

# Using UDL Principles to Support Problem Solving within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

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## Abstract

Within an MTSS-RtI problem solving process the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in Tier 1 can reduce incorrect identification of Tier 2 instructional needs and provide an anchor for Tier 3 service generalization. This presentation will highlight how Florida is including UDL and specially designed instruction within a multi-tiered system of supports.

## Keywords

MTSS, multi-tiered system of supports, RtI, response to intervention, UDL, Universal Design for Learning, specially designed instruction.

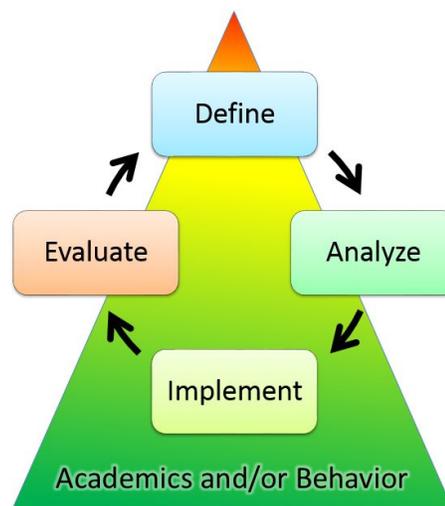
## INTRODUCTION

Florida's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) initiative works to promote system-wide practices that ensure the systemic use of a problem solving process to develop and implement, in varying intensities (i.e., Tiers), instructional and intervention resources that improve learning for all students through integrated academic and behavioral supports. Over the past three years the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) included support for assistive technology (AT), accessible educational materials (AEM), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into the MTSS initiative. Outcomes include the alignment and integration of UDL and MTSS language as well as the development of conceptual frameworks that guide the use of UDL principles across all three tiers of instruction and intervention.

## BACKGROUND

In 2006 the FDOE and the University of South Florida partnered to create the Florida Problem Solving/Response to Instruction/Intervention (PS/RtI) Project. The mission of the project evolved to a statewide focus on building the capacity of Florida's school districts to implement a Multi-tiered System of Supports that merged the efforts of the PS/RtI Project, the Florida Positive Behavior Supports Project, and the Technology and Learning Connections (TLC) Team.

The MTSS model uses three tiers to describe the level and intensity of instruction and interventions provided across a continuum of integrated academic and behavior supports. A four-step problem solving process (see Figure 1) is used to guide the provision of targeted, supplemental interventions delivered in small groups or individually at increasing levels of intensity.



Increasingly Intensive Instructional Interventions  
**Figure 1. The MTSS 4-Step Problem Solving Process**

To assist with the implementation of a data driven decision-making system that would support all students, the PS/RtI Project and TLC Team developed an alignment of UDL principles and language with the MTSS model and the instructional problem-solving process. The elements of this alignment, with a focus on Tier I and Tier III, are being provided through resources and professional development to district and school staff to assist them in reducing or eliminating barriers to engagement in the classroom. UDL practitioners can use these elements to help school based problem solving teams and MTSS teams understand how UDL can impact instructional decision making.

## TIER 1 / TIER 2 INSTRUCTION AND UDL

In Florida, the basis for the focus of instruction are the Florida Standards, which demonstrate what students are expected to learn for each curriculum area, by grade level. Analyzing the skills addressed by a standard include recognizing the implied skills students need to successfully engage in during instruction. For example, a standard may address the ability to “recognize the major common characteristics of all planets and compare/contrast the properties of inner and outer planets.” Skills that are not addressed but implied include reading, writing, organization and synthesis of information, and critical thinking. It would be a mistake to increase the intensity of instruction on planetary charac-

teristics when the lack of response to the instruction/intervention is the result of problems with an implied skill, such as reading fluency or information organization. One negative outcome could be an increased skill gap due to interventions that didn't address the actual barriers to student engagement and progress.

To help increase the effectiveness of Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, and the effectiveness of the problem solving process within an MTSS, professional development is provided to district and school staff on UDL principles and providing scaffolding and technology supports to:

- Remove or lessen the impact of high probability barriers (widespread barriers to academic engagement impacting many students).
- Ensure that instruction and instructional materials are accessible, comprehensible, and engaging for all learners.

This information is used to guide the development of lesson plans as well as the development and provision of instructional activities.

### **TIER 3 INTERVENTIONS AND UDL**

Problem solving for academic progress at Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions focuses on adjusting the intensity of instruction for *all* students and groups of students. Tier 3 shifts the focus to the instruction/intervention needs of the *individual* student. Problem solving at Tier 3 can include:

- Matching instructional practice to the needs of the student, such as elements of direct instruction and strategies for gaining meaning and relevance.
- Addressing student characteristics that impede academic engagement. Examples include self-handicapping behaviors, self-dependence, and self-discounting.
- Removing or decreasing high intensity barriers (barriers to academic engagement that are not widespread but impact specific students). Examples of high intensity barriers include problems with cognitive processes such as:
  - Sensory input – visual and auditory processing abilities
  - Information Integration – sequencing and abstracting skills
  - Memory – short and long term memory
  - Language Output – spontaneous language and demand language

Strategies and technology tools found to be effective for students receiving Tier 3 services should also be utilized in Tier 2 and Tier 1 instruction. Transforming strategies and technology tools to lower Tiers, based on what has been

found to be effective in a more intensive Tier, is critical to increasing the effectiveness of an MTSS. This type of feedback loop within the Tiers can also be used to personalize and “custom fit” the implementation of UDL to a specific classroom or learning environment.

### **SPECIALLY DESIGNED INSTRUCTION AND UDL**

In 2013, the FDOE (2011) released a document on *Specialty Designed Instruction for Students with Disabilities Within a Multi-tiered System of Supports*. The document was developed to clarify the relationship between specially designed instruction, universal instruction, and interventions within an MTSS. Universal Design for Learning is included across all Tiers of instruction as a methodology that ensures all students are engaged and supported during learning. Instructional scaffolding language should also be used alongside UDL language, to help educators bridge the concepts of accommodations for students with disabilities and scaffolds/supports provided universally to all students within all Tiers of instruction.

### **CONCLUSION**

Florida school districts use the problem solving process, response to intervention, and a multi-tiered system of supports model to ensure consistent movement toward maximizing student achievement. Universal Design for Learning language, principles, and strategies are being integrated in MTSS materials, resources, and professional development activities to help all Florida educators provide highly effective learning environments for all students.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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