SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING PLAYBOOK

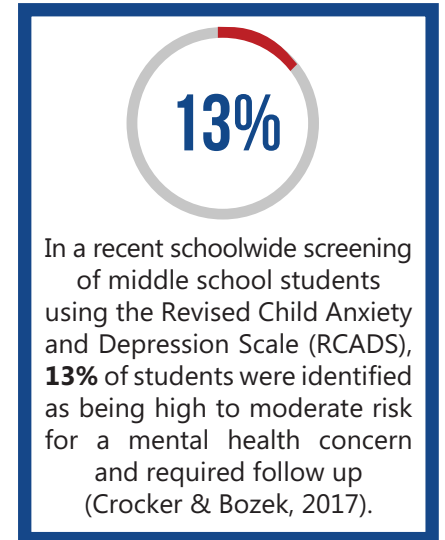## Best Practices and Tips from the Field

CSMH

Center for School Mental Health

Background

Mental health screening is the assessment of students to determine whether they may be at risk for a mental health concern. Screening can be conducted using a systematic tool or process with an entire population, such as a school's student body, or a group of students, such as a classroom or grade level(s). This is different than using assessment measures with students who are already identified as being at-risk for or having mental health problems. However, using a systematic assessment process with referred or enrolled students is also best practice; you can use some of the information in this guide for initial evaluation or progress monitoring as well.

Importance of Screening

Mental health screening in schools is a foundational element of a comprehensive approach to behavioral health prevention, early identification, and intervention. Early recognition and treatment of mental health challenges leads to better outcomes for students. Given the high prevalence and recurrence of mental health disorders, and the availability of effective treatments, it is important to identify problems early and connect students to services and supports. Schools are a critical setting for screening, consistent with the public health framework to improve population health of all students and families.

13%

In a recent schoolwide screening of middle school students using the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS), **13%** of students were identified as being high to moderate risk for a mental health concern and required follow up (Crocker & Bozek, 2017).

Purposes of Screening

- ✓ Identify students at risk for poor outcomes
- ✓ Identify students who may need monitoring or intervention (i.e., secondary or tertiary)
- ✓ Inform decisions about needed services
- ✓ Identify personal strengths/wellness as well as risk factors/emotional distress
- ✓ Assess effectiveness of universal social/emotional/behavioral curriculum

Screening tools or processes in schools may include:

- ✓ Reliable, valid screening measures
- ✓ Academic and behavioral indicators (e.g., attendance, grades, office discipline referrals)
- ✓ Teacher/Peer nominations

Number of individuals screened is the most common national behavioral health performance indicator. However, a quality improvement process also involves monitoring the number of students who were identified, triaged to, and received services and supports based on screening data. Review the Action Steps on the next page to get started.

A northeastern school district found through universal mental health screening that students who scored in the moderate to severe range for depression are absent 47% more often than the average student.

They also found that GPA was consistently lower for students who scored in the moderate to severe range on two different mental health screeners (Crocker & Bozek, 2017).

ACTION STEPS

Build a Foundation

Assemble a Team

Assemble a team of key family-school-community stakeholders that will plan and implement the screening process for your specific school or district.

Generate Buy-in and Support

Use strategies to market and promote your comprehensive school mental health system. See System Marketing and Promotion resources on The SHAPE System to help with this process.

- Utilize data and other strategies to justify mental health screening.
- Consider how mental health screening fits with other initiatives or goals in your school/district.
- Review how students are currently being identified for mental health services. Consider whether current practices may contribute to over- or under-identification of mental health problems.

Clarify Goals

Identify Purpose and Outcomes

Decide how mental health screening will improve system issues and/or student outcomes at the grade, school, or district level.

Identify Resources and Logistics

Identify Student Mental Health Support Resources

Make sure you are familiar with in-school and community-based mental health services to refer students to who are identified via screening. See Needs Assessment and Resource Mapping resources on The SHAPE System to help with this process.

Create a Timeline

Create a timeline for executing the screening process including frequency of screening (e.g., once or multiple times per year).

Identify Staffing and Budget Resources

Identify resources necessary for execution including staffing and budget.

Develop Administration Policies

Develop policies and practices for administration including:

- Materials to share the screening process with staff, caregivers, students, and community members
- Consent procedures
- Data collection process (e.g. when/how/where will the screening take place, who will administer, what supports need to be in place to collect data)
- Follow up process for all students
- Administration timeline and checklist

> *Tips from the Field*
> **ALIGN WITH KEY DECISION MAKER PRIORITIES**
>
> " We knew we had to have buy-in from key leadership in our district for mental health screening to be a success. Our superintendent is dedicated to early intervention work across initiatives in our district, so we made sure to highlight how universal mental health screening fits with this priority. "

Select an Appropriate Screening Tool

When selecting a screening tool(s), consider the following questions:

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Is it reliable, valid, and evidence-based?	Is it free or can it be purchased for a reasonable cost?	How long does it take to administer and score?	Does it come with ready access to training and technical support for staff?	Does it screen for WHAT we want to know? (e.g. type of mental health risk, positive mental health and well-being, age range?)

