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Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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Universal Design for Learning: Strategies Principals Can Employ in Their Schools

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Many adolescents have a difficult time transitioning from school to work or college and from home to independent living. During this transitional time, all students benefit from developing and practicing real-world skills and learning to apply them while they are still in the classroom. The development of those skills is important for keeping students engaged in school and moving toward college and career readiness.

How do school leaders keep students engaged in learning? What can principals do to help classroom teachers connect with all their students, including those at risk of dropping out and those with disabilities?

Proven strategies include implementing an inclusive learning strategy, known as universal design for learning (UDL), to reach a broader diversity of learning styles in the classroom. Every student learns differently, so

instructors need to educate students using a variety of ways to think, learn, and solve problems independently and effectively. Students also benefit from being able to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, which then leads to better assessment of student progress.

Teachers can employ the following strategies to better prepare all students for a lifetime of academic and professional success.

Universal Design for Learning Strategies

UDL promotes a framework that makes course instruction, materials, and content accessible and engaging for students of all learning styles. Incorporating UDL into the general education curriculum means offering multiple, flexible ways for students to receive information and demonstrate their skills. The

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes a framework that makes course instruction, materials, and content accessible and engaging for students of all learning styles.

Just the Facts

- The National UDL Task Force demonstrates that implementing inclusive strategies is feasible because it does not require teachers to add more to their existing lessons; UDL simply calls for different ways of presenting the same information, therefore allowing more learners to access the lesson effectively.
- CAST also stresses the importance of maintaining a high-quality curriculum based on standards. In fact, UDL stems from every learner's right to a high-quality education, a right that is recognized by multiple federal education laws (e.g., NCLB, IDEA).
- UDL is not about doing more, but rather about doing things differently so that every type of learner can reach his or her potential academically and, ultimately, professionally.
- As a complement to the educator's teaching strategies, each student can also do his or her part to understand how he or she learns best ([Learning How to Learn: Successful Transition Models for Educators Working with Youth with Learning Disabilities](#)).

strategies provide both physical and cognitive access to the curriculum while maintaining high achievement standards for all students.

Although UDL is particularly useful for students with learning disabilities, it benefits everyone in today's diverse classroom. For example, video captioning helps students with hearing impairments, but it also helps English language learners, students who are struggling readers, students with attention deficits, and even students working in a noisy classroom (National UDL Task Force, 2008).

The [National UDL Task Force](#) demonstrates that implementing inclusive strategies is feasible because it does not require teachers to add *more* to their existing lessons; UDL simply calls for *different* ways of presenting the same information, therefore allowing more learners to access the lesson effectively.

The [Center for Applied Special Technology \(CAST, 2012a\)](#) recommends that when implementing the UDL model, instruction should maintain these overarching principles:

- Multiple means of *representation* to give learners various ways to acquire information and knowledge
- Multiple means of *expression* to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know
- Multiple means of *engagement* to tap into learners' different kinds of interests and motivations.

[CAST](#) also stresses the importance of maintaining a high-quality curriculum based on standards. In fact, UDL stems from every learner's right to a high-quality education, a right that is recognized by multiple federal education laws (e.g., NCLB, IDEA). Those laws aim to prevent separate educational agendas for students with disabilities, and they also hold teachers, schools, districts, and states responsible for ensuring that all students demonstrate progress according to the same standards. However, CAST (2012b) points out that the major roadblock to achieving this goal is the curriculum, which is still too rigid to meet the needs of all types of learners. Most remedial efforts to modify these limitations af-

ter the fact are expensive and inefficient for teachers, and are often ineffective for students.

