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Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs and Strengths in Vermont Schools

Purpose

These guidelines are designed to support the work of LEA leadership (Supervisory Union, School District, and Independent Schools) in the universal screening of students for social, emotional, and behavioral needs and strengths. Just as with academic needs, addressing social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and wellness needs in school is a core component of a multi-tiered system of support and needs to be specifically addressed in continuous improvement plans at the school and LEA level. There is extensive guidance on interconnecting mental health with the Early MTSS[1], Vermont Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (VTmtss) Framework[2], and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)[3].

Social and Emotional Learning vs. Social, Emotional, Behavioral Needs and Strengths

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is learning and developing competencies or skills that support healthy development, mental health and wellness. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the "process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[4] These skills also underlie students' academic success.

Social Emotional and Behavioral (SEB) needs and strengths represent how the student is presenting in the realms of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating to others.

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[1] Vermont Early MTSS

[2] Vermont Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (VTmtss) Framework

[3] Vermont Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

[4] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Contact: Tracy Watterson, Student Support Services Division, at
tracy.watterson@vermont.gov.

These are typically components of the student's current mental health and wellness status. It is important to distinguish how a student is functioning behaviorally at any one point in time from their knowledge of SEL skills. In other words, students will optimally have both SEL knowledge/skills and the capacity/internal resources to apply them.

Universal Social, Emotional, Behavioral Screening

When implementing multi-tiered systems of support for students, schools and LEAs often consider universal screening of academic; social-emotional learning (SEL); and social emotional and behavioral (SEB) needs and strengths. Universal screening help identify students who may be at risk for academic, behavioral, or social-emotional challenges, and where curricula and additional supports may be needed. Screeners may distinctly target one of these specific areas or combine targeted areas to address SEL, SEB, and academic needs and strengths.

School professionals should differentiate between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competency assessment; universal Social Emotional and Behavioral (SEB) screening, and more targeted SEB assessments. School professionals need basic information relating to screening and assessing that supports the comprehensive planning necessary to implement effective practices.[5]

Why Use a Universal SEL and SEB Screener?

Like academic screeners, universal screening for SEL and SEB can be used for several purposes:

- Identifying needs for Universal and Targeted supports, including SEL curriculum

- Facilitating early identification of students at risk for SEB concerns

- Monitoring effectiveness of Universal, Targeted, and Intensive support in improving student SEL competencies

While some universal screening tools may be amenable for all purposes, others may be limited in focus. It is important that the LEA considers the intended use before selecting a universal screening tool.

- **Identifying needs for Universal and Targeted supports:** Universal SEL screeners identify the status of students' SEL competencies and help inform SEL instruction, methods, and quality. SEL screening helps schools to know where there are gaps in SEL competencies across the student body and what areas to focus on with SEL curriculum. Additionally, SEL/SEB screeners can identify areas of need within certain populations in the school (such as grade level, gender, race, a specific classroom, etc.). These screening programs may reduce

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[5] Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)

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disproportionality in special education by providing early intervention services that reduce the likelihood of future special education placement and increase the likelihood of future school success. SEL/SEB screeners inform the school/LEA in how their system is progressing in developing students' SEL competencies and/or addressing students' SEB needs.

- **Facilitating early identification of students at risk for SEB concerns:** A universal SEB screener focuses on the social, emotional, and behavioral needs and strengths of individual students. Universal screening can help to identify internalizing and externalizing risk or concerns in individual students. In early childhood, universal screening can also identify communication, gross motor, and fine motor strengths and needs. Identification would lead to planning an appropriate response to the identified need(s), including potential referral for further mental health screening, assessment, and interventions. Universal SEB screening can help schools understand the range of all student SEB needs which aids in identifying the types of supports and interventions needed at the universal, targeted and intensive/individualized levels. Screeners typically identify externalizing and internalizing concerns, which can be helpful as internalizing concerns may not be easily recognized and may be less likely to receive early intervention. Internalizing concerns include loneliness, excessive fears or worries, sadness or depression and other intrusive thoughts.

