The Vision of Inclusion: Leading the UDL Journey

Beth Goodrich
Houston Independent School District
Houston, Texas, USA
egoodric@houstonisd.org

Juan Gonzalez
Patterson Dual Language and Literature Magnet School
Houston, Texas, USA
jgonzale@houstonisd.org

Gerardo Leal
Neff Early Learning Center
Houston, Texas, USA
gleal2@houstonisd.org

Kirsten Omelan
Region 4 Education Service Center
Houston, Texas, USA
komelan@esc4.net

Abstract
Here we share resources and strategies used by two school Principals to transform a vision of inclusion into a school wide mindset and practice. An Elementary School Principal will share his approach to UDL implementation from the perspective of the development of expert teachers. An Early Learning Center Principal will share his approach to UDL implementation from the perspective of development of expert learners. Capacity to embark upon these UDL implementation journeys has been built in collaboration with the Region 4 Education Service Center (Region 4, Texas) and with district wide universal systems.

Keywords
UDL, Inclusion, School Administration, Teacher Development, Expert Learners

INTRODUCTION
Inclusion is a vision, a mindset, and a practice. In this large urban school district, diversity is the norm, and inclusion is becoming the practice. In this narrative, we describe the successful implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles through the stories of two schools where inclusion has become the norm. Inclusion, the vision of a Principal', had become the mindset of the school. UDL is the method and tool in creating this mindset. Capacity to shift beliefs and mindsets in these schools is facilitated with supports and resources provided through Region 4. Success is enabled by universal systems established at the district level.

Background
Four key concepts, grounded in the literature, have set the stage for this work as follows:

The importance of integrated supports in the **natural environment** to overall student success
The concept of **universal design** (UD).
The concept of a **universal literacy environment**. "A digital reading environment that provides the learner with a variety of embedded features that are designed to support individual learning needs, while being sensitive to the interactive nature of the reading process." (Dalton, B., & Proctor, C. P., 2007, p.1)
The concept of **multidisciplinary collaboration** inclusive of all business, technology, and instructional entities contributes to success.

Developing an Expert System
"An expert learning system is one that creates or provides conditions that motivate participants to learn new things, to sustain the effort and persistence, and that encourages self-regulation about learning." (Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D., 2014)

Grounded with the above listed concepts, the district has established several key district level supports enabling success for school level UDL implementation plans as follows:

District wide digital standard directing the selection and procurement of accessible educational materials applying the UDL principles
District wide provision of an integrated scan-to-read/text-to-speech software with embedded digital graphic organizers and supported writing environment.
District wide provision of a web-based goal writing tool supporting teachers to personalize learning goals for all students aligned to the state standards and offering UDL strategies to support implementation of the UDL principles in the instructional design process.
School specific special education report card supporting a data driven method for school wide improvement planning directly addressing the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This data provides a demographic overview of students with disabilities (SWD) along with the percentage of SWD receiving instruction in general education, the percentage of SWD receiving instruction in the most restrictive settings, participation rates of SWD in state assessments and suspension rates for SWD.
District collaboration with Region 4 to support campus UDL Leadership teams in designing and sustaining evidenced-based UDL implementation efforts.

The work is now focused on a professional development plan targeting special education program support personnel in UDL and building expert learning environments. The goal of this work is to develop a sustainable group of personnel who can work directly with teachers to support school level UDL implementation plans.

Developing Expert Teachers

Expert teachers are expert learners who model and mentor the process of learning. (Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D., 2014).

Table 1. Demographic Overview of Patterson Dual Language and Literature Magnet School

Grades: K-5	**Staff:** N=61	**Enrollment:** N=931	
Economically Disadvantaged			
Special Education	5%	**African American**	6%
English Language Learners	49%	**White**	2%
Gifted & Talented	19%		

Patterson's UDL Journey

The Patterson Dual Language and Literature Magnet School is in southeast Houston serving students in kindergarten through 5th grade since 1958. The goal of the faculty and staff of Patterson is to become an "A" rated school where learning is measured by the progress rate of each student from year-to-year. Patterson Dual Language and Literature Magnet School is a learning community of teachers, students and parents who share the vision that produces a college/career bound generation of students who are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Over the last several years, Patterson had traditionally performed well academically. In 2014, due to what was described as a "toxic climate" represented by multiple years of teacher attrition as high as 33%, the district appointed a new principal for the school.

