Center on Inclusive Technology & Education Systems

Building an Inclusive Technology Ecosystem through Stakeholder Engagement & Professional Development

Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (Columbus, Indiana)

Challenge Question: How can district leaders enhance the capacity of educators and families to build an inclusive technology ecosystem that improves outcomes for every learner?

Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC), in Columbus, Indiana, was interested in developing and implementing a technology plan that supports their community-wide vision of providing deeper learning for all students. Grounded in the **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL) framework, the district aims to use technology as a tool to remove barriers to learning and address individual learning needs of each student. In order to create an inclusive ecosystem that brings together education technology (EdTech), information technology (InfoTech) and assistive technology (AT), the leadership team in BCSC has focused on enhancing the leadership practices of **1) engaging all stakeholders, including families, in collaborative activities** and **2) developing clear outcomes for professional learning.** The remainder of this document shares the story of how BCSC leadership is building capacity among diverse stakeholders to meet their goals.

BCSC: Setting the Stage

Each year, **Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation** (BCSC) submits a technology plan to the state as part of e-Rate requirements. BCSC's technology plan focuses on several key areas related to building an inclusive technology ecosystem:

- Provide access to all students—Wi-Fi in buildings, one-to-one computing in Grades 1–12 (Grades 1–8 have Chromebooks, Grades 9–12 have laptops).
- Provide ongoing professional development supporting all teachers in understanding both how to use specific AT and EdTech devices and technology more broadly for teaching and learning.
- Grounded in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework—the district does not want technology to be another barrier to learning, but rather a tool that can help remove barriers to learning.

District Facts

- Approximately 11,500 students
- 13% students on individualized education programs (IEPs); students with disabilities receive services beginning at age 3, provide prekindergarten starting at age 4
- 45% free and reduced-price lunch
- 11% English language learners; approximately 60 languages spoken in the district
- Three high schools (two comprehensive, one project based), two middle schools, one adult education program
- District is mix of small city and some rural schools

Columbus, Indiana, is 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.

In the 2001–02 academic year, the BCSC Directors of Special Education and Secondary Education came together to develop a service delivery plan to improve the learning outcomes for students with disabilities. As a result of this planning process, the district leadership team recognized the need for a district-wide vision for inclusive education. The members of the leadership team, including the Superintendent and Directors of Special Education, Elementary Education, Secondary Education and Technology identified UDL as a unifying framework. This decision was based on the realization that UDL aligned with the mission to provide deeper learning for all with a focus on developing students who are strategic, self-regulated, and reflective. The district leadership team moved forward with developing a UDL–focused technology action plan in 2003. By 2007, the UDL initiative and training opportunities had expanded to include all staff in each school within the district. 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.

How Leadership Practices Laid the Foundation for Success

Building an inclusive technology ecosystem is an ongoing process and change doesn't happen overnight. District leaders at BCSC cite a shared vision and culture of inclusive instruction as key drivers of their work. For more than 15 years, BCSC has used the UDL framework as an underpinning for their work, informing their decision-making process, with a goal of creating more inclusive and accessible learning environments for all learners. This consistent districtwide focus has been instrumental to the sustainability of programs, despite staff turnover and changes in leadership. The district ensures consistency by embedding UDL principles in every aspect of education; each staff member from district administration to classroom teachers to food service employees engages in professional learning about how to make each interaction with students and families more accessible and more inclusive.

Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

A consistent theme throughout BCSC is a focus on collaboration across classroom, school, and district levels and an expectation that all teachers (both general education and special education) work closely together. Each building has a half-time UDL facilitator available to support teacher planning as well as to provide building-level coaching and just-in-time professional development. If teachers have deeper professional learning needs, the facilitator can bring in additional district resources. At the district level, two UDL coordinators work across departments, including technology and teaching and learning/ curriculum leaders. UDL coordinators are the "blenders" working across the district to bring everyone together for planning and collaboration.

The theme of collaboration is reflected in a strategic process to engage stakeholders from the community. BCSC actively works to find ways to bring the right people to the table to work together to identify problems and issues within the system. The leadership seek to ensure that the participants have a shared vision and language to talk about challenges and solutions. District leaders noted that having representation from across the district helped them better solve problems and identify appropriate solutions.

Because the district views stakeholder engagement as a "problem-solving process", they do not focus on frequency of engagement, but rather on the value of engagement in response to specific questions, challenges, and issues. As an example of this stakeholder engagement, the district leadership shared challenges with funding for technology at the high school. They worked with a broad group of stakeholders to explore the question, "If costs have to be cut on equipment, what options are out there?" and to examine the issue from a variety of perspectives before making any investment decisions. The team engaged with the community, families, teachers, and students to better understand the kinds of devices students prefer, what teachers need, and what supports families would require, with an end goal of making sure that the device breaks down barriers to learning.

