

Making Connections: Aligning Practices, Efforts, Commitments and Initiatives

Florida's Seamless Educational System

“Begin with the idea that the purpose of the system is student achievement, acknowledge that student needs exist on a continuum rather than in typological groupings, and organize resources to make educational resources available in direct proportion to student need.”

-David Tilly, Deputy Director, Iowa Department of Education

The Florida Department of Education and districts throughout the state share the goal and responsibility of increasing the proficiency of all students within one seamless, efficient system (section 1008.31, Florida Statutes). An efficient and effective public education system is fundamental to Florida's ability to make significant social and economic contributions in our national and global marketplace. Evidence of a national emphasis on reforming public education to prepare students to be competitive in the 21st century global economy is found in federal legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2002 and the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** of 2004. Two themes of innovation expressed in both ESEA and IDEA are supported by the adoption and implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports: adopt a needs-based decision-making process that is student centered and informed by data, and establish multiple service and support options for students and families to account for the diverse needs among U.S. students.

Data-based decision making, the use of evidence based practices, and accountability for student performance are also embedded in important federal legislation that impacts education. Congress authorized the ESEA of 2002 to hold schools accountable for the educational outcomes of students. ESEA requires states to ensure that all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve predetermined levels of academic proficiency as determined through statewide **assessments**. Implementation of evidence based instructional practices is mandated to maximize student performance and subsequently increase the percentage of students who demonstrate proficiency on statewide assessments. Similar to ESEA, the IDEA focuses on the use of data and research-based practices in the selection of curriculum and pedagogy. Schools must make decisions regarding how to respond to these mandates using all of the available educational expertise, blending resources, and unifying efforts.

It is the position of the FDOE that implementing a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) **framework** represents a logic and set of core beliefs that support many current federal and state requirements. Implementation of an MTSS framework can be a catalyst for student learning by supporting the implementation of services to improve the academic and behavior performance of all students, including students at risk for educational failure. The framework also becomes a stimulus for adult learning through embedded professional development designed to support educator **engagement** in evidence based **practices**.

At the core of implementing an MTSS framework is the systematic use of a **data**-based problem solving and decision making process that must be integrated seamlessly into all **systems** planning, including school improvement plans, student progression plans, K-12 comprehensive

reading plans, differentiated accountability plans, Early Warning Systems, and leader and educator evaluation plans. This problem solving process applied within the multi-tiered system must be applied to all learners, which includes general education students from pre-k through graduation, students with disabilities, and advanced and gifted learners in order to elevate the efficacy of statewide improvement efforts and processes.

Important education practices, such as **Lesson Study** and Professional Learning Communities, allow teachers the opportunity to create a model for high-quality instructional practices that contribute to an MTSS framework by matching the method of **quality instruction** to students' needs. CPALMS has more information on lesson study at its **Lesson Study Support Initiative**. Other examples of how various initiatives are connected within a multi-tiered system, such as Florida's State Board of Education Strategic Plan, student progression plans, The **Florida Standards**, Florida's Part B State Performance Plan, District and School Improvement Policy, Florida Principal **Leadership Standards**, **Florida Educator Accomplished Practices**, Florida's reading and STEM initiatives, and **Universal Design for Learning** are explored in this section.

Florida State Board of Education Strategic Plan

The Mission of the State Board of Education for the 2012-2018 term is to "...increase the proficiency of all students within one seamless, efficient system, by allowing them the opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills through learning opportunities and research valued by students, parents, and communities." The goals of the **Florida State Board of Education Strategic Plan** are:

- Highest student achievement
- Seamless articulation and maximum access
- Skilled workforce and economic development
- **Quality** efficient services

The mission and goals of this plan are aligned with an MTSS **framework** in that increased proficiency of **all** students within a seamless system is achievable when the diversity of **instructional** support options is matched to the diversity of student needs. Decisions about access to this continuum of increasingly intensive **supports** are made by use of a data-based problem solving process. More specifically, implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports aligns with the Florida State Board of Education Strategic Plan in the following ways:

1. **Improving Quality of Teaching in the Education System:** PS-RtI provides teachers with the skills to identify at-risk students, to improve performance in the use of student-based **data**, and to improve performance in the delivery of evidence based **interventions**.
2. **Professional Development:** Increasing the number of **leadership** training opportunities throughout the state.
3. **Strengthening Foundation Skills:** An MTSS is an evidence based system to significantly improve the academic and behavioral skills of low-performing students.
4. **Closing the Gap:** An MTSS is an evidence based method to significantly reduce disproportionality and improve performance for minority populations, students from low socio-economic environments, and **English language learners** (ELLs).

