

August 2026

Student Perceptions 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.

As part of our commitment to understanding **consequential validity** (the potential positive and negative consequences of implementing the screener^{1,2}), we first interviewed school staff, administrators, and family caregivers about the initial draft of the ESSY Whole Child Screener.³ Because the screener will also affect decisions made about students (e.g., providing supports, identifying strengths and needs), gathering student input about the tool was important to identifying potential positive and negative consequences.

To do this, we conducted **semi-structured interviews with nine elementary school students** in the target age group (3rd – 5th grade)⁴ to learn about their

- **perceptions of the domains (topics)** addressed in the screener,
- **comfort sharing** information about the domains with their teachers, and
- **desire for teacher support** in each domain.

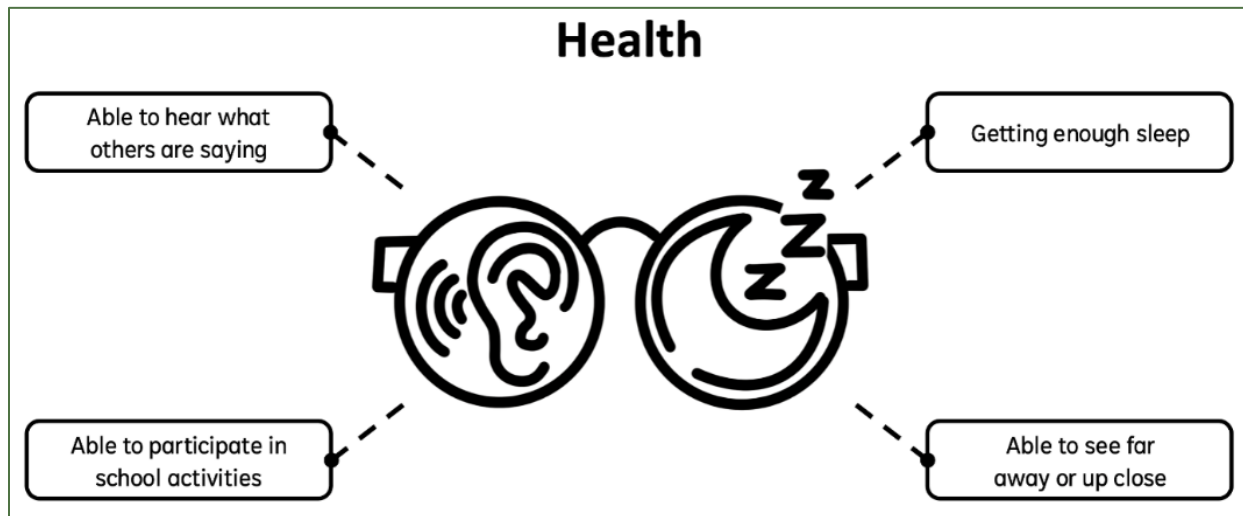
What Did We Do?

In December 2023, we recruited nine students from a community center in the Northeastern U.S. and interviews took place in this setting. After some introductory discussion about the students' typical school day, we showed visuals to students to help explain each domain, and asked questions about: (1) whether the domain affected students' success at school, (2) if they would be comfortable sharing relevant information with their teacher, (3) and whether they would want help from a teacher if they were having a tough time in the domain.

We also used developmentally appropriate language to talk about each domain. For example, the domain of Social Skills was labeled as "Relationships."



Example of Visual:



What Did We Find?

We used reflexive thematic analysis⁵ to identify three themes in the interview data.

1. Students thought that **most of the domains had an impact on school success.**

Participants were **less likely to say that a domain had an impact if it was relational** (i.e., social skills, social support outside of school), but some talked about the impact of bullying.

Something that we had not asked about, but that several students brought up, was the effect of other students' behavior on their school success.

"If you're getting bullied, it can make you not worry about your work and you know, worry about what that kid's going to do to you."

2. Students' comfort sharing information with teachers was influenced by **their past experiences, what they thought the **outcome** of that sharing would be, and whether they thought it **was appropriate** to do so.**

"I don't really like to tell people about my emotions... At school, it's kind of hard because I once told them my emotions and it didn't go too well."

3. Students generally wanted help with their own skills but **did not want teacher support with relationships or matters outside school.**

- Almost all wanted support with academics, emotions, and physical health, especially if the concerns were happening in the classroom (e.g., trouble seeing the board)

- Some students did not want support with relationships or things outside of school. They described wanting to keep home and school separate or to protect friends' privacy.
- Some students wanted teacher support even if they did not want to tell their teacher that they needed help.

"No because it's at home and we can't bring home to school."

Implications

Gathering student perspectives is an important way to identify potential consequences of using new tools in schools. This study offers an example of including student perspectives in the development process of a new screening tool to be used in schools.

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

To Cite this Brief:

Lyon, K., Koslouski, J.B., Chafouleas, S.M., Briesch, A., Caemmerer, J. & Marcy, H. (2026, August). *Student Perceptions of the ESSY Whole Child Screener*. Brief available from <https://expanding-school-screening.education.uconn.edu/>

Content in this Brief is Summarized from:

Lyon, K., Koslouski, J.B., Chafouleas, S.M., Briesch, A., Caemmerer, J. (2025). Student Perceptions of a whole child school screening instrument: An initial step in attending to consequential validity. *School Mental Health*, 17, 788–801. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-025-09782-x>

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Project ESSY represents a collaboration between researchers at the University of Connecticut and Northeastern University. The research project is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A220249 to the University of Connecticut (PI: Chafouleas). The content in this brief does not represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

¹ Caemmerer, J. M., Koslouski, J.B., Chafouleas, S.M., Briesch, A.M., Melo, B., & Marcy, H. M. (2025, January). *Examining the Consequences of Assessment: An Integrated Framework for Developing Measurement Tools*. Brief available from <https://expanding-school-screening.education.uconn.edu/>

² Caemmerer, J. M., Koslouski, J. B., Briesch, A., Chafouleas, S. M., & Melo, B. (2026, Online first). Consequential validity-centered measure development: An illustration using the ESSY whole child screener. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 07342829261438273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829261438273>

³ Koslouski, J. B., Chafouleas, S. M., Briesch, A. M., Caemmerer, J. M., & Melo, B. (2024). Developing a whole child school screening instrument: Evaluating perceived usability as an initial step in planning for consequential validity. *School Mental Health*, 16(2), 370–386. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-024-09670-w>

⁴ Lyon, K., Koslouski, J.B., Chafouleas, S.M. et al. (2025). Student perceptions of a whole child school screening instrument: An initial step in attending to consequential validity. *School Mental Health*, 17, 788–801. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-025-09782-x>

⁵ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.