> *"I had the good fortune to be appointed principal of Patterson Elementary in May of 2014. I had been an experienced principal for eleven years in Houston ISD. Thus, I hired twenty teachers that summer. Even though Patterson had good academic performance I knew it could do better—much better. One of my questions to my interview committee was, "As the new principal of Patterson, what should I tackle first?" The overwhelming theme was that they wanted to be treated fairly and to know they could trust the principal. They did not want the principal to play favorites."*

Principal Juan Gonzalez

On day one, with the assistance and guidance of a professional development expert, the faculty expressed their vison for the future, to move forward from the negatives of the past on to what Patterson should be. The change process evolved into the Patterson Pillars which became the foundation of a new school culture (See Figure 2).

That first year was a success and student achievement improved or stayed the same from previous years. Teacher turnover was reduced to five teachers. School improvement started by confronting the following questions:

What else can we do for all our student groups to be successful?

How can we support our teachers to teach more than one way?

What more might this school do to make sure students make progress and close gaps?

What should our focus be? What is next?

Moving forward into the second year, it was clear that any new program or teaching approach employed would have to fit into the Patterson Pillars and positive culture created in the first year. A Dual Language Program was initiated in Pre-K and Kindergarten. With the support of our feeder high school, Region 4, and the district's special education department, a team of two assistant principals, a fourth-grade teacher, and a first-grade teacher were introduced to UDL.

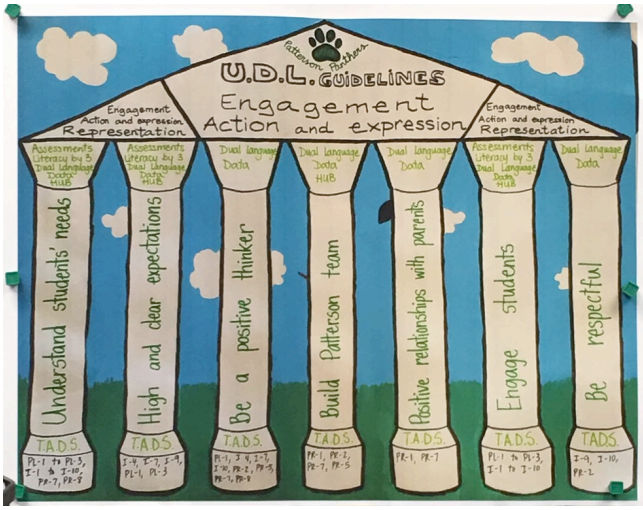


Figure 2. The Patterson Pillars

The goal in this second year was to assist teachers to understand what UDL is and how it works. Three strategies were used as follows:

Whole staff book study using "UDL Now" by Katie Novak introducing teachers to practical strategies they could implement or were already implementing.

Sharing pictures of UDL in action during faculty meetings and reflecting on the impact on student learning.

Establishing UDL as the first item in the weekly professional learning community agenda involving each grade level teacher sharing with the team an activity or strategy on UDL to support all learners.

Last summer, the Patterson UDL leadership team attended the summer UDL Institute at Harvard. This has been a great momentum builder for the school. Now in

year two of a partnership with the Region 4, with a cohort of six schools from the district, one teacher per grade level from Patterson attends quarterly training to increase the core teachers' capacity to implement UDL.

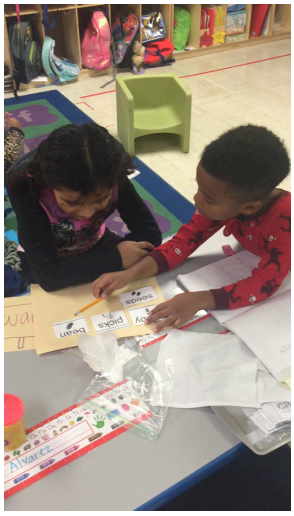
To begin the 2016-2017 school year, the entire faculty and staff gathered at a local movie theater to see, *Life Animated*. This was great way to set the tone for the entire year about the need to reach all learners at the school. This year the school uses each early dismissal professional days to focus on UDL principles.

Developing Expert Learners

Expert learners are resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, goal-directed, purposeful and motivated learners. (CAST, 2014)

Neff's UDL Journey

Neff Early Learning Center is in southwest Houston providing pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade programs. Immediately upon arriving at the Neff Early Learning Center, one experiences a culture of inclusion where each student is recognized as an individual learner. School administrators focus their work on supporting teachers to clarify each student's academic strengths and needs, designing individually tailored instructional lessons and activities. This school has dissolved all self-contained special education classes except one in the last three years and is working to dissolve the one remaining special education preschool class. This work has been a growth experience for administrators, teachers, and students. A focus of this work is on creating student learning environments where students are afforded the benefits of the UDL principles as an integrated component of the learning environment. Teachers use a learning centers approach facilitating learner choice and partner learning. Teachers meet with grade level teams on a weekly basis using data measures to understand the individual academic strengths and weaknesses of each learner and to tailor instruction to the learners. Administrative walk-throughs look for the UDL principles in action and provide feedback for improvement.



