

Systematic Screening for Behavior in Current K-12 Instructional Settings

This fall, educators across the United States welcomed K-12 students to the start of a unique school year. District and school leaders are engaging in a complicated data-informed decision-making process to provide educators and students with positive, productive, and safe learning environments. Many districts are providing families with a range of instructional opportunities including in-person, remote, and hybrid learning environments. The Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has provided several timely, on-demand resources with guidance on how to use tiered systems of support in each of these instructional contexts to meet students' multiple needs. A key feature of tiered systems as implemented in-person, remotely, or in hybrid learning environments is accurate detection of students who may require more intensive interventions at Tier 2 (e.g., Check/In, Check/Out) or Tier 3 (e.g., functional assessment-based interventions), in addition to high-fidelity implementation of Tier 1 efforts. Academic and behavior screening tools are designed for this purpose. Namely, screening data can be used with other information collected as part of regular school practices to inform instruction by (a) examining the overall level of risk of students in a school, (b) determining the need for low-intensity, teacher-delivered supports (e.g., instructional choices and precorrection), and (c) connecting students to relevant Tier 2 and 3 supports according to their individual needs.

With the new range of instructional contexts being offered, many educators are seeking guidance regarding how to conduct systematic screenings for behavior across these different environments. For educators preparing to screen for the first time as well as those continuing with screening within a tiered system for in-person, remote, or hybrid instructional environments, we suggest the following considerations: (1) screen and engage in continued professional learning, (2) use multiple sources of data – including screening data – to identify students who may need additional supports and inform instruction, and (3) conduct screenings responsibly – informed and with care.

1. Screen and Engage in Continued Professional Learning

Given the uncertain times, consider the importance of conducting systematic screening as a consistent practice to look for students at the first sign of concern - yet interpret the data with caution. Decades of research has demonstrated waiting for students to struggle or fail is less than optimal and that engaging in the proactive practice of screening is highly useful for preventing learning and behavioral challenges from occurring, persisting, or escalating.

Many behavior screening tools are designed to look for students exhibiting internalizing (e.g., shy, anxious, and withdrawn) and/or externalizing (e.g., noncompliant, aggressive) behavior patterns. When screening data are used alongside other data collected as part of regular school practices (e.g., attendance, office discipline referrals, and academic screening data), they promote equity of instructional experiences according to individual students' needs. As such, we encourage you to screen three times a year (fall, winter, spring) using validated tools along with your on-going review of student data. For fall, normal screening practice involves administering screening 4-6 weeks after the school year begins. With hybrid or remote learning, you might consider selecting a screening date closer to the 6-week timepoint to allow teachers the additional time to get to know their students. For winter, consider screening before winter break, and for spring, 6 weeks before the school year ends.

We encourage educators to interpret screening data cautiously. Given the current evidence, we anticipate similar findings for the reliability and validity of screening when used in varied instructional contexts. Although there is existing evidence for screening tools for in-person instruction, fully understanding how they work in terms of reliability and validity during remote and hybrid instruction requires additional inquiry. Fortunately, researchers and technical assistance providers are currently examining how established screening tools work in these new environments. We recommend educational leaders continue to look for new evidence and guidance available for the screening tool used in their school or district as these lessons learned unfold in the year ahead. In the meantime, please remember, systematic screening efforts are important as screening data predict important outcomes for students and promote equity of educational practices when used with other sources of information to inform instruction.

2. Use Multiple Sources of Data to Inform Instruction

While the new knowledge base is being developed about how behavior screening scores work to predict important school outcomes in varied school contexts, we remind educators screening scores represent only one of several sources of useful information. Whether providing instruction in in-person, remote, or in hybrid models, use multiple sources of information to guide instructional decisions. Examples of other data sources include academic screening, behavior screening data collected previously, attendance, as well as office discipline referrals (ODR) or other behavioral data. In addition, fidelity data (e.g., Tiered Fidelity Inventory, [now available for remote learning environments](#)) and other system checks (e.g., social validity data to learn about implementers' views) should also be reviewed to ensure universals are firmly in place. For example, the school leadership team might ask, "Do we have our Tier 1 plan in place with fidelity so that students have benefit of core instruction and practices?" and related, "Do our stakeholders agree with the goals, procedures and outcomes?" These questions will help educators to avoid assuming a 'within child' concern and start by examining the strength of the system.

Remember, screening data signal a soft sign of concern indicating there may be a challenge. As part of a tiered system, other data would also be examined to determine how best to support this student and determine if there is a broader issue that may be more effectively addressed by empowering teachers with classroom supports to increase engagement and minimize disruptions. Or perhaps it may be addressed at Tier 1 if the magnitude of the challenges is substantial (e.g., 30% of students having higher than average internalizing issues) by intensifying universal supports (e.g., increase instruction and increase rates of positive specific feedback).

As many educators are noticing, attendance and engagement are currently a challenge for many students. This is particularly true for remote and hybrid instructional environments when there are inequities in resources. For example, some families may not have adequate internet access or technology or to support multiple children on remote instruction at the same time (e.g., computing per child and appropriate bandwidth). Older students may be called upon to support younger or ill family members. When defining instructional expectations, it will be important to consider issues of equity and use multiple sources of data – including screening data – to determine how best to support students in fully accessing the instruction offered.

3. Screen Responsibly – Informed and With Care

Finally, we encourage educators to screen by staying informed and with care while research on the reliability and validity of screening tools in remote and hybrid contexts is under way. We suggest applying our current knowledge of screening practices that have been tested in in-person learning contexts to remote and hybrid contexts as the research community continues to examine screening in these new contexts. Some educators have expanded their screening practices to also include parent-completed and student-completed screening tools also validated for detecting students with internalizing and externalizing issues. While we applaud this effort to expand screening practices to determine which students are at heightened risk, we encourage people to be cautious when doing so. In addition to the importance of selecting reliable and validated tools, it is also imperative to consider the structures and resources for responding to the information received.

As teachers are mandated reporters, if they suspected a student was in harm's way or a threat to oneself or others, that information would have been reported to the authorities. Yet, if similar information is learned from a parent- or student-completed screener, this is new information that must be addressed swiftly to keep the student safe. As such, be prepared to respond. Also, it is important to be familiar with state and local laws regarding screening. For example, in some states parent- and student-completed

screeners require additional permission. Thus, while the goal of securing additional information is notable, it is important to have proper permissions and a plan to respond swiftly with effective supports.

In summary, we encourage educators to stay committed to students' behavior and emotional well-being through a tiered system of support in in-person, remote, or hybrid instructional environments, using systematic screenings inform instruction. As educators continue this important practice in these new instructional contexts, we encourage you to (1) screen and engage in continued professional learning opportunities, (2) use multiple sources of data – including screening data - to identify students who may need additional supports and inform instruction, and (3) conduct screenings responsibly – informed and with care.

Sources and Resources

Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports

[Systematic Screening to Shape Instruction](#)

[Screening Resources](#)

[Systematic Screening Tools: Universal Behavior Screeners](#)

[Systematic Screening for Emotional and Behavioral Challenges in Tiered Systems \(SCTG Webinar\)](#)

[Tips for Communicating with your Community about Systematic Screening: What does your District and School Leadership Team Need to Know?](#)

[School Mental Health Collaborative](#) - Implementation Guide

[Comprehensive, Integrated Three-tiered Model of Prevention](#) - Screening Guidance

[National Association of School Psychologists](#) – Resource

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