

DISES Professional Learning Gallery: Leadership

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Definition of Terms

Inclusive leadership is a leadership style that actively counters discrimination, bias, and inequity based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Inclusive leaders ensure all students, families, teachers, and staff, feel valued and respected; align policies and practices to promote equitable outcomes; and encourage stakeholder participation and belonging.

Objectives

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

1. Define inclusive leadership within global and local educational contexts.
2. Identify barriers and opportunities that influence inclusive leadership in schools.
3. Apply evidence-informed frameworks.
4. Develop an action plan grounded in reflection and data-based decision making.

Rationale

- Support leaders in implementing inclusive practices.
- Provide evidence-informed strategies that strengthen equitable school systems.
- Promote leadership that values diverse perspectives.
- Identify structures and systems that reinforce inclusive leadership.

Elements of Inclusive Leadership

Social Framework

- Ecological Systems Theory

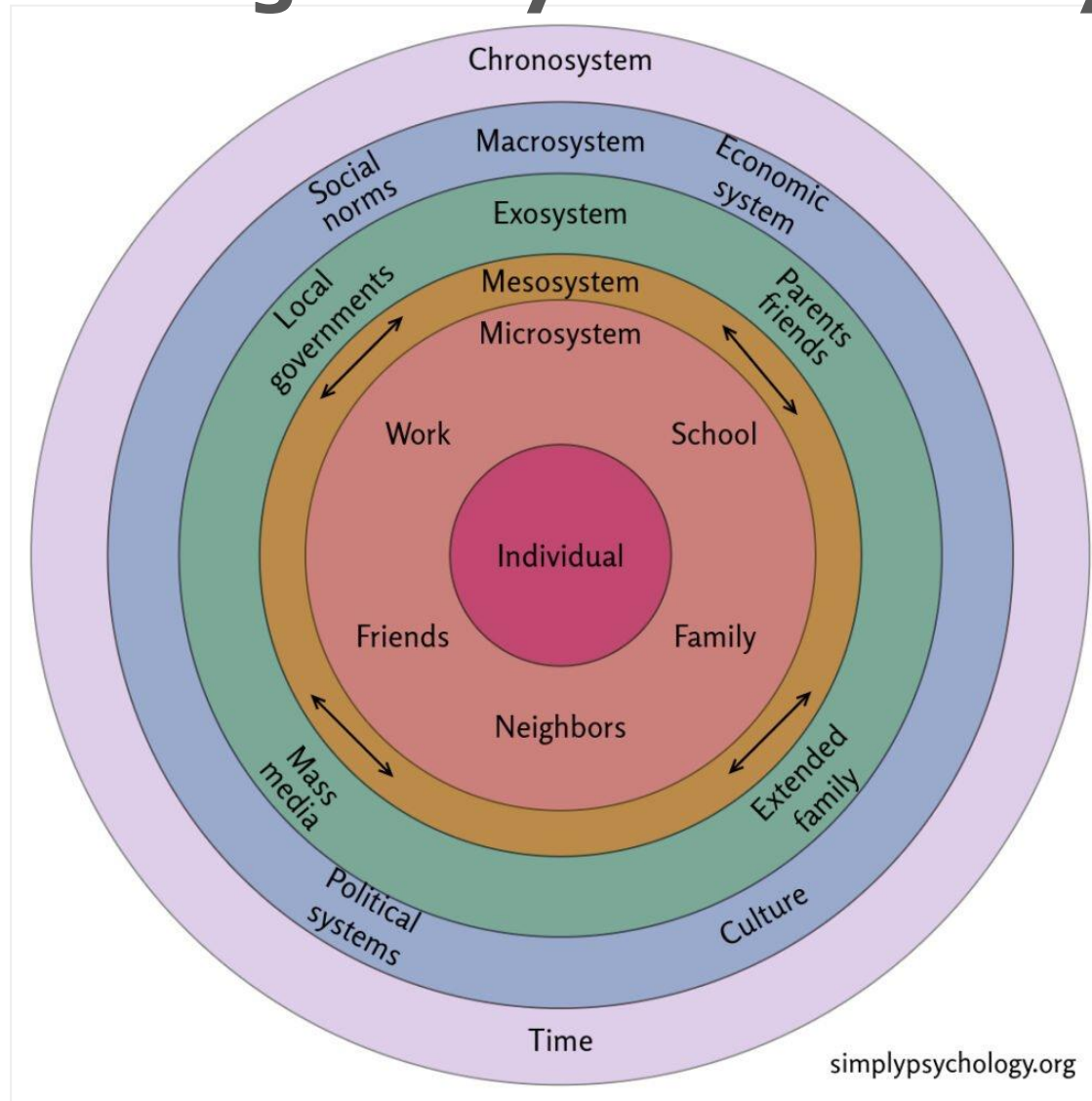
Reflective Framework

- Continuous Improvement and Reflective Practice

Educational Frameworks

- Tiered Supports
- Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive
- High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices

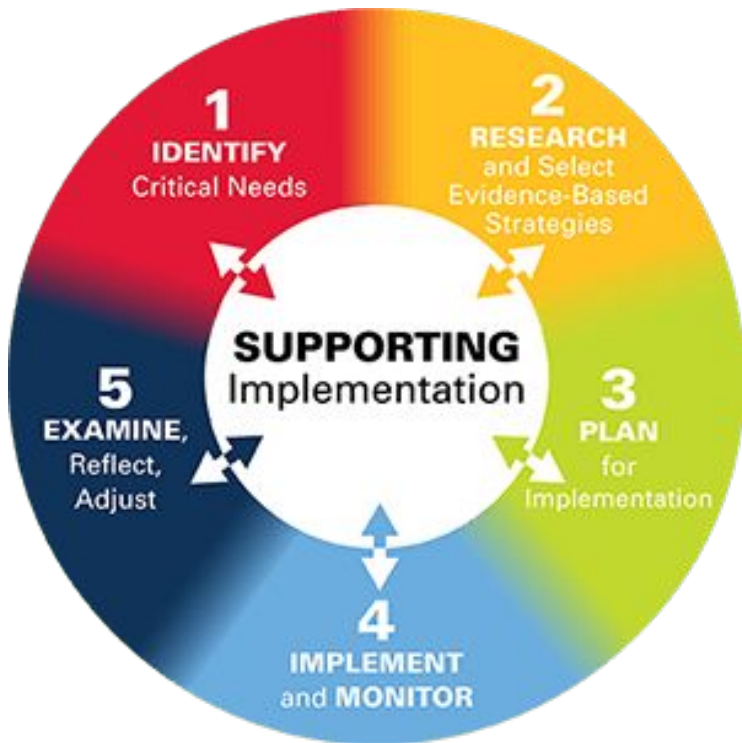
Ecological Systems Theory



Cycle of Continuous Improvement

The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP)

