



## **SPECIAL EDITION: Universal PreK (UPK) Café Issue 2 – February 28, 2024**

Dear Colleagues,

The Early Education Team continues to celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the signing of Act 166 Universal PreK! Please watch for more Special Edition UPK Cafés in your Inbox over the next few months as we share more exciting accomplishments of UPK in Vermont. In this Special Edition of the UPK Café the Early Education team provides a detailed overview of Vermont’s Early Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (Early MTSS).

Please feel free to share with colleagues!



### **The Latest Federal Guidance**

On November 28, 2023, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published an updated Inclusion Policy Statement that emphasized the importance of utilizing a proactive, preventative, tiered approach to support each and every child and their family. Additionally, they recommend that states build capacity among programs in fostering young children’s social and emotional development, and identified the Pyramid Model as a comprehensive framework that utilizes evidence-based practices while addressing system components with a prevention-based capacity building approach.

### **What is Vermont’s Early Multi-tiered System of Support (Early MTSS)**

Vermont’s Early MTSS is an innovation neutral framework that wraps around The Pyramid Model framework designed to build each and every child’s social and emotional skills, competencies, and development. Early MTSS also supports initiatives in early literacy, mathematics, science, arts and expression, and social studies, utilizing a two-prong approach: implementing equitable and inclusive high quality evidence practices while building system capacity. Vermont became one of the first states to implement Pyramid Model practices, starting in 2007. Like the Pyramid Model framework, Early MTSS is grounded in implementation science and



utilizes the data-based decision-making process for continuous improvement efforts.

Early MTSS aligns with the beliefs stated in [Vermont's Guiding Principles, Supporting Each and Every Young Child's Full and Equitable Participation](#). Full participation means promoting a sense of belonging, supporting positive social relationships, and enabling families and early childhood professionals to gain the competence and confidence to positively impact the lives of each and every child and their family. These indicators mirror the goals of the Early MTSS and Pyramid Model frameworks.

Research from the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI), and Head Start supports the federal recommendation of active promotion, prevention, and intervention through the implementation of high quality, equitable and inclusive practices. Universal evidence-based practices increase the competence and confidence of not only each and every child and their family, resulting in positive outcomes and success in the future, but for adults working with young children.

Early MTSS promotes the proactive use or implementation of [universal, targeted](#), and individualized evidence-based practices across all routines and activities. This includes proactively identifying students who may be struggling and intervene early, which helps to ensure improved outcomes for each and every Vermont child and their family. As the continuum of supports are utilized, (universal, targeted, or individualized), data is collected and reflected upon, as part of the data-based decision-making process, in order to determine their effectiveness. As children move in and out of levels of supports, progress monitoring data is gathered and analyzed to ensure each and every child is receiving the appropriate level of support and resources to match their needs. Reflection on data collected will inform any progress the child has made, and whether additional supports or interventions are necessary.

**Vermont's Early MTSS adopted five key components** align with Vermont's established K–12 MTSS framework to allow for a birth through age twenty-one continuum. Early MTSS key components also align with national Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion and national Benchmarks of Quality. Key Components of the Early MTSS framework include:

### **Systemic Support**

- Established Leadership Team
- Shared belief that all students learn
- Educational equity within an inclusive school culture
- Staff buy-in shared understanding of Early MTSS and the alignment with VTmtss
- Integration of service delivery
- A culture of continuous improvement that is focused and program wide expansion and framework sustainability

## **Effective Partnerships and Collaboration**

- Intentional and ongoing practices to increase family and community partner involvement
- Teams include multiple perspectives and make decisions together
- Shared responsibility and promotion of culturally responsive practices for each and every child and their family
- Structures and processes aim at continuous improvement to improve outcomes for each and every child and their family

## **High-quality Environments**

- Leadership and staff create a safe and supportive environment that includes the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development for each and every child
- Each and every child is engaged in intentionally designed instruction with layered universal, targeted, and individualized supplemental intervention provided as needed
- Structures and policies provide equitable access, are student-centered, culturally responsive, and designed to eliminate barriers to learning opportunities
- Coherent, consistent curricula for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning across all routines and naturally occurring environments

## **Comprehensive Assessment**

- A comprehensive and coordinated system that can be used to communicate to families about academic, behavior, and social-emotional well-being of their child
- Data is collected across at every level, analyzed, discussed, reflected on, and used to make decisions
- Data is used to address issues in a timely manner, with resources allocated that are responsive to the needs of each and every child and staff
- Universal screeners are used to identify and address gaps in skill in order to better provide equitable learning opportunities for each and every child

## **Well Designed Professional Development**

- Expectation that all staff will participate in on-going, embedded professional learning (PL)
- Plan for practice-based coaches to support on-going training and implementation of practices, measuring fidelity
- Equitable allocation and use of resources to implement high quality evidence-based practices
- Staff expertise matched to student need including mental health consultation

These five key components are used to assess a program's system, create continuous improvement action plans, track progress on the stages of planning, installation, implementation, and scale up, as well as planning for ultimate sustainability.

