V – Macro-Implementation

With the continuation of the group-designed support network, ongoing need for sustained learning opportunities (both to observe practices and to learn theory), and collegial pressure within professional learning communities, there is now support for scaling UDL system wide.

To accomplish this goal, the district will provide professional development for all certified staff, coaching for additional teachers, and support for principals.

The sustainability of the informal collegial support network will enhance district wide implementation. It is through diffuse leadership, where teachers (both individually and collectively) both influence and are influenced by the system, that UDL can be fully implemented across the system.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of UDL as a systematic practice is ongoing within Chardon Schools. Implementation is sustained and encouraged through the extension of leadership roles to a self-sustaining network of teachers who demonstrated desire for pedagogical improvement and recognized the need for collegial support.

As Friar Lawrence said, implementing change should go slow in order to proceed wisely. By expanding the responsibility of leadership and encouraging the development of implementation planning from within the organization, systematic mission-driven change can be sustained.

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