> *"Implementing the UDL framework requires the flexibility and adaptability to respond to students' learning. It is not a static mindset in which a set of uniform rules or strategies can be applied to facilitate student learning; rather it is a constant evolving process which requires the classroom teacher to refrain from using rigid methods in facilitating student learning."*
>
> Principal Gerardo Leal, Ed.D.

Developing Expert Leaders

District and campus leaders should be expert learners who cultivate systems where a culture of expertise, persistence, and continuous improvement are the norm. Generalizing the ideas of an expert learning system presented by (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014), helps us understand the characteristics of expert leadership. Expert leaders are those who motivate others in the system to learn new things, who sustain effort and persist despite barriers, who model self-regulation throughout the learning community, and who are strategic in their continuous improvement efforts. Expert leaders can be found throughout all learning communities that are successfully implementing UDL. According to Novak & Rodriguez (2016), "…becoming a highly effective, engaging, emotionally intelligent leader is a process that is not widely understood…great leaders are a force that can pull together their colleagues to create a highly functioning system." (p. 2). Therefore, supporting universally designed leadership is a critical component in successful systemic UDL implementation.

Table 2. Demographic Overview of Neff Early Learning Center

Grades	PK-1	**Staff**	58.1	**Enrollment**	683
Economically Disadvantaged	94%			**Hispanic**	85%
Special Education	8%			**African American**	9%
English Language Learners	72%			**Asian / Pacific Islander**	4%
				White	2%

In order to support district UDL implementation efforts, Region 4 partnered with Houston ISD beginning in 2015-2016 and continuing in 2016-2017, to support campuses through a multi-year UDL Leadership Cohort. Currently the cohort consists of five elementary and one middle school campus. The leadership cohort functions as a professional learning community. Region 4 facilitates opportunities for collective inquiry into UDL implementation, provides resources and professional development, supports strategic planning, encourages networking across campuses, and provides a forum for members of each campus team to share implementation barriers and successes. The primary focus of these efforts is to build the expertise of campus leadership teams (i.e. develop expert leaders). Each team is unique, but generally the members include: the campus principal, assistant principal(s), classroom teachers, interventionists, district special education program specialists and district assistive technology facilitators.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in four key evidenced based concepts (integrated supports in the natural environment, universal design, universal literacy environment, and multidisci-

plinary collaboration) campuses in a large urban school district are finding success implementing the UDL framework through the lens of inclusion. In an elementary school, strategies focused on a professional development plan with a select group of teachers gradually expanding to the whole school by establishing teacher models and providing implementation examples collected from within the school. The early learning center approached UDL implementation building upon a well-established teaching practice, learning centers, with added expectations of learner choice and partner learning. In both settings, the UDL framework provided the method and tool for a Principal's vision of inclusion to become the mindset of the school.

REFERENCES

Anderson-Inman, L. (2009). Supported eText: Literacy scaffolding for students with disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 24*(3), 1-7.

Anderson-Inman, L., Horney, M. (2007). Supported eText: Assistive technology through text transformations. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *42*(1), 153-160.

CAST. (2014). *UDL and expert learners.* Retrieved December 28, 2016 from http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/expertlearners

Dufour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, Indiana: Solution Tree Press.

Douglas, K. H.; Ayres, K. M.; Langone, J.; Bell, V.; & Meade, C. (2009). Expanding literacy for learners with intellectual disabilities: The role of supported etext. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 24*(3), 35-44.

Izzo, M. V., Yurick, A., & McArrell, B., (2009); Supported eText: Effects of Text-to-Speech on Access and Achievement for High School Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, *24*(3), 9-20.

Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D., (2014). *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice*. Wakefield, MA: CAST.

Novak, K., Rodriguez, K. (2016). *Universally designed leadership: Applying UDL to systems and schools.* Wakefield, MA: CAST.

Smith, S., and Okolo, C. (2010). Response to intervention and evidence-based practices: Where does technology fit? *Learning Disability Quarterly. 33*, 257-272

Williams, R., Goldman, J., Bergmann, T., et.al. (2016). *Life Animated.* Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, Culver City, CA.