5. **High School Graduation:** An MTSS results in the improvement in performance of students and early intervention will improve graduation rates in the future.
6. **Aligning Resources to Strategic Goals:** An MTSS has proven to be a more efficient way of delivering services and deploying personnel, resources, and time allocation.

Student Progression Plan

In the state of Florida, section 1008.25, Florida Statutes requires each school district to develop and implement a student progression plan which includes policies and procedures that facilitate student achievement in English Language Arts, science, social studies, and mathematics. The establishment of a comprehensive program for student progress must also include plans for informing parents of each student's academic progress and criteria for evaluating student performance towards reading proficiency goals. Students not achieving proficiency on the state's standardized English Language Arts or mathematics assessment must be evaluated to determine the nature of the student's difficulty, the areas of academic need, and strategies for providing academic supports to improve the student's performance. Finally, a district's student progression plan should ensure that the program of study, placement, promotion, reporting, retention, and assessment procedures are **equitable** and comprehensive to support accountability for all students.

Ensuring a common methodology for using **data** to guide instructional planning and decision making is an essential feature of MTSS. When students are identified as "off track" or "at risk" for reaching their learning proficiency goals, decisions must be made to help those students accelerate their learning and reach **learning goals**. Districts adopting an MTSS **framework** in a context of student progression planning recognize that variability of performance needs exists among students. In turn, variability among educators' professional development & support needs also exist. A needs based delivery of supports helps all students reach their learning proficiency goals while also balancing the limited resources with which a district can help all students be successful. A data-based problem solving process is the cornerstone of MTSS and is the process used to identify barriers to student success, aid in the development of instruction and intervention supports to remove those barriers, and devise the method to evaluate effectiveness of instruction and supports provided. While state law provides the accountability expectations for ensuring all students reach learning goals, a multi-tiered system of supports provides the framework for designing and allocating the matched supports each student needs to reach proficiency goals.

The Florida Standards

The Florida State Board of Education approved current math and language arts **standards** on February 18, 2014. The revised standards reflect public input for recommended changes to the originally adopted Common Core State Standards (July, 2010). The **Florida Standards** of 2014 began full implementation across all grades in the 2014-2015 school year.

In a multi-tiered system, the state standards represent what all students should know, understand, and be able to do in order to progress through the K-12 public school system. How those students reach those expectations, and what resources are used to help them reach those expectations, are the decisions that educators are faced with when attempting to ensure every student is successful. Determining who needs additional **supports**, what types of supports, and for how long in order to meet standards is facilitated by use of a data-based problem-solving process. Some students will require supplemental **instruction** or intervention supports and a few may require intensive instruction or intervention supports in order to reach grade level proficiency goals. In short, the

Florida Standards represent the finish line, while the tiered options for student supports represents the differential learning paths that students might follow to reach the finish line.

Florida’s Part B State Performance Plan 2005-2013

Florida’s **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, Part B, State Performance Plan (SPP), consists of 17 Performance **Indicators** across three primary targets: (1) free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), (2) disproportionality, and (3) effective supervision of Part B services. The FDOE has a responsibility to support districts in achieving the performance targets for each indicator and for reporting progress annually to the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Access Florida’s SPP and Annual Performance Report on the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services website at <http://www.fldoe.org/ese/>.

Implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports assists districts in addressing applicable SPP indicators in primarily two ways:

- **Problem Solving:** The focus of this framework is to provide districts and schools with a blueprint for problem solving that addresses district, school, and student-level problems. The entire focus is on **systems** change and the process of implementing reform efforts that improve student performance, school **climate**, and family participation.
- **Program Evaluation:** Schools and districts are able to use **data** resulting from multi-tiered system of supports implementation to identify areas that require targeted assistance and to document the effects of **interventions** implemented to address those areas. In particular, this framework is able to provide assistance to districts and schools in addressing disproportionality in the identification of students with disabilities, their educational placements, their proficiency rates, and discipline.

The **quality** implementation of multi-tiered system of supports directly impacts the student outcomes represented in the SPP indicators.

