

Choosing and Using Screeners and Assessments

The integration of screening in schools to assess students’ social, emotional, and mental health is a strategy used to determine the adequacy of support provided within a multi-tier system for students’ well-being. The terms “screeners” and “assessments” are often used interchangeably in the research literature, and we use these terms as synonyms in this document to denote data collection tools. Screening can be conducted using a systematic tool or process with an entire population (e.g., a school’s student body) or a group of students (e.g., a classroom or grade level). Screening is termed “universal” when it is provided to an entire student population (i.e., a grade, school, district, or state) to identify students’ strengths and needs (safesupportivelearning.ed.gov). With the help of properly trained staff and a plan for implementation, screening tools can provide schools with data to recognize students’ strengths and challenges; in turn, this information can be used to inform next steps to understand and address students’ needs.

Prior to screening students, it is essential that schools have properly trained staff who can safely and effectively screen children and adolescents; a system for referral and follow-up when screening identifies a problem that requires further attention; and access to school-based and community resources to adequately address students’ mental health needs. It is critical that schools ensure—before undertaking screening—that they are connected to the resources necessary to address the student needs that screening identifies.

This guide provides an overview of the distinguishing factors among different types of screeners as well as their purpose, audience, and considerations when selecting one to use.

Types of Screeners and Assessments

Best practices suggest that schools conduct universal screening on common concerns and then assess specific needs using staff with specialized training and expertise. Staff who conduct mental health screening often collect sensitive data (e.g., student reports of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts). These data are critical to identifying student needs and should be securely stored so that only staff who need the information have access to it. In general, universal screeners should cover common themes, including both strengths and challenges (e.g., risk factors and protective factors for youth). Social emotional learning (SEL) assessments focus on interpersonal and emotional domains (i.e., social skills, emotions regulation) and are often tied to program outcomes to evaluate change over time. Finally, behavioral health (i.e., mental health and substance use) assessments are commonly used by school counselors to identify problem areas requiring special services (e.g., depression, eating disorders, alcohol use). Each of these types of assessments are reviewed below.

Category

Universal Screeners

Definition



Universal screening is a proactive method for identifying students who may be at risk of developing mental and behavioral health challenges. It involves examining all students in a population for indicators of well-being or risk. Universal screening can help educators and school health professionals identify students who need additional support. It can also help schools access good data to inform decisions.

Purpose



Equity-centered universal screening can be used to:

Identify the “health” of the learning environment (i.e., school climate) and the impact on students, families, and the school community

Determine the need for appropriate and comprehensive supports

Increase access to support for all students and families

Provide insight into the need for universal changes to the learning environment and adult behaviors and practices

Drive student supports, services, and innovation

Support school improvement goals

Enhance the school environment, inform adult behavior, and identify student needs

Audience



Universal Screening

ALL students within a space (Tier 1: class, grade, school, district, and so forth)

Group Screening

Screeners can be used for students receiving Tier 2 and 3 interventions to make decisions about programming, need, and impact of supports. Often this goal is tied to Behavioral Health Screeners (see below).

What NOT to Do



Should not be used to only change/add supports for students; include focus on learning environments and school climate

Don't make decisions based on a single data source; use a comprehensive and integrated approach when possible

Not to grade students or make any placement decisions; intended to identify students who may need additional supports

Don't focus solely on challenges, but assess for strengths as well

Types of Data Collected



There are many types of data that can be collected using screeners. Before selecting a screener, it is always important to ask: **What are we screening for?**

Mental health*

Physical needs

Social and emotional well-being

School climate, resources and engagement

SEL skills: Interpersonal social skills

School, community, and family needs

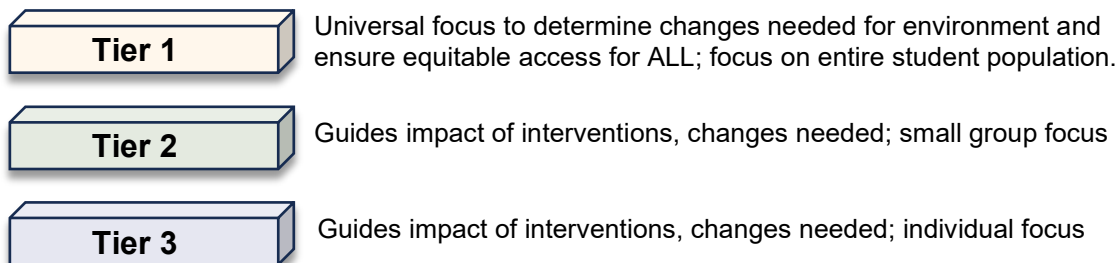
*See Behavioral Health Screeners

Category

Tier Implications



Universal Screeners



Considerations When Selecting a Universal Screener

Universal screening assessments are typically brief, reliable, and valid.

