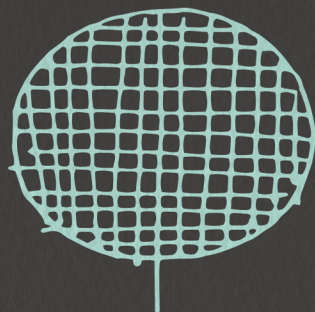
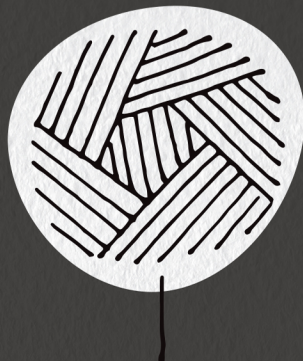
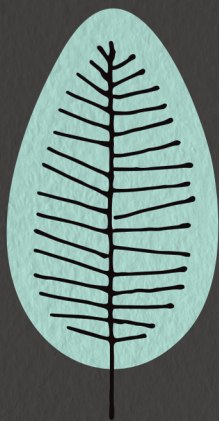
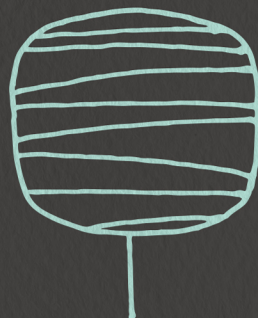
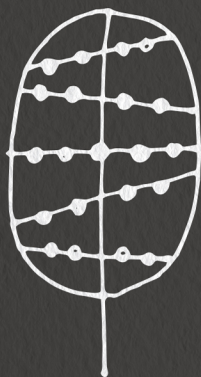




IN SUPPORT OF STUDENTS

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO **EQUITABLE MTSS**

KATIE NOVAK, Ed.D.
KRISTAN RODRIGUEZ, Ph.D.



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Praise for *In Support of Students*

“Katie and Kristan do a wonderful job presenting evidenced-based ideas, strategies, action plans, and ingredients for a MTSS of teaching and learning. They provide the reader with ongoing personal anecdotes, analogies, and steps of MTSS and many opportunities throughout to pause, think, and reflect on how to best support all students. The book highlights how all learners are ‘capable of greatness’ with the appropriate shift in systems and priorities.”

—**Michael W. Adams**, EdD, Executive Director,
*American Schools of Central America,
Colombia-Caribbean and Mexico (Tri-Association)*

“As an educator of 30 years and currently serving as MTSS Coordinator, I believe *In Support of Students* is empowering! Whether you are an educator in the first stage of implementing MTSS or already full-steam ahead, this book provides a blueprint that is proactive and responsive to student success for all learners. The authors take you on a journey through change, crafting a vision, planning for success, and action steps to an inclusive multi-tiered system of supports. Reflection questions posed throughout the book are a bonus to provoke conversation for the reader and district teams. This is the real deal for educators looking to create and sustain an equitable MTSS!”

—**Lorri Race**, MTSS Coordinator 6–12,
Norwich City School District

“Intentionally designing our educational systems to ensure inclusive experiences rooted in belonging for all students is not the work for leaders faint of heart. In *In Support of All Students: A Leader’s Guide to Equitable MTSS*, authors Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez have integrated their vast knowledge of universal design for learning (UDL) and implementation/improvement science to assist equity warriors in their journey of self-reflection, organizational improvement, and ultimately creating a system that benefits those we serve. A must-read and call to action.”

—**Kevin Schaefer**, Director, Inclusive Practices,
*Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) Project,
El Dorado County Office of Education*

“Dr. Katie Novak and Dr. Kristan Rodriguez deliver again! School and district leaders and MTSS teams will benefit from this practical how-to guide that walks readers through the development/refinement of a school’s multi-tiered system of support through the lens of UDL. The authors share practical tips, tools, and tales that can be used by teams to deepen their knowledge of MTSS and improve their systems so that every student can thrive.”

—**Molly McCabe**, *Instructional Services,
Riverside County Office of Education*

“In *In Support of Students: A Leader’s Guide to Equitable MTSS*, Dr. Novak and Dr. Rodriguez provide a clear, concise pathway to the change needed in our schools to support all students. They have demystified equitable MTSS implementation, providing the connections between what we talk about doing and the steps we can take to do it, placing students at the center—guiding the process of adapting our school environments into places where all students are included and learn!”

