UDL and Special Education

Mindy Fattig	All right. Hello, my name is Mindy Fattig, and I'm a Senior Advisor with California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. And I'm joined today by two of my colleagues, Heather Calomese and Kevin Schaeffer. So Kevin, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself.
Kevin Schaefer	Thanks, Mindy. Kevin Schaeffer, Director of Inclusive Practices for the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project out of the El Dorado County Office of Education. Thank you for having me, and it's great to be here.
Heather Calomese	Hi there, Mindy. Hi, Kevin. Great to see you both. My name is Heather Calomese. I'm the Director of the Special Education Division at the California Department of Education. Happy to be here as well.
Mindy Fattig	So we're just here explaining Universal Design for Learning. The term UDL. We hear it all across all of our initiatives that we work with in the state and through our districts that we work with. So Kevin, what is Universal Design for Learning?
Kevin Schaefer	What a big question. So Universal Design for Learning, that's actually the question we get asked most often when we work with districts, county offices, SELPAs throughout the state. What is Universal Design for Learning and how would we go about implementing it? Universal Design for Learning is a proactive framework for the identification of barriers in our educational system. And then in the identification of those barriers, we're then able to mitigate those barriers to student learning, to student access, to student equity. Those barriers in the system that prevent students from feeling a sense of belonging, community, relationship to the system that they're being educated in. So I think that's pretty broad just in terms of a definition, but people tend to get overly fixated on the guidelines, the principles, and the checkpoints, and the guidelines. But it's really about that proactive stance to understanding learner variability. And in understanding learner variability, we can design our educational system so it's representative of the students and the families we teach.
Mindy Fattig	So, it's not a, everyone, you get X. It's really taking where the student is coming from, their needs in order to really gain knowledge for them and being able to instruct them in a way that they best learn. Would that be an accurate way to describe it?

Kevin Schaefer	Even a shorter way, one size does not fit all.
Mindy Fattig	Absolutely. And Heather, how does this fit in for students with disabilities, in your opinion?
Heather Calomese	For me, in my opinion, it fits in for students with disabilities because it puts their needs, terms front and center, right? It centers the students, and it's a highly individualized approach that educators have to take, not only in terms of utilizing that framework in terms of material presentation or how students are showing mastery, but again, it allows for individualization and also flexibility, which often meets the needs and obviously meets the needs of students and students with disabilities.
Mindy Fattig	So I know quite a few of us have experienced being classroom teachers or being in the classroom. And I know when I first heard UDL, I was like, oh my gosh, I have to do individual lesson plans for every single one of my 35 kids in my class? And for me, you know, that was 20 years ago hearing that. And so, but through my understanding of it, it's really just meeting the kids where they're at, and it's actually reducing the need, potentially, for some students for special education services. It's a proactive approach, right, Kevin? Would you agree with that?
Kevin Schaefer	I would definitely agree with that. And that's why UDL can't only be implemented through a lens of special education. It has to be that high quality tier one first instruction that incorporates accessibility for all students based on their variability, the way that they engage in the learning, the way we represent information so that it's comprehensible. So we also have different ways that we allow students to demonstrate their knowledge through action and expression. So in the implementation at that tier one universal high quality instruction, we're actually meeting the needs of students, like you said, proactively before they fall out of the instructional toolbox of the classroom they're in.
Mindy Fattig	And how would special educators, for instance, you know, how would they meet the needs of their students in a general education setting? And how does Universal Design for Learning fit into that? That's a question I get asked all the time out in the field, right? When we're implementing IEPs, and how does Universal Design for Learning in a general ed classroom fit with our IEP goals? Heather, do you have any comments on that?
Heather Calomese	I think that, you know, in terms of UDL and sort of the application in terms of alignment with IEP goals, particularly because UDL allows for flexibility for all students, including students with disabilities in terms of the learning supports

and accommodations that are often noted on a student's IEP. And so in terms of implementation in that sort of general education classroom is that the framework and the curriculum and instruction is tailored, right, for all students so that all students are accessing that curriculum via their appropriate method, mode, or medium. And so, in terms of sort of implementing, there's sort of multiple levels of access for students that are baked into the planning process and also should be noted as well in terms of some of those supports and accommodations on the student's IEP as well.

Mindy Fattig | Yes, 'I think other students' disabilities are general ed students first, right? And entitled to that least restrictive environment that we talk about, LRE. And so, Kevin, in your extensive background, you do a lot of training on Universal Design for Learning, boots on the ground with teachers and professionals and administrators. Where should classroom teachers start or where can they start, build upon the fantastic skills and teaching that they already do? You have suggestions for that?

Kevin Schaefer | Yeah, I think a place to start is to really self-reflect. Self-reflect on your teaching practices, and also self reflecting on the educational system that we design in our classroom and who it benefits and who it marginalizes. And really looking at your environment, looking at your lesson planning to ensure that we are addressing all student identities, therefore we're planning our lesson objectives, our assessments, our methods, our instructional methods, our materials to ensure all students are moving toward becoming expert learners. But I think it's that self-reflection, taking inventory on our current practices, and then expanding our knowledge of Universal Design for Learning as an access, equity and inclusive practice.

