



EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

IMPLEMENTING UDL AT D.J. BAKIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Ten-year-old Jake Nash¹ doesn't find school an easy place to be.

Diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disorder, Jake struggles to get along well with peers in group settings. He is frustrated by “one size fits all” paper-and-pencil tests on things he’s not interested in. His teachers note that something like a small change in the homework assignment or a discussion about the temperature outside may set Jake off—and it’s not just his own experience that’s impacted, but that of his peers as well. Under a more traditional system, students with Jake’s condition often wrongly get suspended, are separated from their peers, and slip through the cracks. But when Jake began fifth grade, he had an advantage. His school, D.J. Bakie Elementary in Kingston, New Hampshire, was implementing Universal Design for Learning as part of a broader personalized learning strategy.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of guidelines and principles that direct educational decision-making and create access to higher levels of learning for all students. A school that is implementing UDL moves toward representing content, engaging students, and assessing them in multiple ways. The benefit of this approach for all students—and especially for students with disabilities like Jake—is that they can learn in whatever way best meets their needs and strengths. They can access lessons through multiple mediums rather than just a textbook. They can demonstrate their learning through written, oral, or hands-on projects. And they can engage learning from a point of interest rather than from a starting point that feels irrelevant to them. It’s not just these choices that help reduce Jake’s anxiety—it’s also the fact that he’s not singled out for an intervention. The accommodations available to him are available for all students in the school.

THE VISION: A NEW NORTH STAR FOR LEARNING

In the fall of 2009, facing low student achievement and high staff turnover, Sanborn Regional District (where D.J. Bakie is located) decided to hit the reset button with a new strategic vision for teaching and learning. Under this vision, which D.J. Bakie Elementary also adopted as its own, Jake and his peers would not just be prepared for a single test, but would instead have the full range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success. D.J. Bakie Elementary didn’t just set a new North Star for learning—it began the journey toward it by implementing three pillars to support the new system:

- **Collaboration:** Fostering a culture of collaboration in how educators think about instruction, training, and evaluation
- **Competency:** Developing clarity around specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to student success
- **Culture:** Emphasizing a culture of engagement, discipline, and wellness

¹ In this instance and throughout the rest of the text, the student’s name has been changed to protect privacy.

D.J. Bakie began establishing specific initiatives and investing in their vision. The school worked with the district to bring educators, community members, parents, and students together to establish and agree on competencies. It changed its calendar and schedule to make time for and encourage strong professional learning communities. And it took part in innovative state pilots to establish performance assessments and competency-based grading that would move away from formal written assessments and rigid grades. But as the work moved forward, a question emerged: “How does this new vision of teaching and learning become real for all students—including students with disabilities?”

THE STRATEGY: UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

The answer to this question came to one of the school’s teachers at a conference provided by the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE). Because of her commitment to creatively reaching students with special needs, D.J. Bakie’s art teacher, Maryanne Swegles, was invited to join a conference outlining the collaborative efforts of NHDOE and the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to introduce the New Hampshire UDL Academy. While in attendance, Swegles watched a speech given by Todd Rose, director of the Mind, Brain, and Education Program at Harvard. He was referencing his book, *The End of Average*. Rose, an expert on and an advocate for UDL, was discussing how the education system as a whole caters to a nonexistent average student, not to learners like Jake—serving all students more effectively demanded a more flexible, nimble approach. Rose’s message resonated with Swegles, who brought the idea back to her team at D.J. Bakie. As Assistant Principal and Building Special Education Coordinator, Ann Rutherford recalls, “Rose was speaking to the myth of average. That’s where we were and we wanted to figure how to not aim at the middle, but instead serve students like Jake more effectively.”

Upon hearing about a new professional learning opportunity facilitated through a partnership between NHDOE and CAST, the school threw its hat into the ring. With professional support from CAST, the UDL Academy would provide interested districts opportunities to test the UDL approach in classrooms in a school. The school would take what was learned and apply it schoolwide, and then the district could scale the approach district-wide. UDL’s focus on providing multiple ways to represent, express, and engage learning fit D.J. Bakie’s goal of providing different representations of competencies, enabling educators to collaborate, and meeting the different engagement needs of the district’s students—especially kids like Jake who didn’t always thrive in the traditional classroom. As D.J. Bakie principal Debora Bamforth recalls, “This just seemed to fit with our different initiatives and vision. We were in.”