<https://u.osu.edu/ebitraining/resources/cycle-of-continuous-improvement/>

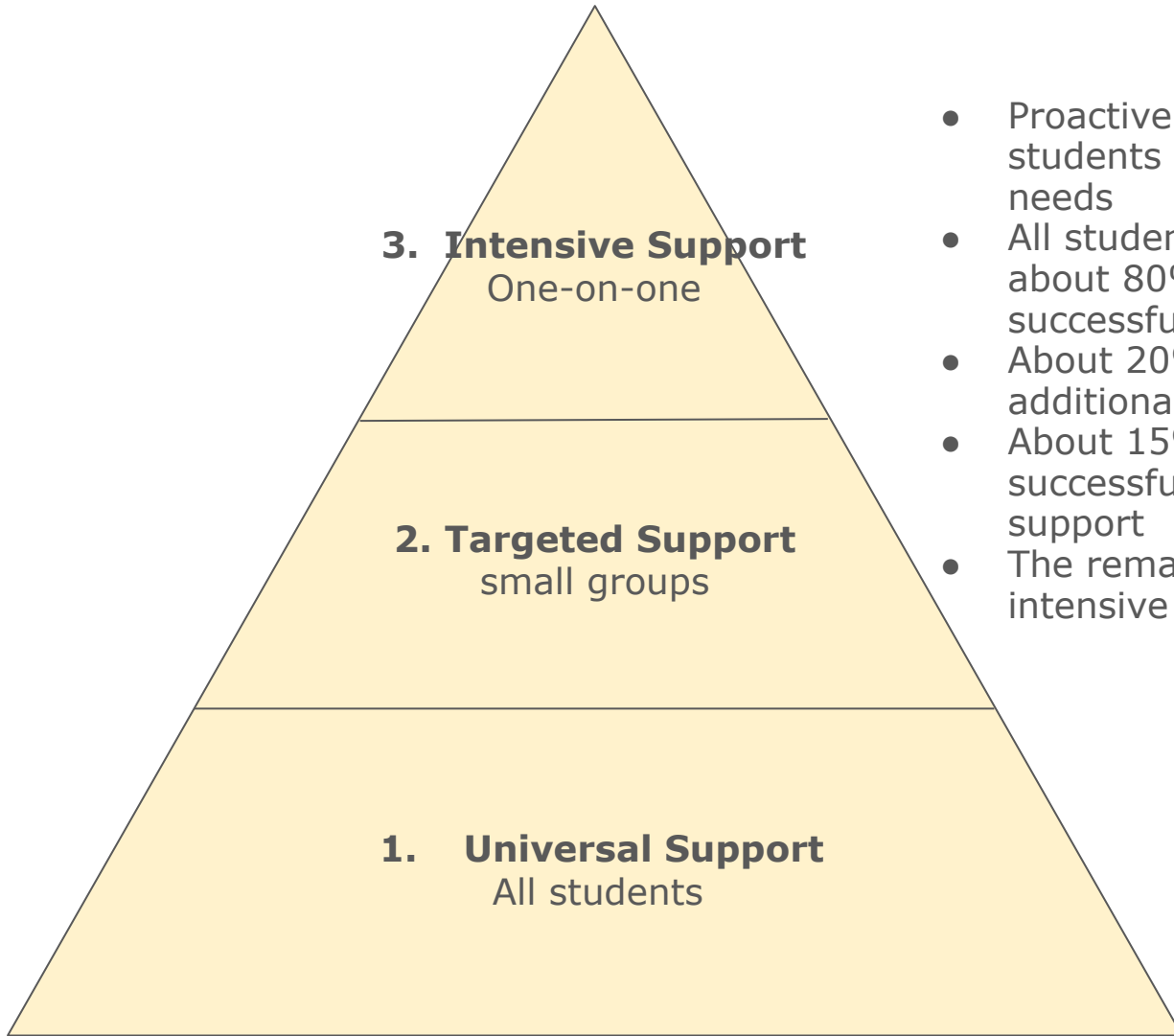


The cycle of continuous improvement provides a formal and ongoing process to aid the improvement of a system and/or its processes.

The sequence of the cycle ensures that planning, collection of data and analysis are completed first to inform what changes are required. The cycle encourages the continuous monitoring and reflection.

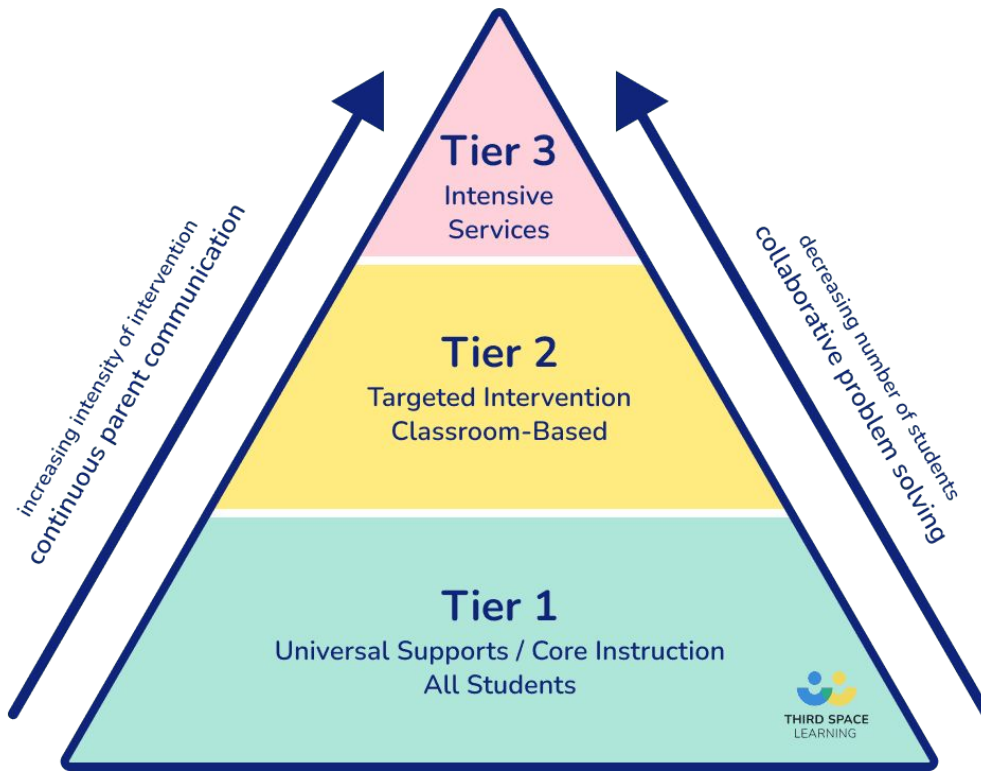
The cyclical structure highlights that improvement is ongoing, reflection of practices and processes should not stop.