Mindy Fattig | Absolutely, and I know when I was teaching, it's so powerful if you can do that with other colleagues together, right? And talk about your practices in your classroom and learn from each other and really building upon your teaching strategies that you already do to promote that inclusivity for everybody, right? And regardless of if they have a label of meeting services for students disabilities or not, ensuring that everyone gets what they need when they need it. And so, definitely working with a colleague too. And Heather, to a point, one question I still get asked out in the field quite a bit is what about students with extensive support needs? How does UDL fit in for those students who really need more extensive supports than particularly for a student who may need less supports in special education?

Heather Calomese | Absolutely, and certainly UDL is for everyone, every student, and think about sort of the foundations of UDL going back to some of the sort of infrastructure

and architectural sort of roots that it has in terms of ensuring that everyone, regardless of status, has access to the information or sort of the spaces that they deserve access to. And so for students with more extensive support needs, I think a couple suggestions is, first and foremost, is I think for educators to really get to know their students, first and foremost. It's an opportunity to learn a lot about a student in terms of who they are as human beings and individuals. And so it may take a fair amount of trial and error. So not to be afraid to try something new in a classroom, in a setting, and sort of pushing a student outside of their comfort zone is that's where the learning occurs. I think also remaining flexible, and like I said before, really sort of figuring out how a student will sort of best access that material. I mean, to me, it's no different in some ways when you're approaching any sort of student, regardless of their need, is really sort of drilling down to help figure out how best students learn and can demonstrate mastery as well. Technology may play a key point in terms of having students with extensive support needs access. Some of the curriculum as well as also utilizing paraprofessionals or support staff in also that framework as well.

Mindy Fattig	I'm just thinking, you mentioned technology too as a support need. It's really just providing what the kids need when they need it and getting to know how you can best support that. And I think it's, in some minds, it might be a shift where it's not we're just teaching a standard and moving on to the other standard because we have so many standards to cover in a year, but it's really, do we want them just to get an A or an F or do we want them to learn the material and grow and have that growth mindset model? And how can we approach that collectively through Universal Design for Learning and have different tools and strategies? But Kevin, as you alluded to earlier, it's not here's a curriculum on UDL, you have to implement it this way, right? And so we hear that a lot. Do you wanna address how UDL fits into the existing curriculum as well as the standards that are being taught?
Kevin Schaefer	Yeah, I think Universal Design for Learning, using it as a framework how you approach the design of your lesson. You can have a curriculum in a textbook, but you can also approach that curriculum from the lens of every class, across years, is going to be different. There's gonna be different variability of learners. So you have to look at that concrete curriculum through a flexible lens and provide students the opportunity for choice. And when they have choice in how they engage in the material, how they understand the material, how they demonstrate their knowledge or implement their executive functions, they're learning about themselves. They're learning how they learn, they're learning what their needs are, and they're becoming self-advocates. So it's not about

that inflexible curriculum. It's how do you approach the curriculum through a flexible mindset. I think it's also really important to note that it can't all, UDL implementation can't all fall on the shoulders of the teachers. It's also how we prepare the system and ensure that our site administrators, our district administrators, our coaches all have a really clear understanding of Universal Design for Learning and what it looks like in the classroom to support our teachers. Otherwise, you'll get a really fragmented implementation, and you'll have pockets of excellence across your organization. So it's thinking more just from a teacher implementation instructional classroom framework as opposed to really looking at it organizationally and how we can set up the policies, the practices, and ensure that the culture and the mindset is one of UDL inclusiveness.

Mindy Fattig	Absolutely agree. And following up on that, what would you say to a first year superintendent or a first year principal? What would the steps that they take in order to have that mindset on their campus and to have that UDL integrated, not just to set aside, but integrated in everything that happens on that campus?
Kevin Schaefer	Yeah, that's a really good question because you have to have a vision. What is your vision, which takes us back to what is our district's mission, what are our core values, and then what are the behaviors that would demonstrate that we are working toward what we say we're going to do? And then once you have that vision, you're setting up the system or you're building the structures. You're looking at your policies and your practices before you ever implement it out to your teachers, your related service staff, your families. You've already set that structure up, you've built the system before you implement it, and you may implement with a core group of early adopters. And then thinking about how you scale and then how you sustain so that it becomes embedded in all of the work that you do. And it's not just an implementation in your ED services or your curriculum and instruction. It's how then do you hire your teachers? How is your HR department? How is your facilities also understanding Universal Design for Learning so that it becomes embedded in every department at the district level, everyone understands what the vision is, we've created our communication pathways out, we've implemented our accountability systems, and we've also provided the support to our teachers to ensure that it's implemented with fidelity in our classrooms. It becomes a part of every single thing we do.
Mindy Fattig	Absolutely, embedded is a key word there, right? It's not a set aside, it's not a siloed program, it's not a set of curriculum, but it's embedded in what we do and how we proactively look at our lessons and our teaching and our

environment to better support kids. And Heather, what would you say, likewise, to a beginning or even a veteran special educator on UDL and wanting to really, maybe their culture isn't there yet. How can they go about really embedding this into their teaching and their everyday teaching?

