

## District Spotlight: Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation, Columbus, Indiana

CHALLENGE: How can a school district implement a unified approach to using technology and best practices to meet the needs of students with disabilities and their peers?

### Implementing Universal Design for Learning With Accessible Technology to Meet the Needs of All Learners

Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC), in Columbus, Indiana, includes a diverse student population from urban and surrounding rural areas. The district was interested in developing a plan that would address individual learning needs to support their commitment to provide deeper learning for all students. The district identified Universal Design for Learning (UDL)<sup>1</sup> as a framework that not only aligned with the district's mission to deepen learning for all students but also provided a blueprint for *how* the district could achieve that mission. A key element in the district's UDL initiative was the recognition that by providing multiple pathways for learning, they could improve learning for all students, including those with disabilities. UDL principles, applied in conjunction with accessible technology tools and assistive technology,<sup>2</sup> can enhance learning by creating a more personalized experience for students.

Learn how Indiana's BCSC staff have collaborated with community leaders and outside organizations to embed UDL principles into all of their initiatives, policies, and procedures, resulting in improved teaching and learning across the district.

### BCSC: Setting the Stage

BCSC is located in Columbus, Indiana, a city known for its modern architecture, public art displays, and several multinational manufacturing and automotive companies. As a result, the business community and the city's economic development goals are closely tied to prioritizing education and workforce development. This local context created a strong culture of support for the mission of BCSC in providing deeper learning opportunities for all students, and it facilitated support for the integration of UDL and technology to support teaching and learning.

<sup>1</sup> "Universal Design for Learning is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone—not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs." <http://www.udlcenter.org/>

<sup>2</sup> "Assistive technology is any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities." <https://www.atia.org/at-resources/what-is-at/>

The UDL initiative began in the 2001–02 academic year, as the Directors of Special Education and Secondary Education collaborated with members of the district leadership team to develop a service delivery plan to improve on learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Working with the Superintendent and the Directors of Technology and Elementary Education, the district team identified UDL as a unifying framework that aligned with the mission to provide deeper learning for all with a focus on developing “expert learners”<sup>3</sup>—that is, students who are strategic, self-regulated, and reflective.

The district leadership team moved forward with developing a UDL-focused technology action plan in 2003. The district piloted the UDL initiative with a small number of schools by providing training and working with teams to incorporate UDL-related goals into school improvement plans. By 2007, the UDL initiative and training opportunities had expanded to include all staff in each school within the district. Throughout the following years, BCSC continued to refine and expand their understanding and application of UDL principles, adjusting the framework to address local implementation challenges and needs of the teachers and learners. For example, as the district worked to enhance their technology infrastructure within each school, it was necessary to help teachers identify low-tech strategies to implement UDL principles in their lessons and understand that technology (while helpful) is not essential to rethinking the ways information is presented to students.

#### DISTRICT FACTS: BCSC

Schools: 17

Students: 11,562

Students with individualized education programs: 12%

As BCSC continued to refine their UDL initiative, they developed and implemented teacher success rubrics that included accountability measures to examine fidelity of UDL implementation and project-based learning. These rubrics helped teachers understand what was expected of them, provided guidelines to measure implementation of UDL principles in the classroom, and supported ongoing districtwide continuous improvement of the UDL initiative. Throughout the implementation process, collaboration among district leads and school-level instructional teams has been instrumental in the district's success. By 2013, based on feedback from teachers, all schools had an in-house UDL facilitator to support continuous professional learning and implementation of the UDL initiative.

Over time, this effort has come to serve as a guiding framework for the delivery of instruction, technology and curriculum purchasing decisions, implementation of new initiatives, and the physical design of learning spaces. For example, when the Director of Technology was exploring new learning management systems (LMSs),<sup>4</sup> he gathered input from school-level instructional teams who expressed an interest in identifying an LMS that could span the grade levels and be implemented as a K–12 solution. The goal was to make a comprehensive shift to an LMS that aligned with UDL principles (provide multiple means of representation and expression), provided support for online instruction and project-based learning, and gave teachers and students access to everywhere, all-the-time learning.

## Strategies for Success

### Build Bridges Between Departments, Schools, Experts, and the Community

- *Work with community stakeholders to get buy-in.* When the BCSC leadership team began exploring UDL implementation, they presented their plan to the school board early in the

<sup>3</sup> Learn more about expert learners: <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/expertlearners>

<sup>4</sup> “A learning management system (LMS) is a software application or Web-based technology used to plan, implement, and assess a specific learning process.” <http://searchcio.techtarget.com/definition/learning-management-system>

process to ensure community-level engagement. Further, they built upon the district's close relationship with the business advisory group, which meets monthly to discuss workforce development, highlighting the ways that UDL implementation aligned with community goals for building a strong, diverse, and well-educated local workforce.

- *Collaborate with outside agencies and experts.* In designing their UDL implementation, BCSC worked closely with staff from [CAST](#), national experts in UDL, to create professional development materials, refine the framework to meet local implementation challenges, and host [UDL Institutes](#).

