

Q&A for Families

About UDL

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that provides ALL students equal opportunities to learn. It encourages teachers to design flexible curricula that meet the needs of all learners.

Using UDL principles in general education classrooms makes curriculum and instruction accessible and engaging. Curriculum barriers are reduced; learning is supported; students gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning; and their learning is validly assessed.

What are the benefits of UDL?

Students come to the classroom with a variety of needs, skills, talents, interests and experiences. For many learners, typical curricula are littered with barriers and roadblocks, while offering little support. UDL turns this scenario around by encouraging the design of flexible, supportive curricula that are responsive to individual student variability.

UDL improves educational outcomes for ALL students by ensuring meaningful access to the curriculum within an inclusive learning environment. In addition, UDL complements existing school reform initiatives, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Understanding by Design (UbD).

What are the principles of UDL?

- Provide multiple means of representation to give students various ways of acquiring, processing, and integrating information and knowledge.
- Provide multiple means of action and expression to provide students with options for navigating and demonstrating learning.
- Provide multiple means of engagement to tap individual learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

Using the three principles of UDL, teachers can create goals that promote high expectations for all learners, use flexible methods and materials, and accurately assess student progress.

What is being done to promote the implementation of UDL?

The National UDL Task Force works to incorporate the principles of UDL into federal policy and practice initiatives. Recommendations of the Task Force on teacher and faculty preparation to use UDL strategies were incorporated into the recently passed Higher Education Opportunity Act. Recommendations have been made for the reauthorization of ESEA (NCLB) and will also be made for IDEA. In addition, the Task Force seeks increased dissemination of information about UDL by the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies. See the UDL Toolkit at www.osepideasthatwork.org/udl/.

The National UDL Task Force is comprised of more than forty education and disability organizations. A complete list can be found at www.udlcenter.org/aboutudlcenter/partnerships/taskforce.

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Isn't UDL just for students with disabilities?

Absolutely not. UDL certainly benefits students with disabilities. However, all students can benefit from the types of supports that curricula designed using UDL provide. For example, video captioning is of great help to students with hearing impairments, because it provides them with a visual representation of speech. This support is also beneficial to English Language Learners, struggling readers, and even students working in a noisy classroom.

In what ways does UDL provide access to grade level curriculum?

Many people think of access in the purely physical sense. For example, a student in a wheel chair might use an elevator to access higher floors in a building. Although, this type of access is very important, access to learning is far more complex. The UDL framework addresses this complexity by encouraging thoughtful planning of flexible curricula (goals, methods, materials, and assessments) from the start, which meet the needs of all learners.

For example, only providing students with paper text could be problematic, but providing students with flexible digital text is one way to make instructional materials more accessible to all students. A student who has difficulty accessing printed text due to a visual impairment or dyslexia could still 'access' the same text by using the text-to-speech feature. While a student who needs cognitive access could use comprehension supports, such as vocabulary definitions, highlighted abstract literary concepts, foreign language translations, or animated coaches that assist with answering comprehension questions.

An important part of UDL is realizing that these supports are also important for students who might be facile with text. For example, a proficient reader might prefer to listen to the text by using the Text-to-Speech function. In short, lots of students benefit from the flexibility and accessibility built into curricula designed using the UDL framework.

How does UDL help with modifying and adapting materials?

Universally designed instructional materials are designed from the start to be used by a wide range of learners, thereby minimizing the need for time-consuming adaptations and modifications. The materials should still be further individualized, if needed, but a lot of the work will have already been done.

UDL does not require the use of a computer and digital materials, although they provide the greatest flexibility. There are also many low-tech options. UDL materials should be available for home use to support homework and project tasks.

What can I do to help promote UDL?

There are lots of ways that parents can help promote UDL. For instance, you could:

- Share this Fact Sheet with other parents and educators;
- Find out if curricula in your school district have been developed in accordance with UDL principles by asking your child's educators and the administrators involved in curriculum development;
- Talk with your child's teacher about UDL;
- Contact your district, state and national policymakers and ask them to support UDL.

Where can I find more information?

Please visit our website at www.udl4allstudents.com or contact Ricki Sabia at rsabia@ndss.org.

The National Center for Universal Design for Learning also contains information about UDL, resources for UDL implementation, and research. It also includes a community section.

Also you can find a detailed Parent Guide on UDL at www.nclld.org/publications-a-more/parent-aamp-advocacy-guides/a-parent-guide-to-udl. Our efforts will be more effective if policymakers are hearing about UDL from all stakeholders, including parents.