Tiered Systems of Support



- Proactive systems to support all students by meeting their individual needs
- All students receive universal support; about 80% of students will be successful with only tier 1 instruction
- About 20% of students will require additional supports
- About 15% of the population will be successful with additional targeted support
- The remaining 5% require more intensive support

Response to Intervention



Response to Intervention is;

- An educational framework to identify and support students who are struggling academically
- Uses evidence-based interventions to meet students individual needs
- Regular monitoring of student progress
- Uses data to make decisions
- Can reduce the number of referrals to special education.

Further information can be found at *Essential Components of RTI-A Closer Look at Response to Intervention*

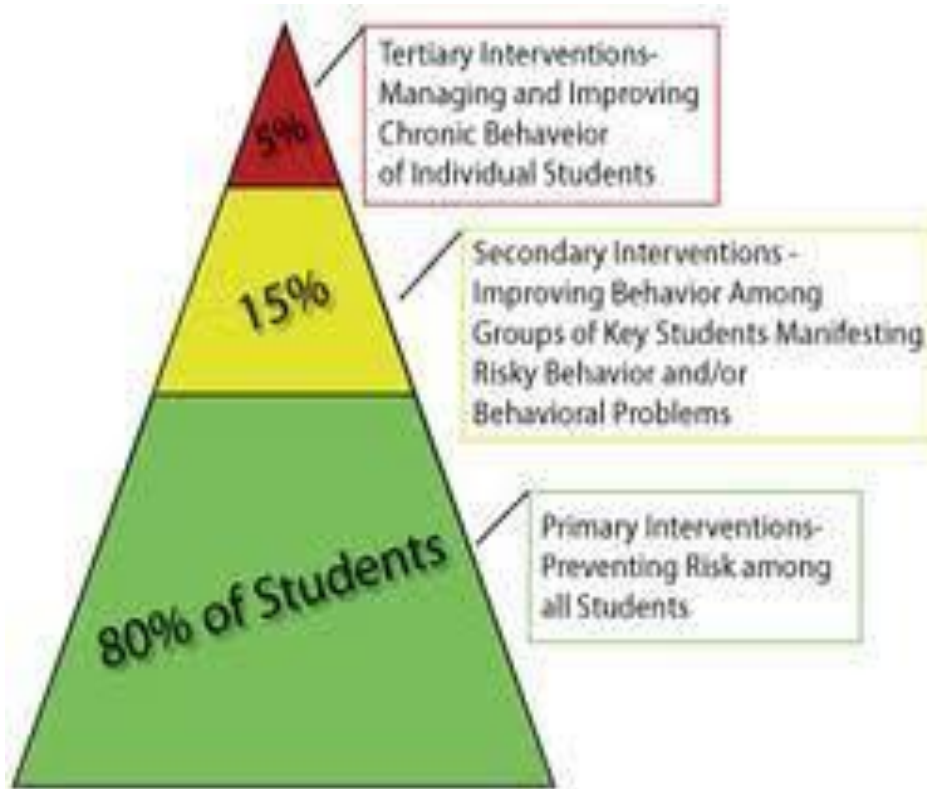
(<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED526858.pdf>)

[Response to intervention](#)

Third Space Learning

ace.edu

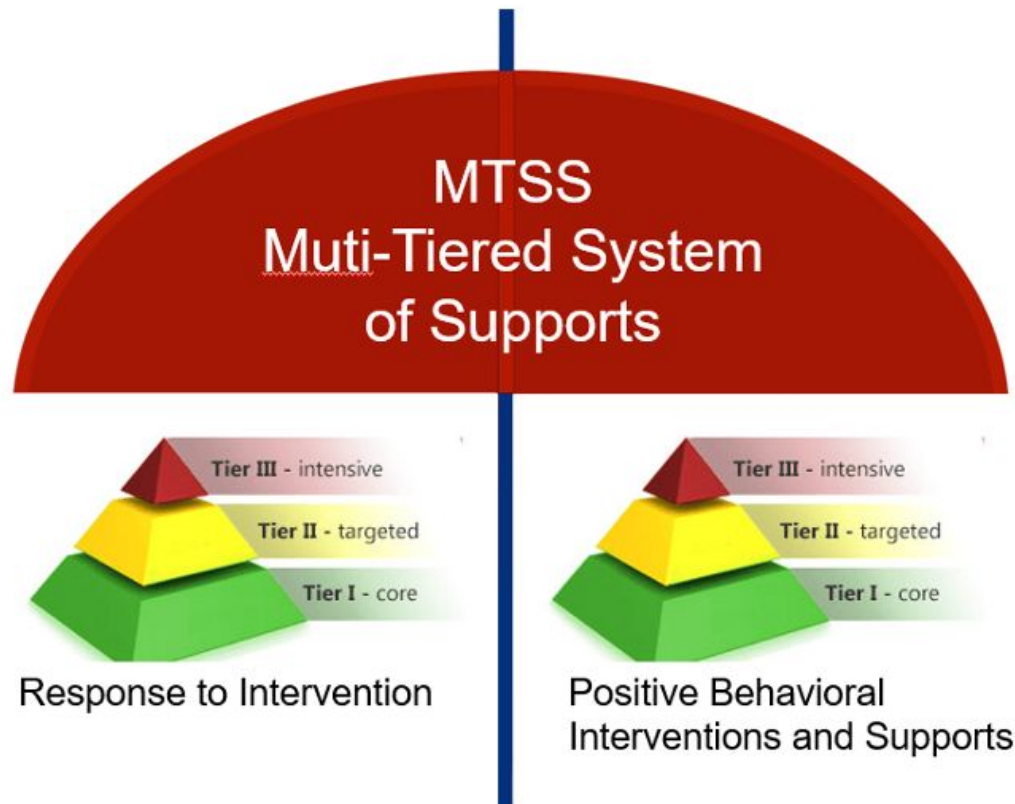
Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS)



PBIS is a multi-tiered framework which encourages positive, proactive, and safe learning environment for all. PBIS supports students behaviour, social, emotional and mental wellbeing as well as academics. PBIS uses evidence-based strategies and uses data in decision making.

