National Exploration of Emotional/Behavioral Detection in School Screening Project

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School-Based Universal Behavior Screening - Issue Brief No. 2018-1

An analysis of state and district-level guidance regarding school-based, universal screening for social, emotional, and behavioral risk

Why This Study

Numerous professional organizations have endorsed, and some legislation has supported, the practice of social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) screening[1] in schools in order to proactively identify and prevent SEB disorders. Despite the potential benefits of conducting SEB screening in schools, preliminary data suggest that it is not occurring.[2] Governmental agencies arguably have the greatest influence on school-based operations. Understanding the degree to which state departments of education provide explicit guidance or mandates to school personnel may therefore further explain the current status of SEB screening implementation, and thus provide directions for future work.

What We Did

Our NEEDs[2] research team tried to gain a national understanding of state-level policy regarding school-based universal screening to identify those students at-risk for SEB problems. We did this by conducting a systematic review of state-level websites to identify the extent to which state departments of education have provided specific guidance regarding the who, what, where, when, and why of universal (i.e. aimed at proactively assessing all students) SEB screening practices implemented in K-12 settings. We identified a total of 124 unique documents across the 50 states and the District of Columbia specifically related to the use of universal SEB screening practices in K-12 settings. After summarizing the content of these documents, we conducted follow-up telephone interviews with state officials in order to confirm and add to the information obtained.

In conjunction with our 2015-2016 national survey of 1,330 district administrators, we then explored the alignment of policy and practice around SEB screening between states and local school districts. Researchers reviewed the websites of the 1,330 school districts that participated in the survey and found that 911 school districts had policy manuals available, which were then reviewed for references to SEB screening. Eighty-seven included references to SEB screening. We then compared those findings with the district administrator survey responses about SEB screening.

Key Findings

- **Over half (53%) of states do not mention universal SEB screening or only provide a vague reference to screening** on their state Department of Education (DOE) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) websites.
- **Nearly all** (95%) of the states whose websites mentioned universal screening **referred to it within the context of describing multi-tiered systems of support** (MTSS).
- **In over a third (35%)** of states, documentation included some reference to universal screening but the **level of guidance was minimal**.
- **Universal Screening** for SEB risk was described **within an MTSS document focused specifically on behavior in only 6 states (12%).**
  - **Only the state of New Mexico provided a mandate for universal screening** within the state rule,[1] though it is worth noting that Illinois passed legislation in early 2017 that will require SEB screening for children as part of school entry examinations.
  - **But district administrators in New Mexico did not report engaging in universal screening**.
- **24 states included policies which recommend universal SEB screening**, yet
  - Only 9% of district-level survey respondents in those 24 states report engaging in it.
  - Across reviewed district policy manuals, reference to SEB screening was present for districts hailing from only 5 of those states.

Follow-up Interviews

NEEDs2 follow-up interviews with 11 state officials indicated that administrators recognize that identification through SEB universal screening is important.

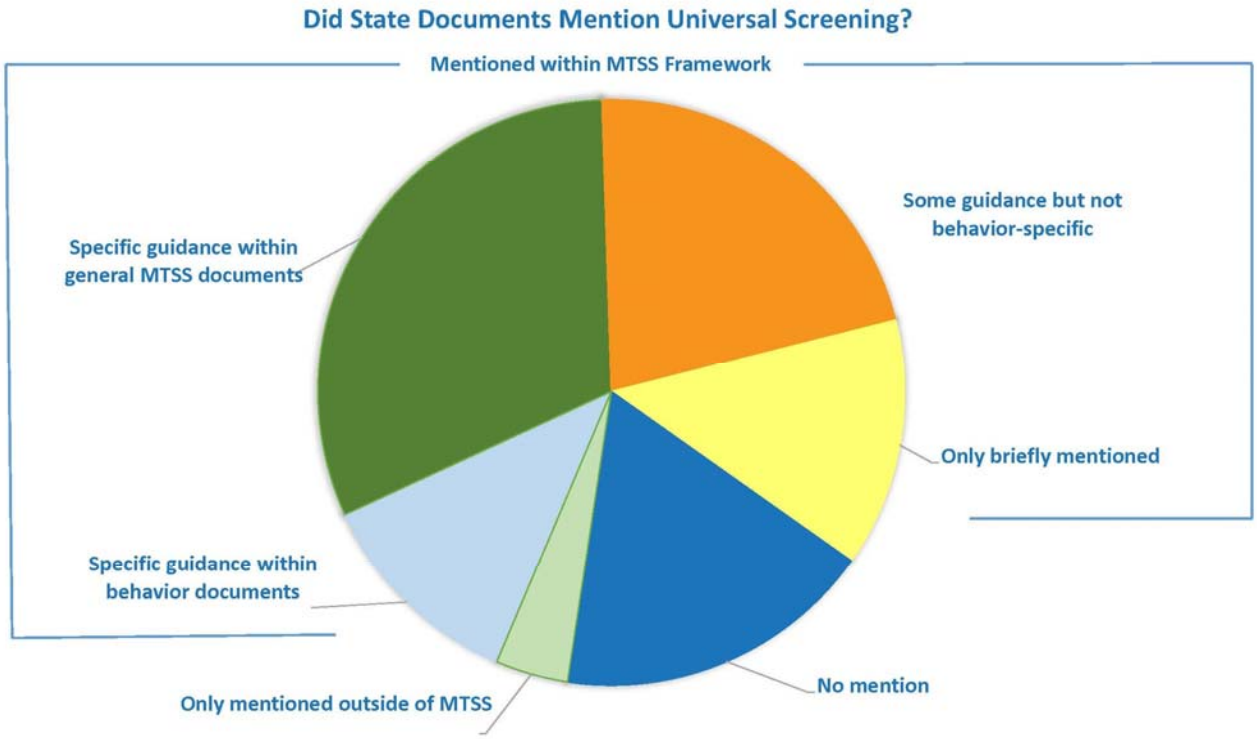
> *"We're really having a lot of awareness around why we have to start supporting mental health issues in our students, and we have to start identifying them earlier because the age of onset is going down. It's getting younger and younger and with suicide being the second leading cause of death in students age 12 to 24, it's just critical." – State Administrator*

