Traditionally, schools have screened students for social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) concerns. This approach can be effective in identifying students who are beginning to exhibit behavioral problems such as aggression and impulsivity, or emotional difficulties such as anxiety and withdrawal, leading to further assessment and intervention. However, SEB screening does have significant limitations; it is reactive and consistent with a “downstream approach” in which interventions are delivered after the challenging behaviors have begun to emerge. Most importantly, it is a lagging indicator in that the behavioral concerns need to be occurring at an elevated rate in order for the student to be identified. Furthermore, the goal of SEB screening is often to reduce or eliminate behavioral concerns, not necessarily to promote student well-being. Strength-based screening of social and emotional competence can shift this paradigm to one that is proactive, upstream, and supportive of social and emotional learning (SEL), mental health promotion and prevention efforts.

**Strength-Based Screening Defined**

Screening has its origins in medicine and public health and within those contexts, screening refers to “the application of a test to all individuals in a defined population...for the purpose of...identifying a previously unknown or unrecognized condition in an apparently healthy or asymptomatic person” (Stoto et al.,1999, p. 1). The goal was to identify a disease in an early or preclinical phase so that an intervention could occur to prevent the further development of the disease. Individuals identified by the screening process were referred to as “at-risk.” In addition to identifying specific at-risk individuals, a process known as case finding, screening could also be used to monitor the prevalence and incidence of a disease or disorder in a defined population, a process known as surveillance. See the call out box on “Definitions” for more information.

In contrast to this pathology or symptom-oriented approach, strength-based screening evaluates the presence of skills, competencies, or assets (i.e., strengths) that are associated with positive
outcomes including academic success and mental health. Strength-based screening has a distinct and important advantage over deficit-based screening because it serves a dual purpose. First, similar to deficit-based screening, it can be used to identify students who may be at-risk of negative outcomes because they have not yet developed the intra- and inter-personal skills, competencies, or assets to enable them to succeed. For instance, Shapiro and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that students who received low scores on the DESSA-mini, a widely-used strength-based screener, were 450% more likely to be suspended or expelled by the end of the school year versus students who received scores in the typical or strength range. Second, strength-based screening also identifies individuals who are “at-promise.” More than a buzzword, this term signifies both that social and emotional strengths are associated with success in school (Durlak et al., 2011) and that these skills are malleable or capable of being taught. So, a student “at-risk” for negative outcomes is also “at-promise” for positive outcomes if appropriate supports and instruction are provided. “At-promise” will be used in the remainder of this article unless the focus is specifically on increased risk of negative outcomes.

The Advantages of Strength-Based Screening

In addition to the emphasis on the promotion of well-being and school success, strength-based screening presents a number of other significant advantages to schools.

- **It promotes school success** - Research over the past 20 years (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) has shown that the social and emotional skills that are being screened for are related to school success including academic achievement, grade promotion, graduation rates, and even college persistence. The same skills are also important for success in the workplace (Cherniss, 2000).

- **It is more acceptable to parents and teachers** - Parents are more likely to provide consent (Shaw et al., 2015), and teachers may feel more comfortable rating positive, desirable behaviors (such as “copes well with negative feelings”) than negative, undesirable behaviors (such as “worries excessively”).

- **Supports efforts to promote educational equity** - As part of a system that helps ensure that each student has the skills necessary to benefit from instruction, strength-based screening plays an important role in promoting and ensuring educational equity (LeBuffe & Robitaille, 2019).

- **Directs teachers’ attention to the assets of their students** - The focus of screening reflects the interests and priorities of the schools. Strength-based screening communicates that students’ strengths are important and directs teachers’ attention to noticing the positive traits of their students.

- **Promotes relationships, a key to transformative SEL** - A teacher’s attention to their students’ strengths as reflected in strength-based screening and assessment is a better basis for forming a positive relationship with the student, which is essential for transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2018).
**Strength-Based Screening and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a data-driven framework in which different levels of support are provided to students based on their documented needs. The overarching goal of MTSS is to ensure that each student is receiving the appropriate level of support to be successful. The MTSS framework has been widely adopted within schools because of its simplicity, its focus on addressing the needs of all students, and its application across multiple domains of functioning including academics, behavior, and SEL. The following outlines how strength-based screening and complementary assessment of social and emotional competencies can be conceptualized within the MTSS framework.

