From:

- James McKenna, Mindy Fattig, and Erik Swanson, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence
- Shamryn Coyle, California Coalition for Inclusive Learning
- Jennifer Boettger, Open Access 2.0
- Kristin Brooks, Supporting Inclusive Practices

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Subject: Enhancing State Capacity and Systemic Coherence for the Implementation of Universal Design for Learning in CA Public Schools

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. Developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), UDL leverages research in cognitive neuroscience and psychology to inform the design of instruction, curriculum, assessments, and materials in ways that allow diverse learners to meet or exceed high expectations.

In recent months, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) has led a UDL Advisory Group, comprising members of CCCE and and the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA), the California Coalition for Inclusive Learning (CCIL), Open Access, and Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP), to explore the state's infrastructure in supporting UDL. The group analyzed the current status of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) implementation in California, focusing on assessing existing strengths, identifying critical gaps, and suggesting ways to enhance support systems for fostering more inclusive general education for all students. This memo synthesizes our findings and recommendations, drawing on insights from the collaboration between CCEE . These conclusions are further enriched by empathy interviews conducted with frontline educators and practitioners, offering a comprehensive view of the UDL landscape in California's education system.

Context

UDL is a core component of best first instruction, as evidenced by the inclusion of UDL in the Every Student Succeeds Act as well as every CA curriculum framework. The California Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) framework includes UDL at all three tiers (universal, supplemental, and intensive), supporting inclusive academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning. UDL also facilitates the use of culturally responsive teaching and learning by offering students options and supports to enhance the relevance and authenticity of the learning experiences and facilitate multiple means of expressing learning and demonstrating standards proficiency.

In their 2015 "One System" report, the Statewide Task Force identified UDL as a key component for providing "a context for success for every student within a core, general education curriculum and classroom". Since that report, UDL has been a growing area of investment, with several state grant

projects working with county offices, districts, and individual educators across the state. These programs, which include CCIL, Open Access, and SIP, are specifically designed to provide significant technical assistance and/or professional learning support for implementing Universal Design for Learning. In addition, many other state-funded projects [Far North Literacy Development Consortium, California Collaborative for Learning Acceleration (CCLA), CA MTSS, and more] incorporate UDL into their support.

Despite this significant and consistent emphasis on UDL as an instructional framework, implementation of UDL in CA is far from systemic or widespread. Pockets of practice and support exist across the state, and grassroots organizations, like the CA UDL Coalition, are organizing efforts between state programs, the Department, and several county offices to enhance collaboration and support for UDL implementation. However, these efforts are scattered and often unconnected.

The UDL Advisory Group examined the universal, targeted, and intensive support provided by several state grant projects. In addition, several field practitioners and UDL implementation support providers were interviewed using a structured protocol to gather diverse perspectives on current and potential future efforts to support UDL implementation. Emerging from this data collection and analysis came four areas for discussion:

- **Awareness:** Has the state's system of support empowered California educators to understand the "why" for UDL and/or how UDL fits in the existing California instructional systems?
- **Alignment:** Has the state's system of support coherently equipped CA educators in the expressed purpose, foundational concepts, and applications of UDL?
- **Application:** Do educators have access to statewide systems that motivate, prepare, and support consistent and incremental application of UDL in their classrooms? Do California educational systems align with a "UDL-style" of instruction and assessment or do they inhibit UDL from taking root?
- **Assessment:** To what extent are existing academic assessment measures universally designed? How can/do state, regional, and local educators measure the effectiveness of UDL implementation at the classroom/school/district level?

Strengths

Awareness

UDL's incorporation into key frameworks and educational events promotes its awareness among educators. This is bolstered by reports of growing interest in UDL implementation across schools and districts. National organizations like CAST and Novak Education are witnessing a surge in demand for UDL-related services in California. The inclusion of UDL in Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) and teacher and administrative preparation programs further amplifies its visibility among new educators. The California Teachers Association (CTA) has been offering ongoing professional development and training on UDL since 2015 and provides technical support through their Instruction and Professional Development department to educators across the state. Further, their internal policies, which are written by CTA members, fully support utilizing UDL to support students' needs.

Additionally, educators should be provided the tools and opportunity to develop innovative and effective teaching methodologies that are consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning. Finally, UDL principles are also a focal point at the CISC Symposium and the annual CA MTSS Professional Learning Institute; the latter having consistently highlighted UDL through pre-conference workshops, conference sessions, and keynote speakers.

Alignment

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is integral to California's educational strategy, as evidenced by its inclusion in all state curriculum frameworks and the CA Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). The concept of Universal Design for Learning is built into the professional development certification course provided to grant awardees throughout the state and is available in open source training materials as well. As mentioned previously, UDL is explicitly incorporated into the TPEs, notably in TPE 1, 3, and 4, which cover engaging students, understanding subject matter, and planning inclusive instruction.