At the same time, state officials acknowledge that schools have not been addressing them proactively.

> *"Our schools [here] are getting better and becoming more proactive and using formative assessment data around academics but social-emotional health related strengths and needs usually don't get addressed until they manifest into some type of crisis." – State Administrator*

However, state officials remain hopeful.

> *"Now that MTSS in [our state] is on a very ambitious and widespread implementation plan, it can become a hub that it goes through. So, I think there was resistance. I think there's opportunity and it will always meet with resistance, but we'll keep working."*



Highlighted Model Documents

(These state documents focused on specifics about how an MTSS model may be implemented for behavior.)

Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project:
Response to Intervention for Behavior (2008)
Implementing a multi-tiered system of support for behavior (2011)
Kansas MTSS: Building Leadership Team Implementation Guide-Behavior (2013)
Module 2 Behavior (2013)
South Dakota multi-tiered systems of support: Implementing a behavioral model process guide (2014)
Missouri's Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support Tier 2 Team Workbook (2014)

Limitations

Our review represents only a snapshot of the status of education policies and initiatives at a single time point. In follow-up interviews, state administrators agreed that the information NEEDs[2] researchers gathered reflected the current status of requirements and recommendations in their state; however, slightly more than half noted that more information was also available. One state administrator remarked that "I feel like what you have here is absolutely accurate for right now. It just doesn't reflect *all* the work that is happening right now on this issue." Another participant indicated that their state uses a statewide internal webpage for school personnel and the publicly available website does not contain the most updated documents.

It is also possible that districts may receive additional guidance from the state through other avenues, such as direct communications, which are not reflected in the current review.

Implications for Policy, and Practice

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 authorizes the use of existing funding streams to improve student mental and behavioral health and requires states to include at least one non-academic indicator of student success within their accountability systems. However, our findings suggest that only a limited number of states have mandates or specific recommendations with regard to SEB screening guidance to K12 schools. Furthermore, even when they do have such recommendations, local school district policies do not necessarily align with state recommendations. States may be more reticent to write procedural requirements into law for several reasons; however, it is important that *all* schools have access to basic procedural guidance regarding universal SEB screening in order to promote sustainable adoption of these practices and address the SEB needs of students in schools.

For Additional Information

Auerbach, E. R., Chafouleas, S. M., & Briesch, A. M. (2018). State-level guidance on school-based screening for social, emotional, and behavioral risk: A follow-up study. Manuscript in submission.

Auerbach, E.R., Long, S.J., Koriakin, T.A., Briesch, A.M., & Chafouleas, S.M. (2017, October). Exploring the alignment of behavior screening policies and practices in U.S. schools. Poster presented at the 22nd Annual Conference on Advancing School Mental Health, Washington, D.C.

Briesch, A. M., Chafouleas, S. M., & Chaffee, R. K. (2017). *Analysis of State Level Guidance Regarding School Based, Universal Screening for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Risk*. Advance online publication. 10.1007/s12310-017-9232-5.

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[1] Screening assessments are conducted with the majority of students in a population in order to identify those who may be demonstrating—or at-risk for demonstrating—significant problems.

[2] Romer, D. & McIntosh, M. (2005). The roles and perspectives of school mental health professionals in promoting adolescent mental health. In D. Evans, E. Foa, R. Gur, H. Hendin, C. O'Brien, M. Seligman, and B. Walsh (Eds.), Treating and Preventing Adolescent Mental Health Disorders: What We Know and What We Don't Know (pp. 598-615). New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. and Bruhn, A. L., Woods-Groves, S., & Huddle, S. (2014). A preliminary investigation of emotional and behavioral screening practices in K-12 schools. Education and Treatment of Children, 37, 611-634.

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