

Reframing a Screening Process to Promote Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments that Support Each and Every Learner

Introduction

A universal screening process continues to be an important part of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework to support the whole child. Of equal importance to a screening process is ensuring the MTSS framework results in a positive, safe, equitable, and inclusive environment. In August 2020, the MiMTSS TA Center paused training on the Student Risk Screening Scale-Internalizing and Externalizing due to concerns raised about the potential risk of teacher bias when rating children whose identities are dissimilar from their own. Of specific concern was use of an instrument that collects observations of students lying, cheating, and stealing, without also surfacing teacher observations of student assets. The guidance that follows is an opportunity to redirect the focus of improvements first toward equity and learning conditions, rather than “fixing” existing deficits within students. A screening process that includes a more balanced inventory of student needs and assets is an essential course correction. Finally, a more equity-oriented screening process is crucial to help families and schools address the reported increase in students coping with anxiety and depression.

The information in this document:

- Provides an update for the field to share current thinking. Opportunities for stakeholder input will be available prior to the release of the next guidance.
- Is designed to call attention to key considerations for a screening process:
 - A definition of universal screening
 - Attention to ensuring safe, inclusive and equitable environments
 - Strong Tier 1 system for each and every student
 - Reframing screening as a process to prompt data-informed improvements to the school environment and supports for students’ multifaceted array of strengths and needs
- Provides high-level ideas and will not be sufficient for anyone, regardless of background knowledge, to pick up and understand how to implement an equity-centered screening process. This document lays a foundation for future guidance that will include more details on how to implement these recommendations per stage of implementation (August 2021), along with examples and tools that are informed by testing the process with districts (Spring 2022).

Universal Screening: Definition and Purpose

Universal screening is a process of systematically assessing all students on academic, social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health indicators and responding to the data. Multiple sources of information are included within a screening process, with multiple decision points along the way. Socially-acceptable and psychometrically-sound tools fit within a universal screening process. Yet, a systematic universal screening **process** is not synonymous with a single assessment tool (Romer et al., 2020).

The purpose of screening is to prompt changes in adult behaviors and mindset that will support positive outcomes for all learners. A screening process that aims to primarily sort, stratify, and diagnose students will not achieve the desired outcome of improved academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health for all learners.

Considerations for Ensuring Safe, Inclusive and Equitable Environments

Having a high-quality MTSS framework that reflects educational equity in which to embed the screening process is foundational to ensuring equitable outcomes for all students. The following are indicators that such a foundation is present:

- The school has a professional learning plan that focuses on continuous improvement that centers equity. This involves collecting and analyzing multiple sources of data to facilitate meaning making and ultimately, to inform decisions.
- The school intentionally examines student learning conditions (e.g., people, practices, and policies) to ensure that each and every student has **access** to high quality educational experiences and opportunities in ways that allow them to **meaningfully participate** in learning that is **representative** of their voices and lived experiences.
- The school centers the voices and cultural referents (e.g., symbols, mental representations, cultural points of reference) of students and families in decision-making through active interaction and participation. These diverse perspectives and active participation should be visible in content development, data review, and development of academic and behavior systems.
- School leadership teams are diverse and representative of the community in which the school is situated.

Considerations for a Strong Tier 1 System for Each and Every Student

An MTSS framework centers equity using ongoing input from multiple and diverse stakeholders. Strong Tier 1 supports require educators to adapt to the changing social and educational landscape, to define and teach the new behaviors students and staff will be required to use to meaningfully engage in school instruction, and to systematically plan for teaching and sustaining those skills. While some students will require targeted and intensive supports, it is essential schools establish and strengthen their core foundations first. Strong Tier 1 systems consider diverse populations and intersecting identities in positive ways that are responsive to all students and minimize discipline issues (Jackson et al., 2018). Whether students receive school instruction through in-person or remote learning, educators must create positive, predictable, safe, and culturally responsive environments.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are complementary and essential Tier 1 supports. These approaches serve as a foundation for universal screening to have a better chance of accurately detecting individual students who may need something more or different. PBIS involves the identification, teaching, and reinforcement of behavioral expectations in the school setting. Teams use data to monitor the use and impact of PBIS. The aim of PBIS is to make the learning environment one that is predictably safe, inclusive, culturally sustaining, and positive.

Adult modeling of their own SEL skill is a critical first step in assuring that equity and SEL instruction are reinforcing and aligned. The professional learning associated with SEL recommends adults consider their own SEL proficiency first. As they work through a self-assessment process (Yoder, 2014), they might model their skills and make their thinking visible to children. For example, a teacher might share that they are working on self-management and identify what behaviors prepare them to manage the ups and downs of their day. Along with this example of congruent behavior, parents, youth-serving staff, teachers and leaders who support a child's agency, belonging and identity during explicit SEL instruction enable children to "feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021). Without assuring that SEL lessons affirm a child's multiple identities, connections to their family and community, SEL might reinforce whatever the dominant culture has normalized.

