



The main goal of the Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) is for schools to use their resources in ways that enables every child, preK-12, to be successful. Effective classroom teachers are essential to the successful implementation of a strong evidence-based core curriculum (Tier 1) in order to meet the needs of all students. A key component of a strong core curriculum is differentiated instruction. Recent research on the brain and how we learn supports what we already knew, that students learn in a variety of ways (Nunley, 2003; Sousa, 2001). In a well-functioning MTSS students receive research-based instruction based on data and suited to their diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning styles in order to expand the opportunity for growth (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993) within the core curriculum. In an MTSS, students who do not attain adequate achievement with differentiated core instruction alone, will be provided further support through a comprehensive tiered intervention system (i.e. Tier 2 & Tier 3). As the amount of support a student needs at each tier changes so does the terminology within the MTSS associated with instructional changes. Educators must “differentiate” at Tier 1 (core), “adjust” instruction at Tier 2 (supplemental), and “customize” instruction at Tier 3 (intensive).

Differentiated instruction occurs when teachers modify curriculum, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the needs of individual students and/or small groups of students in order to maximize the learning opportunities for each student in the classroom (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). According to Tomlinson (1999), teachers begin where students are, not necessarily page one of a curriculum guide. Differentiated classrooms employ a variety of instructional strategies, embrace flexibility around timing, and develop partnerships with the students to ensure the learning environment and what is learned are molded to fit the needs of the learner. Furthermore, teachers should not assume one student’s blueprint for learning is identical to another’s, and therefore provide specific ways for each individual to learn as intensely and swiftly as possible (Tomlinson, 1999). A critical element of a differentiated classroom is frequent assessment to provide the teacher data on a daily basis to measure a student’s readiness for specific skills. The assessment data are used to determine what modifications need to be made to the content, process, and/or product (see figure). The organization of the differentiated classroom may include whole group, small group (both heterogeneous and homogenous when appropriate), partners, teacher-led, centers, and independent work. Keeping in mind all students continue to receive core instruction, it is essential for classroom teachers to differentiate instruction to provide students with the appropriate support as well as multiple opportunities to be successful at demonstrating their mastery of the core curriculum’s objectives or benchmarks. Additional information regarding differentiated instruction is available through Access Center (www.k8accesscenter.org), Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (www.ascd.org), and the Florida Center for Reading Research (www.fcrr.org).

Teachers can **differentiate instruction** by:

- *Content* (what you want the students to learn)
- *Process* (what activities you design to make certain students use key skills to make sense of the information)
- *Product* (what vehicle students use to demonstrate and extend their learning)

(Tomlinson, 1999)

Supplemental and Intensive Instruction is provided in addition to the core curriculum when students’ needs require targeted interventions in order for them to be successful. Supplemental instruction (Tier 2) provides specific instruction of skills to small, homogenous groups of students, where individual student progress is

monitored biweekly, at a minimum, using curriculum-based measurements to determine if the instructional needs of each student are being met. The instruction is delivered by the classroom teacher, specialized teacher, or other trained interventionist, in addition to the regularly scheduled core instructional time. Intensive instruction (Tier 3) takes place in even smaller homogenous groupings of students. The instruction provided at this level is characterized by an increased length of instruction on a daily basis, and represents the most intensive of interventions in addition to the regularly scheduled core instructional time. While all content areas within the MTSS (i.e., reading, math, behavior) are characterized by tiered instruction, the descriptions provided herein are specific to the academic content areas only.

Individuals responsible for providing the core instruction must be cognizant of differentiating their instruction to provide students with the optimal opportunity to be successful with the curriculum, skill, or strategy. It is a common misconception that because a system offers tiered levels of instruction (i.e. Tiers 1, 2, 3) differentiation is occurring. While providing tiered levels of instruction can be viewed as the simplest form of differentiation, it is not best practice to limit differentiation to tiers of instruction alone. Instruction within the core curriculum must be meaningful and accessible for all students.

In closing, differentiation plays a role within the instruction an educator provides students at all levels of instruction (Tier 1, 2, 3). Educators differentiate instruction by content, process, and product recognizing that “one size doesn’t fit all” because each student has unique needs. According to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010), a fundamental goal of teaching is to maximize the capacity of every student. It is typical for teachers to think of their students as a group (Brighton, Hertberg, Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, 2005), but it also makes it nearly impossible to address individual student differences when we think “the students.” Teachers should ask themselves, “What is this student’s next step in learning essential content today? How can I help each student understand and contribute to his or her next step in learning?” (Tomlinson, & Imbeau, 2010, p. 37).

In differentiated classrooms:

- Certain skills are goals for ALL learners
- Instruction may be whole group, small groups, partners, individual or a combination there of
- Instruction is typically delivered by the classroom teacher

In Tiers 2 and 3:

- Certain skills are goals for a small, homogenous group of learners or individual students
- Instruction may be delivered by the classroom teacher, specialized teacher or external interventionist
- Small groups (3-5 students) or one-on-one with individual students
- Explicit and intense instruction

Common to both:

- Frequent, ongoing data-based decision making
- The use of technology-assisted instruction to support and reinforce skills
- Flexible scheduling
- Creative use of teaching styles
- Proactive

References:

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