Further information can be found at <https://pbis.org>

Examples of MTSS – Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS)



MTSS

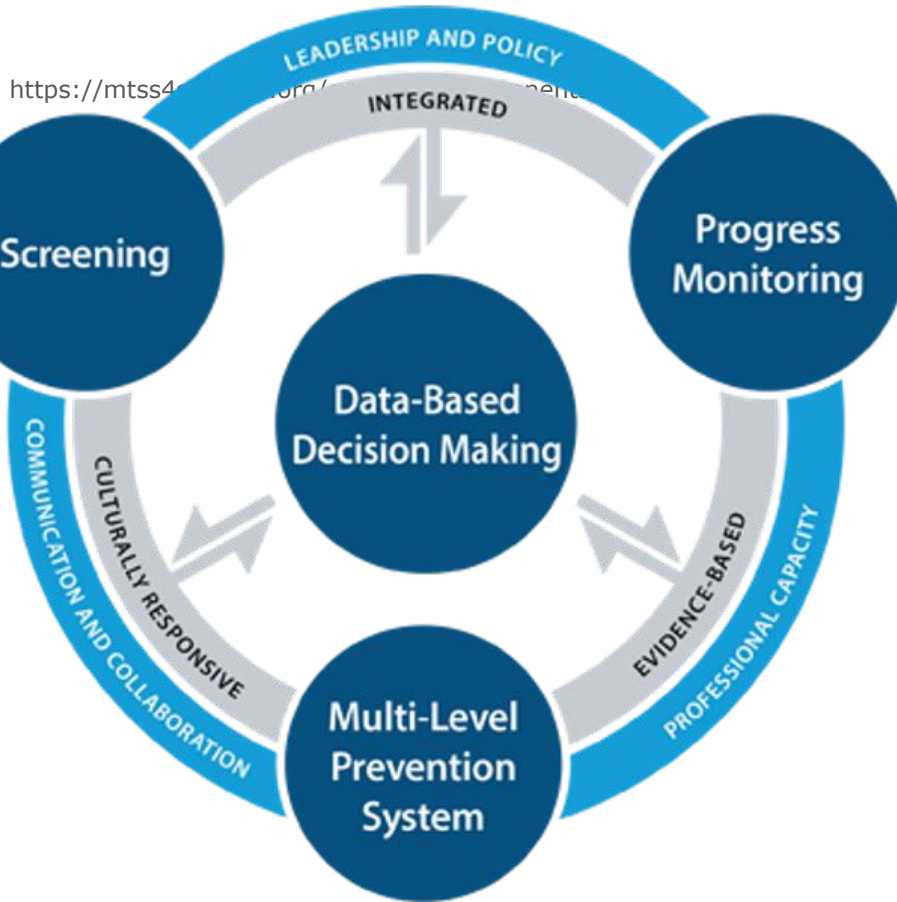
MTSS is a proactive framework which integrates data and instruction to maximise student success.

Screening – student data is collected regularly (3 to 4 times a year) to identify students who may be at risk of poor outcomes and may require additional support.

Progress Monitoring- continual evaluation of the effectiveness of instruction, interventions and supports.

Multi-level Prevention System – this system helps to organise supports for students. They have 3 tiers which intensify in instruction and intervention.

Data-Based Decision Making – relevant data is used to make decisions about instruction, movement between tiers in prevention system and allocation of resources.



<https://mtss4success.org/>

<https://mtss4success.org/essential-components>

Trauma-Informed Practices in Education

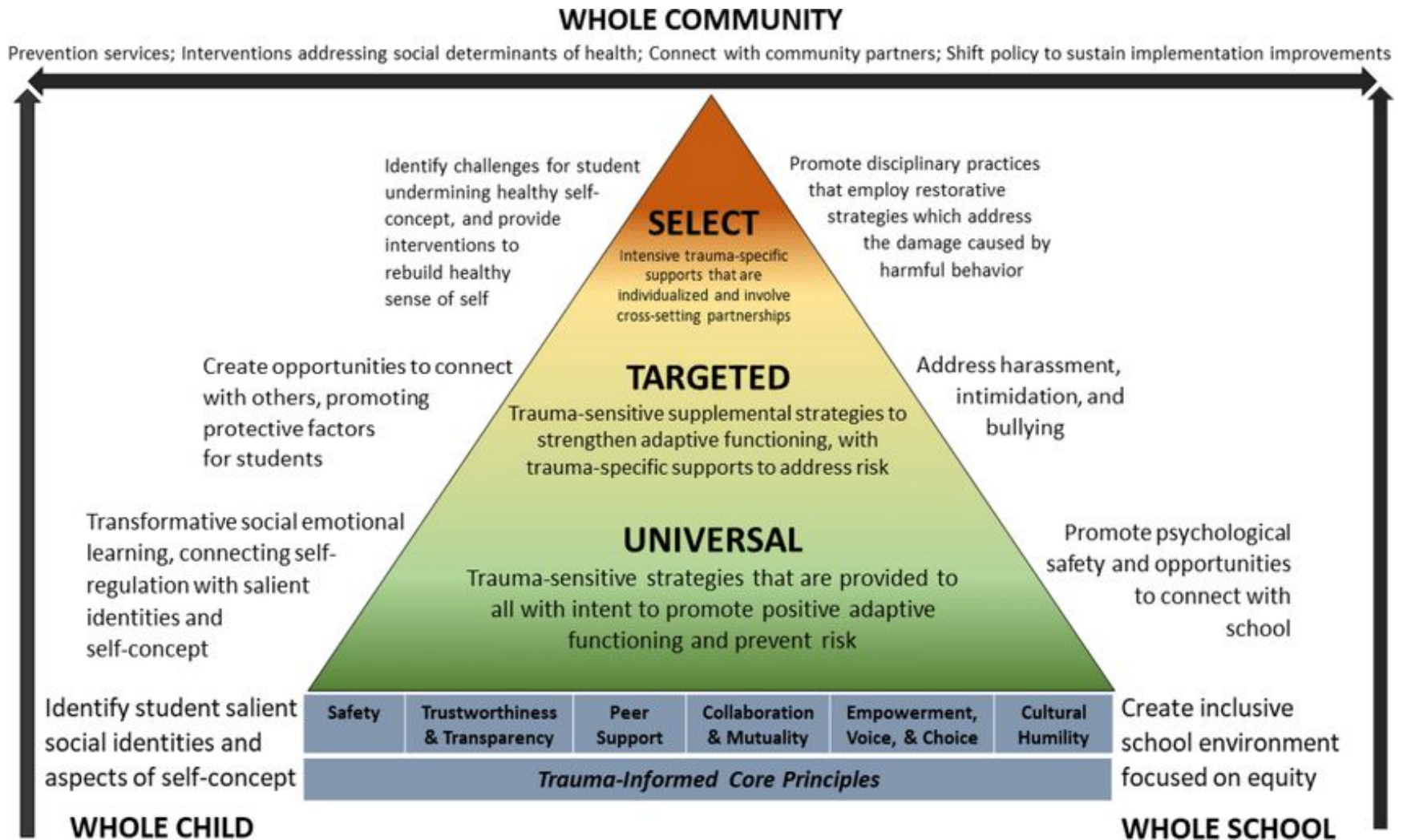


TEDxTalks - Dr Mary Crnobori

Why All Schools Should Be Trauma-Informed



Trauma-Informed Practices



[Illustration-of-a-system-approach-to-trauma-informed-care-in-schools-Note-An-ecological.png](#)



What is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy?

