Braiding MTSS & UDL

A Practice Profile

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Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are two frameworks designed to build capacity by welcoming and educating all students. While MTSS and UDL may present with similar aims, there are distinct differences between the two frameworks' underlying beliefs, principles and practices. The strengths of each framework, though, may provide a powerful guide for a school or district to design a coherent education system.

This Practice Profile, a listing of key components and descriptions of the components when fully implemented, offers a guide for educators interested in exploring the use of these two frameworks in a unified system. Twelve components are organized in four categories:

- Beliefs and Principles for Developing Expert Learners
- Standards and Curriculum for Developing Expert Learners
- Decisions for Developing Expert Learners
- Implementation of a Coherent System of Equity and Inclusion

This document is not an exhaustive review or description of all aspects of either framework. This document is written with an assumption that readers and those who may want to use the tool bring, at least, an intermediate understanding of MTSS and UDL. Finally, this document is limited by input from only a handful of experts and stakeholders. It is not an exhaustive review or teaching resource for either framework.

Purpose:

The purpose of this tool is twofold: 1) provide education leaders with a thought piece to explore the integration of MTSS and UDL and 2) provide school and district leaders with a tool to take stock of current aspects of their local system that may already be in place and identify some next steps for their efforts to implement and integrate MTSS and UDL.

How to use this Practice Profile:

It is recommended that a person with expertise in both MTSS and UDL lead or facilitate the use of this tool with school/district leaders. The column headers will guide the reader to make sense of the content. The left column presents each of the Essential Components with a broad definition. The next column to the right presents a "look for" description of the component in full implementation, articulating specific observable aspects of the Component in practice. The last two columns, Developing and Beginning, suggest criteria for discerning a milestone in the implementation process (from Beginning to Developing to Full Implementation). This tool is intended primarily as a way to focus the discussion of leaders throughout implementation, noting progress overtime. The authors ask users to cite this document. See citation on the cover and last page.

An Overview of MTSS and UDL:

MTSS: MTSS evolved from national efforts applying problem-solving, prevention oriented, and data-based models like Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports and Response-to-Intervention. (For example, see www.swiftschools.org) The system is used to deliver a continuum of supports (i.e., tiers) for all content areas (e.g., academics, behavior, social-emotional) and to integrate and align educational service delivery approaches (e.g., general and special education, Title 1, English Learning) to address all aspects of a learner's needs.

MTSS begins with delivery of high quality, evidence-based curriculum and instruction as the base. Additional intervention and supports are layered to enhance the learning outcomes for students. A learner's need for support (e.g., to help achieve the learning standards, to help challenge beyond the learning standards), is determined by data collected through universal screening, content area assessments and progress monitoring. Universal screening includes administration of brief assessments to identify or predict students who may be at risk for poor learning outcomes. Screening is intended to be conducted with all students at a grade level. Progress monitoring includes periodic brief assessments of student performance, to quantify a rate of improvement or indicate how students are responding to the instruction, intervention and supports. Screening and monitoring data become central sources to inform decisions about instruction, intervention and supports for students (e.g., when to continue, switch, adjust or discontinue instruction).

Decisions regarding MTSS implementation and student-level supports are made by teams of educators analyzing and reflecting on data. Educator teams use the data to continually improve the curriculum and instruction provided for all students – and to determine, deliver and monitor the focus and intensity (i.e., tiers) of instruction for students.

UDL: Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a collection of researched, best practices from education, psychology, and the neurosciences and organized into a framework most often represented by The UDL Guidelines. The goal of UDL is to provide learners the opportunities necessary so they can become motivated, purposeful, knowledgeable, resourceful, strategic, and goal-directed learners; skills necessary throughout life.

The UDL framework guides educators to think about instructional design, environment design, and how they provide instruction. Subsequent design choices are driven by the UDL founding idea that barriers to learning lie in the curriculum, not in the learners. This idea is supported by the concept of variability, which comes from the neurosciences. By understanding variability, we understand that every human (a) learns differently from one another and, (b) all learning depends on the context; therefore, we must shift our work to creating environments and curriculum that is flexible so as to meet the needs of all learners. Understanding variability also erodes the old beliefs that learners have a certain style of learning, that IQ is the determining factor of acquiring knowledge, and that standardized assessment provides the only true sample of a learner's abilities.

