

# Empowering all learners

Monique Taylor-Gibbs, an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher at [A. I. duPont Middle School](#), shows off the rolling chairs in her classroom. “Students love the flexible seating,” she says. Offering them seating options can enhance their collaboration and increase opportunities for participation, she says.

Creating a flexible learning environment is one of many components of [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), an educational framework centered on empowering students by equipping them with the tools and strategies that can help them learn best. Together, teachers and students consider and tap different ways to meet goals, access materials and communicate.

“It’s about recognizing that variability is the norm,” says [Esley Newton](#), program manager of the [Adapting Curriculum and Classroom Environments for Student Success \(ACCESS\) Project](#), a collaboration between CDS and the [Delaware Department of Education](#). UDL, conceived in the 1980s by [CAST](#), encourages constant self-reflection. Teachers anticipate educational barriers and offer multiple ways around them; students identify difficulties they’re having and consider how to address them.

UDL came to A. I. duPont in spring 2017 when Principal Susan Huffman, staff from the Delaware Department of Education, Newton and ACCESS Instructional Coach [Amy Brown](#) launched the UDL initiative. After one year, says Huffman, teachers reported students were participating more in the classroom, collaborating, even initiating their own learning activities.

What started as a 10-week pilot with three English Language Arts teachers grew to a school-wide project involving almost 30 educators across multiple subjects. ACCESS conducted classroom observations, facilitated teacher self-reflection and goal setting and coached educators to improve instructional practices. ACCESS staff also began working with educators at an elementary school. Newton and Brown foresee supporting more schools in coming years.

Students aren’t the only beneficiaries. “This has had even more impact on me as a teacher than the students,” says Taylor-Gibbs.

“UDL emphasizes setting goals, self-reflection and flexibility, which are essential tools for students and educators alike,” says Brown. “They enable people to reveal their talents and abilities.”



A win-win: Flexible learning environments can benefit students *and* teachers, says Monique Taylor-Gibbs. Pictured: her students’ chairs have wheels.