Inclusive Teaching Using UDL

Principals know that a teacher's approach in the classroom can truly make the difference in a student's ability to learn and succeed. Since every student learns differently, it does not make sense to teach toward a narrowly defined learner. UDL acknowledges the need to reduce learning barriers and incorporate activities that benefit all students. One of UDL's strengths is that it addresses the learning process from all angles, including the teacher's delivery of the material, the student's expression of understanding, the teacher's assessment of a student's progress. As a result, UDL improves the whole course of learning, maintaining high expectations for all students while meeting diverse learning needs and effectively monitoring student progress. In other words, UDL enhances outcomes for both the student and the teacher.

Principals and other school leaders can work with their classroom teachers to infuse the following eight UDL strategies, promoted by the University of Washington's (2013) [DO IT](#) Project, into all aspects of the classroom throughout the day.

1. **Class climate:** Adopt practices that reflect strong values with respect to both diversity and inclusiveness;
2. **Interaction:** Encourage regular and effective interactions between students and the instructor and ensure that communication methods are accessible to all participants;
3. **Physical environments and product:** Ensure that facilities, activities, materials, and equipment are physically accessible to and usable by all students, and that all potential student characteristics are addressed in safety considerations;
4. **Delivery methods:** Use multiple, accessible instructional methods that are accessible to all learners;
5. **Information resources and technology:** If your course uses computers as information resources, ensure that these systems employ

Table 1

By incorporating diverse teaching methods and adopting more-appropriate curriculum standards, educators improve youth outcomes. The following table outlines various methods that teachers can use in the classroom to carry out each UDL principle, and reach more students in the class.

Universal Design for Learning Model

Instructional Supports	Sample Classroom Application*
<i>Multiple means of Representation</i> ■ Gives learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge	Use interactive white boards and word processors to: ■ Vary font ■ Color code ■ Highlight text ■ Enlarge text ■ Create and use graphic organizers, rubrics, and mnemonic devices with pictorial supports, particularly for rules and standards
<i>Multiple means of Expression</i> ■ Provides learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know	■ Incorporate blogs and electronic discussion boards to develop writing, reading and responding with other students and/or teachers ■ Share information through song writing, drawing, poster presentations, and playwriting
<i>Multiple means of Engagement</i> ■ Taps into learners' interests, offering appropriate challenges and increasing motivation	■ Offer audio supports (i.e. MP3 recordings) ■ Offer E-Readers ■ Design and present brochures, poster presentations, art work, plays and songs using concept definitions, rules, and theories ■ Integrate peer collaborations/group projects with individual work

Adapted from CAST (2012a) materials.

*Educators do not have to use all of these methods at once.

- accessible design, consider accessibility options, and that systems are in place to make technology-related accommodations;
6. **Feedback:** Provide specific feedback on a regular basis;
 7. **Assessment:** Regularly assess student progress using multiple accessible methods and tools, and adjust instruction accordingly; and,
 8. **Accommodation:** Plan for accommodations for students whose needs are not met by the instructional design.
- Above all, school leaders and instructors should

approach educating all students with the shared determination to maximize each student's strengths. All students have both strengths and weaknesses when it comes to learning and developing skills for school and the workplace. Educators can use techniques that call on those strengths, especially when certain talents can help in an area in which a student has difficulty. These methods, known as *compensatory techniques*, allow students to conquer tasks that they may have found insurmountable before.

Students may go through years of schooling with the impression that they cannot perform well on cer-

tain tasks. When a teacher introduces compensatory techniques, not only does the student succeed at the task, he or she also builds self-confidence and self-determination. Using compensatory techniques also begins a process in which the students begin to carry out these techniques on their own, allowing them to develop successful long-term learning habits they can use in any setting. (To learn more details about compensatory techniques as an effective teaching strategy, visit www.ncwd-youth.info/ld-guide)

Additional UDL Strategies for Students with Disabilities

There are additional UDL-related strategies that meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities that principals and classroom teachers should become familiar with. Although some products are fee-based, studies have demonstrated that many accommodations are low cost and have significant positive impact for school and work environments. According to the [Job Accommodation Network](#) (2012), a technical assistance service from the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), most accommodations cost less than \$500 and many are free.

