



Universal Screeners

An Introduction to Universal Screeners for Literacy

Abstract

This research brief focuses on universal screeners for literacy, what the research says about universal screeners, and what the best practices are for using them in grade PK-2nd grade.

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What are Universal Screeners for Literacy?

Universal screeners that examine students' early literacy skills are an important part of creating a high-quality equity-focused early literacy program. These brief but intentional assessments are a proactive way to systematically examine predictive literacy skills. Data collected from administering a literacy screening tool allows teachers to identify students that are at risk of reading difficulties. This process also allows teachers the opportunity to provide evidence-based instruction and interventions.

Universal screeners are typically brief, reliable, and valid assessments that are conducted with students in all grade levels. These screeners should be followed by additional testing or progress monitoring to determine the next steps for the students. Universal screenings that are conducted in Grades K-2 are an evidence-based practice recommended by the [Institute for Education Sciences](#). Universal screeners seek to avoid the "wait to fail" response (Gaab, 2017).

Here is the International Dyslexia Association's definition of screening:

Screening measures, by definition, are typically brief assessments of a particular skill or ability that is highly predictive of a later outcome. Screening measures are designed to quickly differentiate students into one of two groups: 1) those who require intervention and 2) those who do not. A screening measure needs to focus on specific skills that are highly correlated with broader measures of reading achievement resulting in a highly accurate sorting of students (International Dyslexia Association, 2019).

What Does the Research Say about Universal Screeners for Literacy?

The purpose of early literacy screening is to determine the risk levels for reading difficulties in students. Research studies have shown a strong predictive validity of universal screeners for literacy (Barger, 2003; Buck and Torgesen, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). Using universal screeners allows for the identification of children at risk of reading difficulties, and the assessment data can be used to help select appropriate interventions. Universal screening in literacy involves evaluating all children in a grade level several times per year, predicting their risk levels, and helping to decide on interventions that should be used to prevent reading failures (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Students' scores on universal screeners are usually benchmarked with an established criterion score.

What are the Best Practices in Using Universal Screeners?

Since the results of universal screening assessments are used to quickly identify students who may be at risk of reading difficulties, early elementary students should be screened three times a year. These brief assessments are typically administered by the classroom teacher to all students in the early fall, mid-winter, and spring. Teachers should use brief, reliable, and valid assessment measures, and screeners should be conducted for all students in the grade level of the school. The results of the different types of universal screeners can be used to predict students' risk of academic or behavioral difficulties.

To assess the academic progress of students, curriculum-based measurement (CBM) probes can be used like an "educational thermometer" to determine the academic needs for individual students (Shinn, 2002). The purpose of academic screening tools is to help determine how all students are responding to

the core curriculum and Tier 1 instruction. Analysis of the collected screener data can help determine whether a student may be at risk for reduced learning outcomes.

Less commonly used but equally as effective are screeners to identify students who may benefit from social, emotional, or behavioral (SEB) interventions. A reciprocal relationship exists between achievement and behavior. Therefore, conducting SEB universal screeners can help make data-informed decisions. These social, emotional, or behavioral screeners are used within the context of a school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) initiatives. According to the Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (2023), conducting universal screeners for behavior is one important part of the framework needed to systematically establish a foundation for delivering regular, proactive support and preventing unwanted behaviors" (n.p.).

How can teachers use data from universal screeners to plan instruction and interventions?

One of the most important overarching purposes of universal screening data is to determine the efficacy of the core curriculum and Tier One instruction. After the data has been collected, teachers can use the data to intentionally place students into flexible instructional groups. Another valuable outcome of conducting universal screening data regularly is to check for warning signs of reading difficulties, such as dyslexia. The data from universal screeners should also be used to plan well-designed and evidence-based interventions.

Therefore, it is critical that reading difficulties be identified in a timely manner, so appropriate interventions can begin early. Early warning signs of dyslexia and related disorders can be identified through the effective use of universal screeners. Catts (2017), states that children at risk for dyslexia and reading difficulties should be identified "prior to, or at the very least, the beginning of formal reading instruction" (p. 311).

Data-Informed Decision-Making Projects for Teacher Candidates

- Learn about a universal screening assessment that is widely used in your state/region or school district.
- Analyze sample data from the screener.
- Role play that you are a first-grade teacher and have been asked to use the data provided from the universal screener to create instructional groups and decide the most necessary instruction for each group.
- Write a two-page constructed response of how you would create the groups and what evidence you would use to support this decision. What would be the focus of the instructional strategies you would use with each group? Be specific and provide a clear rationale and evidence for your data-driven decisions.

Common Universal Screener Used in Literacy

- DIBELS (8th edition)
- Easy CBM
- STAR Early Literacy
- Measures of Academic Progress Suite
- iReady + iReady Early Reading Tasks

Resources to Learn More About Universal Screeners

Resource	Description
<p>CEEDAR- Practiced Based Learning Opportunity- Mixed Reality Simulation HLP #6- Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.</p>	<p>This resource provides a Mixed Reality Simulation that enables educators to practice and analyze instructional practices using student assessment data. It's designed to help teachers make necessary adjustments that enhance student outcomes in a roleplay/virtual reality setting.</p>
<p>Cox Campus Connection: Response to Intervention Course Video Course, Time to Complete: 2.5 Hours</p>	<p>This video course of approximately 2.5 hours explores the Response to Intervention (RtI) approach, providing educators with the knowledge and strategies needed to intervene effectively when students struggle academically.</p>
<p>Cox Campus Connection: Assessing Our Students Video Course, Time to Complete: 1 Hour</p>	<p>A one-hour video course that provides educators with key insights on student assessments. It explores various assessment methods, their benefits, and how to analyze and utilize assessment results for improved teaching.</p>
<p>Cox Campus Connection: Universal Screener Component Skills Document</p>	<p>This resource is a detailed document outlining the key components and skills required for effective universal screening. It serves as a guide for educators to understand and implement universal screening practices in their classrooms.</p>

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