Differentiated Accountability State System of School Improvement

At the heart of an MTSS **framework** is the logic that differential needs exist, and therefore differential **supports** should be provided matched to those needs. The state system for School Improvement shares this same logic. Pursuant to Rule 6A-1.099811, Florida Administrative Code, *Differentiated Accountability State System of School Improvement*, schools demonstrating insufficient student outcomes may be provided differential supports in order to help “turn around” those schools and improve student outcomes. An important feature of this law is recognition that school improvement success hinges on the success of district changes and improvements in operations designed to ensure school practices are sustainable and evaluated for effectiveness in producing desired student outcomes. The process of “turning-around” a school follows a similar process as problem solving: Identify the discrepancy between current performance and desired performance (e.g., school grade of F to A), identify barriers preventing goal attainment (e.g., high quality instruction), develop a plan for reducing barriers (e.g., coaching, PD, instructional planning practices, etc.), and evaluate success of school-based intervention to reach desired goal. MTSS aligns with School Improvement policy in that both share a student centered focus in which all system variables are aligned and organized to support effective student instruction and needs based supports at the classroom level.

Florida Principal Leadership Standards

Rule 6A-5.080, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.) defines standards for its principals and school administrators: “The **Standards** are set forth in rule as Florida’s core expectations for effective school administrators. The Standards are based on **contemporary research** on multi-dimensional school **leadership**, and represent skill sets and knowledge bases needed in effective schools. The Standards form the foundation for school leader **evaluations** and professional development systems, school leadership preparation programs, and educator certification requirements.” The following standards represent Florida’s expectations of performance for school principals:

- Student Achievement
 - Standard 1: Student Learning Results
 - Standard 2: Student Learning as a Priority
- Instructional Leadership
 - Standard 3: Instructional Plan Implementation
 - Standard 4: Faculty Development
 - Standard 5: Learning Environment
- Organizational Leadership
 - Standard 6: Decision Making
 - Standard 7: Leadership Development
 - Standard 8: School **Management**
 - Standard 9: Communication
- Professional and Ethical Behavior
 - Standard 10: Professional and Ethical Behavior

The Principal Leadership Standards Align within an MTSS

- **Standards 1 and 2**
 - These standards align with an MTSS in that student performance should drive all decisions about **instruction** and student support practices. Principals are expected to ensure student **learning goals** are based on the state’s adopted standards and ensure a professional environment in which faculty and staff work as a “system” to maintain a school **climate** that supports student engagement and learning by continuously monitoring student performance and closing learning gaps.
- **Standard 3**
 - This standard reflects a core element of MTSS in that principals are expected to ensure alignment of state standards, effective instructional practices, student learning needs, and the assessments used to monitor student learning are up to standards. An effective Tier 1 instructional system prevents student learning concerns and behavior problems. Moreover, the expectations within Standard 3 reflect the MTSS concepts of fidelity of effective **instruction**, evaluation of instructional effectiveness, and prioritization for Tier 1 improvements when insufficient outcomes are evident.
- **Standards 4 and 5**
 - The standards of Faculty Development and Learning Environment contribute to Instructional Plan Implementation in that an effective leader will develop and support an effective faculty and staff by linking student performance with system-

wide strategic objectives and school improvement strategies. A key feature of Standard 5 is that principals will establish an environment that “improves learning for all of Florida’s diverse student population.” Within this professional learning environment standard are the MTSS concepts of data-driven professional development, differentiated educator supports, and **systems coaching** in that all of these concepts are applied to implementation of evidence based practices within school settings.

- **Standard 6**
 - This standard is a critical role within an MTSS **framework** in that principals are expected to use **data** within a “decision making process” to develop solutions to problems affecting student and teacher proficiency and to evaluate effectiveness of actions to improve outcomes.
- **Standards 7, 8, and 9**
 - Across Standards 7 through 9 exists recognition of the important role principals have in building the capacity of all educators to implement and sustain effective practices in a system where relationships are dynamic, changes in routines and faculty assignments can occur, and changes in student needs fluctuate. These standards also embody the MTSS concepts of effective leadership and systems coaching to implement a **continuous improvement culture** and way of work.
- **Standard 10**
 - Completing the list of principal standards is the overarching importance that principals act as systems change problem solvers. Pursuit of highest student outcomes in the State of Florida drives school improvement planning. Implementation of school improvement plans, just as with student instructional plans, will encounter barriers to the **fidelity** of their use and attainment of desired outcomes. When barriers arise, Standard 10 highlights the critical role of the principal to maintain a clear focus on the school vision and lead problem solving activities designed to address implementation barriers to their improvement plans.

Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAPs)

The **FEAPs** represent the core **standards** for effective educators. They represent the foundation for the State of Florida’s teacher preparation programs, educator certification requirements, and school district **instructional** support appraisal systems. These educator standards are based upon 3 essential principles:

1. The effective educator creates a culture of high expectations for all students by promoting the importance of education and each student’s capacity for academic achievement.
2. The effective educator demonstrates deep and comprehensive knowledge of the subject taught.
3. The effective educator exemplifies the standards of the progression.