Read aloud accommodations. Educators should be trained on using computer-based read aloud support for instructional and assessment purposes. This type of accommodation (products include Read/Write Gold and ReadPlease for example) allows students with visual or reading disabilities to read and summarize text independently. However, if students do not know how to use the technology, teachers should be able to provide explicit instructions and suggest ways in which students can manipulate computer-based programs to achieve comprehension fluency and reader independence.

Practice computer-based test taking opportunities to teach students how to appropriately answer questions. Teachers may instruct students to:

1. Highlight key words in the questions
2. Skim the paragraphs from top to bottom to search for these same words in the passage
3. Highlight the portion of a passage (using the

navigation tools) that contains the same key words in the passage

4. Guide students to cross check the highlighted passage along with the questions to determine if the answer fits the question.

Assistive technology supports. Assistive technology (AT) devices vary, and some teachers may require additional training to incorporate them in the classes. AT devices can include, but are not limited to: pencil grips, highlighters, reading guides, magnifying lens, slant boards for writing, electronic dictionaries, digital text, audio books, reading pens, talking calculators, text-to-speech software or word prediction software, iPods, iPads, and electronic spellers.

Web-accessibility guidelines. Principals, teachers, and other school personnel would also benefit from training to promote effective facilitation of web-based interaction so that students can successfully acquire concepts taught online. Key elements for educators to keep in mind to determine the appropriateness of a website might include:

- Use alternative text for graphics
- Design pages that do not rely on color alone to convey information
- Identify row and column headers and provide summaries for tables or graphs
- Avoid blinking or scrolling text
- Avoid animated graphics
- Allow users to skip repetitive navigation links
- Provide a breadcrumbs alternative to navigation or site map
- Include directions and cues within an online form
- Organize documents so they may be read without style sheets; implement headings, lists, and outlines
- Limit the use of frames or provide a 'no frames' alternative.

The first and most important step for educators is implementing UDL into the classroom curriculum and design. Principals, district and school administrators, and mentor teachers can play a significant leadership role in achieving that goal. A teacher's ap-

proach can make the difference between a student's struggle and success. Beyond utilizing UDL inclusive strategies and compensatory techniques, educators can do even more to deliver UDL to more students.

To promote the use of UDL, educators can:

- Serve on curriculum selection committees and encourage school districts to invest in curriculum materials that incorporate UDL principles;
- Demonstrate how to use UDL principles to their teaching colleagues
- Request professional development on UDL for all educators in their school or district (National UDL Task Force, 2008).

There is also a great online community called UDL Connect from the National Center on Universal Design for Learning. Teachers can join UDL Connect (<http://community.udlcenter.org/>) and learn from other educators who are using UDL in their classrooms around the country. CAST recently launched [UDL Exchange](#), a free website community that enables educators to create, mix, and share lesson plans and other teaching resources based on UDL principles and aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Applying the UDL instructional strategies to a classroom leads to more effective learning for more students. Better outcomes for students mean better outcomes for schools, teachers, and communities. UDL is not about doing more, but rather about doing things differently so that every type of learner can reach his or her potential academically and, ultimately, professionally. Currently, schools and employers are not doing enough to reach a broad diversity of learning styles, including students with learning disabilities. By incorporating UDL, educators embrace their responsibility to identify and carry out teaching methods that inform and engage every student. In turn, all students can demonstrate their understanding of material, and educators can better assess student ability and progress. Teachers should also seek out specific training and professional development opportunities to improve inclusive lesson designs, work more effectively with students with

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disabilities, and promote UDL to other educators.

As a complement to the educator's teaching strategies, each student can also do his or her part to understand how he or she learns best (see "[Learning How to Learn: Successful Transition Models for Educators Working with Youth with Learning Disabilities](#)," [NCWD, 2012]). Through these strategies, more students, including those with learning disabilities, can become self-sufficient and achieve academic and ultimately professional success. [PRR](#)

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