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# Exploring the Potential for Whole Child Screening in Schools

This brief shares findings from Project ESSY, an IES-funded research grant (R305A220249) with aims to develop and evaluate the ESSY Whole Child Screener, a school-based screening instrument and associated data reporting structures for assessing a range of child and environmental indicators.

Have you ever been asked to read rows of letters at a healthcare visit? If so, you have engaged in vision screening. Screenings like these help medical professionals to identify those who may need additional care quickly and efficiently.
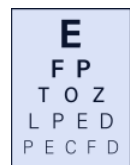
Schools also use screenings to check for things like reading difficulties or behavioral concerns. However, some drawbacks to existing school-based screeners include:

- Predominant focus on student challenges or deficits, with limited attention to their strengths
- Narrow focus within a screener (e.g., only assessing reading fluency or hearing), necessitating use of multiple screeners
- Missed inclusion of items that assess contextual supports or stressors in a student's life that could be impacting school success (e.g., food security, social support)

Project ESSY is developing a school-based screening tool focused on providing a strengths-based, comprehensive view of each child. Our process engages a Consequential Validity-Centered Measurement Development Framework. As part of our initial development steps, we interviewed school staff, administrators, and family caregivers to gain their perspectives on potential items to include in the screener, and to understand any potential positive or negative consequences that might result from using the screener in schools.

Consider Sofia. Sofia's teacher filled out a screening instrument about her social and emotional skills. Sofia's teacher indicated that Sofia is often impatient and rude towards her classmates. Follow-up observation suggests this primarily happens in the morning. Without additional information, a social skills group might be suggested. What if Sofia's behavior is caused by hunger because she does not eat breakfast before school? Access to the school's breakfast program may be a better matched support than a social skills group in improving Sofia's well-being and interactions with her peers.

What Did We Do?

In 1:1 interviews, we shared the drafted ESSY Whole Child Screener with 7 school staff, 3 administrators, and 8 family caregivers. We asked if they perceived the items were relevant to students' school success, if any might introduce teacher bias, and whether teachers could accurately rate each item (e.g., do they

know this information about students?). We also asked about any potential barriers to using the screener in schools and their suggestions for improvements.

What Did We Learn?

Participants' perspectives were summarized into three themes:

Paving the road for implementation of a whole child screener (alignment with existing school initiatives and goals)

- Example: The screener's comprehensive yet efficient design made it more likely to be used in schools
- Example: The whole-child approach provided a more well-rounded understanding of students and increased educators' empathy for student challenges

> "*We're not only supporting the academic side, but we're also addressing barriers that families face, whether it's food, homelessness, any number of barriers. [...] We address all those questions on a daily basis with families.*"
>
> – School administrator

Potential roadblocks to use (potential barriers to uptake and use in schools)

- Example: Families may be uncomfortable with items related to students' home or community experiences, fearing they might feel judged
- Example: Teachers may be unable to accurately answer all of the items, especially those occurring outside of school or related to students' internal experiences
- Example: Schools may be unable to provide follow-up supports for identified needs

> "*So, if you're saying we're getting rid of that one [a social emotional behavioral screener recently implemented by their district] and replacing it so soon, I think people will have a hard time accepting that. Because we didn't see if there was any success with the first one.*"
>
> -Teacher

Suggested paths forward to maximize positive intended consequences (recommendations for optimizing the screener's use and impact)

- Example: Providing clear messaging to staff and families about the screener's purpose
- Example: Rewording items to reduce the potential for bias
- Example: Offering educators easy-to-read data reports

> "*When teachers and educators take the time to say, "We're here to help, and it's not anything that you've done wrong, and we really want to help your kids be as successful as possible." I think that that helps take the edge off, and really helps parents to be able to not only educate them, but also educate the kids.*"
>
> -Family Caregiver

What will we do next?

This study helped us identify strengths and areas for improvement in the draft ESSY Whole Child Screener. In preparation for a large-scale study to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measure, we made several revisions in response to these data including:

- Removing words or phrases that could induce bias (e.g., aggressive, overly talkative)
- Rewording contextual items to reduce potential judgement toward families
- Removing items difficult for teachers to rate or less relevant for elementary students

To Cite this Brief:

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