Application

Momentum is increasing towards adopting UDL at various levels – individual educators, schools, districts, and county offices. UDL is the stated primary foundation for many definitions of tier 1 instruction for districts across the state, with this definition being reinforced through much of the state's work incorporating MTSS. This is evident in the increasing sharing of UDL applications and their positive impacts on students. Resources on UDL, including professional development tools and templates, are becoming more accessible through platforms like CA Educators Together. Finally, the recently updated CA Mathematics framework recommends teaching practices, assessments, and instructional materials that are aligned to the principles of UDL.

Assessment

Our focus on assessment encompasses two aspects: assessing student learning through UDL principles and evaluating the implementation and impact of UDL.

Universally Designed Assessments:

UDL's emphasis on diverse methods of student expression enhances the accuracy of learning assessments, which is crucial for the effective and equitable support of students. Technological advancements and educators' openness to various assessment methods are supported by resources like California Educators Together. The Every Student Succeeds Act aligns with UDL principles, as seen in the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), which includes embedded and non-embedded universal tools, designated supports, and IEP/504 specific accommodations available to all, some, and a few student populations across the state during the testing experience. By embedding these tools within the state's assessment, California sends the message that differentiation, options, and choice tools and strategies can be cornerstones of assessment experiences. Educators are encouraged to familiarize students with these supports to build their confidence and skill.

In addition to formal statewide assessments, UDL's effectiveness has involved classroom, school, and district-level assessments. The increased use of equitable grading practices that make standard success criteria clear while providing flexibility on how these success criteria could be communicated is just one example of an assessment strategy that is supportive of UDL-based instructional methods. In one example of support for universally designed classroom assessments, the Chapter 12 of the 2023 CA Mathematics Framework recommends UDL and calls for "assessments should be flexible, allowing for multiple means of expression, such as talking, writing words, drawing, using manipulatives, or typing responses." Also, increased use of portfolio-based assessments, project or problem-based learning, and culturally responsive instructional strategies centered on students having "voice and choice" in their assessments all support UDL-driven assessment practices.

Assessing Implementation and Impact:

Tools like the UDL Look Fors, UDL-SIC, and UDL Journey Guide offer criteria and self-assessment rubrics for educators. Research on UDL's impact on student outcomes is expanding, with California investing in studies to understand its effects on teacher practices, mindset, and student learning though the CCIL project. Initiatives like CCEE's learning network (AB86 funded) and the partnership with CAST highlight this commitment.

Gaps

Awareness

General awareness of UDL is rising, yet misconceptions persist. UDL is often viewed as an additional burden or exclusively for special education and assistive technology. Furthermore, there is a gap in understanding the comprehensive requirements for successful initiative implementation, including policy revisions, resource alignment, community engagement, and data-driven planning. Additionally, many educational agencies focus on introductory UDL concepts, including the outcomes hoped to be achieved with UDL, without delving into these deeper, systemic elements that need to change to embrace UDL, including the concrete actions needed to transform the instructional design. Lastly, the field struggles to comprehend how the UDL framework fits into other instructional initiatives, leading to confusion in the field on where to focus in reimagining efforts in lesson and learning environment design and how to build rigorous assessments that are still inclusive to a wide array of student populations.

Alignment

While Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is recognized in California's educational frameworks and teaching standards, there is a misconception of UDL being primarily a tool for special education and is reinforced, at times, by ableist assumptions that UDL has little relevance to populations outside those with an IEP. This narrow perception overlooks UDL's foundation in cognitive neuroscience and psychology, research that is applicable to all learners. The situation is possibly compounded by UDL's

funding sources, often linked to special education grants. Furthermore, education's historically siloed divisions between general education- and special education-based systems only exacerbate the issue. This association between UDL and special education may inadvertently reinforce the misperception of UDL's broader applicability. The lack of clarity and coherence in messaging about UDL's role in general education, as well as inconsistencies in foundational UDL elements and indicators across various training programs. These disparities lead to confusion and hinder effective, sustainable UDL implementation.

Application

The application of UDL to instruction and assessment is made more challenging when existing curricula are not designed with enough flexibility for UDL principles. Rigid, prescriptive curricula increase the burden on educators to adapt materials for diverse learners. On the other hand, curricula that emphasize clear goals and offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression facilitate UDL application. The state's incorporation of UDL into various programs and frameworks implies its relevance to general education, yet this is not explicitly communicated, resulting in a lack of clarity about UDL's value and the resources available to support its application. Additionally, UDL's nature as a flexible framework, rather than a prescriptive set of strategies, creates ambiguity for educators, who require support in understanding and implementing UDL's core strategy of firm goals and flexible means. Finally, curriculum designers have yet to be incentivized to make UDL-based content easily adaptable to educators in the field, leaving educators to carry the full burden of adaptation into lesson planning. Infrastructure for choice-making, clear goals with loose means of expression, and scaffolding for ways to contextualize content to different populations embedded within district curriculum is largely missing today's curriculum adoptions.

