

Educational Decision Making Using the ESSY Whole Child Screener

This brief shares findings from [Project ESSY](#), an IES-funded research grant (R305A220249). Project ESSY aims to develop and evaluate the ESSY Whole Child Screener, a multiple-gated, school-based screening instrument assessing a range of child and environmental indicators.

Universal screening is an important part of a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model. In universal screening, all students are assessed, regardless of any known risk factors, to identify needed support.^{1,2} Universal screening data are often reviewed by school-based data teams. These teams are tasked with reviewing and interpreting data, identifying needs and potential explanations, and putting appropriate interventions into place.

We have developed a data report to present the results of the ESSY Whole Child Screener, which is different from other screener reports in multiple ways. After summarizing the Gate 1 responses, it indicates whether there are any concerns about the student-teacher relationship or the teacher's confidence in their responses. It does not use any numbers or scores.³ Instead, responses are organized to help teams analyze in order to action plan. As part of our development process, we conducted a focus group study to compare how school-based data teams discuss students and develop action plans when they use the ESSY screening reports compared to when they use their existing system's reports.⁴

What Did We Do?

In the spring of 2025, we conducted focus groups with nine school-based data teams, each consisting of 3-8 members. These teams had to be at a school that had an existing social, emotional, or behavioral screener and familiar with reviewing student data together.

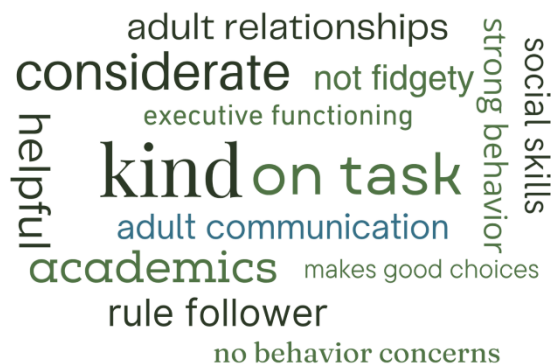
Using fictional student case studies, the ESSY team completed the school's existing screener and the ESSY screener for **two** students and generated corresponding screening data reports for each. We then presented each of the four reports to the focus group teams as if they were four separate students, using different gender-neutral names to represent each report. The teams were asked to review and discuss the reports as if the student attended their school.

What Did We Find?

After extensive qualitative analysis, we identified the following about the use of the ESSY Whole Child Screener data report as compared to existing screener data reports:



1. **A greater number of teams identified student strengths:** All nine teams identified strengths of both students when using the ESSY data report. Only five teams identified strengths of Student C, and six teams identified strengths of Student J when using their existing screener's data report.



Strengths identified using existing screeners were primarily focused on the child



Strengths identified using ESSY screener included were related to both the child and their context

2. **Teams noted contextual influences in addition to within-child concerns:** The ESSY report enabled teams to identify several more important contextual factors impacting student success.

3. **Hypotheses were less clinically diagnostic:** When they used the ESSY data reports, teams often hypothesized that concerns were due to contextual influences (e.g., problems at home or school) as opposed to clinical conditions (e.g., autism, anxiety, depression, ADHD).

4. **Teams engaged in more immediate and comprehensive intervention planning:** When reviewing the students with their existing data reports, the teams talked about needing more data. When they used the ESSY report, they generally felt they had the relevant information and were able to start action planning. For instance, **all nine teams planned to connect with Student J's family** to help meet their basic needs through community supports.

“Family is a significant stressor, and then for school to be a stressor as well, I worry about what type of support the student feels that they have.”

– Team Member using ESSY data report to discuss Student C

Implications

Findings suggest that using the ESSY Whole Child Screener led to more strengths-based and contextualized conversations about students. Teams were also ready to implement multiple child-focused and contextual interventions to support students. Because the student cases used in this study were fictional, future research is needed to be sure the findings remain the same with real-world use.

To learn more, visit the Project ESSY website at <https://expanding-school-screening.education.uconn.edu/>.

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¹ Harlacher, J. E. & Bailey, T. R. (2025). *Multi-tiered system of supports within schools: The what and how*. Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports at American Institutes for Research. <https://mtss4success.org>

² Briesch, A. M., Chafouleas, S. M., Iovino, E. A., Abdulkarim, N., Sherod, R. L., Oakes, W. P., Lane, K. L., Common, E. A., Royer, D. J., & Buckman, M. (2022). Exploring directions for professional learning to enhance behavior screening within a comprehensive, integrated three-tiered model of prevention. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 45, 245-262.

³ Dodman, S. L., Swalwell, K., DeMulder, E. K., View, J. L., & Stribling, S. M. (2021). Critical data-driven decision making: A conceptual model of data use for equity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 99, 103272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103272>

⁴ Koslouski, J. B., Briesch, A. M., Chafouleas, S. M., Caemmerer, J. M., & Lyon, K. (2026). Investigating the potential for treatment utility and usability of the ESSY Whole Child Screener. *School Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-026-09888-w>