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a strengths-based instructional approach that centers and sustains the cultural and linguistic identities, experiences, and ways of knowing of diverse students, families/caregivers, and communities. This approach recognizes that culture is a dynamic set of values, beliefs, and practices that varies across students' social identities (related to gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and time period).¹ Educators adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies so that culturally and linguistically diverse students might leave schools with a sense of pride in themselves, a sense that they belong at school and have access to meaningful postsecondary pathways.^{2,3}

Culturally sustaining pedagogies are inherently dynamic approaches. They meaningfully center the communities and identities of students by affirming and uplifting their perceptions and experiences and incorporating their expertise into classroom practices. Therefore, what is culturally sustaining will look different across communities and contexts. Despite this variance, **four common elements tend to emerge** across teachers implementing culturally sustaining pedagogical practices.⁴

Including student and intergenerational community agency and input.

Example Practice:

Recognize that families/caregivers and community members are experts in their own right. Learn about important cultural practices from families/caregivers that might be incorporated into classroom practices (for example, how to make tamales or weave mats). Partner with, not just involve, families/caregivers and communities in classroom planning and goal-setting.^{6,7,8}

Supporting positive relationships with the land and the people of the land.

Example Practice:

Develop reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities through cross-cultural learning settings. This might include centering the values, knowledge, sovereignty, and expertise of Indigenous students, families/caregivers, communities, and educators in the curriculum or implementing feedback cycles with Indigenous communities about educational goals across the home and school. Lesson topics can include environmental sustainability and vulnerability, sociopolitical history and citizenship, or ethnomathematics.^{9,10,11}

Centering dynamic communities and their languages, practices, and knowledge.

Example Practice:

Learn about students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and their communities. Incorporate knowledge students gain from their families and communities and rich cultural and linguistic ways of being into instruction. Doing so helps to expand and sustain students' ways of being and promotes their conceptual understanding, language competence, and mastery of analytical practices.⁵

Providing structured opportunities to contend with internalized oppressions.

Example Practice:

Create opportunities for students to learn about the histories of their own and other students' cultures. Support students in using their voices to raise awareness about or push back against oppressive systems and structures in culturally relevant ways that simultaneously foster a critical awareness of the world, move beyond damaging narratives, and highlight the joy and resilience of communities of color (for example, Hip-Hop Pedagogy).¹²

Adopting or incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy can help educators affirm students' identities and engage students, families/caregivers, and communities in determining their own agentic goals and outcomes for learning. This pedagogical approach has also been shown to be positively correlated with educational outcomes, such as student engagement, attendance, and performance on traditional academic indicators (such as grades and test scores).^{13,14,15}

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an evidence-based framework that guides educators in designing inclusive instruction.

UDL shifts the focus from “fixing the learner” to removing barriers in the learning environment.

UDL recognizes that learners vary in **why** they learn, **what** they learn, and **how** they show learning.

It is based in three principles:

- Engagement
- Representation
- Action & Expression

UDL Principles

1. Engagement – *the “why” of learning*

Engagement focuses on how learners are motivated and emotionally invested in learning.

This principle encourages educators to:

- Offer choices to increase relevance and ownership
- Build supportive, inclusive learning environments
- Reduce threats and distractions while fostering persistence

Engagement is about helping students *want* to learn and *stay* engaged.

Examples: Providing topic choices, using collaborative learning, setting clear goals, or incorporating culturally meaningful examples.

UDL Principles

2. Representation – *the “what” of learning*

Representation focuses on how information and content are presented to learners.

This principle encourages educators to:

- Provide content in multiple formats (text, audio, visuals, models)
- Clarify language, symbols, and vocabulary
- Highlight key ideas and relationships

Representation is about making content *understandable* to all learners.

Example: Pairing readings with visuals or videos, pre-teaching vocabulary, using graphic organizers, or modeling concepts aloud.

UDL Principles

3. Action & Expression – *the “how” of learning*

Action & expression focuses on how learners demonstrate their learning.

This principle encourages educators to:

- Offer multiple ways for students to respond and show learning
- Support executive functioning (planning, organizing, self-monitoring)
- Provide tools and scaffolds for communication




Action & expression allows students to *show* learning in flexible ways.

Examples: Allowing written, oral, visual, or digital products; using checklists or templates; incorporating assistive technology.

Universal Design for Learning

CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

The goal of UDL is **learner agency** that is purposeful & reflective, resourceful & authentic, strategic & action-oriented.

	Design Multiple Means of Engagement 	Design Multiple Means of Representation 	Design Multiple Means of Action & Expression 
Access	<p>Design Options for Welcoming Interests & Identities (7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimize choice and autonomy (7.1) Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity (7.2) Nurture joy and play (7.3) Address biases, threats, and distractions (7.4) 	<p>Design Options for Perception (1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support opportunities to customize the display of information (1.1) Support multiple ways to perceive information (1.2) Represent a diversity of perspectives and identities in authentic ways (1.3) 	<p>Design Options for Interaction (4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vary and honor the methods for response, navigation, and movement (4.1) Optimize access to accessible materials and assistive and accessible technologies and tools (4.2)
Support	<p>Design Options for Sustaining Effort & Persistence (8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify the meaning and purpose of goals (8.1) Optimize challenge and support (8.2) Foster collaboration, interdependence, and collective learning (8.3) Foster belonging and community (8.4) Offer action-oriented feedback (8.5) 	<p>Design Options for Language & Symbols (2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures (2.1) Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols (2.2) Cultivate understanding and respect across languages and dialects (2.3) Address biases in the use of language and symbols (2.4) Illustrate through multiple media (2.5) 	<p>Design Options for Expression & Communication (5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use multiple media for communication (5.1) Use multiple tools for construction, composition, and creativity (5.2) Build fluencies with graduated support for practice and performance (5.3) Address biases related to modes of expression and communication (5.4)
Executive Function	<p>Design Options for Emotional Capacity (9)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize expectations, beliefs, and motivations (9.1) Develop awareness of self and others (9.2) Promote individual and collective reflection (9.3) Cultivate empathy and restorative practices (9.4) 	<p>Design Options for Building Knowledge (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect prior knowledge to new learning (3.1) Highlight and explore patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships (3.2) Cultivate multiple ways of knowing and making meaning (3.3) Maximize transfer and generalization (3.4) 	<p>Design Options for Strategy Development (6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set meaningful goals (6.1) Anticipate and plan for challenges (6.2) Organize information and resources (6.3) Enhance capacity for monitoring progress (6.4) Challenge exclusionary practices (6.5)