## **Early MTSS and Universal PreK**

With the enactment of Act 166/Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) in 2014, partnerships began between school-based classrooms, Head Start programs, licensed child care programs, private preschool child care programs, and family child care homes. These partnerships allow school districts to provide more opportunities for each and every child, particularly for children with disabilities to participate in regular education settings with their same-age peers. Early MTSS implemented to fidelity is key to ensuring each and every child has access to and is able to participate in a high quality inclusive UPK education across Vermont's mixed delivery system.

## **Current Early MTSS Grant Initiatives**

Historically, Early MTSS has been supported by grant work. In 2022, grants focused on the continued implementation and scale-up of Early MTSS and Pyramid Model framework across Vermont's Early Childhood System. While Title II and IV grants support implementation in UPK public and private programs, the State Personnel Development Grant focuses on expanding Early MTSS within Children's Integrated Services (CIS) and Early Intervention. The Preschool Development Grant, otherwise known as the Vermont Integration Project (VIP) B-5 is expanding across UPK public and private programs, and licensed and registered child-care programs, including family child care homes. Each of these grants provides free professional development training and coaching support, both at the System and Practice Based level.

## **Vermont's Early MTSS State Leadership Team**

In 2022, an Early MTSS State Leadership Team (SLT) was established in Vermont, comprising of a cross sector group of individuals representing Vermont's Early Childhood System, who are passionate about creating high quality, equitable and inclusive early childhood environments for each and every child and their family.

The primary purpose of the Vermont Early MTSS State Leadership Team (SLT) is to ensure supports and resources are available to communities and programs adopting and implementing Early MTSS evidence-based practices with fidelity. The team uses the nationally recognized Benchmarks of Quality, the data based decision-making process, and action planning and evaluation, to guide implementation and continuous improvement. The SLT works closely with the [Pyramid Model Consortium](#) to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for implementation of the Pyramid Model and complete the exploration/planning stage for each of the Pyramid Model key components.

## Looking to the Future

In 2014, the [U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services](#) called for an improved system approach to discipline, and the prevention and ultimate elimination of the use of exclusionary discipline practices across early childhood settings. Both offices were and still are concerned with informal removals and shortened days, practices in which a child is removed by school personnel for part or all of a learning day, or even an indefinite period of time, in response to the child's behavior.

Vermont responded to the federal offices by first implementing Act 35 (2021) and then Act 166 Suspension/Expulsion law (June 1, 2022), banning suspension and expulsion of students under eight years old, except in cases of imminent harm or danger to others. This law applies to both public and private Universal PreK programs. Additionally, UPK public and private programs are required to report any incidents that fall under the definition of suspension and expulsion within 5 days of incident:

- In-program suspension is the placement of a child in a specified supervised location (e.g., director's office, alternative classroom, other space in building) outside of their regular early childhood setting/classroom.
- Out-of-classroom/program suspension is the removal of a child from their regular early childhood setting/classroom (off premises).
- Expulsion is the permanent removal of a child from their regular early childhood setting/classroom

The mandated Vermont law ignited a greater need for Vermont's early childhood programs to prioritize professional development and coaching, in an effort build equitable and inclusive high-quality environments across our early childhood system. To date, free Early MTSS professional development and training has focused on promoting:

- Positive social and emotional outcomes for each and every child and their family
- Universal, targeted, and individualized preventative practices in order to create equitable and inclusive high-quality environments
- Equitable access and inclusion for each and every child
- Effective family engagement
- Use of the data decision making process
- Positively addressing challenging behaviors in early childhood environments which in turn reduces the use of exclusionary discipline practices.

If you are interested in learning more about Early MTSS and the Pyramid Model Frameworks, and free professional development opportunities, please contact Thalia Garcia, Early MTSS Coordinator for the Agency of Education at [Thalia.Garcia@vermont.gov](mailto:Thalia.Garcia@vermont.gov)

## Resources

[MTSS in EC Position Statement 2021](#) - This position statement has been developed by the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children. The purpose of the revised statement is to define an early childhood multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework and to promote a broader understanding and discussion of the implications for young children, their families, and those who serve them.

[Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children With Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#)

[Preliminary Pyramid Assessment](#) is an Early MTSS tool that helps teams, teachers, and adults working with children determine what universal and targeted practices are being implementing at any given point, and if those practices extend across all routines and activities.

The Vermont [Early MTSS System Inventory](#) is to be used by Universal PreK public and private programs and their leadership team to assess readiness, identify strengths and gaps, develop an action plan, and to promote program wide adoption.

[National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#) - The goals of the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) are to assist states and programs in their implementation of sustainable systems for the implementation of the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (Pyramid Model)

[Early MTSS Padlet](#) is a free resource for anyone to access in Vermont. It contains free Pyramid Model module trainings, upcoming webinars, family engagement tools, universal and targeted tools and strategies, and functional assessments etc.