### Support Commitment to and Practice of UDL

- *Move beyond shifting initiatives.* At BCSC, “UDL is no longer a district initiative, it is the framework through which all other initiatives, policies, and procedures are filtered, supported, and implemented.” Through the implementation process, BCSC has integrated UDL into the daily practice of the district, moving away from viewing UDL as “just another initiative” to the framework that informs all instructional and technology decisions.
- *Align existing vision and initiatives with the implementation of UDL.* Because UDL aligned with a districtwide commitment to valuing individual learning differences, deepening learning, and building a community of expert learners, UDL principles provided a blueprint for actualizing that vision and gave educators a clear pathway for achieving goals.
- *Make UDL implementation a living framework.* District personnel and their partners at CAST continue to work together to identify ways to dive deeper into the UDL principles and improve teaching and learning. Through yearly UDL Institutes and in-school UDL facilitators, BCSC deepens staff understanding and gathers input on barriers to implementation. BCSC uses this information to refine understanding and implementation of the framework and makes adjustments to encourage deeper understanding.

### Collaborate to Design a Successful Learning Environment

- *Engage a wide range of stakeholders.* Leaders representing instruction, technology, special education, and the community work together to make decisions on technology purchases, learning space design, and curriculum planning. When changes to the physical spaces in district schools were needed, representatives from technology, instruction, and facilities worked with the architects to design spaces that met learning needs.

### Provide Ongoing Opportunities for Professional Learning

- *Facilitate comprehensive onboarding* of new teachers to address issues of teacher turnover and ensure that all new teachers in the district understand how to use UDL in their classrooms. First-year BCSC teachers participate in a New Teacher Academy, which provides professional development and mentoring throughout the school year.
- *Provide just-in-time support for both new and veteran teachers.* Building-level UDL facilitators are in each school and meet regularly to discuss common challenges, problem-solve, and develop new trainings.

## Recommendations for Districts Facing Similar Challenges

- **Start small.** The UDL framework consists of three broad principles, followed by guidelines and checkpoints. BCSC staff avoided overwhelming teachers new to the concepts by focusing on the principles first and moving into talking about guidelines only once teachers had developed mastery.

- **Collaborate!** BCSC was able to plan, implement, and sustain their UDL initiative for years through ongoing collaboration among school and district leadership. The Director of Technology sits in on every meeting with principals and is very involved in curriculum and instruction. Instructional teams were involved in planning from the beginning.
- **Communicate to break down silos.** Ongoing communication has been key to BCSC's success, through regular participation in curriculum planning, monthly tech newsletters, and a unified LMS for the district that provides one-stop shopping for information and professional development.
- **Value your infrastructure and work with what you have.** When undertaking a new technology and teaching initiative, you cannot expect the necessary infrastructure to support the work overnight. BCSC had to address an initial lack of technology (before moving to 1-to-1) by altering their perceptions of what UDL looked like in practice and exploring low-tech solutions. They also understood that infrastructure goes beyond the physical supports for technology implementation to include the people and processes and that those need to be in place before you can move forward.
- **Empower your teachers!** At BCSC, teachers are provided with ongoing support through the New Teacher Academy, UDL Institutes, online professional development, and in-building UDL facilitators. Teacher-friendly rubrics help teachers make technology decisions that support learning goals. When teachers want new technology for their classrooms, the question is not "Why do you need it?" It is instead "What do you expect to do with it? How will it fit with your instructional process?"
- **"Burn the ships."** From the story of Cortés burning his ships to ensure that his expedition moved forward, BCSC addressed a common problem of new initiatives—returning to the old way of doing things rather than changing—head on by adopting new LMSs that housed every professional development resource, every curriculum material, and every resource teachers needed and removed the opportunity to revert to previous tools.

## Additional Resources

- [Promising Practices: Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation and the Journey to UDL for All](#)
- [Universal Design for Learning at BCSC](#)
- [BCSC Resource Adoption Rubric](#)
- [Technology Implementation Practice Guide](#)
- [Digital Accessibility Toolkit: What Education Leaders Need to Know](#)
- Contact an assistive technology (AT) specialist at the Center on Technology and Disability for support at [ctd@fhi360.org](mailto:ctd@fhi360.org).

### About This Resource

This resource was developed by members of the Center on Technology and Disability, including the American Institutes for Research team—Kristin Ruedel (Principal Researcher), Alise Crossland (Senior Researcher), Tracy Gray (Project Director), Jillian Reynolds (Researcher), and Marcelino Justo-Zavaleta (Research Assistant) in collaboration with the BCSC team—Mike Jamerson (Director of Technology), Nick Williams (Coordinator of Instructional Technology), George Van Horn (Director of Special Education), and Bill Jensen (Director of Secondary Education). The content was developed under cooperative agreement number #H327F130003 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. Project Officers: Carmen Sanchez and Terry Jackson.