Universal Design for Learning

UDL Principles Answer these Questions

Engagement: *Why am I learning this?*

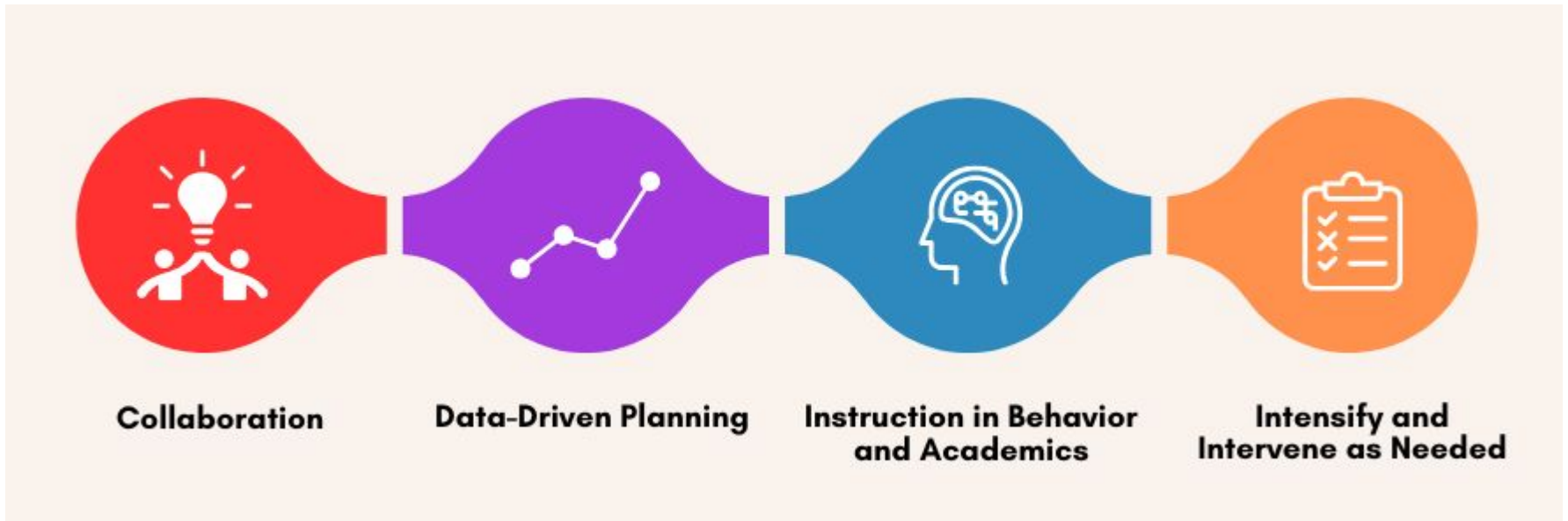
Representation: *What am I learning?*

Action & Expression: *How do I show what I know?*

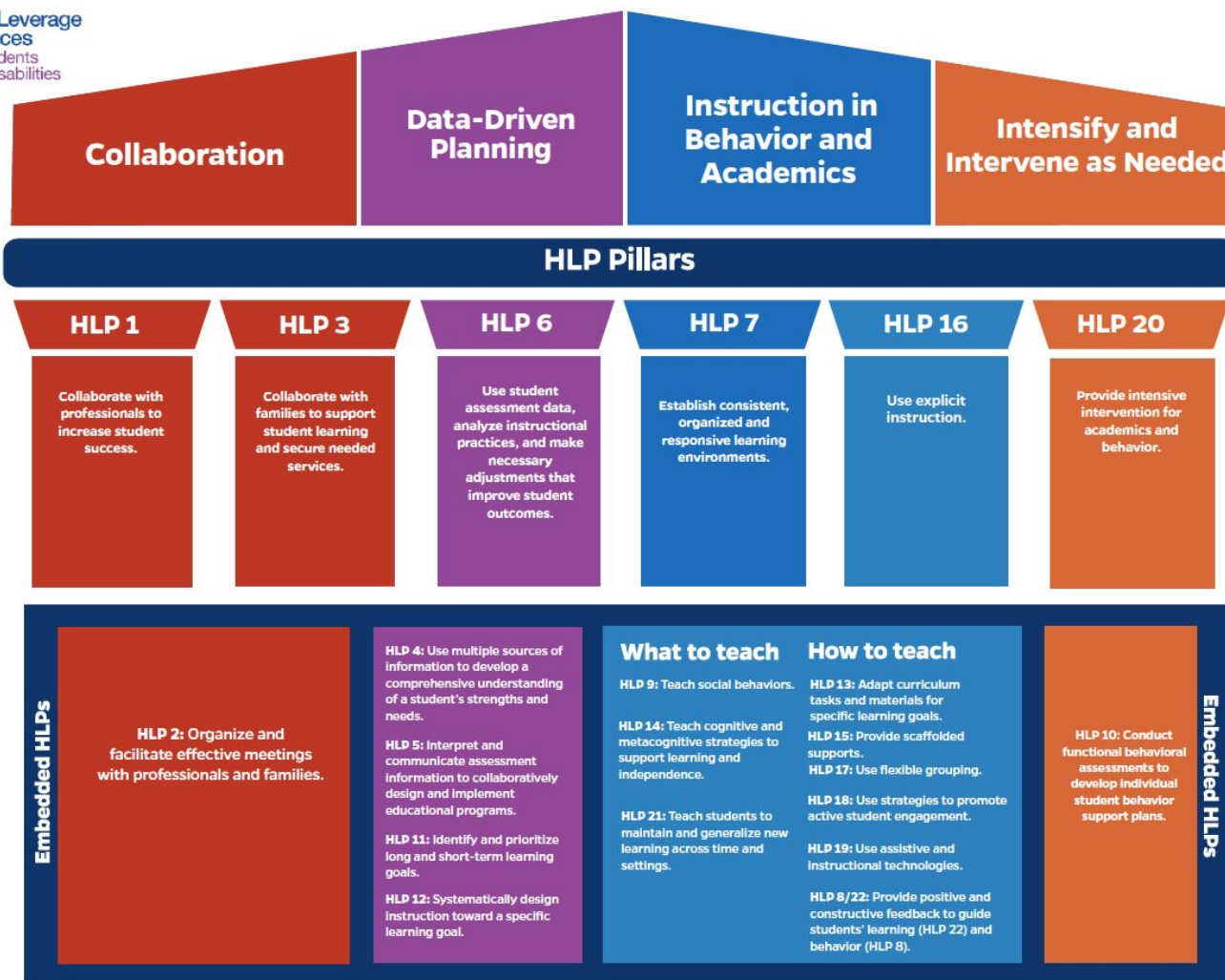
High-Leverage Practices (HLP) in Special Education

A set of key practices all educators should know and be able to implement to support all students' learning and behavior needs (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Twenty-two research-based practices that, when implemented, benefit all students. Practices are grouped into four domains. They are related to and enhance the [High-Leverage Practices for General Education](#)



HLP in Special Education



Evidence-Based Practices (EBP)

EBP are effective practices that high-quality research shows will increase student achievement when matching to student needs, include teacher training, and are implemented with fidelity (Cook et al., 2012).



