



# Selecting a Universal Behavior Screening Tool: Questions to Consider

In any tiered system, it is important for implementers to have reliable data to detect students for whom Tier 1 supports alone are insufficient and may benefit from Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions and supports. Systematic screening is a proactive, reliable method for examining overall levels of student performance in a district, school, department, grade level, or class as well as one component of a process to connect students to more intensive supports. As with academic screening tools, universal behavior screening tools can provide reliable, valid data to detect initial signs of internalizing (e.g., extremely shy, anxious, and withdrawn) and externalizing (e.g., defiant, disruptive, and aggressive) behaviors before they may become chronic challenges for the student, potentially negatively impacting their social and emotional well-being. In this brief, we provide considerations for selecting a universal behavior screening tool to inform instruction for all students by providing teachers with reliable, valid data that can be analyzed along with other sources of data (e.g., attendance, nurse visits, office discipline referrals) to inform instruction. For educational leaders interested in adding a behavior screening tool to their regular school practices, we offer considerations when answering the question: Which universal behavior screening tool shall we adopt?

For educators interesting in selecting a systematic screening tool, it is beneficial to first consider your school or district specific priorities relative to systematic screening, and what resources are available for investment. Taking stock at the beginning of this process allows you to set priorities and create a feasible plan for selecting a tool that will meet the needs of your school or district. As you read this practice brief, consider the [Systematic Screening Tools: Universal Behavior Screeners](#) listing of examples of currently available screening tools. In this practice brief, we offer five questions for you to consider as you decide which systematic screening tool to adopt, install, and sustain. These questions are intended to support you to identify your available resources and your screening needs.

## 1. Student groups

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

Many systematic screening tools are available, with each being designed and evaluated for use with specific grade levels. Therefore, beginning your considerations by identifying the grade levels for which you plan to screen is an important first step. If you plan to screen students across a wide range of grade-levels (e.g., kindergarten through twelfth-grade), you might consider adopting a single screening tool validated for use across all grade spans. However, given fewer systematic screening tools are validated for use at the high school level, it might be necessary to use different screening tools for different grade spans (e.g., one screening tool for the elementary level and another for the middle and high school levels). When reviewing tools, be certain students are screened only using tools designed and evaluated for that

particular grade-level. Reliability and validity of screening tools are critical to ensure accurate detection of students experiencing behavioral risk (Lane, Oakes, Menzies, Buckman, & Royer, 2020). Following specific procedural guidelines for how to use each tool is important to ensure resulting scores can be interpreted according to available evidence for the psychometric properties of the tool.

## 2. Behaviors of interest

### What types of behaviors or concerns do you wish to detect (internalizing, externalizing, both)?

Each screening tool is designed to detect students demonstrating specific types of behaviors that often serve to communicate an underlying concern. Some behaviors commonly assessed include externalizing (e.g., disruptive, aggressive, attention-seeking) and internalizing (e.g., shy, anxious, withdrawn). Monitoring these various behaviors is important as these behavior patterns may negatively impact students' experiences at school (e.g., academic difficulties: Lane, et al., 2019). Furthermore, these collections of behaviors are often reflective of challenges in the areas of social and emotional well-being. As such, it is important to note, that students displaying consistent patterns of internalizing and/or externalizing are at risk for long term negative outcomes. A few screening tools also include desirable behaviors such as prosocial skills, adaptive behaviors, and motivation-to-learn. Determining which behaviors are of interest will ensure the tool you select will provide the desired information. Attend carefully to publisher specifications and available psychometric evidence (e.g., reliability, validity) when selecting a systematic screening tool to ensure the selected tool provides reliable and valid assessment of behaviors of interest for your student population.

## 3. Cost

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

An important initial consideration is the funds available to install and support ongoing use of a screening tool. Some tools are free access, whereas others are commercially available (see [Systematic Screening Tools: Universal Behavior Screeners](#) for cost information). Although some tools are free-access, there can still be financial costs (e.g., personnel time) to set up and sustain. For example, free-access measures may have costs related to set-up of electronic structures to support the administration, collection, housing, and reporting of screening data. Similarly, regardless of the screener selected, consider costs related to training staff on screening procedures and implementing interventions in response to screening data. If you identify areas where resources may be insufficient, making long-term plans to build capacity or acquire expertise can provide a path forward even when financial resources are strained.

## 4. Time and expertise

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

Although screening tools are by definition brief to administer, they nevertheless require time from educators, administrators, and support staff (e.g., informational technology personnel) to install and conduct, as well as to summarize and interpret resulting data. Therefore, consideration of available time and expertise is necessary. For example, plan for time required to complete the following activities: (a) teachers independently screening students (e.g., fill out the screeners); (b) leaders at the district and school level reviewing, summarizing, sharing, and interpreting data; and (c) coordinators of screening setting up data collection structures if necessary. Depending on the answers to these questions, you may select screening tools with priority on administration times or built-in systems for collecting and reporting data. If financial challenges prevent consideration of commercially available systems that include built-in data-management systems, it will be important to plan for the additional time and expertise required to build free-access tools into existing data structures for efficient collection and use in your school or district. As you move forward with your selection of a screening tool, focus on issues of efficiency. The goal is to adopt and install a screening tool that can be used and sustained efficiently over time to meet students' multiple needs (e.g., academic, behavioral, as well as social-emotional well-being).

