

Understanding Universal Mental Health Screenings

As parents and caregivers, it's important to recognize the critical role that schools play in looking after the mental well-being of our children. One key aspect of this is the use of universal mental health screenings as part of a broader plan to support youth mental health. Research shows that the sooner we identify a problem, the sooner we can address it. Screening tools can be useful for schools to understand how to identify and address the mental health needs of the children and adolescents they work with.

Below is helpful language for understanding how schools should administer universal mental health screenings:

Mental Health Literacy: It's important for schools to provide mental health education regardless of whether a universal screening is being conducted. This helps create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.

Comprehensive Approach: Universal mental health screenings are just one piece of a larger plan within schools to promote mental wellness among students.

Universal: Screenings are considered universal when they are provided to an entire population (i.e., grade, school, district) to identify students' strengths and needs.

Validity and Reliability: Schools should ensure they are using reliable tools that consider cultural sensitivities and biases to assess students' strengths and needs.

Timing: Screenings should be conducted at routine times, similar to a well-child visit or vision and hearing screenings. This might happen in the middle of the school year or when transitioning to middle or high school.

Prevention: Students do better when they feel well emotionally. Universal Screening tools are one way to make sure that small problems do not grow into bigger problems.

Identification and Support: Screening tools can provide schools with data to recognize student's strengths and needs. The school can then develop appropriate in-school support and connect the student to community resources.

Fishing Net Analogy: Think of mental health screenings as casting a fishing net. While they can identify some students in need of support, they won't catch every student. Schools should continue offering education, training, and supportive environments alongside screenings.

Screenings vs. Assessments: Screenings are used for early identification and to indicate the need for further evaluation, while assessments provide a more comprehensive clinical picture.

Mental Health Screenings vs. Suicide Prevention Screenings: If schools administer a mental health screening, the screening tool should assess student strengths and weaknesses. It should provide a well-rounded picture of the student at a particular moment in time. Whereas suicide prevention screenings are reserved for students who are at risk of suicide (via self-reporting, staff reporting, peer reporting).

Informing Parents/Guardians: Schools should have a clear plan for informing parents/caregivers if their child's screening suggests they may need additional support. Schools should provide parents/caregivers with community resources and a plan to support the student.