

## Initial Validation of 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.*

We have worked to develop the Expanding Screening to Support Youth (ESSY) Whole Child Screener to comprehensively and efficiently assess child and contextual factors that affect students' success in schools. The ESSY Screener uses a “gating” approach so that teachers rate all students on several broad, Gate 1 domains (e.g., academic skills, attendance, social and emotional well-being, social supports outside of school). Then, they rate specific, Gate 2 questions only if one of the broad categories raises a concern.

When initially conceptualized, we believed that the ESSY Whole Child Screener would measure nine domains: five assessing within-child factors and four assessing contextual factors. In 2024-25 we conducted two studies to test whether the hypothesized factors were actually supported by the data. We did this by having two large samples of 3rd-, 4th-, and 5th-grade teachers rate their students using the screener.<sup>1</sup> This brief summarizes the combined findings from the studies.

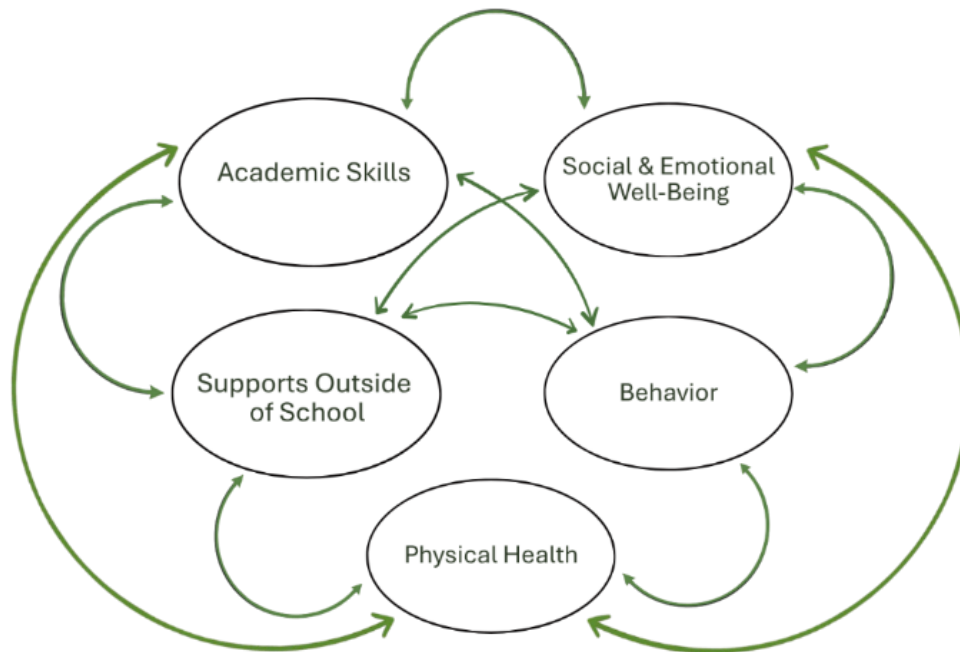
### What Did We Do?

We were interested in evaluating the **validity**, **reliability**, and **usability** of the screener.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we wanted to know whether the screener measured the domains it was intended to measure, how strongly the domains related to each other, and the consistency of ratings within domains. To do this, we asked teachers to complete the screener for one or more students in their class. We conducted the initial analysis with the data from the first sample of 448 teachers and then confirmed those results with data from the second sample of 317 teachers. Additionally, we asked teachers open-ended survey questions to understand their opinions about the measure's **usability** and about its potential positive and negative **consequences**.<sup>2</sup>

### What Did We Learn?

The final measure consisted of 53 items across the five domains shown below. The internal reliability estimates were good for all domains, with most domains including both child-focused and context-focused screener items. The five domains were moderately to strongly related to each other and provide a comprehensive whole child perspective about students.





In both the first and second studies, teachers noted positive and negative aspects about the screener in terms of usability and potential intended and unintended consequences.

**Positive aspects and potential consequences:**

- easy to navigate
- identifies students in need of supports
- helps identify root cause of concerns
- helps teachers to reflect on causes
- screener focuses on strengths and is more comprehensive
- could connect students with necessary supports

“[The screener] would allow me to understand students in many different areas.”

– Teacher, Study 2

**Negative aspects and potential consequences:**

- Teacher sometimes does not have enough information to answer some questions
- Screener could take a lot of time to complete if there are many concerns about a child
- Misidentification, overidentification, or negative consequences of labeling a student
- Could cause teachers to lower expectations
- Intruding upon student and family privacy
- Relevant supports might not be available

“I worry that learning more about a student’s external factors will negatively impact the high standards they are held to. If a student is going through stressors outside of school, they need extra compassion, but not pity.”

– Teacher, Study 1

## Implications

Although there are certainly some potential negative consequences of the ESSY screener, when teachers do not reflect on environmental/contextual influences (e.g., the presence of stressors outside of school, social supports), student behaviors might be thought of as problems within the student. However, thinking about the stressors students might face could help educators to recognize certain behaviors as a trauma response. Although more research on the ESSY screener is needed, it provides a potential comprehensive tool to enable educators to better understand students holistically so that students can receive relevant school supports to increase their well-being and to improve academically.

To learn more, visit the [Project ESSY website](https://expanding-school-screening.education.uconn.edu/).

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<sup>1</sup> Caemmerer, J.M., Koslouski, J.B., Briesch, A., Chafouleas, S.M., Scudder, A.M., & Melo, B. (2026). Advancing whole-child screening in schools: Initial validation of the ESSY screener. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829261468065>

<sup>2</sup> International Organization of Standardization. (2018). *ISO 9241-11:2018. Ergonomics of human-system interaction: Part 11: Usability: Definitions and concepts*.