



## Do More Data Make for Better School Outcomes?

A Review of

*Universal Screening in Educational Settings: Evidence-Based Decision Making for Schools*

by Ryan J. Kettler, Todd A. Glover, Craig A. Albers, and Kelly A. Feeney-Kettler (Eds.)

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Public education in the United States is immersed in a period of deep soul searching about how best to meet the needs of the wide range of students who enter its doors. Beginning in prekindergarten, children who are already writing their names and reading books sit alongside children who have never held a pencil or owned a book. At the other end of the age spectrum, high schools must provide appropriate instruction both to students excelling at calculus and to math-avoidant students struggling to understand fractions and decimals. Similar challenges exist in the domains of behavioral and socioemotional functioning.

In response to these challenges, schools are experimenting with a variety of strategies that involve early detection and systematic interventions for students who display difficulty acquiring foundational competencies and for those who exceed grade-level expectations in language, literacy, and mathematics. Responses also include reform through differentiated instruction, emotional learning programs, programs for gifted students, and bilingual education for English-language learners. When implemented, many of these innovations are often nested within the broader framework of Response to Intervention (RTI) or School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports programs. Although these programmatic efforts differ in target populations, focus, strategies, and intended outcomes, they share a need for reliable valid data as well as a staff trained to translate the data into instructional strategies and intervention programs. These data are most commonly collected through systematic programs of universal screening.

The volume *Universal Screening in Educational Settings: Evidence-Based Decision Making for Schools* is part of a series produced by Division 16, School Psychology, of the American Psychological Association. In selecting the 11 chapters for this volume, the editors aspired to provide information useful to readers in discerning the need for screening, determining how to evaluate and select screening tools, and planning how to link universal screening to RTI.

Authors describe several approaches to screening in a number of content areas such as early childhood literacy, reading, mathematics, and behavior. They also address a range of issues that need to be considered in the design of universal screenings and describe the steps necessary to implement them effectively in educational settings. Technical and psychometric considerations in the selection of screening systems are also covered. However, overall, the chapters more often constitute a conceptual introduction than a set of pragmatic rubrics that can be used to apply the concepts to the task of selecting, implementing, and using screening systems.

The press for accountability through high-stakes testing has motivated school administrators to institute programs of academic benchmarking to assess student progress multiple times over the school year. As a consequence, educators have had more experience in the use of universal screening for reading and mathematics than for behavioral and socioemotional development. In fact, many of the benchmark tests have proven invaluable to administrators in providing estimates of how their students will do on a high-stakes, end-of-the-year test. For these academic screenings, there is a clear incentive for administrators and teachers whose continued employment may be linked to how well students perform on these high-stakes tests. There is a less tangible and powerful incentive to allocate time and resources for screening to assess the socioemotional and behavioral needs of students. Accordingly, schools have less experience with and knowledge about systems that use behavioral and socioemotional screeners. Coverage of this topic is the book's most important and unique contribution, although much more space might have been allocated to it.

Systems of mental health service delivery in most pre-K–12 schools are nascent and often inadequate to meet the needs of students. It is axiomatic that universal mental health screenings have minimal practical value unless they are linked to and incorporated in a system of mental health service delivery for students. Such universal screening can provide a basis for a range of services that includes staff professional development, group-based services, and intensive mental health intervention when needed (Barbarin, 2007). Only two chapters of the book address behavioral screenings from a conceptual and practical standpoint. Given the relatively limited experience that many schools have had, this is an area that deserves more attention and could easily be the subject of an entire volume.

Another topic that deserves more discussion is the very critical tension that exists about the goals and the philosophy of universal screening. This tension is between a focus on remediation and one on preventing problems (Shinn, Walker, & Stoner, 2002). This tension also extends to targeting low-performing children for remediation versus addressing the needs of the broader range of students, including those of high-performing students for supplemental instruction. Is the screening system targeted and designed to identify a broad range of children who are not responding to typical interventions and who need supplemental intervention to meet basic standards, as well as those who would benefit from more challenging instruction?

These criticisms aside, *Universal Screening in Educational Settings* is a very helpful contribution that highlights the relevance and applicability of psychological science to many of the most pressing and worrisome issues facing schools. Taken as a whole, this edited volume makes a convincing case for the utility of universal screenings. The use of data from universal screenings by school staff is heralded as an important strategy for improving

school performance. At the same time, the book is balanced in its treatment of universal screening.

Several chapters identify specific steps necessary to implement programs and point out potential ethical quandaries involved in the implementation of universal screenings. For example, there exists the danger of reifying children's status on a screening tool in a way that transforms individual differences on a screening tool into a category such as *deficient*, *at risk*, or *failing*. Authors caution against such labeling of children on the basis of results from these tests. Similarly, care must be taken not just to measure children's academic abilities but to provide the programs and interventions children need. This is becoming more and more of an issue in an era when many school districts experience declining financial support. It raises the possibility that universal screening might be decoupled from the provision of more effective services. Finally, other chapters advocate for staff development as an essential step in building the capacity of a school district to use data from universal screenings.

Although the book does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that more data are better, a convincing case is made that better data and their use can go a long way toward reforming schools so that they better serve the full range of students. There is not yet much data on the contribution of universal screening to school improvement. However, this edited volume offers an array of ideas about what is needed to make universal screening successful. Most readers will come away giving the benefit of the doubt to the proposition that better and more relevant data used wisely can improve the decisions that educators make in addressing the needs of their students. For this reason, the book should be of interest to a range of professionals and administrators interested in school improvement and those who may be responsible for the design and implementation of academic and socioemotional programs in school settings from prekindergarten to high school.

## References

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