—**Annie Lamberto**, *Special Education and Inclusionary Practices,
Washington Education Association*

“This book is an excellent playbook for any school administrator to follow to get equitable MTSS going in their district. Whether this is your introduction to MTSS or you are well on your way, this book is the reference that you need to make the transformative changes in your school in order to truly support all students.”

—**Steven C. Meyer**, *Superintendent,
Clinton Public Schools*

“This book is a must-read for any leader looking to make their school or district meet the increasingly diverse needs of all students. Written by practitioners for practitioners, it is a roadmap to follow, including many opportunities for collaboration and reflection built into each chapter.”

—**Dr. Matthew Crowley**, *Superintendent,
Woburn Public Schools*

“In Support of Students stands out among other books that are focused on MTSS in that Novak and Rodriguez focus on change and improvement science strategies to incorporate a comprehensive and equitable multi-tiered system of support. As always, Katie and Kristan incorporate their sense of humor and relatable anecdotes to make sense of complex changes like this.”

—**Henry J. Turner**, *EdD, Award-Winning High School Principal and Author of Change the Narrative: How to Foster an Antiracist Culture in Your School*

“Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez have delivered a truly empowering gift. In Support of Students: A Leader’s Guide to Equitable MTSS is a how-to guide that delivers not only the tools and resources for learning leaders, but the strategies and models to examine current systems to support implementation of an authentic tiered system of support. Now we can finally answer the question ‘Where do I start?’ Through their candid storytelling and reflections at the onset of each chapter, Katie and Kristan connect with readers at such a genuine personal and professional level. Get ready to be equipped to lead inclusive, equitable, and sustainable change!”

—**Jennifer Knight DeLashmutt**, *Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning, International School Bangkok*

“Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez have written a must-read guide for systems to move beyond theory and planning to actionable systemic changes for all of our children to be successful and engaged in their learning. This book is invaluable for all levels of educational leaders.”

—**Krestin Bahr**, *Superintendent, Peninsula School District*

“Every student deserves the very best education. Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez advocate for all students by coaching school leaders to design school and classroom systems that support every child’s access to the grade-level curriculum. This is a book for school leaders and leadership teams looking to break free from the ‘that’s how we’ve always done it’ mindset and entertain ideas and change that will support learners’ academic, behavioral, and social needs. The ‘Pause and Reflect’ questions used in this book are a lifeline for school leaders looking to change their mindsets and systems.”

—**Joanna Shelley**, *Educator*

In
Support of
Students

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A Leader's Guide to
Equitable MTSS

Katie Novak, Ed.D.
Kristan Rodriguez, Ph.D.

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This book is for educational leaders who believe that we can create more inclusive and equitable systems, that change is possible, and that our learners, especially those who have been excluded, minoritized, marginalized, and have had to be resilient, deserve so much more.

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Acknowledgments

From Katie

To KRod, you paved my road to leadership, and for that, I am forever grateful. You saw leadership capacity in me before anyone else, and your perseverance (and the fact that you never take no for an answer! Ha!) encouraged me to expand my classroom walls further and further. From our first meeting in Chelmsford to the many years we collaborated in G-D (Dream Team!) to our ongoing work around the world, you will always be my BPF (Best Professional Friend). Can't wait to celebrate this book in PR. I'm coming! Love you so much.

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And to my amazing family:

Lon, if I could go back, I would choose you all over again. Thank you for stepping away from your work to support mine. You are the best husband, dad, and partner in crime (although you aren't nearly as funny as me!). Truly, none of this would be possible without you. To Torin, Aylin, Brec, and Boden, this work is driven by my love for each of you. You deserve classrooms that accept you for who you are and provide you with the conditions you need to be wildly successful. Every parent wants that for their children and they shouldn't have to work so hard to get it. When systems work seems overwhelming, I think of you. I always say that every child is somebody's baby, and they deserve the very best. You are my babies and you make me better and happier every day. I am so proud of the people you are.

From Kristan

There is literally only one person who fits into my size fours and sixes as maternity wear, vigorously drinks decaffeinated coffee by the gallon, and whose opinion I intrinsically know is aligned with my vision, values, and goals as an educator, friend, and business partner. *The* Katie Novak is a blessing I have been given in this lifetime. I am forever grateful for the years we saw each other every day and missing you like crazy on this island.