Screening tools may include measures and rating scales administered to students, teachers, and/or parents; academic and behavioral data (e.g., attendance); and teacher/peer nominations.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: The SHAPE System Screening and Assessment Library includes instruments appropriate for use in school mental health. Search for the screening or assessment tool that fits your school by focus area (academic, school climate, or social/emotional/behavioral), assessment purpose, student age, language, reporter, and cost. The CSMH team has carefully reviewed every measure to provide a brief summary of each with direct links to copies of the instrument and scoring information. https://theshapesystem.com

Determine Consent and Assent Processes

Schools and districts have found success using passive consent and opt-out procedures to garner parent consent and student assent for universal screening procedures. To successfully implement passive consent, consider the following strategies:

Deliver a consistent message
Deliver a consistent message about the purpose and importance of mental health screening in advance of all screenings. Schools are routinely involved in physical health screenings like eye exams to ensure students are ready to learn. It can help to explain the importance of mental health screening as a similar process, tied to learning.

Share information in multiple formats
Ensure all caregivers are aware of screening procedures by sharing the passive consent message in multiple formats, such as:

- automated phone calls to all families
- information on the school website
- written notification sent in the mail
- signs posted in the school building

Example Passive Consent and Opt-out:

"In an effort to promote the health and well-being of students in XX Public Schools, students will be periodically provided with questionnaires, surveys, and screeners that address issues related to mental health. The information gained will support the school's ability to provide comprehensive and timely support for your son or daughter if they require any assistance. Students can opt-out of filling out any questionnaire, survey, or screener that they are not interested in taking and you can opt-out your son or daughter at any time by contacting the Guidance Office of your son's/daughter's school or filling out the opt-out form here. A list of the questionnaires, surveys, and screeners is available below for you to review. We are committed to ensuring your son or daughter is supported academically, socially, and emotionally, and we look forward to partnering with each of you toward achieving this goal."

Develop Data Collection, Administration, and Follow Up Processes

Data collection
Develop screening data collection and progress monitoring systems.

- An **electronic format** for data collection, such as Google forms, allows students to complete screening data online and facilitates prompt analysis of results and follow up.

Administration
Determine what students will be screened and the process for screening.

- Who to screen: **Pilot screening procedures** with small groups of students (e.g. five students in one grade at one school) to test procedures before administering to an entire grade or school. Collect feedback from students, caregivers, and staff administering the pilot screening about the screening tool and process to inform screening procedure modifications.

- When to screen: **Consider using advisory or home room time to administer screenings.**

- Staff to support screening: Determine who will help to support the screening process. **Provide screening instruction scripts for staff** to read to students immediately prior to the screening administration and include procedures for any questions that arise during screening administration.

Follow up
Determine systematic process and data rules to follow up with students identified with different levels of risk for a mental health concern.

- Determine what scores/indicators will identify students who need immediate follow up (high risk – same day), prompt follow up (moderate risk – within the week), or non-urgent follow up (low risk – follow up to communicate negative findings).

- Determine what interventions will be implemented for students at different levels of risk (e.g., immediate crisis referral, referral to a school-based or community mental health provider, referral to early intervention/prevention group).

- Determine a plan to ensure mental health staff receive and analyze data the same day as the completed screening to ensure prompt follow up.

- **Ensure any students endorsing risk of harm to self or others receive immediate follow up (same day).**

- Determine a plan for following up with the parent/guardian of students with elevated scores and with negative results.

- Determine a plan for following up with school staff about screening and progress monitoring results.

- **Alert crisis teams and local community mental health providers to be on call in advance of screenings.**

Resources

Websites and Web-based Materials

- The SHAPE System Screening and Assessment Library — The SHAPE System Screening and Assessment Library includes instruments appropriate for use in school mental health. Search for the screening or assessment tool that fits your school by focus area (academic, school climate, or social/emotional/behavioral), assessment purpose, student age, language, reporter, and cost. The CSMH team has carefully reviewed every measure to provide a brief summary of each with direct links to copies of the instrument and scoring information.
https://theshapesystem.com/

- CSMH Comparative Review of Free Measures for School Mental Health.
http://bit.ly/compreviewofmeasures (link is case sensitive)

- Center on Response to Intervention at American Institutes for Research Screening Briefs.
http://www.rti4success.org/resource/screening-briefs

- Crocker, J. & Bozek, G. (2017). District-wide Mental Health Screening: Using Data to Promote Early Identification and Quality Services. http://bit.ly/dwmhscreening (link is case sensitive)

- Desrochers, J., & Houck, G. (2013). Depression in Children and Adolescents: Guidelines for School Practice. Handout H: Mental Health Screening in Schools.
https://www.schoolhealth.com/media/pdf/handout_mental_health_screening_JD.pdf

Articles and Guides

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