In addition, use of the UDL framework is guided by the educators' understanding, design, and application of the non-negotiable concepts of accessibility, flexibility, goals, rigor, and choice. These concepts are woven throughout the framework, but the UDL framework is only fully implemented when these concepts are practiced and embedded within the lesson and learning environment.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) have distinct components that, when combined, can guide a school or district to design a coherent system of equity and inclusion. Facilitated use of this practice profile guides educators through a process where essential components necessary to the full implementation of MTSS and UDL are discussed. Upon completion, the organization's status of implementation is calculated providing a reference for reflection, planning and noting progress.

School/District: _____ Date: _____ Facilitator: _____

BELIEFS and PRINCIPLES for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
1	**BELIEFS:** The lens through which we look at students and education is understood and agreed upon.	1. Educators and leaders have shared understanding with core beliefs about students and education. 2. Educators and leaders have agreement with core beliefs about students and education. 3. Beliefs include **all of the following:** • All students can learn and achieve to high standards. • All students can become expert learners. • All students deserve to experience equity and inclusion in their local or neighborhood school. • Social emotional well-being is essential for academic learning. • All students are lifelong learners[1]. • Learners and their educators are all highly variable and require flexible supports. • Collaboration among educators across disciplines and roles is essential.	Two criteria met.	One criteria met.

[1] See for example short video by CAST about learning environments.

BELIEFS and PRINCIPLES for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
2	**PRINCIPLES:** How we approach teaching and learning is understood and agreed upon.	1. Educators and leaders have shared understanding with core principles, articulating how they approach teaching and learning. 2. Educators and leaders have agreement with core principles, articulating how they approach teaching and learning. 3. Principles include all of the following: • Educational systems and learner environment design must be flexible enough to respond to the variability experienced by each learner. • Educators design learning environments and supports that guide learners toward the six characteristics of expert learning. (See Component #5.) • Decision making is informed by data and guided by expert learner characteristics. • Educators participate in collaborative teams to address important questions. • Universal instruction is designed to include all learners and utilizes high-leverage, high impact instructional approaches. • Educators prepare for and address systematic variability as a way of preventing failure and promoting learner success. • All educators and staff are responsible for all learners, regardless of discipline or role.	Two criteria met.	One criteria met.

STANDARDS, CURRICULUM, and CONTEXTS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
3	**STANDARDS:** Prioritized Standards, from the total list of grade-specific and course-specific standards within each content area, are identified using objective selection criteria and used throughout the local system.	1. The process used to identify Prioritized and Supporting Standards[2] includes objective selection criteria (e.g., endurance, essentiality, leverage, readiness) and involves collaboration among general and specialized educators across K-12. 2. Educators and staff are knowledgeable and fluent with the local school/district Prioritized and Supporting Standards. 3. The Prioritized and Supporting Standards: a) are addressed through a coherent, curriculum; b) focus in-depth instruction and assessment across academics, behavior, and social emotional learning; and c) are used throughout the school/district.	Two criteria met.	One criteria met.
4	**CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT:** Goals, methods, materials and assessments are aligned with the local learning priorities and are designed and delivered applying UDL Guidelines across content areas (academics, behavior, social emotional learning).	A coherent curriculum[3]: 1. is well organized and purposefully designed to facilitate learning; 2. is free of academic gaps and needless repetitions; 3. is aligned across lessons, courses, subject areas, and grade levels; 4. is articulated as the goals, methods, materials, and assessments; and 5. prioritizes instructional approaches which have been demonstrated to have high-effect on learning (e.g., self-reported grades, direct instruction).	Two criteria met.	One criteria met.

[2] Blog by Edweek about Priority Standards.
[3] Definition of coherent curriculum by The Glossary of Education Reform.

STANDARDS, CURRICULUM, and CONTEXTS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
5	**ENVIRONMENT:** The teaching space or location (in person or remote) is designed to promote access and partnerships.	1. Educators pre-design the environment to promote physical, affective, and cognitive access to the curriculum (e.g., units/ lessons) and the partnerships among learners and educators. 2. Educators reflect on learner experiences and continue to examine the environment for barriers through reflective structures (e.g., instructional coaching, improvement cycles, or reflective practice).	One criteria met.	No criteria met.
6	**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE:** The school community commits to developing cultural competence of educators and learners.	1. The school community attends to the cultural and historical responsiveness in all aspects of education. 2. Educators design and deliver curriculum to develop learners' identities and to engage learners' thinking about power, equity, and the disruption of oppression[4] particularly in relation to issues of ability, race, poverty, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and language.	One criteria met.	No criteria met.