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Introduction

Recently, while scrolling through social media, an advertisement for a shirt stood out. It noted, “If you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention.” In education, we know the outcomes of our learners and we know we can do better. Teachers are working way too hard not to have a greater impact on the outcomes of all students, especially those learners who have been historically underserved. Educators around the country are burnt out, overworked, and overwhelmed. These realities are maddening. Despite this, we believe at our core that all students and all educators can experience success when schools and systems get the conditions right for them to be successful. And this requires a systems overhaul. A big one.

Federal education law requires the adoption of multi-tiered systems of support to ensure that every student has equitable access to grade-level classrooms, equitable opportunities to learn at high levels, and equitable feelings of belonging and hope. Numerous texts offer theories and conceptual frames for creating these systems, but don’t offer the tools to actually put them into practice. We both understand conceptually how ships sail and love the idea of a cruise down to the island of Nevis but we sure as heck don’t know how to build a yacht. Understanding a theory and understanding how to put that theory into practice are not the same. Any attempts to build a boat without concrete tools would result in the edu-version of *Gilligan’s Island* (note: lost at sea).

Similarly, leaders and school boards love the idea of inclusive and equitable systems and are committed to the mission of meeting the needs of all learners. What is missing is the guidance on how to accomplish this. We

have to provide tools and guidance so that people know how to build the ship, and more importantly, can sail it on both calm waters and choppy seas.

As the authors of this text, we are in a unique position as practitioners, lead authors of state MTSS guidance, and consultants with hundreds of districts worldwide to support district and school leaders in creating inclusive, equitable systems using a conversational style, concrete planning tools, numerous analogies, and just the right amount of sass. Thank you for joining us.

1

Planning for Systems Change

In this chapter, we introduce multi-tiered systems through the lens of complex change theory. Creating robust MTSS requires adaptive change throughout organizations. Facilitating this level of change requires an understanding of complex change, implementation science, and improvement science as drivers of success. We offer a Deeper Learning Model for MTSS, which explicitly connects MTSS to critical equity work and highlights the importance of deep, authentic learning experiences for all students.

The View from My Window (Kristan)

Recently, I moved to the eastern coast of Puerto Rico. Each night, I fall asleep to two sounds—the call of the coqui frog and the “woosh” of breaking waves. As the sun peeks out in the morning, the waves serve as an ancient siren song, luring me into the ocean. However, I have yet to heed that call. Instead, I sit at my desk, my fingers on the keyboard, staring at the blue light until I’m too exhausted to consider a moonlight voyage. It seems obvious that I should slam the laptop shut, walk over to the marina I can see from my terrace, and sail away. I promise that someday soon, I will charter a catamaran to Culebra, an island that encompasses wonders beneath its waves, spending a day filled with white sand, calm waters, and the sea life that I only see in the framed photos on my office wall.

It is not like I haven't taken some steps toward this goal. I even bought a snorkel! It currently sits in a drawer, in its plastic packaging, not yet having had the chance to peek at the leatherback turtles that hatch off my island shore that serves as protected land. I have the desire, the equipment, and the vision. But I have not yet taken all the steps necessary to change. It's time.

Our Call

We have all been engulfed by waves of educational shifts that pull us to make changes. While the past few years have taught us resiliency, they have also taught us that what we thought was, and always would be, the model for education in this country is quite malleable. If ever there was a time for us to evaluate our systems to design ones that can be more proactive, more responsive, and more successful, it is now.

Like us, you know, without a doubt, that educators are capable of creating something that works better for everyone. You can see it. You have a vision, one that nags at you. As a district leader, a school leader, or a member of a distributed leadership team, you feel in your bones the call for system shifts like the pull of waves in the ocean. However, let's be clear: the work you are doing in schools, the moral imperative of creating something that positively impacts all learners, is far more important and far more complex. The snorkeling anecdote illustrates that even small goals and small changes are difficult to make when we are committed to our routines. Changing how we educate our youth and educators is monumental, but there is a science behind it. We can take steps to realize our vision, but first, we must recognize the challenges we face and create a strategy for addressing those areas.

It may be helpful to recognize that two types of challenges require us to change: technical problems and adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Technical problems can be addressed through existing solutions and expert guidance. The barrier of identifying high-quality instructional materials is a technical problem that can be addressed by accessing research from organizations like EdReports and WhatWorks Clearinghouse and using curriculum alignment rubrics. These types of problems differ from adaptive challenges (e.g., learning how to get teachers to use instructional materials in ways that are inclusive, equitable, and promote

deeper learning), which require leaders and stakeholders to collaboratively experiment with new procedures, norms, or beliefs to address problems of practice (Pak et al., 2020). A great example of an adaptive challenge as it relates to curriculum adoption was discussed by Pak and colleagues (2020) in the research paper “The Adaptive Challenges of Curriculum Implementation.”