Lessons Learned

- **Engage a wide range of stakeholders.** Fostering an inclusive technology ecosystem requires that leaders from instruction, technology, special education, and the community to work together and make decisions on technology purchases, learning space design, and curriculum planning.
- **Communicate early and often.** Ongoing communication has been key to BCSC's success, through regular participation in curriculum planning, monthly tech newsletters, and a unified Learning Management System for the district that provides one-stop shopping for information and professional development.

Professional Development and Coaching

At BCSC, providing ongoing and job-embedded professional development and coaching are key elements of the strategy for building an inclusive technology ecosystem. Co-planning with leadership from special education, general education, AT, EdTech and InfoTech led to the recognition that many

of the assistive and accessible tools and supports included on student-specific IEPs and/or 504 plans could also benefit other students both with and without documented disabilities. The team crafted a professional learning plan to provide ongoing coaching and support to help all teachers understand and implement the wide range of assistive and accessible technology supports available to them, and to deepen their understanding of how AT and EdTech can fit into, and support, the district's overall vision for instruction grounded in the UDL framework.

For example, each summer BCSC holds a weeklong UDL Institute to help teachers connect their practice back to the UDL principles. This Institute provides practical workshop activities to support an environment with options that empower students to make choices about their learning. In addition to new teacher onboarding workshops (New Teacher Academy), these teachers receive ongoing training through the school year with mentors. Trainings for all teachers are held monthly, with a focus on how to use all the available tools to remove barriers to learning. Technology is presented as an option, not a requirement, and teachers are encouraged to use decision-making rubrics to ask themselves, "If I use this tool with my students, is it removing barriers for students with disabilities or creating more [barriers]?" They are encouraged to work through different options for improving access for all learners.

In the process of providing this ongoing professional development for all teachers, the role of the district **UDL facilitators** is critical to its success. About 10 years ago, the district developed a way for teachers to request education planning support. Through this process, teachers are given planning resources for learning environment design grounded in **the UDL Guidelines** that they can work through their building UDL facilitator. The facilitator helps the teacher think through the options in the learning environment under each Guideline as part of planning instruction. In addition, the facilitator provides professional development in faculty meetings, 1:1 support and coaching as needed, and acts a liaison to additional district resources for teachers. The BCSC team referred to the UDL facilitators and district UDL coordinators as "the glue that holds everything together."

District interviewees provided an example of how they work with teachers to create learning environments that support student success. When a student is not making progress, UDL facilitators move away from a focus on the students for poor grades or school-related issues–rather they encourage educators to examine how they can improve the learning environment for the student to be successful. This approach extends beyond the classroom in how the district thinks about their teachers as well—district staff are continually evaluating the environment for teacher learning to determine whether the technology available, facilities, and environment are encompassing everyone and providing the supports teachers need to succeed.

Lessons Learned

- **Design and sustain a system that supports ongoing learning for staff.** By providing continuous and comprehensive professional learning opportunities for both new and veteran teachers, BCSC facilitates a culture that enables teachers to enhance and grow their practice to best meet the needs of each student.

- **Mentor new teachers and provide ongoing support.** BCSC's professional learning system includes extensive onboarding of new teachers to ensure that all teachers in the district understand how to use UDL in their classrooms. The New Teacher Academy provides professional development and mentoring throughout the school year. Ongoing coaching supports building-level UDL facilitators as new questions and challenges arise.
- **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 and **planning tools** 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 and how will it support learning?"

Conclusion

As illustrated by BCSC's story, building an inclusive technology ecosystem that meets the needs of every learner is not simple, nor does it happen overnight. The process begins with the collaborative leadership of a diverse team of stakeholders –-administration, general education, special education, assistive technology, information technology, as well as families, students and business leaders. BCSC's leadership team developed a shared vision and clear goals for inclusive teaching and learning supported by technology. Through the implementation of high-leverage leadership practices, the district has been able to develop opportunities for collaboration, community engagement, and professional learning that support meeting those goals and creating sustainable change.

Visit BCSC's **UDL page** to find resources, planning tools and videos that showcase their implementation process.

Explore the other high-leverage leadership practices and read stories of how districts have used these practices to create and sustain inclusive technology ecosystems to improve outcomes for every learner.

- Create a community-wide vision and aligned goals.
- Develop a strategic technology implementation plan.
- Measure progress for continuous improvement.
- Engage families in collaborative activities.
- Develop clear outcomes for professional learning.
- Take ownership of infrastructure development.

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