Los Angeles Unified School District & Unique Learning System

LAUSD – Special Education

CASE STUDY

Everyone can learn
n2y.com • info@n2y.com • 1.800.697.6575
With 30,000 teachers, 1,000 schools and 9,000 students with special needs, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) faced steep challenges when it came to implementing a mandated district-wide special education curriculum change. But, with a three-phase implementation process, good strategic planning and the right curriculum, the district was poised to move forward with an approach that provided support to teachers, and enabled students to increase their level of knowledge.

Implementation of n2y’s Unique Learning System® (ULS)—designed to provide comprehensive access to the general education curriculum for students with moderate to severe disabilities—delivered the support needed to LAUSD special education teachers who must meet a wide variety of student needs in their classrooms. Students, in turn, are getting the help and support they need, which is reflected in the positive results of the ULS assessments that monitor student achievement.

For LAUSD, the first step on the road to success was choosing the right curriculum to meet the needs of both teachers and students. With ULS, a comprehensive online curriculum especially designed for students with special needs and featuring instructional units that accommodate the diversity of those needs, student outcomes improved significantly.

To further ensure success of the rollout, the district also combined adoption of a formal policy mandating the curriculum change—a key component for smooth implementation—with a wealth of critical support for teachers.

The last step of the implementation process utilized the in-depth, multi-faceted data collection facilitated by the unique GPS in ULS to evaluate each student’s strengths and weaknesses, enabling teachers to track progress over time and develop individual education and therapeutic plans for their students.

All of these steps have put LAUSD teachers and students alike, on the road to successful learning.
Serving 600,000 students, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest school district in the nation.

Managing 30,000 teachers in more than 1,000 schools, it covers a very large portion of LA. Stretching across such a wide swatch of the city means that the district faces many challenges. The sheer numbers coupled with the diversity of the student body present an extensive range of needs—from socio-economic to academic. This reality is particularly acute in the 9,000 students with special needs.

In the Fall of 2012, the LAUSD hired Nathan Edson, a specialist in the Division of Special Education who was tasked with overseeing alternate curriculum programs. Edson’s small program and team of four support staff serves the 1,000 educators who teach the district’s students with moderate to severe disabilities. His primary responsibilities include supporting the teachers and helping them to implement the alternate curriculum. He spends a lot of his days visiting classrooms and hearing directly from the teachers.

Implementing an alternate curriculum in a school district with such size and diversity presented several challenges.

The first challenge came in finding materials that would address a broad spectrum of needs. Edson recognized that a high functioning student might be able to carry on a conversation and understand meaning from a lecture while another student might be completely non-verbal. It was important to implement a program that was differentiated for those needs.

Another challenge came in the form of logistics. Edson’s relatively small program ran into fiscal difficulties when it came to resourcing 1,000 teachers. In addition, reaching out to all those teachers with training, encouragement, and support was proving to be a huge challenge. Previous lack of communication meant that teachers were not all on the same page.
PHASE ONE
Decide on a Curriculum

Pulling from his own days as a teacher, Edson remembered what it was like to walk into the classroom with a smattering of materials. But he was always on the lookout for something comprehensive that would connect all the dots. He became exposed to n2y, a leading developer of a special education curriculum and special education materials, in his early days at LAUSD when he got a better look at the Unique Learning System (ULS). ULS is an online, dynamic, standards-based curriculum specifically designed for students with special needs. Subscribers download monthly, instructional thematic units of study. Each unit contains up to 30 special education lesson plans and downloadable materials that teachers can readily implement into classroom learning activities. All materials are created using SymbolStix graphics. The unit lesson plans define three levels of differentiated tasks to accommodate the diversity of learners with significant disabilities. Edson was impressed with the curriculum and its well-thought-out assessments. He began formally piloting it with some of his teachers and was convinced of its value right away.

PHASE TWO
Adopt a District-Wide Policy

At the end of the 2012–2013 school year, the LAUSD developed a district-wide policy that adopted ULS. Adopting a formal policy communicated that the district was serious about ULS and gave administrators leverage to enforce it. The policy mandated the ULS curriculum for all of the 1,200 LAUSD alternate curriculum classrooms. However, based on past experiences with district-wide policy changes, Edson knew that there was a big difference between requiring something and actually supporting it. In order to successfully launch ULS, Edson and his team set out to develop a plan for teacher support and training.

PHASE THREE
Successful Launch of a Support Plan

Phase Two might have looked like a victory but it was really just the beginning. Edson realized that adopting ULS would not serve the students well if the teachers didn’t know how to use it. But, given the logistical and fiscal challenges of training 1,000 teachers, he also
knew it wouldn’t be easy to get the message out and truly support his teachers. For instance, training all of the teachers at one time simply was not an option.

To help facilitate a successful launch of the ULS curriculum, Edson worked with n2y to implement several support options.

**Weekly E-Newsletter**
Edson recognized that the enormity of the district made it difficult for teachers to share best practices on a regular basis. A weekly e-newsletter changed all that. It started off simple at first but expanded as the weeks went by. His team developed things like podcasts, online videos and webinars to share with the teachers.

**Monthly Training Sessions**
Monthly training sessions were incorporated into the professional development plan for the alternate curriculum teachers. The greatest challenge to implementing this part of the plan was finding a place to hold the sessions because Edson needed a classroom full of computers. He eventually found a solution and has been able to get it done.

**Weekly Support Group Meetings**
These meetings are run by Edson and his staff and take place every Tuesday. They are designed as a dialogue, offering teachers a place to ask questions and get support.