Evidence-Based Practices

Evidence-based practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shown to have a positive effect on student outcomes• The research design allows one to infer that the practice led to child or student improvement• Multiple high-quality studies have been conducted• Reviewed by a reputable organization (e.g., What Works Clearinghouse)
Promising practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shown to have positive effects on learner outcomes• The research design does not clearly demonstrate that the practice led to child or student improvement• Insufficient number of studies conducted to demonstrate its effectiveness
Research-based practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some research studies have demonstrated positive effects on student outcomes while other studies have not• Based on research that may or may not clearly demonstrate that the practice led to improved child or student outcomes• Multiple studies have been conducted
Emerging practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anecdotal evidence of effectiveness• Research has not been conducted

How HLP and EBP are Connected

Owiny & Cornelius (2024) demonstrate that HLPs and EBPs go hand-in-hand. They must be chosen well and implemented with fidelity.

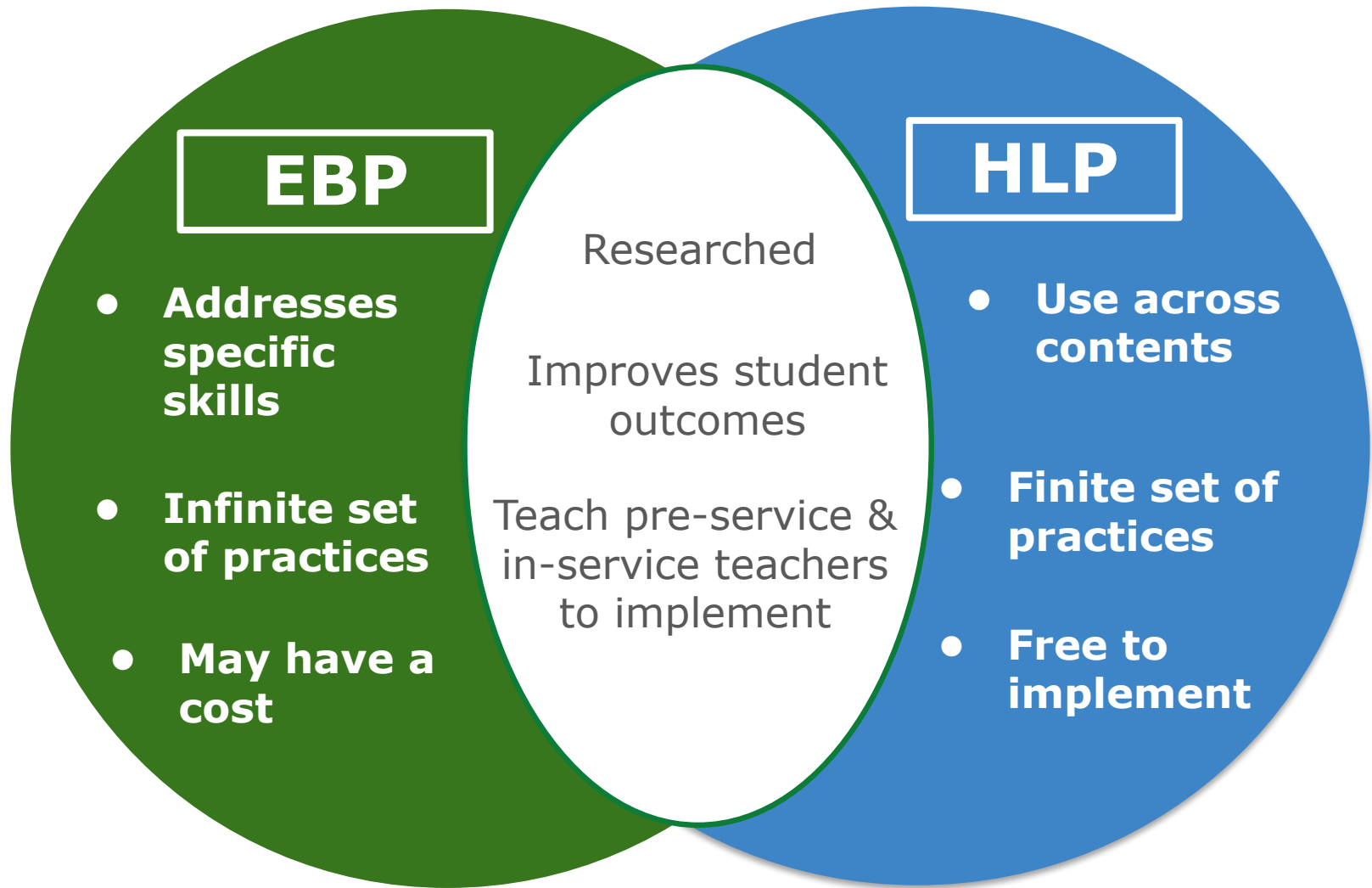
EBPs

- Instructional practices that are identified through rigorous research to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.
- Set of interventions to address and mediate a specific skill/behavior deficit.
- **WHAT** we teach!

HLPs

- Research-based teacher *actions* that are fundamental to support K-12 student learning.
- Set of core tasks necessary to teaching.
- **HOW** we teach!

How EBPs and HLPs are Connected



Becoming a More Inclusive Leader

1. Reflect on Personal Beliefs and Leadership Stance

Inclusive leadership begins with self-awareness.

- What beliefs do I hold about students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students with extensive support needs?
- In what ways might my own experiences with schooling shape how I define “success,” “behavior,” or “readiness”?
- When faced with challenges, do I default to fixing students or examining systems?
- How comfortable am I with ambiguity, flexibility, and shared leadership when supporting diverse learners?

Becoming a More Inclusive Leader

2. Understand Inclusion as a Systems Commitment (Not a Program)

Inclusion is not a place; it's a practice embedded in systems.

- How do I currently define inclusion in my school, and whose voices shaped that definition?
- Is inclusion positioned as “extra work” or as core to how teaching and learning happen?
- How do general education, special education, and support service staff collaborate or operate in silos? If special education and support services are not adequately staffed, how are general education teachers trained for inclusion?
- Whose responsibility is inclusion in my school, and how is that communicated explicitly?

Becoming a More Inclusive Leader-2

3. School Climate and Culture: Take an Honest Pulse

Culture reveals what a school truly values.