- ✓ The cost of the screener
- ✓ Whether the screener is acceptable and useful to involved stakeholders
- ✓ The school's or district's resources
- ✓ The support and consent of parents and guardians, when needed
- ✓ Determine appropriate use of the tool
 - Self-report, teacher-report, family-report
 - Validity and reliability of instrument (reliability scores over .7)
- ✓ Data is disaggregated (e.g., look at special subgroups) to ensure equitable environments, access, and opportunities for all student populations
- ✓ Engage families, providers, and so forth to ensure multiple voices
- ✓ Student needs are contextual; consider ecological factors
- ✓ Consider bias and equity, language and culture
- ✓ Consider unintended consequences

In most cases, if used with all students, no permission is needed; however, it is good to communicate with families about the process

Additional Resources

- Michigan Department of Education SEL guidance: [Early Childhood to Grade 12 Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Competencies and Indicators](#)
- Michigan School Health Survey System: [County Report Generation database](#)
- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS): [Universal behavior screeners](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Youth risk questionnaires](#)
- Rhode Island Department of Education: [Universal Screening Guidance](#)

Category

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills Assessment

Definition



A **social-emotional learning (SEL) screener** is a tool that helps measure how students feel about school and how well they are supported. The screener data can help identify students who may need SEL support for academic success. SEL assessments are used to measure skills and behaviors associated with social and emotional skills. They can:

- Assess social and emotional competence
- Deliver consistent, high-quality SEL instruction to all students
- Align SEL data with academic data, such as grades and attendance, to identify students who need additional academic and/or SEL support
- Assess both children and adults

Purpose



SEL screeners –

Used to drive instruction, changes to prevention and intervention supports, changes to environment/culture

Could be a screener and/or assessment to determine impact of curriculum/interventions

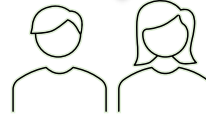
For adults, impacts professional learning, changes to environment, adult well-being

Part of a system of supports/multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) process; used to assess specific skills regarding strengths, needs, or progress of improvement/change

Audience



Students engaged in specific SEL curriculum



Adults engaged in specific SEL curriculum or professional learning supports

Students can be identified by screeners and subsequently receive interventions/supports

What NOT to Do



Don't focus exclusively on deficits

Not for diagnosis without properly trained staff, extensive supports, interventions, multiple data points, collaboration with various staff/family, and appropriate permission (see Behavioral Health Screeners below for this)

Types of Data Collected



SEL competencies:



Intrapersonal competencies – Knowledge, skills, and attitudes directed toward oneself (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making)

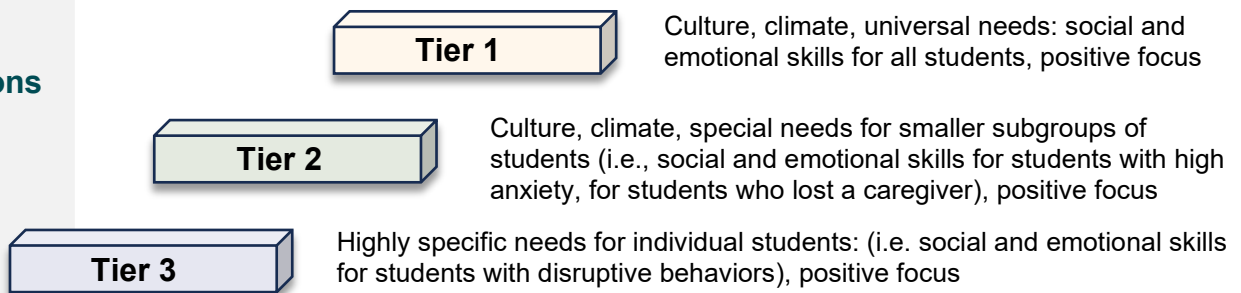


Interpersonal competencies – Knowledge, skills, and attitudes directed toward other people, institutions, or social structures (e.g., social awareness) (Taylor et al., 2018)

Category

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills Assessment

Tier Implications



Considerations When Selecting an Assessment

- ✓ The cost of the assessment
- ✓ Whether the assessment is acceptable and useful to involved stakeholders
- ✓ The school's or district's resources
- ✓ The support and consent of parents and guardians, when needed
- ✓ Determine appropriate use of the tool
 - Self-report, teacher-report, family-report
 - Validity and reliability of instrument (reliability scores over .7)
- ✓ Data is disaggregated (e.g., look at special subgroups) to ensure equitable environments, access, and opportunities for all student populations
- ✓ Engage families, providers, etc. to ensure multiple voices
- ✓ Student needs are contextual; consider ecological factors
- ✓ Consider bias and equity, language and culture
- ✓ Consider unintended consequences
- ✓ Positive focus; not just deficits

Specific assessments are often recommended when staff choose a SEL program; align with program outcomes.