**Supplemental Materials**
Edson makes it a priority to give his teachers the latest information from n2y and to offer tips on how to do things within the ULS platform.

**Incentives**
Edson works to motivate his teachers with various tangible enticements. For example, the LAUSD was able to get some funding to buy LCD projectors for the classrooms. In order for a teacher to receive one, Edson required them to attend a ULS training and complete assessments within the program. By pushing them a bit with an incentive, Edson hoped they would try it and see how much time and effort ULS would actually save them in the long run.
LESSONS LEARNED

The value of unifying a district-wide policy cannot be underestimated.

A formal policy communicated volumes about district goals. It said:

- the district was serious about the alternate curriculum and would give it priority
- there was need for support from the entire school district with time, effort and money
- the new ULS curriculum was chosen as the best tool for LAUSD teachers to use, not just an optional ideal
- the push for administrators to support their teachers in embracing the initiative was imperative

Implementation of a district-wide change comes in phases.

Educators and administrators need to think long term. In Edson’s words, “It’s going to take a lot of massaging.” Edson did not expect his teachers to learn everything about ULS after a one-day training.

Instead, he implemented a plan to help change the culture at LAUSD. He recognized that he was asking teachers to make a big shift away from having few requirements, to having some tangible accountability. He gave them time and space to make that shift even though it was in the context of a mandated policy. His primary goal during the first year was to give the teachers exposure and experience with the program. He expects more and more from them each year.

Support and regular communication are critical, ideally through already-established pathways.

Edson and his team used regular meetings, webinars, trainings, and a regular newsletter to keep the teachers resourced and supported throughout the process. The results have been evident as teachers and students feel better supported.
The LAUSD roll-out of a mandated, district-wide alternate curriculum change is a successful example of meeting challenges head on. Edson and his staff became convinced that the switch to the ULS curriculum needed to be made despite some of the logistical and fiscal hurdles that come with large-scale change. They employed strategic planning to anticipate those challenges and were able to offer many creative avenues of support to the teachers involved. As a result, the integration of the Unique Learning System has been a success, leaving teachers and students feeling more supported.

2017 UPDATE

The goal of the ULS curriculum ultimately is to have a positive effect on student outcomes and achievement. Test scores in LAUSD show this desired result is being met.

After implementing the ULS curriculum, the district used monthly ULS Post-Test Checkpoint Scores from the 2013–2015 school years to determine students’ levels of growth. Checkpoint Assessments are administered at the beginning and end of each month to measure students’ level of knowledge before and after instruction within pre-identified skills in ELA and Math.

With average scores over the two-year period indicating an overall 100 percent increase in accuracy for all special needs students, including those requiring the most intensive level 1 supports, implementation of the ULS curriculum has been deemed a success for LAUSD.

Enhancing Student Achievement

Unique Learning System® (ULS) is used to provide students with moderate to severe disabilities comprehensive access to the general education curriculum.

- Aligned to California State Standards for ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies for preschool through 12th grade
- Provides age-respectful and grade-level appropriate content, differentiated for personalized learning and access needs
- Provides teachers and related service staff with lesson plans and support using best practices in teaching to ensure high quality
**Improving Student Outcomes**

Unique Learning System® (ULS) assessments are used to monitor student achievement.

- Track progress toward IEP goals and grade-level academic skills through monthly checkpoints, benchmark assessments, daily performance and more
- Provide Administrators with access to class or individual student data which can be used to identify staff support needs

**Demonstrated Growth by LAUSD Students**

To determine growth, the following data and filters were used:

- Monthly ULS Post-Test Checkpoint Scores* from 2013–2015 school years
- Sample Size: All students in LAUSD that have a Post-Test Checkpoint Score for the time frame and grade selected

**Overall**

Average Post-Test Checkpoint Scores indicate an **OVERALL 11% increase in accuracy**.

---

*Checkpoint Assessments are administered at the beginning and end of each month. They assess a consistent set of pre-identified skills in ELA and Math. Checkpoints measure what students know before and after instruction.*
**Level 2 or 3 Supports**
Average Post-Test Checkpoint Scores indicate a **13.2% increase in accuracy** for students requiring **Level 2 or 3 Supports**.

![Diagram showing checkpoint score accuracy results for Level 2 or 3 Supports over the years 2013, 2014, and 2015.](image)

**Level 1 Supports**
Average Post-Test Checkpoint Scores indicate a **12.2% increase in accuracy** for students requiring **Level 1 Supports** (most intensive supports).

![Diagram showing checkpoint score accuracy results for Level 1 Supports over the years 2013, 2014, and 2015.](image)
**Year-Over-Year Comparison**

- Students begin each school year with higher average Post-Test Checkpoint scores than the previous year.
- A small yearly dip in scores is present and corresponds to the winter holidays.
- Students end each year with higher average Post-Test Checkpoint scores than the previous year.

### Year-Over-Year Elementary Grade Band (K–2)

Overall **23.1% increase** in accuracy
Year-Over-Year Intermediate Grade Band (3–5)
Overall 17% increase in accuracy

Year-Over-Year Middle School Band (6–8)
Overall 22% increase in accuracy
**Year-Over-Year High School Grade Band (9–12)**

Overall **16% increase** in accuracy

![High School Grade Band Chart](image)

**Year-Over-Year Transition Grade Band**

Overall **26% increase** in accuracy

![Transition Grade Band Chart](image)