## 5. Person providing information

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

In this practice brief, we focus primarily on teacher-completed screening tools. There are also screening tools that can be completed by families and students themselves. For example, some screening tools offer multiple screeners from various perspectives (e.g., teacher, parent, and /or student). If the decision is made to adopt and install screening tools to gather information from these other informants, be certain you have the necessary permissions for collecting this new information and that you are prepared to respond to information shared. It is important to review district policy to understand when direct permission may be required (e.g., asking students to complete screening tools about themselves) and when an information or "opt-out" letter to families may be permitted.

## Concluding Thoughts

Although we have discussed the importance of selecting reliable and valid screening tools previously in this brief, with our commitment to equity we emphasize it is important for continued inquiry into the extent to which specific items on screening tools are absent of bias in terms of sex, gender, ethnicity, race, and disability status (Lane, Oakes, Menzies, Buckman, & Royer, 2020). The good news is that research is currently underway to explore these important issues. In the meantime, it is important to continue your practice of screening as systematic screening is one potential strategy to guide equity decisions, particularly when screening data are examined alongside other information collected as part of regular

school practices (e.g., attendance, nurse visits, suspensions) through the disaggregation of screening data by sub-groups of students. Decades of studies continue to demonstrate that screening data predict important student outcomes, including academic (e.g., reading, grade point averages, course failures) and behavioral (e.g., attendance, office discipline referrals, suspensions) performance. By screening, we can detect potential risk that leads to teachers' instructional decision making and team planning to address before the behaviors of concern become chronic or increase in intensity.

Selecting a screening tool is the first of several important decisions. For example, after you have selected your screening tool, it will be important to develop plans for (a) establishing data collection, data management, and data sharing procedures; (b) providing professional learning to your faculty and staff, including coaching to support each step in the implementation process; and (c) communicating with your families and community members about the whys and how of systematic screening.

*Note.* Questions often arise about the role of systematic screening in relationship to Child Find procedures. As part of their Child Find efforts under IDEA (2004), schools often have processes in place for detecting students with behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health challenges (e.g., record reviews, input from families, student self-reported information). Child Find screening processes are typically distinct from school-wide systematic screening in that school-wide screening practices are used as part of an on-going problem-solving process whereby multiple data sources are reviewed to guide instructional and systemic decisions for all students, including those who may need additional supports but a disability is not suspected. If the screening process, or specific data sources, schools or local education agencies put in place as part of their School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (SW-PBIS) system are to be potentially considered as part of the Child Find process, a plan should be reviewed by the director of special education and be in compliance with state and federal guidelines.

**Additional Resources to Guide Screener Selection  
Website Resources & Articles**

**Systematic Screening for Behavior in Current K-12 Instructional Settings**

Lane, K. L., Oakes, W. P., Buckman, M. M., Sherod, R., & Lane, K. S., (November 2020). *Systematic screening for behavior in current K-12 Settings*. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

**Tips for Communicating with Your Community about Systematic Screening: What does your district and school leadership team need to know?**

Sherod, R., Oakes, W., Lane, K.L., & Lane, K.S. (May, 2020). Tips for communicating with your community about systematic screening. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

**Systematic Screening for Behavior: Considerations and Commitment to Continued Inquiry**

Lane, K. L., Oakes, W. P., Menzies, H. M., Buckman, M. M., & Royer, D. J. (2020). *Systematic Screening for Behavior: Considerations and Commitment to Continued Inquiry* [Research Brief]. Ci3T Strategic Leadership Team. [www.ci3t.org/screening](http://www.ci3t.org/screening)



**Screening Resources**

Lane, K. L. (October, 2020). Screening Resources. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon.  
[www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)

**Universal Screening – Systematic Screening to Shape Instruction**

Lane, K. L., Powers, L., Oakes, W. P., Buckman, M. M., Sherod, R. L., & Lane, K. S. (2020). *Universal screening – systematic screening to shape instruction: Lessons Learned and practicalities* [PBIS forum 19 practice brief].  
<https://www.pbis.org/>

**Systematic Screening Tools: Universal Behavior Screeners**

Lane, K. L. (October, 2020). Systematic Screening Tools: Universal Behavior Screeners. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)

**Predictive validity of Student Risk Screening Scale—Internalizing and Externalizing (SRSS-IE) scores in elementary schools**

Lane, K. L., Oakes, W. P., Cantwell, E. D., Common, E. A., Royer, D. J., Leko, M. M., ... & Allen, G. E. (2019). Predictive validity of Student Risk Screening Scale—Internalizing and Externalizing (SRSS-IE) scores in elementary schools. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 27(4), 221-234.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426618795443>

**Predictive validity of SRSS-IE scores for internalizing and externalizing scores in secondary schools**

Lane, K. L., Oakes, W. P., Cantwell, E. D., Royer, D. J., Leko, M. M., Schatschneider, C., & Menzies, H. M. (2019). Predictive validity of Student Risk Screening Scale for internalizing and externalizing scores in secondary schools. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 27(2), 86-100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426617744746>

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