- **Universal/Tier 1** involves strategies or interventions applied to all students in the classroom, school, or out-of-school time program that are designed to develop, strengthen, or reinforce positive social and emotional skills, regardless of whether the students have been identified as at-promised by the screener. The goal of strength-based, universal/Tier 1 efforts is to promote student well-being, competence, and resilience. These services and supports, which might include strategies such as a morning greeting ritual or an optimistic closure to the school day, are sufficient for about 80% of the student population to succeed.

- **Selective/Tier 2** interventions or strategies are applied to students, often in small groups that need more intentional services and supports. These students have been identified as at-promised by the screener or other information. Often based on a more thorough assessment, the goal of selective/Tier 2 services is to remediate any knowledge or skill deficits to ensure that the student has the social and emotional skills to be successful before problem behaviors begin to emerge or become severe enough to interfere with learning or development. Examples of Selective/Tier 2 strategies include friendship skills groups or using peer accountability partners. Layered on top of the universal strategies, Selective/Tier 2 interventions will be sufficient to ensure the success of an additional 10-15% of students (90-95% in total).

- **Indicated/Tier 3** services provide the individualized and intensive interventions or strategies that are required by the remaining 5-10% of the student population who have not made significant progress based on universal and selective interventions. These students may have already begun to develop significant challenging behaviors that are interfering with learning or jeopardizing their mental health. Within a strength-based framework, indicated/Tier 3 interventions identify, honor, and leverage whatever specific social and emotional strengths the

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**Definitions**

- **Screening**: a procedure, program or tool used to detect the early signs of a disease/condition or the demonstrated strengths in the student. Screening is conducted for all students, not just those identified as at-risk of a particular concern.

- **Assessment**: the process of systematically gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge.

- **Case Finding**: a strategy for identifying students or groups of students who are suspected to be at-risk/promised that involves actively searching for risk, rather than waiting for students to present with significant behavioral or academic challenges.

- **Surveillance**: the systematic collection and reporting of school-wide or community-level data to monitor patterns and trends within segments of the student population in order to guide the implementation and evaluation of school-based interventions.
student may have to help them acquire skills they have not yet learned. The goal is both to reduce the frequency and severity of any challenging behaviors and to provide additional competencies and skills that will promote school success, resilience, and mental health.

It is important to note that at all three tiers, the goal is not just to reduce or prevent challenging behaviors, but also to develop competencies that promote school success and mental health.

**A Step by Step Guide to Implementing a Strength-Based Screening Approach**

Universal screening is the critical first step in a process to identify at-promising students and provide needed supports to promote equitable, positive educational outcomes. The success of subsequent steps, including assessment, intervention, and progress monitoring, is largely dependent on the success of the initial screening. Poor initial universal screening will result in wasted resources, especially staff time, as well as poorer outcomes for students. These guidelines will maximize the chances of an effective and efficient screening approach.

1. **Define your screening approach and build support.**
   
   a. Collect and share information with your colleagues and school leadership on the benefits of strength-based screening.

   b. Form or utilize an existing school-based work group with representation from key stakeholders such as administrators, school psychologists, counselors, school social workers, teachers, and caregivers. This group will develop and oversee the screening process including the steps below.

   c. Specify what actions you will take as a result of the screening. Will you administer a more detailed assessment (case finding) or just report the results in aggregate (surveillance)? What interventions or supports will you provide based on the results of the screener?