Universal SEB Screening is not a mental health assessment. Identifying potential risks or needs is not the same as making a diagnosis. Only a qualified mental health professional can conduct an assessment to gather information that might lead to a diagnosis.

- **Monitoring effectiveness of Universal, Targeted, and Intensive supports**, including SEL curriculum: Teams can review data at the LEA, school, grade, classroom, or individual level. "Grade- and classroom-level results can be considered to identify any groups of students or teachers in need of additional support, including intervention and ongoing professional development" (Romer, 2020). When a school or LEA has an established schedule and protocol for universal SEB/SEL screening, the data can be reviewed for trends over time to help understand if the universal supports are adequately addressing SEL skills/deficits and SEB needs/strengths. It is important to note that this is only one data set to consider when reviewing the efficacy of support and should be reviewed in conjunction with additional data (ex. climate surveys, attendance, time out of class, and other community data).

Establishing effective protocols for the review of data, identification of supports, tracking referrals and tracking whether students received the services are essential steps of effective implementation of universal SEB screening. The effectiveness of protocols can be evaluated through a continuous improvement review process, such as Plan-Do-Study-Act.

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We Want to Use a Universal SEL/SEB Screener, Now What?

Screening for SEL/SEB should be part of a comprehensive school mental health system. Once a decision is made to implement[6] any type of SEL/SEB screening tool there are important considerations that need to be addressed prior to selecting and using a universal SEL or SEB screening tool. The process and implications for these screenings differ from those of academic screeners. LEA leadership teams must consider ethical, practical, and technical issues beyond simply selecting a universal SEB screening measure. Additionally, there are system considerations for building or identifying tiered responses to appropriately address screening results that indicate a need.

"As districts and schools commit to implementing a system for universal SEB screening, they are faced with a myriad of logistical considerations such as privacy, the frequency of screening, how best to use data to improve intervention selection, and need for parental consent." (Romer, 2020).

Cultural considerations should be woven throughout the implementation steps from planning to data collection and ongoing. Examples include exploring how social and emotional behaviors and traits are understood by families and professionals through a cultural lens, as well as examining language and terms used in communications to staff, families and in the assessment tool to reflect trauma-sensitive culturally responsive practices that are accessible to all and avoids stereotyping and perpetuating negative bias. "Action must be taken to ensure assessment and screening policies and practices are trauma sensitive, culturally responsive, and done through a lens of advancing equity"[7]

Steps to Implement Universal SEB Screener

(Adapted from Romer, et. al. 2022)

A summary of the effective implementation process is captured below.

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[6] Romer, et. al. (2020) Best Practices in Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening: An Implementation Guide. Version 2.0

[7] Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)

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Exploration

- Identify LEA-Community Leadership Team
- Determine purpose and objectives of universal screening
- Engage key stakeholders (parents, teachers, school leaders, community partners)

Readiness

- Team includes member(s) with SEB expertise
- Team reviewed available SEB supports and resources available to respond to screening results

Adoption

- Explore and select universal SEL/SEB screening tool
- Develop screening procedures
- Determine who is target population, who is informant, timing and frequency of administration
- Establish consent procedures
- Develop plan to train staff on use of screener and protocols
- Establish communication protocols for results
- Develop response procedures (who responds to what level of need and when)
- Develop referral and follow-up procedures and pathways to access supports

Data Collection and Storage

- Determine how data will be stored, reviewed, used, shared
- Review data privacy protocols
- Develop structure to track referral and response

Installation/Use

- Engage protocols for reviewing results to inform decisions for universal supports or targeted SEB interventions and supports
- Review and revise pathways for needed supports

It may help to pilot the use of a universal SEL/SEB screening tool in one grade level within a school or one school within the LEA, to work through the screening

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procedures, gather input, and adjust the process before scaling up for broader implementation.[8]

Who Gets to Decide?

Making the decision to explore universal SEL/SEB screening is the first step. Now it's time to engage the LEA-community team – or enhance an existing team with community partners – to work through the steps to gain clarity on the goals and purpose of universal screening and build support within the school system and with key community stakeholders, including parents/guardians. Families and staff will have questions, perhaps even assumptions, about what this entails and the benefits and concerns about this process. Determinations about parental consent/assent will need to be made, including the use of opt-out procedures.[9]

How Do We Pick a Screener?

