UDL and CA MTSS: Part 1

James Mckenna	Hello, my name is James McKenna, and I'm an Assistant Director with the California Collaborative Educational Excellence.
Rhonda Marriott-Spencer	Hello, my name is Rhonda Marriott-Spencer, and I am an Administrator with the Orange County Department of Education and also part of the California MTSS Executive Leadership Team, supporting the spread and scale of a multi-tiered system of support throughout the state of California.
James Mckenna	So for those who are new to UDL, can you please give us a brief description of what it is and why it's important?
Rhonda Marriott-Spencer	I think for me the best way to describe it is that Universal Design for Learning is proactive. We are providing those supports, giving students what they need when they need it, and it's intentional. It's that intentional design so that we are removing those barriers to accessing the curriculum, to accessing the activities, to support their overall engagement.
	I always reflect on my experiences with the great Katie Novak around Universal Design for Learning, and she sums it up just beautifully is that "Variability is the rule, not the exception." So we know that all students come in and adults come into the school system with different entry points, right? They have different foundational experiences, they have different perspectives, they have different cultural identities. And so we need to intentionally design our lessons and our supports with that in mind, that variability is the rule.
	And then also firm goals and flexible means, right? So here are the standards, here's our overall goal. However, the pathways that our students can access and achieve those goals can be different. And, that is okay. Because when we intentionally remove those barriers, all of our students can succeed. UDL is so important for the success of our students because we truly need to think about empowering them as learners, putting the learning in their hands, and then also empowering our educators to be able to remove those barriers for students.
	So as an educator, we can reflect on what barriers as I am presenting information or designing these learning experiences, what are these barriers that students are going to come up against in order for them to access the content or the project or the activity? So as we do that, this just builds the

capacity of the entire system. So as educators are building their capacity with this, then the administrator is really understanding what to look for as they walk into a classroom, that is intentionally designed, that is removing barriers, that is engaging students, presenting content in meaningful ways, and then providing those opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding or connections to the content. So it just empowers the entire system and will lead, again, to that future success of our students.

James McKenna	So you mentioned barriers and needing flexible paths to deal with barriers. Could you give us an example of what it looks like in a classroom for a child to encounter barriers and what support they might need?
Rhonda Marriott-Spencer	Yes. When we think about barriers, that's not always something in our terminology as educators. And so, you know, I just think about, okay, I would like my students to read this grade level text in a specific content area. However, I have a child that is not reading at that fourth grade level, they're reading at a first grade level. So that is an intentional barrier that is put in place so that student cannot access that content. So, you know, as we think about providing those flexible means, well, I can offer a different level of text so that students can access the content. And then I can also, maybe could I provide that student with a partner, a learning buddy, to actually engage in the content. So my goal is still to access that grade level content, however, I'm providing flexibility that that student can work with a partner, so that again that is also removing that barrier which leads to that underlying idea of variability is the rule, not the exception, right? Our students come into our learning environments at different places, and so we need to meet them where they are and then remove those barriers to support them.
James McKenna	You know, what really came across clearly to me is that when we talk about barriers, you're talking about barriers that are in the learning design, in the environment. It's not about trying to figure out what's not working in James. It's about what's not working for James, and how we could ally with them and help them get where we all want to go.
Rhonda Marriott-Spencer	Absolutely. And so that's where that word, intentionality, comes in, right? So I'm very intentional about what is going to support this student and how can I design this learning environment so they can be successful? So then that puts the ownership on that educator to be in that proactive stance, that we're not responding, we are actually being proactive to be able to support them.