Assessment

The assessment of UDL implementation is complicated by alignment challenges and the subjective nature of implementation perceptions, hindering the ability to scale support and recognize excellence. State-level grant projects' evaluation requirements often fail to directly demonstrate UDL's impact on student outcomes, focusing instead on correlating data such as educator learning and teacher efficacy. The short duration and varied focus of these projects limit the state's ability to gather longitudinal data, which is essential for defining UDL in practice and evaluating its long-term impact. A more detailed understanding of UDL's benefits to students necessitates the establishment of a coherent definition of UDL implementation that crosses state contexts and is coupled with ongoing data collection and analysis by local education agencies. While individual components of UDL are well-researched, collective efficacy assessment needs further robust study. For universally designed assessments, reliance on rigid assessment models persists among educators, often due to concerns about student preparedness, time constraints, and assessment validity. This reliance limits the flexibility and inclusivity that UDL aims to promote in assessments.

The Need for Enhanced Support

As described in the introduction, UDL is recommended in several sections of the Every Student Succeeds Act, and it is woven through the curriculum frameworks and CA MTSS. Additionally, a growing number of states are emphasizing the use of UDL through investment and state-level requirements. Examples include:

- **Colorado** has embedded UDL into MTSS efforts conducted <u>outside</u> special education systems within the LEA.
- **Maryland** requires all local school systems to "incorporate UDL principles and guidelines into the development and provision of curriculum, instructional materials, instruction, professional development and student assessments."
- **Mississippi** offers a menu of UDL-based training offerings and has UDL cohort schools and districts working to implement UDL across the state.
- **New Hampshire** has been conducting a multi-year, statewide UDL initiative to roll out UDL "as a systemic framework for educational decision-making."
- **Wisconsin** is engaged in a statewide effort to implement UDL, including the creation of UDL Forward, an "asynchronous and universally-designed environment in which educators engage in sense-making and resource sharing for UDL implementation."

Therefore, the incorporation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in educational practices is not only becoming a normative approach across various states but also a legislative requirement, reflecting a nationwide shift towards more inclusive and adaptable educational strategies.

Recommendations

Clarity

- **Clarify Effective UDL Implementation:** Define clear success criteria using UDL-SIC and UDL Journey Guide for schools and districts. Emphasize the role of these criteria as a framework for successful UDL implementation.
- **Reinforce UDL's Place in Tier 1:** Make clear the primary goal of Universal Design for Learning as developing capacity and contexts for expert learning, which is applicable to all students, not just those who are traditionally marginalized. Enhance emphasis on UDL as a foundational element of best first instruction..
- **Showcase Successful UDL Examples:** Share practical examples of UDL implementations at classroom, school and district levels to demonstrate its applicability and effectiveness.

Capacity

- **Develop Professional Learning Objectives:** Create a unified UDL training and practice framework, synthesizing classroom-level and system-level rubrics and CAST norms for consistency.
- **Enhance Support at County Offices:** Build COE capacity through training and professional networks, and provide comprehensive UDL implementation standards.
- **Disseminate Open Educational Resources:** Offer universally designed educational materials for teachers, supporting various learning and expression methods.
- **Facilitate Comprehensive Assessment Strategies:** Provide resources like rubrics, digital tool guides, and model lesson plans for diverse assessment methods.

Coherence

- **Integrate UDL with Current Educational Practices:** Emphasize UDL's relevance to existing educational efforts, presenting it as a complementary approach. Highlight how UDL enhances various teaching methods, linking it with other educational frameworks to alleviate perceptions of a one-size-fits-all or stand-alone approach.
- **Encourage Curricular Flexibility:** Urge curriculum developers to create materials that support diverse teaching approaches and allow for digital updates, fostering an assets-based approach in UDL.
- **Conduct Implementation and Readiness Assessments:** Implement assessments based on common criteria at various educational levels to refine UDL implementation and share best practices.

Call for Action

We encourage policymakers to enhance the strategic, systemic approach to supporting UDL's expansion in CA by:

- **Promoting** the development of a coherent, compelling vision and strategic plan to increase awareness of UDL and support LEAs seeking to implement UDL to enhance best first instructional practices and tiered levels of support.
- **Encourage** the development of curriculum and resources that are more flexible and supportive in alignment with UDL principles. Develop guidance for LEAs to incorporate a UDL lens in their curriculum adoption processes.
- **Aligning** timelines and evaluations of existing state funding initiatives with a focus on UDL including supporting systemic facilitation to ensure collaboration and integration between initiatives.
- **Focusing** future UDL professional learning and technical assistance initiatives on enhancing best first instruction and supporting the whole child rather than relying on special education

as the primary application/driver of UDL. Current state UDL projects are driven by special education initiatives, adding to the misconception that UDL is a "special ed thing".

Closing

The CCEE is grateful to our partners in the Statewide System of Support and educators in the field for their contributions to this memo. If you would like more information on CCEE's efforts related to UDL, please contact Dr. James McKenna at jmckenna@ccee-ca.org.