Heather Calomese | Yeah, I think for a teacher, there are plenty of places to start. Obviously there are many different resources online, and certainly there are resources across the state, not only with supporting inclusive practices, but also CCE and CDE in terms of resources that teachers can turn to to learn more about UDL and how to sort of build, if you will, that that framework within their sort of classroom or educational setting as well. And I think that for teachers, it's important to, like I said before, really tap into some of the creativity that a lot of our teachers just bring naturally to the classroom as well. And so, again, knowing those students and tapping into also their creativity as well and their sort of strengths that they already bring to the classroom is also just a good way to start. And like I said before, really see their classroom as a learning lab, if you will, to create, I think, the vibrant, not only classroom, but also school community that UDL can also foster just because of the sort of various avenues in which students are accessing the curriculum as well.

Mindy Fattig | Absolutely, and I know in UDL when I, again, was out in the field before I came to CCE, it's really providing students and embedding that wherever they need at that particular time, right? There's some, if you're a single subject in high school, they may need something different in science for accessibility and curriculum access than they do in math or they need in PE. And what I've seen, which I'm so passionate about UDL, is because the social emotional issues tend to be addressed through the UDL framework of embedding and focusing on what kids need. And so, Kevin, did you wanna talk about how social emotional learning plays into this as well? 'Cause we've talked a little bit about academics but I think it'd remiss if we don't talk about social emotional impacts that UDL can bring for students.

Kevin Schaefer | Yeah, I think when students experience an environment that's safe where they're able to be vulnerable, where they have connection, they have relationship, that's all part of Universal Design for Learning. When we talk about engagement, like students seeing themselves represented, it's when students have a disconnect that then you see the heightened behavior, negative behaviors. It's where we get disproportionality. Thinking of Universal Design for Learning as an equity framework to ensure all students have a safe place, a connected place, a sense of community, that's the foundation of

	Universal Design for Learning. And if they don't feel that in tier one, that's where we end up with that marginalization based on identity because we haven't considered the variability of students sitting in front of us, and we haven't provided the resources or built the structures systemically to support the implementation of UDL.
Mindy Fattig	Yeah, for sure, right? It's a sense of community and belonging and approaching the kids where they're at, not where we think they need to be at right now or what our preconceived idea is.
Heather Calomese	So we talked about tiers. Tiers is used a lot in education jargon for a lot of different reasons. And so tiers mean a lot of different things, depending upon the educational environment in which you are sort of situated. But generally, there are tiers, and Kevin has mentioned sort of universal tiers, a universal tier, and sort of that's the foundational tier, core instruction. This is the instruction that every student receives as a result of being a learner in that school. And so, universal tiers and tier one, as we often call them, or often call it, is a tier that, again, can alleviate the need for more intensive supports and services if there is sort of a coherent approach school-wide to ensure that there is solid sort of planning, instruction, instructional supports for all learners in a classroom setting as well.

Tier two sort of levels up in terms of the supports and services that students are receiving based upon an identified need by an educational staff. And so students may need a little bit more to address some of the concerns that have been raised by school staff. And that comes through a variety of measures. Sometimes that comes through by looking at classroom performance, test results, observations, et cetera. And so then school teams engage in a planning process that includes students and families to ensure that, number one, the need for additional supports has surfaced. And then also some planning around what would be appropriate for that student and sort of what timeframe a student would be expected to sort of address sort of that need in terms of developing that skill or demonstrating mastery in that way.

Tier three is sort of, as you can imagine, again, the most sort of intensive tier, if you will. And so tier three, I think, again, if the student's not responding, will often time need additional, more intensive supports and services. And so, again, lots of planning goes into ensuring that the student is getting the right appropriate supports to the right areas. And in terms of that multi, sort of multifaceted approach in terms of ensuring that the student is meeting their goals in progress within that tier and sort of monitoring closely.

As you can imagine, sort of the monitoring sort of ramps up for students in terms of are they making progress in terms of addressing some of their needs as well. And so the goal, obviously, is students are sort of in those various tiers. It's a fluid thing, right? And so, again, wanna dispel a myth that the tiers are just a pathway to special education. I think the tiers are meant to address student need appropriately and in a comprehensive manner that involves various school personnel, including the family as well.

Mindy Fattig

So, wanna say thank you on behalf of my colleagues, Heather Calomese and Kevin Schaeffer and myself, Mindy Fattig, and our respective state agencies for joining us in learning about UDL today.