There is a growing number of Social emotional and behavioral screeners available. To assist schools and LEAs in identifying which universal screening tool to adopt, install, and sustain to meet their needs, the Center on PBIS published a practice brief, *Selecting a Universal Behavioral Screening Tool: Questions to Consider*[10] outlining five consideration.

1. What grade levels of students will you be supporting with universal screening (e.g., preschool, elementary, middle, and/or high school)?

2. What types of behaviors or concerns do you wish to detect (internalizing, externalizing, both)? Does the screening tool assess student strengths as well as risk factors?

3. What type of financial investments can be made to support the screening process?

4. What investments – in terms of time and expertise – can you commit each year?

5. Who would you like to participate in providing information (e.g., teachers, parents, students themselves)?

LEAs can determine how to provide an opportunity for stakeholders, including families, to view the screening tool.

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[8] National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH, 2020). School Mental Health Quality Guide: Screening. NCSMH, University of Maryland School of Medicine

[9] Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), 20 U.S.C. § 1232h and 34 C.F.R. part 98.

[10] Oakes, W. P., Buckman, M. M., Lane, K., L., and Sherod, R. L. (March, 2021). Selecting a Universal Behavior Screening Tool: Questions to Consider. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. www.pbis.org.

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When finalizing an agreement with a screener vendor, LEAs will need to make decisions about which staff team should have access to the system to review, extract, and share data. Consider the need for collective expertise to evaluate and use data gathered.

Who Completes the Screener?

Universal screening tools will identify who completes the tool. This is often an element that is considered when selecting a tool. Many universal screening tools are completed by the person who interacts with the student daily and knows the student best, often the student's classroom teacher. Some tools may elicit input from several perspectives, including the teacher, student and parent/guardian.

When Should We Screen?

LEA-community teams will need to consider timing based on the LEA's calendar. Typically, screening is conducted two or three times during the school year, with the first occurring 4-6 weeks after the beginning of the school year, another occurring 4-6 weeks before the end of the school year, and, if three administrations are planned, one could be conducted two weeks before winter break. LEA-community teams should establish expected timelines to follow-up with an effective response to positive screens and review data at the universal, targeted, and intensive levels. It is advised that LEAs begin with screening two times a year until full scale screening of the student body is successful including effective and timely response to identified needs and data review is routine.

We've Screened, Now What Do We Do with the Data?

Consider in advance who is on the team(s) to review the data at each level: LEA, school, classroom, student.

Flagging students who need immediate follow-up.

Immediately after each session of universal screening, a pre-identified school-based team reviews the student-level data to identify individual students whose screening results flag concerns that need immediate follow up. This team could include the school counselor, nurse, school mental health professionals (including Designated Agency school-based providers). student support services director, and others as determined by the school[11].

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[11] Vermont Agency of Education (2019); Educational Support Teams in School District Systems: Act 173 Technical Guidance

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Reviewing the Aggregated Data

Establish or identify a LEA-community team to review aggregated, de-identified data. The team can review the data with these questions in mind:

- Is this screening tool meeting our needs/goals?
- Is the tool helping us to identify students?
  - What does the data show about the needs of most students?
  - The needs of some students?
  - Are there individual needs for specific students that need to be attended to?
- Are there differences when looking at disaggregated data? Are there certain populations that show different trends than the aggregated trends?
- Are students getting linked to the right level of support/services at the Universal, Targeted and Intensive levels?
  - Do we have effective protocols and pathways to connect to resources?
  - What other initiatives are we involved in that can be leveraged to support these needs (part of initiative inventory and resource mapping)?
  - Are there gaps in what is available to address need?
- Have we communicated well with parents/guardians about how we are using this information?
  - Are there a high number of families who have opted out or expressed concern about the SEL/SEB screening?

Additional Assistance

Please contact Tracy Watterson, Assistant Director, Student Support Services, Tracy.Watterson@vermont.gov with questions regarding the content of these guidelines.

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