It helps to adaptively uncover some of the root causes behind teachers’ issues with these technical resources, as some of these root causes address teachers’ mindsets about student ability and cultural interests (i.e., the adaptive challenge of speaking the unspeakable). . . .

While there were teachers across all districts who appreciated the rigor of the provided curriculum for exposing them to the demands of the standards, there were also teachers who expressed that their students did not have the “prerequisite skills, prior knowledge, or background experience to keep up with the pacing” in the curricula (teacher interview, Orrington). Statements such as this reflect the fixed mindset that students’ intelligence levels are static, rendering them unprepared to take on academic challenges (p. 8).

This example makes it clear that it would be much quicker to adopt a curriculum review rubric than to challenge ableist mindsets about student potential. The work of instructional leaders is to consistently work toward a shared vision while balancing and addressing our systems’ technical and adaptive barriers (Table 1.1).

The book *UDL Playbook for School and District Leaders* (Novak and Woodlock, 2021) shares another example of how adaptive challenges will require much more than technical fixes and how it’s the adaptive challenges that will require long-term commitment, passion, and patience.

If you have a negative staff culture, you can’t just pick up the phone and fix it. You can’t read a blog online or show a video and solve it. There are no procedures addressing what to do when your staff feels hopeless, not listened to, and uninspired. Sure, you can host a morning coffee as a technical bandaid, but that won’t solve your problem. Adaptive challenges will take every strength you have.

Table 1.1 Technical and adaptive challenges.

Technical Problem	Adaptive Challenge
It is easy to identify.	It is difficult to identify.
Most of the time has quick and easy solutions (tried and tested).	It requires changes in the way things are done (changes in approach to work).
It can be solved by expertise or authority generally.	People who are working from where the problem is generated need to solve it.
It requires small changes within organizational boundaries.	Requires changes in many places that may cross organizational boundaries.
People are receptive to technical solutions.	People resist acknowledging adaptive challenges.
Solutions can be implemented fast and by authority/experts.	Solutions emerge from experimentation and discovery, and take a long time to implement.

Source: Adapted from Heifetz et al. (2009).

Pause and Reflect

Brainstorm some of the challenges you are facing in your leadership practice as it relates to building a system that supports all learners. Are they technical problems or adaptive challenges?

Suppose you and your team have already completed an equity review or a district self-assessment. In that case, you may have begun to invest in necessary changes, but your district will not realize full implementation and complex change until all the systems are in place, and that work is not easy. We want you to feel confident in navigating the tides of systems change. We are here to charter this journey with you. When we finally build the multi-tiered system that our students, staff, families, and communities deserve,

we can all celebrate with a snorkeling trip (bring your sunscreen and life preservers!).

The Need for Complex Change

The persistent achievement gap between privileged and nonprivileged populations has been referred to as the “most stubborn, perplexing issue confronting American schools today” (Evans, 2005, p. 582). Some researchers argue that the achievement and opportunity gaps are “an act of civil war” (Thirunarayanan, 2004, p. 479). We all know this needs to change. What is missing is concrete guidance on how to accomplish this.

Creating robust multi-tiered systems will require us to make significant changes to our systems and structures. Understanding change theory, therefore, is a helpful foundation for thinking about the work ahead. Understanding the bigger picture of how change occurs helps visualize the journey. In the following sections, we will unpack major change theories and make concrete connections to how these theories will impact your work in building comprehensive MTSS systems. Think of them as tools in your toolbox as you learn more about how to put theory into practice.

Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze Model

In 1947, Kurt Lewin theorized the unfreeze-change-refreeze model, which argued that for change to occur, practitioners have to reject and replace prior systems. “Prior systems” are the current beliefs, practices, and routines we must change. Turns out, this is much more difficult than one would think. The book *Unlearning: Changing Your Beliefs and Practices with UDL* (Posey and Novak, 2020) notes how difficult it is to unfreeze simple “facts” we think we understand. For example, it is a simple fact that when there is no light, there is no color.

When you look at an apple, it looks red because wavelengths of light are reflected from the apple onto the cone photoreceptors in your eyes. You perceive the redness because of the reflection of that light. Without light, there is no color. Literally, nothing is reflected onto the cones of your eyes, so there is nothing to perceive. No electrical signal goes to your brain.