[4] Muhammad, G. (2020) Cultivating Genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy. Scholastic Inc. NY, NY.

DECISIONS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
7	**CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPERT LEARNERS:** Educators understand and are able to apply the frame of an "expert learner" in instructional decision making.	1. Educators understand the 6 characteristics of expert learners. 2. Educators reflect on the 6 characteristics and apply findings to instructional decision making. For example, educators address how learners are growing and demonstrating each set of characteristics: Purposeful & Motivated, Resourceful & Knowledgeable, Strategic and Goal Directed. 3. Leaders at the school/district arena and educators at the class/grade arena reflect on systematic variability and apply findings for continuous improvement using prompts such as: What systematic variability is being addressed to support learners? How might this be enhanced? How are systematic variability and individual variability being addressed with a system-wide approach?	Two criteria met.	One criteria met.

DECISIONS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
8	**SCREENING:** School/ District use data to describe, anticipate, and address systematic learner variability (e.g., barriers learning, continuum of supports to promote expert learners)	1. Universal screening procedures (inclusive of but not limited to standardized screening assessments) are conducted for all learners during the 3rd- 4th weeks of school, 3x/year, and include formal & dynamic assessments, learner self-reports, and use of traditional universal screeners where appropriate. 2. As an outcome of universal screening procedures, educators gain an understanding of students' Expert Learner status across Academics, Behavior, and Social Emotional Learning. 3. If learners do not demonstrate expected skills or characteristics during screening events, there is a procedure to consider other ways learners can demonstrate knowledge and provide additional and different opportunities for learners to do so (e.g., teachers have a watch list or a re-test list). 4. Summaries of levels of risk[5] within and across grade levels are created from universal screening, analyzed by teams, shared across the school community, and used to develop plans to adjust and respond to needs. 5. Procedures are in place to ensure integrity (learners are assessed, scores are accurate, decisions follow agreed upon protocols to determine level of risk).	Three criteria met.	Two or fewer criteria met.

[5] Risk is a dynamic construct as is learner variability. We intend to provide preventative supports that will assist learners striving to reach a standard and learners requiring challenge to extend beyond a standard.

DECISIONS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
9a	**MATCHING:** School personnel ensure learners are matched to supports that address their specific needs, as identified using data and diagnostic assessment where appropriate.	Matching learners to supports is completed using a decision-making protocol[6]: 1. to identify type and focus of those supports which align with the UDL framework; 2. to identify where and how the supports will be provided (e.g., group intervention, embedded support within class routines, etc.); 3. as identified by data, including reflection on indicators of learner strengths and needs in becoming an Expert Learner; and, 4. with consideration for the integrated nature of academic, behavior, and social-emotional factors. 5. Intensified supports are informed by diagnostic and function-based assessment data with attention to the most expert providers working with learners with the greatest needs.	Three criteria met.	Two or fewer criteria met.
9b	**MATCHING:** Learners select the supports they believe are necessary to meet the identified goal(s).	1. Educators consistently scaffold and encourage learners to discover their "best matched supports" through learner voice and choice. Using learner focused tools like checklists, rubrics, and mind-maps, learners organize information about themselves and are empowered to make decisions about the type and nature of supports. 2. Educators develop learners' understanding of their goals and how learners will know that the supports are a good match (i.e., developing learner abilities to self-assess, choose supports, try them out, and determine if, in fact, the supports helped the learner meet the goal).	One criteria met.	No criteria met.

[6] Information about data-based decision making by Center on PBIS.