2. **Carefully evaluate and choose a screener.**

   a. Identify strength-based screeners for consideration. Several searchable compendia of social-emotional screening and assessment measures are available that will help you compare multiple options to narrow down your search including:

      i. [CASEL SEL Assessment Guide](https://measuringsel.casel.org/access-assessment-guide/)

      ii. [RAND Education Assessment Finder](https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/assessments.html)

   b. Evaluate the screeners for their technical adequacy. Screeners should meet the same quality standards as psychological and educational assessments. Pay special attention to the sensitivity and specificity of the screener which indicate the likelihood of over-identifying or missing at-promising students (see Key Quality Indicators to Consider in Choosing a Screener below).

   c. Consider practicality. What is the cost, including staff time, of implementing the screener? Is a scalable, web-based platform available for administering and scoring the screener? Is the screener age and culturally appropriate for your student population?

   d. Consider the information the screener will provide. What reports are available and how long does it take to obtain them? Can the results be filtered by student demographics or school characteristics? Are results available at different levels of aggregation (student, class, grade, school, district)?
Key Quality Indicators to Consider in Choosing a Screener

A key consideration in the selection of a screening tool is accuracy: screeners need to be able to correctly identify students who are truly in need of additional instruction or support. If a screener over-identifies students, schools may waste precious resources conducting follow-up assessment and unnecessary intervention. If a screener under-identifies students, schools will miss an opportunity to support students who need additional instruction, behavioral guidance, or emotional support. When examining the validity of screening tools, here are some important things to look for:

**Sensitivity:** The extent to which a screening instrument correctly identifies those students who are actually at-risk/promise.

**Specificity:** The extent to which a screening instrument correctly identifies those students who are not actually at-risk/promise.

Typically, screeners will favor either sensitivity or specificity. Therefore, school practitioners will face the decision as to whether their screening protocols will be overinclusive, with higher sensitivities triggering more false alarms, or over exclusive, with higher specificities missing some students that may benefit from more intensive interventions. Schools will need to carefully weigh these options in light of their local needs and resources available.

Conclusion

Screening students can be a valuable investment of school time and resources yet realizing the full potential of screening hinges on a number of important preliminary decisions that can drive outcomes. Such considerations include the usefulness and timeliness of the results and the availability of an aligned, more detailed assessment. Strength-based screening provides many advantages as compared to deficit-based screening including: 1) being proactive in facilitating the identification of students who, although at-risk, may not yet be showing signs of trouble; 2) identifying students who are at-promise, especially if needed instruction and supports are provided once their needs are identified; 3) being more consistent with a whole child approach that promotes thriving and mental health; and 4) focusing staff attention on student strengths. Implementing effective strategies for identifying, monitoring, and promoting student strengths and assets can serve as the building blocks for strategic and comprehensive school mental health systems available to support all members of your school community.

3. Plan your screening process.

a. Provide staff development to the individuals who will be completing the screener because research indicates that staff training reduces teacher bias and results in more accurate and reliable results (Shapiro et al., 2016). If the screener is being completed by students, provide an orientation so that the students understand the rationale and intended uses of screener results.

b. Provide protected time for staff or students to complete the screener.

c. Review screening results and determine next steps. The individuals involved in this process will need to be trained in interpretation and use of the screening results. Consider involving important stakeholders, including caregivers and community members, in reviewing anonymized aggregate data that informs school-wide decisions.

d. Determine how many times during the year you will screen, keeping in mind that students’ status can change over the school year.

e. Lastly, plan for an end-of-year meeting to review the success of the screening program and to identify opportunities for quality improvement in the following school year.
Suggested Resources


Suggested Citation
References


ii derived from https://www.westminster.edu/about/accreditation-assessment/definition.cfm


Aperture Education empowers over 8,000 schools and out-of-school time programs across North America to measure, strengthen, and support social and emotional competence in K-12 youth and educators. This system enables education leaders to make strategic, data-based decisions about SEL within their organizations. The Aperture System includes the DESSA suite of strength-based assessments, CASEL-informed intervention strategies, and robust reporting, all in one easy-to-use digital platform. Aperture has supported over one million students in their social and emotional growth and continues to develop innovative solutions to bring the whole child into focus. To learn more, visit www.ApertureEd.com.

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