Implementation of Tier 1 does not need to be perfect and fully implemented before layering on a screening process. However, with PBIS and SEL in place, adults may be better equipped to respond the data yielded by a screening process. When equity and Tier 1 practices are aligned, school experiences do not contribute to additional challenges students might face. For example, a child might say something disrespectful to a teacher that is in direct response to being treated without respect. A screening process will not be enough in of itself to bring about necessary changes to the environment and supports for individuals. Without Tier 1 SEL and PBIS, screening children in order to address the social-emotional, behavioral and mental health needs of children is unbalanced.

Assessment Process: Considerations for Identifying and Responding to Needs

Having multiple perspectives informing (e.g., teachers, students, caregivers) a screening process can help to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences. Adults who are rating students as part of a universal screening process should have at least 4-6 weeks to get to know students and develop relationships before conducting ratings. Ratings must be grounded in behaviors that they have personally observed. An assessment gating process often begins with teams first conducting a universal screening process (Pentimonti et al., 2019). With these results, individuals with content expertise work with district and school teams to determine the degree that more diagnostic and clinical assessments might be used. The teams identify practices that support wellness and identify a child's vulnerability to internalizing behaviors, anxiety, and depression. This scenario parallels the process for supporting academic concerns: conduct universal screening and then assess specific skill needs using staff with specialized training and expertise. A non-example of a less effective and mental health plan would be to skip over universal screening and employ mental health assessments as a first step.

Districts may consider gathering information on these types of social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health indicators that reflect an array of both strengths and challenges:

- Learning history and past experiences
- Culture and community identity
- Academic performance
- Behavioral performance
- Mental health and wellness
- Physical health and wellness
- Basic needs (e.g., food, housing)

A universal screening process helps to identify multiple types of needs:

1. A need for systemic change to the learning environment and adult behaviors to support all learners (e.g., addressing chaotic learning environments and lack of Tier 1 supports for social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health).
2. A need for systemic change to the learning environment and adult behaviors to support marginalized learners (e.g., addressing enhancements to systems and practices to better support each and every learner when there is evidence that and every student does not yet have **access** to high quality learning experiences and other educational opportunities in ways that allow them to **meaningfully participate** in learning that is **representative** of their voices and lived experiences).
3. A need for adults to provide different, additional, or more customized supports for students who are not yet benefitting from a learning environment that is designed to support their development and success.

Existing resources on the topic of universal screening have overemphasized the third function, identifying needs of specific students. When the first two functions of universal screening are underemphasized, there is the potential for local screening systems to overemphasize sorting, stratifying, and diagnosing students. This may have the unintended effect of burdening students and families with additional systems of oppression and marginalization. For example, a student might become labeled as a “Tier 2” learner who needs a behavioral intervention to assimilate to the school expectations. A well-meaning intervention plan might unintentionally communicate to a student that they must assimilate to white, dominant behavioral norms and adults will be constantly monitoring and providing feedback on the assimilation process. Through intervention, a marginalized student who is trying to preserve their cultural identity might be viewed as a “non-responder” to the intervention, further exacerbating a deficit view of the student.

Table 1. Teams are Encouraged to Consider How Needs are Identified

Best Practices	Problematic Practices
A broad group of stakeholders, representative of diverse identity markers, ideas, and life pathways discuss and agree upon a screening tool that measures both health and possible risk.	A small group of educators choose a screening tool that will be used to identify student need. Screening only prompts respondents to consider risk factors, potentially reinforcing and promoting deficit views of students.
A “healthy” student could identify with any race, culture, gender, socio-economic, or ability group. Conversely, it is not assumed that students with specific identities will struggle.	The definition of a “healthy” student is covertly synonymous with a student from the dominant school culture.
Needs are viewed as temporary, connected to the environment, and specific to one or some aspects of a student’s array of strengths and needs (e.g., a student who may benefit from access to a specific resource).	Needs are viewed as internal to the student, considered to represent a large part of who they are and how they are viewed as a person in the school (e.g., a Tier 3 student, a struggling learner, a behavior problem, a student with a disability).

Once a systemic or individual need is identified, it is important to select and implement supports that are matched to the need. The team should have confidence that the strategies and supports will produce meaningful outcomes as informed by research or previous practice. Cultural fit and contextual fit are critical ingredients that must be pre-checked with the individuals who will be receiving support.

Across the district, engage multiple and diverse stakeholders (e.g., families, youth serving community members, and educators) throughout the process between the needs assessment and the selection of evidence-based practices.

- Clearly document the array of resources and practices available to support social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health.
- Keep records on who is accessing each available support.

Having a plan to implement research-informed practices is not enough to ensure meaningful outcomes. It is important to collect data on implementation fidelity and progress toward systemic and individual student goals. This information is then used to determine if (a) the plan is being implemented as intended, (b) if the plan is producing the desired effect, and (c) if modifications are needed to improve the quality and impact of the supports.

- Have a plan for collecting and reviewing fidelity data.
- Establish a process for monitoring outcomes of interventions and supports.
- Establish a plan for adjusting the interventions and supports when needed.