The **Educator Accomplished Practices** are organized into two broad categories encompassing 6 standards of practice:

- Quality of Instruction
 - Instructional Design & Lesson Planning
 - The **Learning Environment**
 - Instructional Delivery & Facilitation

- **Assessment**
- **Continuous Improvement**, Responsibility, and Ethics
 - Continuous Professional Improvement
 - Professional Responsibility and Ethical Conduct

Adoption and implementation of MTSS across a school district supports educators' demonstration of the FEAPs in that the skills required of effective educators are the same skills necessary for supporting all students to reach the highest **learning goals**. The FEAPs align with MTSS through the concepts of data-based decision making, needs-based instructional design and delivery, homeschool communication and partnerships, the reciprocal relationship between classroom management and instructional design, and the role of educator as problem solver when barriers to student growth are evident. Differentiation of instruction, instructional design and modification, and analysis of student progress in response to instructional delivery content and methods all represent the intersection of a data-based decision making process (i.e., problem solving process) and a three-tiered service delivery system. Having a clear understanding of what educators should know, understand, and be able to do to help students reach their highest learning outcomes allows all other education professionals to identify their roles and responsibilities to implement and maintain effective educator practices in an MTSS **framework**.

Florida's K-12 Comprehensive Research-Based Reading Plan

Every year, school districts must submit a **K-12 Comprehensive Reading Plan** for the specific use of the research-based reading **instruction** allocation for review and approval by Just Read, Florida! The requirements of this state policy share many characteristics with the implementation of MTSS. This policy requires that decisions about student instruction and **supports** in the area of reading and literacy be driven by **data**, that a sustainable coaching model be provided to educators with ongoing professional development, and that all educators be required to implement a **differentiated instructional** method based on student need. Moreover, districts are required to provide differentiated and appropriately matched intensity of supports to educators based on both student data and educator proficiency progress data. Within an MTSS **framework**, Tier 1 is most critical to ensuring that problems are prevented or otherwise addressed as early as identified. The model advocated by the Florida Department of Education for the instruction of reading and literacy to students recognizes the critical role of effective universal instruction and supports, the need for differential options to match the diversity of student needs, and the importance of ongoing professional development and data-based decision making to continuously monitor and improve student outcomes.

A multi-tiered system supports Florida's reading initiatives by:

1. Collaborating with **Just Read, Florida! (JRF)** and the **Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR)** to increase the number of schools using problem solving and data-based decision making at early grades to prevent reading failure.
2. Including data-based problem solving components in district K–12 Comprehensive Reading Plans.
3. Increasing the number of early grade **interventions** to facilitate early identification and intervention for students at risk for reading failure.
4. Decreasing the percent of students in need of special education services through the use of systematic problem solving as a prevention and early intervention process rather than one that requires the student to fall behind prior to receiving assistance.

While effective instruction is a hallmark of an effective educator, knowledge and expertise in specific content areas is foundational. The State of Florida is fortunate to have many education partners who provide **leadership**, training, and technical assistance to educators at the state, district, and/or school levels to implement evidence based practices specific to literacy, **math, science, STEM**, and **behavior education** in our K-12 public schools. Implementation of MTSS in all schools builds upon existing federal policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in that evidence based practice, programs, and interventions are necessary to ensure that all students are provided the highest **quality** education. When students struggle to reach their **learning goals**, it is therefore incumbent upon all educators to ensure they have the most current knowledge from research and the field about practices that have a proven success at addressing student learning or behavior problems. When a team of educators engage in problem solving about universal, supplemental, or intensive needs that students are demonstrating, content experts are necessary to ensure (1) the selected instruction or intervention option is evidence based, and (2) the selected instruction or intervention option sufficiently matches the student(s) needs. These and other agencies in the state are equipped to provide resources to support ongoing professional development to educators to ensure student needs are best supported.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a “framework for designing curricula that enable all individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning. UDL provides rich **supports** for learning and reduces barriers to the curriculum while maintaining high achievement **standards** for all” (**Center for Applied Special Technology**). **Universal Design** is found in federal legislation such as the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** of 2004 and the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

The National Center on Universal Design for Learning has developed three evidence-based UDL principles for educators.