- What messages do students, families, and staff receive about who belongs in this school?
- Whose strengths are recognized and celebrated, and whose are overlooked?
- How are discipline, referrals, and support decisions made, and who is disproportionately impacted?
- Do students with disabilities and other marginalized identities experience joy, belonging, and meaningful participation here?

Becoming a More Inclusive Leader-2

4. Reflect on Tiered Systems and Effective Instructional Practices Through an Inclusion Lens

Frameworks can either reinforce exclusion or disrupt it.

- Which frameworks are currently in place? Do they promote exclusion or inclusion?
- How are tiered systems and effective instructional practices (i.e., trauma-informed practices, CLSP, HLP, EBP) currently framed in my school: as compliance tools or as equity-driven supports?
- Do these systems focus more on identifying deficits or removing barriers to learning?
- How do we ensure Tier 1 instruction is truly accessible before intensifying interventions?
- Are data used to support students or to justify exclusion from general education spaces?

Becoming an Inclusive Leader-3

5. Family and Community as Partners in Inclusion

Inclusion extends beyond the school walls.

- Whose families feel welcomed, heard, and respected in decision-making?
- How do we engage families of students with disabilities as experts on their children?
- Are language, culture, and disability viewed as assets or challenges?
- How do we build trust with families who have experienced exclusion or harm from schools?

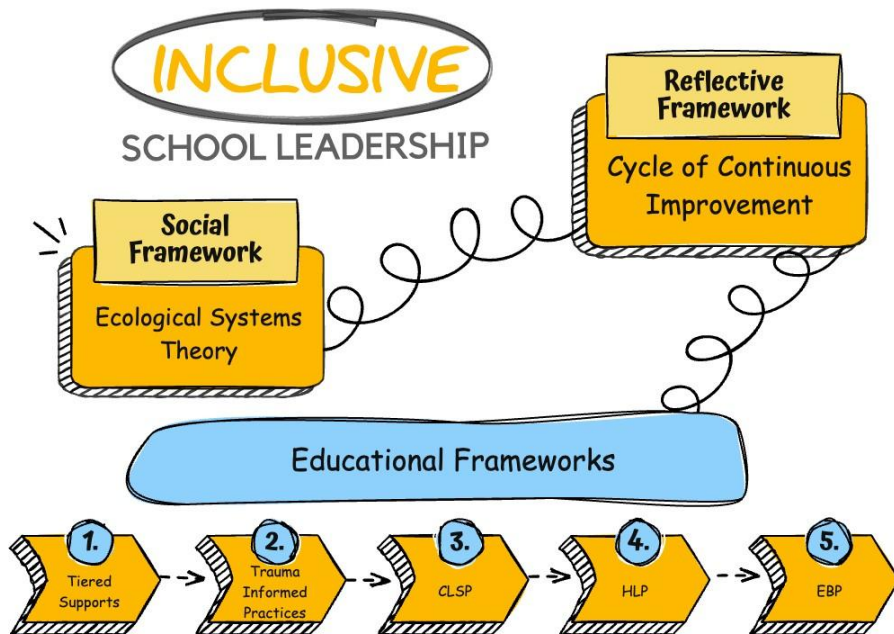
Becoming an Inclusive Leader-3

6. Moving from Reflection to Action

Inclusive leadership is measured by what changes.

- What policies or routines in my school unintentionally reinforce exclusion?
- What is one system-level change I can initiate to improve access and belonging?
- How will I know if our school culture is becoming more inclusive, and who gets to define that success?
- What accountability structures ensure inclusion remains a shared, ongoing commitment?

Reflection



1. Consider your leadership style and school context.
2. Which of these concepts of inclusive leadership most resonate with you? Which is most relevant to your school context?
3. What is one small action step you can take to improve your school's inclusion of students with disabilities or learning challenges and their families in general?

Resources

Inclusive Education

- [Government of Malta: Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools](#)
- [UNESCO Incheon Declaration](#)
- [National Council for Special Education: Inclusive Education Framework](#)

Ecological Systems Theory

- [Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory](#)
- [Ecological Systems Theory](#)
- [Applying the Theory in Practice](#)
- [Ecological Systems Analysis of Initiatives in the UK](#)

Cycle of Continuous Improvement and Reflective Practice

- [Cycle of Continuous Improvement](#)
- [Improvement Cycles](#)

Resources

Tiered Supports: MTSS

- [Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support](#)
- [What is MTSS?](#)
- [MTSS: What is a Multi-Tiered System of Supports?](#)

Tiered Supports: RTI

- [Using a Response to Intervention Framework to Improve Student Learning: A Pocket Guide for State and District Leaders](#)
- [What is Response to Intervention?](#)
- [Essential Components of RTI – A Closer Look at Response to Intervention](#)

Tiered Supports: PBIS

- [Center on PBIS: What is PBIS?](#)
- [Positive Behavior Strategies: A Guide for Teachers](#)
- [Behavior Intervention and Positive Behavior Support for Young Children](#)

Resources

Trauma-Informed Practices

- [National Education Association \(United States\) Suggestions for TIP](#)
- [Supporting Trauma-Informed Schools](#)
- [Open-Education Resource: Trauma-Informed School Practices](#)
- [A Call to Connection: Making Childhood Trauma Personal](#)
- [ReMoved](#)
- [Remember My Story: ReMoved Part 2](#)
- [Love is Never Wasted - ReMoved Part 3](#)

Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices

- [National Equity Project: Culturally Responsive Teaching](#)
- [Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Infographic](#)
- [CLSP Terms Defined](#)
- [What Is Culturally And Linguistically Responsive Teaching?](#)
- [Video on CSP-Bridging Theory and Practice](#)

Resources

High-Leverage Practices

- [High-Leverage Practices: Revised and Updated](#)
- [highleveragepractices.org](#)
- [IRIS Center Resources for HLPs](#)
- [CEEDAR Center: High-Leverage Practices](#)
- [Teaching Works: HLPs for General Education](#)

Evidence-Based Practices

- [Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#)
- [Center on Instruction](#)
- [IRIS Center Evidence-Based Practices Summaries](#)
- [IRIS Center: Trustworthy Sources for Current Evidence-Based Practices](#)
- [National Center on Intensive Intervention](#)
- [Teaching LD](#)
- [Vanderbilt: Evidence-Based Practices Landing Page](#)
- [What Works Clearinghouse](#)

References

- Aceves, T. C., & Kennedy, M. J. (Eds.) (2024, February). *High-leverage practices for students with disabilities*. 2nd edition. Council for Exceptional Children and CEEDAR Center.
- Hammond, Z., & Jackson, Y. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- IRIS Center. (2014). *Evidence-based practices (part 1): Identifying and selecting a practice or program*. https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/ebp_01/
- Owiny, R. L., & Cornelius, K. E. (2024). *The practical guide to high-leverage practices in special education: The purposeful 'how' to enhance classroom rigor*. Routledge.