Additional Resources

- Social, Emotional, and Behavior Academy: [Understanding and Implementing SEL Surveys and Mental Health Screeners](#)
- Western Psychological Services (WPS): [Behavior Intervention Monitoring Assessment System](#)
- Aperture Education: [All Students Can Benefit from SEL: The Importance of Tier I SEL Screening and Supports](#)

Category

Behavioral Health Screeners

(Individual Use by Behavioral Health Providers)

Definition



Behavioral health screeners are a subset of universal screeners that are used by behavioral health providers such as school counselors and social workers to track the signs and symptoms of behavioral health issues (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, trauma, eating disorders, alcohol and drug use) and may be used to assess the effectiveness of prevention and intervention supports related to student well-being. Behavioral health screeners can be used in universal screening with all students and/or may be used with students manifesting special problems.

Purpose



Behavioral health screenings can help bridge the gap between when symptoms first appear and intervention. Screenings in school can address this gap in services and assist youth in need to access services and supports. Behavioral health screening can be used to:

Identify signs and symptoms of behavioral health issues in a student population (i.e., 43% of high school students report depression)

Determine the need for appropriate and comprehensive supports for all students (i.e., access to counselors must increase)

Increase access to support for identified students and families (i.e., students reporting suicidal thoughts receive follow-up care)

Support school improvement goals concerning behavioral health

Provide insight into the need for universal changes to the school environment and adult behaviors related to student well-being

Drive student supports, services, and innovation

Identify specific student needs for specialized services

Audience



Universal Screening

ALL students within a space (class, grade, school, district, and so on) for common behavioral health issues

Targeted Screeners

Targeted screeners for students receiving Tier 2 and 3 interventions to make decisions about programming, need, and impact of supports (i.e., grief groups, teen parent groups, trauma-focused therapy)

What NOT to Do



Do not focus solely on challenges, but also assess for strengths

Do not allow untrained staff to access or utilize private behavioral health information

Do not store private behavioral health information in a non-secure area

Do not allow breaches or inappropriate use of sensitive information

Do not screen for sensitive behavioral health information without clear plans for follow-up to address identified concerns

Category

Behavioral Health Screeners

(Individual Use by Behavioral Health Providers)

Types of Data Collected



There are many types of data that can be collected using behavioral health screeners. Before selecting a screener, it is always important to ask: **What are we screening for?**

Mental Health (i.e., anxiety, depression, attention deficits, hyperactivity, suicidal thoughts, aggressive behavior)

Substance Use (alcohol, marijuana, vaping, illicit drugs)

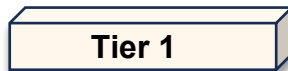
Sexual Behavior (i.e., sexual activity, gender identity)

Trauma (abuse and neglect, sexual assault, bullying victimization, dating violence)

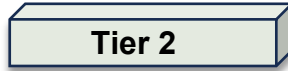
Tier Implications



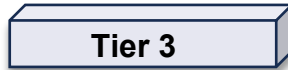
Can be used for decision-making in all MTSS tiers:



Assess behavioral health issues for ALL students



Guides impact of interventions, changes needed; small group focus



Guides impact of interventions, changes needed; small group focus

Considerations When Selecting an Assessment

- ✓ Determine appropriate use of the tool and level of sensitivity
 - Self-report, teacher-report, parent-report
 - Validity and reliability of instrument (reliability scores over .7)
- ✓ Include school counselors and social workers in selection process because they will be responsible for data
- ✓ Engage community providers, professional partners for guidance

In most cases, if used as a regular part of school business, no permission is needed; however, it is good to communicate with families about the process, especially if concerns

Additional Resources

➤ The National Center on School Mental Health offers resources to assist schools in strengthening screening. [Their SHAPE System maintains a Screening and Assessment Library that offers a list of 35 free and low-cost measures.](#)

Assessments are available for: Anxiety, Hope, Academic Optimism, ADHD, Student Risk, Student Engagement, School Climate, Depression, PTSD, Mania, Worry, Resilience, Autism, and Alcoholism.

➤ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): Behavioral Health Screening in Schools – [Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavior Health Risk in Schools](#)

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[Choosing-and-Using-SEL-Competency-Assessments_What-Schools-and-Districts-Need-to-Know.pdf \(casel.org\)](https://casel.org/~/media/CASEL/Assets/Reports%20and%20Publications/Choosing-and-Using-SEL-Competency-Assessments-What-Schools-and-Districts-Need-to-Know.pdf)

Key Screening-Related Resources

- [*Best Practices in Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes: An Implementation Guide*](#) (School Mental Health Collaborative)
- [*Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools*](#) (SAMHSA)
- [*School Mental Health Screening Playbook: Best Practices and Tips from the Field*](#) (Center for School Mental Health)
- [*School Mental Health Referral Pathways \(SMHRP\) Toolkit*](#) (SAMHSA)



REGION 8
Indiana
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Ohio

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