

We Are All In This Together: A Universal Design for Learning In ALCDSB, Ontario, Canada*

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Abstract

Supporting every student means celebrating strengths and ensuring the curriculum is accessible to all students. This session will focus on sharing our learning of the opportunities and challenges associated with advancing educator practice in Universal Design for Learning in a district where full inclusion is the standard within all 38 schools; elementary and secondary. We will share the story of how a variety of organizational barriers had to be removed in order to create fertile ground to advance student-centered pedagogy. The strategic moves we have made as a district have energized our system and are supporting our goal of creating expert learners, young and old!

**Authors Note: This is an adapted version of Shannon and Giroux (2017). A link to a pdf that contains the original, can be found in the references.*

INTRODUCTION

Identifying and leveraging systemic barriers and assets in order to create a shift from having students complete the same task at the same time in the same way to student-centered learning, has been the work at hand in the Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board (ALCDSB). As a geographically diverse, Catholic school system, our mix of 38 urban and rural schools (5 secondary, 32 elementary and 1 adult learning school with five campuses) situated across 16,000 square kilometers in south-eastern Ontario, enjoy deep cultural connections within each of their respective communities. Distances between schools and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues teaching in similar contexts pose challenges. Our model of Special Education service delivery, on the other hand, provides a common framework of full inclusion with students educated in their most enabling environment. Recognizing that diversity of learners in the classroom is a positive, natural reality and that all students are capable of deep learning have always been core values in ALCDSB. These core values are the fertile soil in which our UDL roots are growing.

FULL INCLUSION: ALL STUDENTS EDUCATED IN THEIR MOST ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Education service delivery and Special Education models are determined in Ontario at the individual district school board level and plans are submitted and registered annually with the Ministry of Education. All services must be in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, the Ontario Human Rights Code, The Education Act and all regulations made under the Act. The decision to

educate all students in their home school community, in ALCDSB, as a preferred model of service predates the restructuring of school districts in Ontario which took place in 1998. Alternative placements are available only to a small number of students with complex needs who meet certain criteria. Integration in regular classrooms continues to be a core component of the program for almost every child. Allocating resources to support specialized equipment and training to all schools is an inherent challenge, compared to concentrating resources and students of similar needs in one or more locations. We have found, however, that the opportunities and benefits for students and families far outweigh the challenges.



Figure 1. Staff training with RoboKind to support students with ASD across the district

Children attend school with others from their neighbourhood and strong community-based relationships support the success of students throughout their educational journey, from Kindergarten to Grade 12 or age 21 for students with complex needs. In this context, children learn that variability is normal, healthy and to be expected as they develop relationships with a variety of peers in their school. Every school facility is unique with two thirds of the buildings being in service for over forty years. Improv-

ing accessibility features, technology infrastructure and modernizing learning environments has been an ongoing priority for capital investment across the district.

STRATEGIC APPROACH TO SETTING CONDITIONS

Recognizing that all students are unique learners, we began to redesign learning spaces in our schools to create flexibility in the physical environment to better support collaboration, access to resources and choice for students. The transformation of all traditional library spaces to Learning Commons designed for multi-purpose dynamic inquiry took place over a five-year period, from 2013 to 2018, and positive impacts on student engagement are clearly evident.



Figure 2. Learning Commons Grade 6-8 Community at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School, Kingston Fall 2017.

The integration of technology in all learning spaces and thoughtful decisions about the purpose and function of devices in support of achievement created another building block for developing continuity in instructional practice and learning resources for students as we improved our alignment in student-centered learning using the UDL framework.

Figure 3. Students self-select workspaces in Learning Commons

Listening to the aspirations of students and parents/guardians within ALCDSB and seeking their advice on how to support high levels of achievement and well-being for all students has been key in affirming our vision

of student-centered learning. With clarity and consensus on a vision for teaching and learning, we began to explore ways to engage in the professional learning we would need to move forward.

In the summer of 2016 a team of nine; two Superintendents and seven program and special education consultants participated in a week-long course on Universal Design for Learning at Harvard University, co-facilitated by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST). This small, core team began to work together in new ways, identifying and removing barriers to cross-departmental collaboration, extending their learning, building UDL resource banks and sharing their learning with like-minded colleagues. Planning professional learning for our system and going deeper in our learning were early priorities.



Figure 4. ALCDSB Team at Harvard, July 2016

The absence of Canadian communities of practice necessitated further collaboration with colleagues in the United States. Bringing the experts to ALCDSB enabled us to provide engaging professional development in our district. Additionally, Principals and Vice Principals, organized in four formal Learning Networks, initiated professional reading and exploratory exercises in UDL and introduced the principles to their staff.

Investments in capacity-building have continued with multiple training opportunities provided to all Principals, Vice Principals and designated teachers in all schools, elementary and secondary. The core central team has expanded and have deepened their knowledge and expertise by learning with colleagues in more advanced stages of practice in districts in the United States. The principles of UDL have been incorporated in all embedded professional learning including the Ontario *Renewed Math Strategy* and intervention planning facilitated by Student Services. A Team of 17 educators including representatives of the four Principal Learning Networks, classroom teachers and central program staff participated in a three-day UDL conference facilitated by CAST in the summer of 2017.

The knowledge and capacity building of staff in understanding and leveraging the principles of UDL continue to

gain momentum in the 2017 – 2018 school year with student-centred pedagogy embedded at the core of the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Wellbeing (BIPSAW). A free technology-focused conference open to all educators, community members and guests within the region was hosted by ALCDSB in early November featuring Jon Mundorf, an international leader in UDL practice.

Formal staff development and training for school teams has continued to take place and School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement and Wellbeing reflect school-based plans to advance UDL principles in all classrooms. Our instructional coaches are working with math learning partners across all elementary schools. Part of their collective work is planning for student learning in mathematics through the lens of Universal Design for Learning. At the secondary level, our Differentiated Instruction Partners have received professional development on the topic of UDL. Opportunities for small teams of secondary educators to explore and learn more about UDL were available to all of our secondary schools this year. In April, all staff within ALCDSB were able to hear common messages on UDL, facilitated by Liz Berquist, setting the stage for our next cycle of improvement planning for student achievement and well-being.

Exploring and implementing UDL principles in all schools has been championed by the Principals and Vice Principals within ALCDSB. Their instructional leadership is key to achieving consistency in student-centered pedagogy in all classrooms. A Principal-led Professional Development Committee has been established to align resources and learning opportunities to support the advancement of the work of the BIPSAW. Principal/Vice-Principal Learning Networks are supporting high levels of collaboration and a web-based forum has been developed to share effective tools and resources used with staff. School leaders continue to identify the support they need to further their capacity building to lead the instructional program.

MOVING FORWARD

Developing a cadre of central staff facilitators and establishing networks of practice for educators at like levels of implementation of UDL practice are next steps in our plan to extend student-centered pedagogy across our district. This includes honoring the need for multiple entry points for adult learners in this learning journey. We are growing professionally in our understanding of the conditions which promote high levels of achievement and well-being for every student. We are becoming more skilled at identifying and removing barriers for individual learners and are

energized by the positive impacts we are seeing in teaching, learning and engagement of all students.

Embracing the variability of learners in all classrooms and schools across the district, predicated on a commitment to inclusion, we are placing students at the centre of their own learning. Attending to the principles of Change Management, we recognize the iterative nature of the need for ongoing capacity-building for all members of the broader district community including all staff, students and parents and guardians in understanding the principles of UDL. We are all in this together!

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