- **Principle I** — Provide Multiple Means of Representation (the “what” of learning). Present information and content in a variety of media. **Instructional** materials should be digital and flexible to support adjustments by the user (e.g. enlarging the text, converting text to speech, etc.). Curriculum content should be provided in text, graphic illustrations with descriptions, charts, captioned videos, and immersive formats.
- **Principle II** — Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the “how” of learning). Learners differ in the ways that they can navigate a learning environment and express what they know. Options in how students express what they know should be provided. Examples include choices in writing, presentations, story-telling, and video production. Interactive, digital instructional materials can provide choices in how students navigate curriculum content and move quickly between target information, background information, glossaries, etc.
- **Principle III** — Provide Multiple Means of Engagement (the “why” of learning). Affect represents a crucial element to learning, and learners differ markedly in the ways in which they can be engaged or motivated to learn. Learning skills and strategies require sustained attention and effort. Increasing relevance can help students sustain the effort and concentration needed to build self-regulation and self-determination skills.

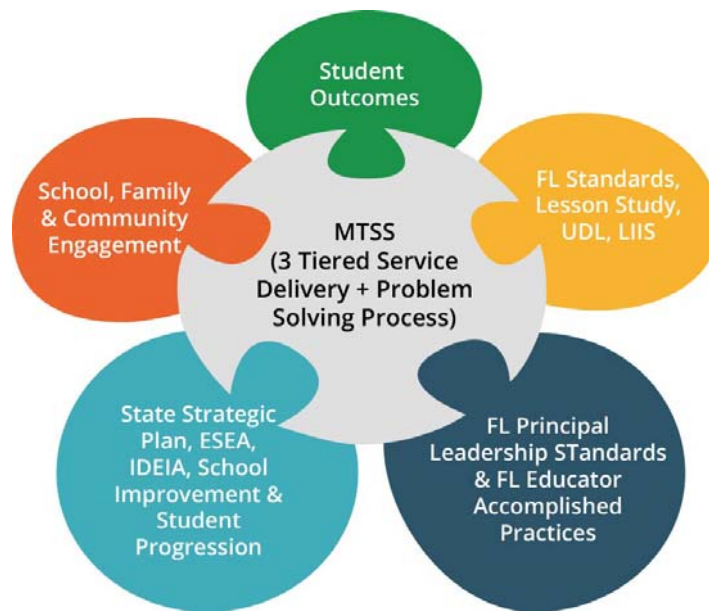
During the planning process for addressing **learning goals**, UDL principles (options in representation, expression, and **engagement**) should be an integral part of the lesson plans and should be made available to all students in core instruction. Technology-rich **learning environments** with digital instructional materials enhance the implementation of UDL. Within a problem solving framework, instruction and **assessments** based on UDL principles should be provided during any intensive **interventions** to identify focused, learner specific UDL supports and instructional scaffolds needed for rapid engagement, academic success, and increased learner independence (release of responsibility). The resulting information on effective UDL supports and instructional scaffolds of these UDL assessments should then be incorporated into Tier I to support these students in that setting as well as provide a focused and customized **data**-driven implementation of UDL in that school.

Integrating Student Improvement Initiatives While Implementing MTSS

Over the past several years, important lessons learned from Florida’s Statewide Problem Solving and Response to Intervention Project and Florida’s Positive Behavior Support Project reveal a need to make connections and blend resources throughout a process of comprehensive **systems** change. With all the various federal, state, and district demands that exist targeting increased student outcomes and performance, state, districts, and school leaders can no longer attempt to implement or comply with each demand in isolation of the others. As schools and districts confront the challenges involved in building **consensus**, making connections, aligning efforts, developing an **infrastructure**, and responding to legislative requirements among all the various educational policies and procedures, it is essential that a comprehensive **framework** be used to guide the integrated implementation of all student/school improvement initiatives in a way that meets compliance with policy requirements, but also maximizes efficiency of operations and use of resources to (1) implement those policies and procedures with **fidelity**, and (2) evaluate effectiveness of those policies and procedures to produce desired student outcomes. The crucial point to understand is that successful implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports encompasses all general education initiatives that impact all students.

Therefore, leaders must help all educators acknowledge the need for change and embrace a shared purpose of ensuring all students learn at high levels and take collective responsibility for achieving this shared purpose. This represents a shift from operating within departmental silos to depending on blended expertise and resources. Download the Matrix for Making Connections (<http://fcim9.fcim.org/gtips/content/chapter2/MatrixforMakingConnections.pdf>), which district- and school-based **leadership** teams can use to blend expertise and resources across state-, district-, and school-level initiatives.

Guiding Tools for Instructional Problem Solving — Revised (GTIPS-R)



MTSS (which is a 3-Tiered Service Delivery + Problem Solving Process) integrates the following areas:

- Student Outcomes
- School, Family, & Community Engagement
- FL Standards, Lesson Study, UDL, LIIS
- FL Principal Leadership Standards & FL Educator Accomplished Practices
- State Strategic Plan, ESEA, IDEIA, School Improvement, & Student Progression