



Universal Social-emotional Screening in Schools

What is universal social-emotional screening?

Universal school-based social-emotional screening is the process of systematically scanning the entire student population to identify students who may require additional social-emotional or behavioral support to improve readiness for learning and increase well-being. Regular review of screening data can help school staff and administrators better understand the needs of individual students as well as the overall school population (e.g., whether a behavior is being exhibited by the majority of students and best addressed through a schoolwide support/intervention), so they can provide appropriate tiered supports and track student progress over time. A universal screening process may or may not include the use of a social-emotional screening questionnaire.

How does social-emotional screening differ from psychological assessment?

Universal screening relies on identification of common, observable behaviors that serve as indicators of social-emotional strength and risk, and as such does not require any specialized knowledge or advanced training. Psychological assessment, on the other hand, involves the collection and interpretation of in-depth information using specialized tools and expertise to arrive at a formal diagnosis.

School readiness for universal screening

Before implementing a universal screening process, schools should meet the following prerequisites.

1. Functioning Tier 1 and Tier 2/3 MTSS-B teams
2. Well-established referral/request for assistance procedures
3. An adequate and comprehensive array of evidence-based (and/or promising) practices installed at each MTSS-B tier to address student social-emotional concerns that may be identified by the screening process
4. Decision rules for student entrance and exit into/out of interventions at each tier
5. Regular review of fidelity, screening, and outcome data by appropriate tiered teams to support data-based decision making and quality improvement

What indicators of student well-being can we use?

As a first step, school teams can identify existing data sources to identify, prioritize, and monitor needs related to student wellness. The following indicators, when taken together, can provide some information about student social-emotional functioning and tend to predict school success:

- ✓ Office discipline referrals/problem behaviors
- ✓ Chronic absenteeism
- ✓ Academic functioning

National guidelines have been developed to help middle and high schools recognize early warning signs of future school drop-out; see below. We recommend use of local data to refine these thresholds for your schools.

INDICATOR	THRESHOLD
Behavior	More than 1 office discipline referral per quarter ¹
Absences	Missed 10% or more of instructional time ²
Academics	Grade of D or F in middle/high school ³ ; locally determined for elementary level

¹ Johns Hopkins University, School of Education, Center for Social Organization of Schools. (2012). *Using data to keep all students on track to graduation: Team playbook*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved January 10, 2014, from http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Team_Playbook.pdf

² Therriault, S. B., O'Cummings, M., Heppen, J., Yerhot, L., & Scala, J. (2013). *High School Early Warning Intervention Monitoring System implementation guide*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, National High School Center. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521686>

³ *ibid*



Why use a universal screening tool/questionnaire?

Ideally, universal screening also includes use of a validated social-emotional screening tool or questionnaire (screener) in addition to the school data described above. Screeners are particularly useful in identifying internalizing and/or less severe risk behaviors of students that typically go undetected when relying exclusively on school data. Many students (close to 20%) with burgeoning mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) may be overlooked in a classroom setting if they are not acting out and disrupting the learning environment.⁴

Screeners are brief rating scales that ask a knowledgeable adult or caregiver (such as a teacher or parent) to rate students on observable behaviors, without inference about the source, meaning, or function of those behaviors. Universal social-emotional screeners commonly used in school settings may ask teachers to identify student strengths and observable areas of concern such as:

- **Externalizing behaviors:** Cooperation, prosocial interactions, arguing, disruptive behaviors, etc.
- **Internalizing behaviors:** Attitude, ability to rebound from setbacks, sadness, worry, withdrawal, etc.
- **Academic functioning:** Interest, preparedness, ability to work independently, distractedness, etc.

How can we address implicit bias in screening?

Implicit bias refers to attitudes toward and stereotypes about people that we hold without our own conscious knowledge.⁵ Processes like universal social-emotional screening, in which teachers rate observable student behaviors, are inherently somewhat subjective and thus can be skewed by implicit biases.

