



**A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR  
PERSONALIZED LEARNING**

# How leaders can apply the Universal Design for Learning framework to continuously support personalized learning

By *Bill Wilmot*

**F**or school leaders who support personalized learning, a critical question is not whether you'll do it, but how. How do we move from the aspirational to the operational? How do we create effective, learner-centered environments that leverage individual differences rather than expunge them in the pursuit of excellence?

If personalized learning is the destination, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the road map—or better yet, the GPS device—that takes us there. Based on research in cognitive psychology and the learning sciences, UDL is a framework for remaking the relationship among teachers, learners, and curriculum.

Instead of focusing on “fixing” the “deficient” learner, UDL practitioners concentrate on lesson design to find and eliminate the barriers embedded in educational materials, goals, assessments, instructional methods, and learning environments, according to *Universal Design for Learning: Theory & Practice* by CAST's Anne Meyer, David H. Rose, and David Gordon. The nonprofit organization's UDL Guidelines can help identify obstacles in the curriculum and suggest ways to lower those barriers by taking flexible approaches to:

- The “why” of learning (keeping learners engaged and motivated);
- The “what” of learning (ways in which information is represented and delivered); and
- The “how” of learning (the strategies learners employ and the ways in which they express themselves).

## The learner's attention is the currency of a school.

By shifting focus from the learning problems of students to the barriers built into the curriculum, UDL offers the means of providing equity and access to all learners. To accomplish this, a UDL practitioner asks three basic questions when designing lessons: (1) What is the goal? (2) What barriers in the curriculum might prevent learners from reaching that goal? and (3) How do I design a more flexible curriculum so they can reach that goal?

As instructional leaders, principals play a crucial role in the implementation of UDL. Principals who support personalized learning via UDL create the essential conditions for the growth of UDL practice in three ways. Here's how:

### 1. By Supporting a New Mindset

Deep UDL practice requires a new way of thinking built on a different set of concepts. This mindset is embodied in two UDL maxims: "Variability of learners is the norm" and "The barriers are in the curriculum."

Principals play an essential role in fostering and feeding the development of this new mindset. First, they highlight the limitations of the old one-size-fits-all way of thinking, which works only for some learners and often results in learners who have a few areas of highly developed but narrow skills that don't transfer easily to new contexts.

Next, principals look to their own practices, language, beliefs, and framing to reinforce this new way of seeing the learning environment. They infuse UDL into professional development, staff meetings, problem-solving, and the evaluation process.

Finally, principals embrace the notion of an iterative learning design process. They give teachers space to try new ideas, examine the results, and change course if necessary. Through this cycle, teachers strengthen their

UDL mindset, focusing on remedying deficits in the curriculum rather than in the student.

Like a delicate flower, new approaches can be crushed with a few impatient words or inflexible systems that rob teachers of their agency to try new things. The innovative principal embraces a growth mindset (and the practices that come with it) to protect and feed this new way of thinking.

### 2. By Envisioning Teachers as Expert Learners

Embracing innovation is essential because UDL is, at its core, an invitation to reimagine all people—including teachers and principals—as expert learners who are driven by clear goals, infused with purpose, and empowered with the knowledge and resources to succeed in any setting. The UDL Guidelines define expert learners as "purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed."

To become expert learners, teachers must be supported as they generate questions about their practice, try new approaches suggested by the UDL framework, and reflect upon the impact of their design choices on student learning. Teachers engage in a continuous cycle of goal-setting, planning for learning, monitoring their progress, and seeking and giving feedback to colleagues as they work in PLCs to develop practices shared within the larger community.

With UDL, you might see a team of teachers focused on math ask, "What would need to be in the environment so that all students can monitor their progress?" They then might develop resource videos for hard-to-master skills, feedback stations for students to check works in progress, or collaborative protocols for sharing mathematical thought with classmates.

If teachers are strategizing ways to help students become more strategic writers, they could develop a goals board, a checklist to monitor progress, and personalized word lists to develop vocabulary. In this way, teachers drive the creation of their own professional learning pathways.

Principals should create the conditions for teachers to see themselves and each other as expert learners of their craft. Professional learning for teachers must push beyond the classroom doors, simultaneously increasing the rigor, relevance, and accessibility of new learning. Principals can and should design learning experiences for teachers while mustering the

resources and creating the structures for teachers to learn outside the supervisory relationship.

This creates opportunities for meaningful teacher leadership focusing on instruction. Principals can work collaboratively with teachers to answer questions such as, “How can we use staff meetings to prepare ourselves to pursue our own goals as practitioners?” Such practices support teachers in developing a sense of personal accountability to their students and colleagues.

Expert learners see failure not as an end result, but as a step toward revision and success. Principals can model this by trying new ways of conducting faculty meetings, for example, and gathering feedback before trying again. Some principals go so far as to share all of their missteps with teachers and students as pathways to new learning.

Teachers learning UDL for the first time often react in this way: “This gives language and structure to what I have been trying to do this whole time.” Or, “This is a totally different way of seeing my job and how I interact with learners and curriculum; I don’t know where to start.” Or, somewhere in between: “I use many of these practices already; I guess I’m already doing UDL.”

Principals can acknowledge the work teachers are already doing while challenging everyone to think about how, when, for whom, and under what circumstances we intentionally employ the practices detailed in the UDL Guidelines.

### 3. By Implementing Structural Changes

Like the studs in the wall or the foundation of a house, we often forget about the importance of school structures: the schedule, the policies, the staffing, and even the building itself—all of the ways we organize time, space, and resources. Principals play a key role in considering how these support or interfere with the development of young people and teachers as expert learners.

Working with leadership teams, teachers, and other administrators, principals can multiply the effect of instructional changes in the classroom by applying CAST’s UDL Guidelines and mindset across school systems and procedures. This includes whole-school thinking about barriers to engagement, representation, action, and expression.

Imagine rethinking the school schedule with an eye toward the learning goals of young people and teachers. Imagine doing the same for cafeteria design. Imagine a



teacher evaluation process that honors teachers as resourceful, goal-directed learners. Imagine student supports that begin with the learner’s own goals.

The learner’s attention is the currency of a school. The more engaged attention learners give to a topic, the more they will learn. More elaborate methods of attention control or more amusing song-and-dance routines are not the answer to capturing learner attention. Every decision we make has the potential to affect how students focus their attention.

School leaders can use UDL as a lens for these decisions, asking questions such as: “Does this decision increase or decrease barriers to engagement?” “How is information represented so that all have access?” “How can all learners express what they know?” Only with clear-eyed, intentional design can schools become the vehicles and venues for equity, fulfilling the promise of free universal schooling. 

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