Table 2. Teams are Encouraged to Consider How Screening Results are Used to Make Meaning and Decisions

Best Practices	Problematic Practices
Teams regularly examine what they can do to improve the learning conditions for each and every learner as they review screening data	Individual students get placed into intervention supports, pulling them away from regular classroom and school activities without attention to the learning conditions needed to support each and every learner (Tier 1 systems and practices to support all learners)
Teams rely on multiple sources of data and informants before drafting a plan of support	A single data source is used to determine a student is eligible for additional intervention and supports.
Parents, families and caregivers have agency and are asked for input as valued stakeholders who will inform decisions about systemic and individual interventions.	Parents, families, and caregivers are only informed of the school’s plans to support a student.
There are multiple avenues for students to obtain needed resources and equitable access for all students.	Students with more vocal advocates who understand how to navigate school- and community-based health systems have greater access to supportive resources inside and outside of school.
Teams use an equity-centered continuous improvement process for the screening process itself to understand if all student groups are experiencing success, to look for over and under identification and possibly harmful diagnosing practices.	Educators continue to collect data, without fully understanding why and without reflection on whether the screening process is having the intended impact.

Resources and References

The resources are designed to complement each other, not be used in isolation to address all of the guidance provided in this document.

Considerations for Ensuring Safe, Inclusive, and Equitable Environments

Jackson, R. G., Coomer, M. N., Sanborn, E., Dagli, C., Martinez Hoy, Z. R., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A .K. (2018). Teaching towards understandings of intersectionality. Equity Dispatch. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

[Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework](https://www.pbis.org/resource/returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis)

(<https://www.pbis.org/resource/returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis>)

- This guide describes the use of a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework to support students, families, and educators during the transitions back to school during and following the global pandemic in a manner that prioritizes their health and safety, social and emotional needs, and behavioral and academic growth.

[Supporting PBIS Implementation Through Phases of Crisis Recovery](https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-pbis-implementation-through-phases-of-crisis-recovery)

(<https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-pbis-implementation-through-phases-of-crisis-recovery>)

- This practice brief provides strategies to guide implementation efforts through the various phases of crisis recovery for schools and districts that are (a) getting started or (b) strengthening and maintaining current implementation.

[Students are Not Their Behavior: Returning to the Roots of Multi-tier Systems of Behavior Support](https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/students-are-not-their-behavior-returning-roots-multitier-systems-behavior-support)

(<https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/students-are-not-their-behavior-returning-roots-multitier-systems-behavior-support>)

- This brief describes the foundational principles underpinning multi-tier systems of support, challenging common misuse of the approach to label students. As such, this brief identifies and examines the consequences of this conflating behavior, describing how to promote effective and supportive policy & practice.

[Guidance on Reopening Schools: Equity Considerations During COVID-19](https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/guidance-reopening-schools-equity-considerations-during-covid-19)

(<https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/guidance-reopening-schools-equity-considerations-during-covid-19>)

- This equity brief highlights equity issues that arise in the process of reopening schools during a global pandemic. The authors examine state plans and guidance for reopening schools across the Midwest and Plains Region including Michigan. The purpose of this paper is to provide explicit consideration of equity issues across 10 topics in the context of reopening schools and generate discussion about the topics addressed.

Considerations for Strong Tier 1 Systems for Each and Every Student

Yoder, N. (2014). *Self-Assessing Social and Emotional Instruction and Competencies: A Tool for Teachers*. Center on Great Teachers & Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from gtlcenter.org/products-resources/self-assessing-social-and-emotional-instruction-and-competencies-tool-teachers.

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. (2021, June). SEL is. . . <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

[Social Emotional Learning](https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-74638_72831_72834-361321--,00.html) (https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-74638_72831_72834-361321--,00.html)

- This page on the Michigan Department of Education website includes a compilation of resources about Social Emotional Learning.

[Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-1) (https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-1)

- This page on the Center on PBIS website provides information about the Tier 1 features of PBIS.

Assessment Process: Considerations for Identifying and Responding to Needs

Pentimonti, J. M., Fuchs, L. S., & Ghandi, A. G. (2019). Issues of Assessment within Intensive Intervention. In R. Z. Edmonds, A. G. Ghandi, & L. Danielson (Eds.) *Essentials of Intensive Intervention*. (pp. 30-50). The Guilford Press.

Romer, N., von der Embse, N., Eklund, K., Kilgus, S., Perales, K., Splett, J. W., Sudlo, S., Wheeler, D., (2020). Best Practices in Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening: An Implementation Guide. Version 2.0. Retrieved from smhcollaborative.org/universalscreening.

[Best Practices in Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes: An Implementation Guide](https://smhcollaborative.org/universalscreening/) (https://smhcollaborative.org/universalscreening/)

- This guide provides foundational concepts, research, and considerations for universal screening. The conclusion on page 20 outlines areas for future inquiry and guidance, including a recognized need to better promote equity and methods for actively engaging families and students as partners in the screening process.

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