



Core Feature 5: Mental Health Screening in Schools

Schools have been a long-standing source of health screening of children. For decades, schools have conducted physical screenings to broadly describe the status of factors that are important to learning. More recently, schools have focused on social, emotional and mental wellness as factors that significantly impact learning. Consequently, many schools have added mental health to the array of screenings that help them identify needs, influence practice and shape policy.

Mental health screening is defined at [schoolmentalhealth.org](https://www.schoolmentalhealth.org) as “the use of a systematic tool or process to identify the **strengths and needs** of students. Screening is conducted for all students, not just students identified as being at risk for or already displaying mental health concerns. This might involve screening an entire population, such as a school’s student body, or a smaller subset of a population, such as a specific grade level.”

The source document, [*Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: Guidance from the Field*](#), summarizes the expert panel conversations on Mental Health Screening in Schools by coming to the following critical agreements:

- Early identification and intervention lead to better outcomes for students.
- Given the high prevalence and recurrence of mental health disorders, it is important to identify

problems early and connect students to needed services and supports.

- Mental health screening, including assessment of the social determinants of mental health, is a foundational component of a comprehensive approach to behavioral health problem-prevention, early identification and intervention services.
- 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 should be conducted only when there is a system in place to promptly review screening data once it is collected and then make necessary referrals for further assessment, services and supports.

The conversation among stakeholders focused on three themes:

- Do the important stakeholder groups understand why and how we should screen at the student, classroom, school, district, state and community levels?
- Do our mental health screening practices at the student, classroom, school, district, state and community levels align?
- How is mental health screening addressed in student support teams operating at the school/district level?

This Dialogue Guide incorporates both sources. The guide offers *Reaction Questions* and *Application Questions* from which you can choose Dialogue Starters that will allow you to take these conversations into your work.

Resources

Resources to inform this content are available at:

- [School Mental Health Quality Guide Screening](#)
- [Identifying Mental Health and Substance Use Problems of Children and Adolescents: A Guide for Child-Serving Organizations](#)
- [Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools](#)
- [Dialogue Guide Response Strategies](#)

Practice Issue 1

Do the important stakeholder groups understand screening at the classroom, school, district, state and community levels?

Reaction Questions:

1. In your experience, what are some examples of a system screening tool?
 - What are some examples of an individual screening tool?
2. Many important groups are stakeholders in mental health screening in schools. Identify a stakeholder group and share why you think mental health screening is important to them.
 - What do stakeholders say in support of mental health screening in schools?
 - What concerns do stakeholders express?
3. Using a 1-10 Scale (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), how well do school staff members understand mental health screening in schools? Give reasons to support your rating.
4. Using a 1-10 Scale (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), how well does the community understand mental health screening in schools? Give reasons to support your rating.

Application Questions:

1. Best practice tells us that mental health screening should **only** be conducted when a system is in place to review findings and make recommendations and interventions. Given the importance of a mental health screening system:
 - What does your local system look like?
 - How does the system address mental health screening?
 - How would you learn more about the mental health screening system?
2. Think about the need to develop effective mental health screening in the system that you know.
 - If you could influence **one** role that could make a difference, which role would you choose and what would you do in that role?
3. A commitment to effective mental health screening is critical.
 - What are your “look fors” (*Response Strategy: My Look Fors*) in an effective system?
4. How do large group mental health screenings and individual screenings “fit together” in an effective system?
 - Give some examples from the system that you know.

5. In some locations, limitations have been imposed on mental health screening in public schools.
 - Have limitations been set on mental health screening practices in the system that you know?
 - Are these limitations set by statute, regulations, policy or practice?
 - Why is it important to know the source of the limitations?
6. Imagine a conversation with families about mental health screening in schools.
 - Using the iceberg visual (*Response Strategy: What Lies Beneath*), what is the conversation above the surface?
 - What questions, fears and beliefs lie below the surface?
7. In some cultures, mental health screening may be understood differently.
 - On a scale of 1-10 (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), how responsive are we to cultural differences? How do you address different perspectives?
8. Mental health screening has a stigma in some circles.
 - What are your “look fors” (*Response Strategy: My Look Fors*) in detecting stigma?
 - How would you address each?
9. Imagine a conversation with school staff about mental health screening.
 - Using the iceberg visual (*Response Strategy: What Lies Beneath*), what is the conversation above the surface?
 - What lies below the surface?

Practice Issue 2

Do our mental health screening practices at the student, classroom, school, district, state and community levels align?

