

Universal Design for Learning

The Arc Michigan supports the concept of universal design for learning. This phrase means the design of instructional materials and activities that make the learning goals achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Universal design for learning is achieved by means of flexible curricular materials and activities that provide alternatives for students with differing abilities. These alternatives are built into the instructional design and operating systems of educational materials; they are not added on "after-the-fact." (1)

Both IDEA and NCLB recognize the right of all learners to a high-quality standards-based education. The laws preclude the development of separate educational agendas for students with disabilities and others with special needs. They also hold teachers, schools, districts, and states responsible for ensuring that these students demonstrate progress according to the same standards. (2)

Neither law adequately addresses the greatest impediment to their implementation: the curriculum itself. In most classrooms, the curriculum is disabled. It is disabled because its main components—the goals, materials, methods, and assessments—are too rigid and inflexible to meet the needs of diverse learners, especially those with disabilities. Most of the present ways to remediate the curriculum's disabilities—teacher-made workarounds and modifications, alternative placements etc.—are expensive, inefficient, and often ineffective for learning. (2)

Universal design for learning moves beyond a narrow interpretation of "least restrictive environment" to environments that include all students learning together in neighborhood schools in age-appropriate, integrated classes. "Universal" does not imply a single optimal solution for everyone. Instead, it is meant to underscore the need for multiple approaches to meet the needs of diverse learners. UDL provides a blueprint for creating flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that accommodate learner differences. (2)

In October 2005, the State Board of Education approved the Vision and Principles of Universal Education as a framework and foundation for policy development by the State Board, the Department of Education, and local and intermediate school districts.

Universal design for learning is a framework for designing curricula that enable all individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning. Universal design for learning provides rich supports for learning and reduces barriers to the curriculum while maintaining high achievement standards for all. Universal Design for Learning calls for

- *Multiple means of representation*, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge,

- *Multiple means of expression*, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know,
- *Multiple means of engagement*, to tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.(2)

A universally designed curriculum is designed from the outset to meet the needs of the greatest number of users, making costly, time-consuming, and after-the-fact changes to curriculum unnecessary. By addressing the diversity of learners at the point of curriculum development (rather than as an afterthought or retrofit), Universal Design for Learning is a framework that enables educators to develop curricula that truly "leave no child behind" by maintaining high expectations for all students while effectively meeting diverse learning needs and monitoring student progress.(2)

Universal Design for Learning supports teachers' efforts to meet the challenge of diversity by providing flexible instructional materials, techniques, and strategies that help teachers differentiate instruction to meet these varied needs. It does this by providing options for:

- Presenting information and content in different ways (the "what" of learning)
- Differentiating the ways that students can express what they know (the "how" of learning)
- Stimulating interest and motivation for learning (the "why" of learning)

Universal Design for Learning is already the policy of the Michigan Department of Education. It is fully consistent with federal law. The Arc Michigan, therefore, calls on every school district, every public school academy, every intermediate school district, and everyone who is affected directly or indirectly by the education of children in Michigan to make Universal Design for Learning a reality.

(1) Adapted from the Michigan Department of Education's Presentation of Proposed High School Graduation Requirements, November 2005.

(2) www.CAST.org

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