

Universal Design for Learning: Building Learner-Centered Environments in a Large District

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Abstract

This paper will provide an overview of the Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) strategic plan for communication, professional development, and stakeholder buy-in about UDL. This paper highlights professional learning options that must be considered by any district planning to embrace the UDL framework.

Keywords

Systemic change, Professional learning, Universal Design for Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS), the 25th largest school system in the U.S., serves more than 112,000 students. The student body is diverse, composed primarily of minorities representing over 110 different languages. To ensure success for every student, BCPS has embraced a bold Theory of Action: “To equip every student with the critical 21st century skills needed to be globally competitive, BCPS must ensure that every school has an equitable, effective, digital learning environment. All students will be provided a digital learning device and personalized, blended, interactive curriculum” (BCPS, 2015, p. 12). In each of the system’s 175 schools, traditional, teacher-centered classrooms are becoming innovative, learner-centered environments. The initiative, referred to as Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow (S.T.A.T.), is a multi-year conversion driven by a strategic planning framework that assures communication among stakeholder groups.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK

To transform teaching and learning, BCPS has framed their strategic plan as a series of eight conversions. These conversions are interdependent and occurring simultaneously. All eight conversions (curriculum, instruction, assessment, organizational development, infrastructure, policy, budget, and communications) are closely monitored to ensure alignment and consistency, to avoid gaps or overlap, and to ensure a systemic approach that is equitable for all students.

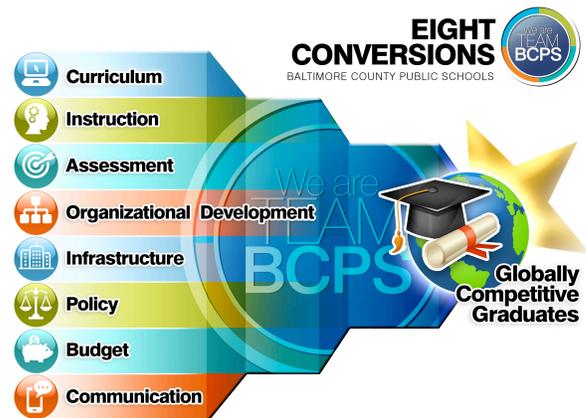


Figure 1: BCPS Strategic Planning Framework

A S.T.A.T. Steering Committee meets monthly to monitor progress in each of the conversions. The committee is comprised of a wide range of stakeholders including staff representing Curriculum and Instruction, Department of Information Technology, Business Services, schools and a local university, as well as parents. These committee meetings facilitate updates among offices as well as provide opportunities for professional learning. For example, in January 2017, the committee engaged in professional learning with staff of Hillcrest Elementary School on the implementation of a learner-centered makerspace environment.

In addition to monthly S.T.A.T. Steering Committee meetings, BCPS publishes a Biannual Conversions Update. The document communicates progress in each of the eight conversions by reporting “Where we are” and “What’s next.” (BCPS, 2016). This document is made available to all stakeholders on the BCPS webpage (<http://www.bcps.org/academics/stat/>).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

BCPS currently supports twenty “Lighthouse Schools,” including three high schools, seven middle schools and ten elementary schools. The Lighthouse Schools are the first in the system to receive individual digital learning devices for students; implement one-to-one personalized and blended learning; and create an innovative, comprehensive digital learning culture. Lighthouse Schools also serve as model demonstration sites, with a Teacher Leader Corp (TLC) turning their classrooms into learning labs. The twenty

Lighthouse Schools receive intensive professional learning opportunities in order to ensure that teachers are well equipped to design learner centered environments. Professional learning for Lighthouse Schools includes monthly meetings and learning walks with central office staff, monthly facilitated professional learning communities, Saturday professional learning sessions, and an intensive summer institute. The design of each professional learning experience is grounded in the UDL framework, with attention given to modeling the principles of UDL in all sessions.

Central to this work is the role of the school S.T.A.T. teacher. Each school in the district has one full time position dedicated to transforming teaching and learning through job embedded professional development. These S.T.A.T. Teachers are responsible for creating a professional learning community in each school. They work closely with their administrator(s) and colleagues to offer flexible professional development options aligned to district initiative. All S.T.A.T. teachers participate in monthly professional learning that is designed to build their capacity in content guided by discipline specific standards, pedagogy guided by the UDL Framework, and technology integration guided by the ISTE Standards (TPACK). S.T.A.T. teachers also participate in professional learning on the use of the learning management system in BCPS One. Following these monthly conferences, STAT teachers are tasked with taking this information back to their schools and designing professional learning experiences for their teachers.

Professional learning for administrators focuses on equity, cultural competency, and culturally responsive instruction as it relates to providing customized, personalized learning. All principals receive training on their role in leading change as they work to create learner-centered learning environments. Using the UDL framework, principals are given choice in determining their professional development path, which focuses on four themes: leading instructional shifts (i.e., Universal Design for Learning), leading with an equity lens, leading change, leading building level professional development.

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