Reaction Questions:

1. Using a 1-10 scale (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), rate the extent to which school staff members make the connection between mental health screening and early identification, intervention and better outcomes for students. Support your rating.
2. Using a 1-10 scale (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), rate the extent to which community stakeholders make the connection between mental health screening and early identification, intervention and better outcomes for students. Support your rating.

3. In your experience, what do schools need to notice about student behavior and emotions? Why?

Application Questions:

1. Many schools have practices in place to identify social and emotional issues that need to be addressed.
 - In an effective system, how are these practices communicated to the staff and the community?
 - What should be done to convey the value of these practices?
2. Some states have adopted mental health screening tools that are implemented statewide.
 - How do statewide screeners serve to identify areas for policy initiatives?
 - How do statewide screeners serve to identify areas for professional development?
 - How do statewide screeners serve as a tool for districts and schools?
3. Some communities have initiated reports on the aspects of a healthy community.
 - In your view, which aspects of community health are most important to schools?
 - In your experience, to what extent does the system that you know seek and use information on community health?
4. In some district systems, social and emotional indicators are monitored at a particular grade level.
 - Using a *1-10 scale* (10 high; *Response Strategy: Using a 1-10 Scale*), to what extent does the system that you know discuss these indicators across grade levels?
 - Why might it be important to engage staff members across grades around these indicators?
5. Social and emotional indicators across levels of the system (preschool, elementary, secondary) vary.
 - Using the *Four Quadrants Response Strategy*, place the issue of learning about mental health practices across the grade span. Support your placement.
6. How well do we convey the practices around systemwide screening surveys and individual screenings to families?
 - Which practices need to continue?
 - Which practices need to end?
 - Which practices need to be improved?
7. Cultural sensitivity is an important concern in mental health screening.
 - What role does district leadership play in bringing attention to cultural issues in mental health screening?
 - What role does school leadership play in bringing attention to cultural issues in mental health screening?
 - What role could family leadership play in bringing attention to cultural issues in mental health screening?

8. Organizational culture exerts a significant impact on the effectiveness of school mental health screening. What are your “look fors” (*Response Strategy: My Look Fors*) in assessing the understanding and support for mental health screening?
9. Confidentiality practices address safety concerns in mental health screening.
 - How does confidentiality address safety issues for students?
 - How does confidentiality address safety issues for families?
 - What should schools do to respect confidentiality without creating barriers?
10. District and school teams are the “guardians” of confidentiality.
 - What practices should guide access to screening data?
 - What practices should be in place to ensure that confidentiality is maintained?

Practice Issue 3

How is mental health screening addressed in student support teams operating at the school/district level?

Reaction Questions:

1. In the system that you know, what teaming structures are in place?
 - To what extent do building level teams interact with each other?
 - Is a team in place that overarches the many building levels teams?
 - How does that team coordinate efforts?
2. Teams are the connectors that use system data and identify the need for individual screening. A screening tool is a brief list of questions relating to a youth’s behavior, thoughts and feelings. A specific method is used to score the answers to the questions, and the score indicates whether the youth has a high likelihood of having a problem or is unlikely to have a problem.
 - How do effective teams connect system screening data to their individual screening practices?
 - How do effective teams ensure that the school community, including staff, providers, families and youth, understand their practices?

Application Questions:

1. Far too often, multiple initiatives address the same issue. How does an effective building team build coherence across initiatives that should be aligned?
 - What are the technical considerations (content, frameworks, etc.)?
 - What are the human considerations?
2. Teams often affiliate individuals who are the most knowledgeable about the aspects of school mental health. To be successful over time, these teams need to have an awareness of the general knowledge and support for school mental health.
 - In your view, how can school teams get and keep the “pulse” of school support for the practices they implement?
 - Using the *Give and Get Response Strategy*, what will a school team learn about their practices through greater planned interaction with staff?
 - Using the *Give and Get Response Strategy*, what will a leadership team learn about their practices through greater planned interaction with building teams?
3. What is the role of school teams in addressing family concerns in mental health screening?
 - In your view, what might a high rate of opting out indicate?
 - Using the iceberg visual (*Response Strategy: What Lies Beneath*), what issues are above the surface in opting out?
 - What issues lie beneath the surface?
 - How might school teams address the number of families who opt out of screenings?
4. We all have biases that can influence our perceptions of situations and the behavior of individuals in situations.
 - How can we build capacity for screeners to be aware of unconscious bias?
 - How can we ensure that policies and practices do not over identify or under identify groups of students for mental health issues?
5. How can effective teams manage existing screenings so that we don't overload staff or students?