DECISIONS for DEVELOPING EXPERT LEARNERS				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
10	**MONITORING:** School personnel engage in ongoing and frequent "reflection cycles" or progress monitoring using grade level assessments for academics, function-based assessments for behavior and indicators of expert learner characteristics.	Monitoring is completed: 1. at least monthly for all learners and weekly for learners receiving more intensified supports and 2. procedures are in place to ensure integrity (e.g., appropriate learners are assessed, scores are accurate, etc.) and alignment with the UDL framework.	One criteria met.	No criteria met.
11	**ADJUSTING AND PROBLEM SOLVING:** When results from a monitoring "reflection cycle" suggest that a learner (or group of learners) is not making expected progress, then school personnel conduct a "deeper dive" to adjust support, problem-solve, and develop a different plan for support.	When a learner is not responding sufficiently to supports, educators convene for a "deeper dive" to adjust the supports: 1. using a decision-making and problem-solving protocol, 2. basing decisions on learner response, as identified by data, 3. considering the 6 Expert Learner characteristics, and 4. integrating across Academics, Behavior and Social Emotional Learning. The resulting plans: 1. increase, decrease, or refine the focus of support; and 2. align strategies to learner strengths and needs.	Four criteria met.	Three or fewer criteria met.

IMPLEMENTATION of a COHERENT SYSTEM OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
12	**LEADING IMPLEMENTATION:** School and district teams lead and monitor implementation of the whole system, including alignment of initiatives and communication with stakeholders (school boards, administrators, faculty, staff, families and community).	Site-based school and district leadership teams lead, monitor and continually improve implementation of UDL/MTSS: 1. using an agreed upon performance measure (fidelity tool) that includes the essential components of UDL/MTSS, 2. using agreed upon implementation strategies, 3. actively involving key stakeholders (including family and community members) in decisions and promote two-way, open communication, and 4. attending to the alignment of initiatives to promote one, coherent and comprehensive system of support.	Three criteria met.	Two or fewer criteria met.
13	**PLANNING & MONITORING TEAMS:** Grade level and specialized educators work in teams to plan instruction, intervention and supports across content areas and levels of need, to monitor learner progress, and to adjust strategies based on learner response.	Grade level or other teaming structures: 1. have both general and specialized educators, 2. meet at least twice a month, 3. monitor progress and plan for instruction, interventions, and supports that address systematic and individual learner variability, and 4. include family and external collaborators, as appropriate for Intensified Support (e.g., wraparound).	Three criteria met.	Two or fewer criteria met.

IMPLEMENTATION of a COHERENT SYSTEM OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION				
ESSENTIAL COMPONENT		**FULL IMPLEMENTATION = 1.0**	**DEVELOPING = .5**	**BEGINNING = 0**
14	**LEVERAGING UDL/ MTSS FOR EQUITY & INCLUSION:** School and district leaders design the school-wide system to foster equity and inclusion.	1. The design and implementation of UDL/MTSS ensures all historically marginalized learners, including learners associated with IEPs, 504s, English Learner, Title 1, and Gifted and Talented participate in the grade level class(es) of their grade level peers. 2. The design and implementation of UDL/MTSS attends to culture and climate among learners and staff, actively fostering and experiencing equity and inclusion.	One criteria met.	No criteria met.

Calculate Current Implementation Status

	Step 1 Count number of items at each rating	**Step 2** Multiply Counts by Ratings for Scores	Implementation Status
# of Items Rated 1		x 1 =	
# of Items Rated 0.5		x 0.5 =	
# of Items Rated 0		x 0 =	0
TOTAL POSSIBLE VALUE	15		
Step 3 Sum Scores			
Step 4 Convert to Percentage		Sum of Scores ___ / 15 x 100	%

Authors:

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Michael McSheehan is a systems-thinker and implementation specialist. A leader in the field of MTSS and inclusive education, he assists schools and districts to braid multiple initiatives and build coherent approaches to teaching and learning. Michael co-led the Center on Inclusive Education at UNH and helped establish the SWIFT Education Center. Michael founded Evolve & Effect, LLC to collaborate with schools and districts who are asking hard questions and seeking significant change in the education of all students, especially those with disabilities and those who have been historically marginalized. https://www.evolveandeffect.com/our-team

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Loui Lord Nelson, Ph.D., is a global leader in UDL implementation. A former special education teacher, she originated the role of UDL Coordinator, completed her post-doctoral fellowship at CAST, and thinks deeply about the complexities of UDL across cultures. Some of her publications include: Design and Deliver: Planning and Teaching Using Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Design for English Learners: The UDL Approach, and A Tree for All: Your Coloring Book of UDL Principles and Practice plus the card game, *Go Fishing with UDL*. She hosts two popular podcasts: UDL in 15 Minutes and UDL Research in 15 Minutes. www.theudlapproach.com.

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