History of the Accessible Curriculum for All Project

In 2014, an eclectic group of stakeholders from across the Sacramento region (Assistive Technology Consortium organized through the Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (CEDD) - UC Davis MIND Institute) began discussions around the concern that students with disabilities in our region were not getting access to the AT supports and services they need. From the region, we learned that the range of service delivery models for supporting AT in local districts, counties and SELPAs was broad (from “no” resources, to single individuals assigned the role of “AT Specialists” across an LEA or county, to one example of a multidisciplinary team charged with specialized AT assessment and services to a region, Placer County). Regardless of the model, delivery of services was “one student at a time” based on referral, assessment and the IEP process (an “expert driven” model). In Placer County the concern was that even with a functioning multidisciplinary team, this type of service delivery model was not scalable to meet the needs of all students with disabilities including those with high incidence disabilities (students with low incidence disabilities across the region were receiving the support of OI, VI and DHH specialists to address their more specialized AT needs).

In 2014, ongoing AT services were being provided to approximately 150-175 students in Placer County with high incidence disabilities per year, and in the prior two years new referrals for assessment had come in on approximately 50-60 new students per year. Although dramatic increases in referrals had been noted for the prior 3 years, this still accounted for less than 3% of the total special education population for the county. In a national survey students with learning disabilities (who made up approximately 47% of the special education population) accessed approximately 17% of all AT services provided even though the potential for the effectiveness of AT with these students is well-established in research [e.g. increases in reading comprehension scores with use of text-to-speech tools, benefits of graphic organizers, the use of e-books and the ability to adjust font size, word prediction for writing, speech recognition for writing]. We felt that we needed to address the service delivery model from a “scaling up” perspective (how could we handle increasing numbers of referrals, while considering that we were also only reaching a small number of potential students who could benefit from AT?).

With a limited pipeline to increase candidates to assume AT specialist roles, and fiscal limitations in sustaining an “expert-driven” model to meet all student’s needs, Placer County made the decision to shift from an “expert-driven” to a “capacity building” model that would better meet the needs of our students with high incidence disabilities. This decision was supported by our belief that technology integration is also more likely to occur in a capacity-building model. We had learned from experience that it takes more than just good assessment and tool demonstration and training to make technology use an everyday occurrence for a student with a disability. What we know from educational models for technology integration is that it goes beyond just substituting for inaccessible methods or augmenting classroom tasks; when truly integrated, technology raises possibilities for students to modify or alter learning in ways that benefit them or to create novel learning experiences that wouldn’t be possible without the technology. This can only happen when teachers are an integral part in the decision making and implementation of technology in the classroom, and we were not achieving that outcome for many of our students. In fact what we were finding when following up on students is a high rate of technology abandonment (student no longer using the tool), or tools not following the students when they transitioned to different school sites or districts (e.g. to the high school setting from the K-8 district).
Based on a successful model implemented in Montgomery County Public Schools (High Incidence Assistive Technology/HIAT - “Supporting Teachers Using Technology to Support All Students”, Link to HIAT website), we spent a year developing a broad set of training materials and implementation resources in order to begin a capacity building (training and coaching) phase in Placer County over the 2015/16 to 2016/17 school years. Over those two years, 190 site-based “UDL/AT Coaches” were developed with a combination of flipped content (assignments/modules), followed by face-to-face training, with ongoing mentoring and coaching support to LEA teams. In 2017-18, the training was opened to the region with 84 additional participants completing the training in that year, and approximately 50 additional participants have been trained in each subsequent year. The current training is designed to develop site-based UDL/AT Coaches to serve as leaders at their sites with foundational knowledge and skills around:

● The Universal Design for Learning framework;
● Using the UDL guidelines as a scaffold to design lessons that remove barriers to learning for students;
● Common challenges and barriers learners face that impact reading, writing, math, executive function, and speaking and listening;
● No-tech and digital tools available to provide options for all students as well as to address these challenges and remove barriers for some students;
● Conducting a team-based consideration of UDL and AT supports for individual students;
● When deeper dives or AT assessment is needed, using a team-based assessment process (“Student Access Planning” or SAP) that was developed specifically for the project and includes data gathering and data collection strategies;
● Documenting needs to support the SST process, 504 plans and IEPs;
● Conducting and documenting trials; and
● Developing and supporting implementation plans.

The design was intentionally aligned with some of the key recommendations from California’s Statewide Taskforce on Special Education’s report released in March of 2015 (One System: Reforming Education to Serve All Students), including: to ensure that teachers are prepared in UDL and MTSS, digital literacy and instructional technology; to ensure special educators are trained in AT and AAC; to ensure that professional learning for all educators is purposely integrated (general and special education); to ensure support for technology in implementing common core state standards, related assessments, and with AT where needed.

From a SELPA/County level perspective, the model developed and implemented across Placer County was designed to assist LEAs and sites in the development of their specific MTSS frameworks, by providing training of district and site leaders as well as access to coaching and ongoing resources from the SELPA in order to:

● Leverage Universal Design for Learning as an instructional framework that meets the needs of all learners;
● Leverage universal strategies, tools and supports that can reduce barriers to learning for a greater number of students and potentially reduce referrals for special education by providing students with what they need to be successful without needing to undergo referral, assessment and eligibility in order to receive these;
● Implement consistent processes for consideration of AT that meet the best practice guidelines identified by QIAT for AT Consideration and Assessment. Our intent was to develop an accessible process for all students (the SAP) in order to support planning and implementation for students across Tier 2;
● LEAs in Placer County continue to have access to AT assessment and services for low incidence (OI, VI, D/HoH) and high need students (e.g. intermediate/advanced level AAC device users) at Tier 3.