

uPAR: Supporting Equity and Excellence in Wisconsin

By Eliza Anderson

uPAR™
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QUOTES

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Dr. Barbara Kelley,
Director of Student Services
Janesville School District, WI



Kathy White, Sara Vold, and Barbara Kelley, Ph.D. of Janesville School District

uPAR arrived at an auspicious time for special education in the Janesville, Wisconsin School District. Janesville's Director of Student Services, Barbara Kelley, Ph.D., was leading the development of an Equity and Excellence plan to address the achievement gap for their students with special needs. The Plan engages case managers to create goals, strategies and timelines for bringing special education students to grade level. "We studied the assessment data, and it was clear we couldn't keep doing what we'd been doing," Dr. Kelley explains.

When Dr. Kelley learned about uPAR, she saw right away how this online protocol was the perfect catalyst to help propel the plan. uPAR (the Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading) takes students through a series of reading passages under different accommodated conditions. After completing the protocol, which typically takes one class period, data shows the specific comprehension levels a student can achieve with read-aloud accommodations. "Equity and Excellence rests on the assumption that all students can learn. uPAR dramatically supports this growth mindset," emphasizes Dr. Kelley.

Janesville's Assistive Technology (AT) Specialist Kathy White first brought uPAR to the attention of the District after learning about it at a conference. For years she has utilized technology to empower students with special needs, helping to transform learning and challenge the perception of what students are capable of achieving. uPAR, White saw, produces clear data that not only removes the guesswork from choosing a particular accommodation, it goes further, finding each student's grade-level comprehension.

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Kathy White,
AT Specialist
Janesville School District, WI

“Across the grades,” White says, “we had students with reading deficits, and we had no way of proving what they could comprehend with the right supports.” Without an effective way to access the general education curriculum, they risked falling further and further behind. “uPAR would tell us if students can understand the material in their general education classrooms [with accommodations] or if students need scaffolded materials.”

With the support of Dr. Kelley and AT Specialist Sara Vold, White deployed uPAR to a group of third through twelfth graders. “And what we found was a huge gap between these students’ ability to decode on their own and their ability to understand.”

The impact was dramatic.

One student with a pre-K reading level demonstrated comprehension on par with his fourth grade peers “And his teacher cried. She was crying and saying, ‘I didn’t think he knew all that!’ It was her ah-ha moment.”

Another re-took a social studies test after his uPAR assessment. Originally he tested with a group of students read to by an adult and scored 36 %. When re-tested independently with a text reader, he scored 86 %.

Then there was the third grader who struggled to decode with pre-K skills and had always hated reading. Following uPAR he received a Bookshare account and went on to compete in the Battle of the Books. “We couldn’t download enough [books] for him,” reports Sara Vold.

uPAR’s data proved transformative for so many students and teachers, it soon played an essential role for Equity and Excellence far beyond students first identified by Kathy White. Indeed, both White and Vold believe uPAR may prevent students from receiving inappropriate labels, instruction, and even a modified curriculum. “Recently we’ve seen students about to be evaluated for intellectual disabilities,” Sara Vold says, “but then their uPAR scores show they comprehend at or above grade level!”

White and Vold also work with students with behavioral emotional disorders who have been transformed by uPAR. Their favorite example is a 10th grader who decodes independently at a third grade level, and before uPAR, had rarely attended school for more than an hour each day. “He was over-the-moon excited by his uPAR results,” White says. “uPAR demonstrated his comprehension at above tenth grade with a text reader. It made such a huge difference for him. When he saw he is very capable, he became much easier to work with.”

White set him up with a Bookshare account, Snap&Read text reading accommodation, and Co:Writer for help with his spelling. His attendance and concentration dramatically improved. “It showed his teachers he’s not being defiant on purpose—he was just telling us that he can’t do the things we were asking him to do in that way.”

To support Equity and Excellence, uPAR, Snap&Read and Co:Writer are now available on every computer and Chromebook in Janesville schools, an approach which embraces Universal Design for Learning. Equity and Excellence has also moved high school students working on general education standards out of self-contained environments and into classroom teams co-taught with a special and a general educator.

The literacy tools, combined with Janesville's one-to-one tech initiatives (a Chromebook for every student), means most students who use accessible reading and writing tools do not have to "look different" in the inclusive classroom. Increasingly all students are using technology.

And increasingly more students are using uPAR.

Thanks to the professional development provided by Kathy White and Sara Vold, more classroom teachers are deploying uPAR. "General education classroom teachers who suspect their students are not comprehending at grade level are now using uPAR to help inform the instruction and supports needed to get there," Vold reports. So far all of Janesville's 9th and 11th graders have taken uPAR.

Dr. Kelley is ecstatic. Empowered by the universal availability of technology supports, Equity and Excellence is helping teachers reach learners beyond special education. "I've had two co-teaching teams call me and say, 'This is awesome, Barb! This is great information!' "Our message across the District is *all means all*." They're all our students. Everyone can learn."



About the Author:

Eliza Anderson is passionate about assistive technology and writing respectfully to and for the disability community, with over 20 years experience writing for non-profit/human services. She currently focuses on creating and writing for program newsletters that promote assistive technology for individuals with disabilities.

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Sara Vold,
AT Specialist
Janesville School District, WI



UDL Project

Janesville, WI

912



Students Assessed with uPAR (grades 1-11)



Data shown to
to school board,
parents and
students



Teachers got data on each
student that helped provide
equitable access to the
curriculum



Decisions driven by uPAR Data

+75

Students signed up
for Bookshare

+500

Chromebooks Purchased



+audiobooks
audiobook players
& Snap&Read
Universal



+web-based
curriculum adoption



Got to grade level

4th
grader

pre-k
reading level
4th grade
w/accom.

Austin



Exceeds grade level

4th
grader

1st grade
reading level
6th grade
w/accom.

Grace



Got to grade level

11th
grader

2nd grade
reading level
11th grade
w/accom.

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