D.J. BAKIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AT A GLANCE

Location:

Kingston, New Hampshire

of Students: **365**

of Students With Disabilities: **63**

Year UDL Academy Program Began
at D.J. Bakie Elementary School:
2015-2016

Other Grants/Funds
Supporting Work:

**District Support of Teacher
Leaders through stipends**

IMPLEMENTING UDL AT D.J. BAKIE ELEMENTARY

UDL isn't a curriculum you can buy and immediately begin implementing. It's a schoolwide and systemic approach to learning—a new way to make decisions that impacts every dimension of the educational experience, from curriculum to procurement, and from staff training to evaluation. Changing the school's DNA in this way takes time, intentionality, and investment. The school began to implement the UDL approach in its first-, third-, and fifth-grade classrooms with hopes of supporting and scaling the work through their strong professional learning communities. With support and a clearly articulated framework from CAST, the UDL team met and went through a six-step, iterative process of implementing UDL:

- **Step 1: Agree on a focus area.** The D.J. Bakie UDL team began by choosing the areas they would test the UDL approach on. The team chose three focus areas to work on to build student success in writing and vocabulary: independence, task initiation, and perseverance. As it turned out, these were particularly important areas of growth for students like Jake.
- **Step 2: Develop a rubric.** Once arriving at a focus area, the UDL team had to decide how to define success and progress in these areas through clear rubrics. For example, what would it mean for Jake to demonstrate proficiency in perseverance and how could he show improvement?
- **Step 3: Come up with baseline data.** Teachers then took those rubrics into the classroom and, through observations and collaborative discussions, arrived at baseline data on where Jake and his peers were on these domains.
- **Step 4: Develop three trials based on each UDL component.** The grade teams then began to introduce different strategies, class-wide accommodations, and learning approaches aimed at providing flexibility in the three areas of UDL: representation of content, engagement, and assessment. This included giving Jake and his peers greater agency over their learning tasks and different ways to represent their learning.
- **Step 5: Evaluate performance.** Teachers then evaluated how students were progressing across the three focus areas against the rubrics they had developed in the second step. Was providing Jake more opportunities to explore vocabulary through his interests in technology increasing his capacity for independent learning? Was he persevering through challenges better? Were there any trade-offs between strategies?
- **Step 6: Meet in PLC to discuss modifications.** These were questions that teachers not only evaluate against rubrics, but have begun to bring back to their collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs). Through collaborative problem-solving, the PLC team would then suggest modifications and the teachers would go back and fine-tune their approach to improve outcomes on the focus areas and strengthen the elements of the UDL approach for Jake and his peers.

The biggest benefit is that teachers adjust their thinking by looking at the curriculum obstacles to learning rather than the student being the obstacle to learning.”

– Ann Rutheford

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

This iterative process brought significant benefits for both students and teachers at D.J. Bakie, but it also came with challenges. The benefits can only be realized in a culture where staff members are willing and unafraid to take on challenges of a new mindset to teaching and learning. As principal Debora Bamforth notes, “You’ve got to build a culture of risk-taking. You have to try things and make sure your staff knows it’s OK to take risks.”

Key Benefits of UDL

- **Engagement**

All students, including those with disabilities, go from passively receiving knowledge to engaging in active choices where they come to own their learning.



- **Inclusion**

Jake and other students with disabilities don’t get singled out and separated as much for interventions. The general classroom is designed in a way that better meets their needs.

- **Confidence**

Students shed their feeling of inadequacy, better understand their own learning needs, and actively advocate for themselves. Teachers at D.J. Bakie noted that the combination of these factors significantly reduced Jake’s outbursts.

Key Challenges in Implementing UDL

- **Buy In**

UDL not only changes learning for students like Jake, but practice for his teachers. D.J. Bakie staff members suggest both working with the staff to convey why the framework is necessary, and starting small—not going too global with the approach at the very beginning.

- **Time**

Leaders need to set aside time for staff to truly understand the underlying principles, expectations, and demands of UDL and to do the work UDL demands. Without dedicated time, the UDL process can’t flourish.



- **Professional Development**

Transitioning to UDL requires a new set of skills and collaborative problem-solving strategies for teachers, school leaders, and paraprofessionals. Time and resources must be dedicated to building this capacity.

CONCLUSION

Schools like D.J. Bakie that are approaching personalized learning in earnest know that the equity and access of personalized learning are only achieved through a series of often-difficult conversations, dedicated action, and effort. But the fruits of this effort are quite real. Jake—who in fourth grade had felt despondent and who had been difficult for his teachers and peers—began to understand himself and own his learning. The disturbances went down and his learning prospects greatly improved. In the process, it was not only Jake but also his peers whose learning trajectories were transformed.