Research has found that differences we see between two teachers' ratings of the same student's behaviors are not always random. Teachers' evaluations of students vary systematically by teacher demographics and student race, among other characteristics. For example, teachers were found to make more negative (e.g., discipline) and fewer positive (e.g., gifted program) referrals for Black and Latinx students than for White students. In addition, variation in teachers' perceptions of students is related to the racial match between teachers and students. For instance, non-Black teachers are less likely to have favorable expectations and perceptions of Black students.⁶

Before implementing a universal screening process, staff should participate in implicit bias training to help address personal biases, develop self-awareness, and learn strategies to keep biases in check when completing student ratings. Diversity and/or cultural competency training can also provide staff with valuable knowledge, skills, and resources to identify and address student needs in equitable and culturally responsive ways.

How should we use our screening data?

School-level

Leaders at the district/school level should develop a protocol for how screening data will be used and shared. This includes:

- ✓ Who will have access to student-level screening data?
- ✓ Who will analyze screening data to match students to supports/interventions?
- ✓ Will we analyze screening data by subgroups? School/grade/classroom? Gender, race/ethnicity, IEP status, etc.?
- ✓ How will we share aggregate screening results with stakeholders such as school staff, students, parents, or other stakeholders?
- ✓ How will we share student-level screening data with parents (and students, if appropriate)?

⁴ Splett, J. W., Trainor, K. M., Raborn, A., Halliday-Boykins, C. A., Garzona, M. E., Dongo, M. D., & Weist, M. D. (2018). Comparison of Universal Mental Health Screening to Students Already Receiving Intervention in a Multitiered System of Support. *Behavioral Disorders, 43*(3), 344–356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0198742918761339>

⁵ Perception Institute. (2021). *Implicit Bias*. Retrieved June 17, 2021 from <https://perception.org/research/implicit-bias/>

⁶ Weathers, E. S. (2019). *Bias or Empathy in Universal Screening? The Effect of Teacher–Student Racial Matching on Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior*. *Urban Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919873691>



Student-level

Districts/schools should designate a team that holds responsibility for analyzing screening data and matching students to supports; ideally, this role would be filled by your Tier 2/3 team. Procedures for matching students to interventions should include:

- ✓ How to confirm the need for supports/interventions
- ✓ When to consult additional data sources – and which ones
- ✓ How to match students to appropriate interventions
- ✓ How to set outcomes/exit criteria and monitor progress at the individual and aggregate level

How do we implement universal screening?

The chart below provides a universal screening implementation timeline.⁷ The first screening can take place in the fall and be repeated again during the school year to monitor student progress, depending on the needs and capacity of the district. Teams should adopt data-informed criteria to determine when student should add, change, or exit supports.

Universal social-emotional screening timeline

District-level || **School-level**

PHASE	TASK	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV
Preparation	District/community leadership develops district-wide universal screening plan*	█			
	Present universal screening plan to district and building stakeholders	█			
	Develop parent information letter about screening procedures*		█		
	Develop screening tools and written protocols to support administration		█		
	Establish building-level protocols for screener administration*		█		
	Establish district-wide protocols for screener administration*		█		
	Ensure school leaders develop fluency in explaining universal screening			█	
	Identify building-level universal screening facilitators; provide training			█	
	Prepare building staff with universal screener training session*			█	
	Schedule screening dates with building administrators			█	
	Prepare necessary materials and administer screening				█
Administration/ scoring	Team leads/coaches check screener forms for completion/accuracy*			█	
	Team meets to review scores/data			█	
	Share results with all staff and families per the district-level plan				█
Post-administration	Determine plan for re-screening in January and/or April				█
	Review the results with teams and leadership in each building				█
	Using established protocols, match students to appropriate supports				█

*Only required if using a social-emotional screening tool/questionnaire

For a comprehensive guide to effectively implementing universal screening, please see:

Best Practices in Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes: An Implementation Guide. School Mental Health Collaborative. <https://smhcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/universalscreening.pdf>

⁷ Adapted from: Hearn, A., Barrett, S., Eber, L., & Perales, K. (2019) *Interconnected Systems Framework Universal Screener Timeline*.