



Screening Districtwide for Students' Social-Emotional Health

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MY VIEW

In the wake of a heartbreaking incident in a neighboring district, where a high school student tragically took his own life without any visible signs of distress, many were left wondering what could have been done to prevent such a devastating loss. In response, our school district made a pivotal decision to implement universal social-emotional behavioral health screening across the district to identify students at risk for suicide and prevent future tragedies.

The imperative to support students' mental health in schools has become increasingly urgent, particularly as suicide rates among children and adolescents continue to rise. Even before the pandemic, schools struggled to provide comprehensive support for students' social-emotional well-being.

The National Center for School Mental Health stresses the importance of identifying and supporting students within the school environment, recognizing the barriers many families face in accessing traditional mental health services.

Seeing these pressing needs, our school district of 1,225 students in upstate New York embarked on implementation of universal screening, leveraging tools such as the Behavioral Intervention Monitoring and Assessment System, or BIMAS-2, as part of our multi-tiered system of supports. BIMAS-2 is a web-based tool that screens and monitors behavioral and social-emotional learning



Parents and staff at first were skeptical about using a social-emotional behavioral health screener. However, through communitywide communication and board meetings, we emphasized the importance. Our superintendent's message: If you would do anything to save one life, then this effort is worth it to identify at-risk students.

When students indicate thoughts of self-harm, support professionals assess them and call home to discuss concerns and interventions, helping parents navigate difficult conversations and build trust with school staff. Parents can view their child's screening scores by scheduling an appointment with the counselor for data interpretation.

Empowering Prevention

Applying the BIMAS-2 marked a significant change from a reactive to a preventive model of support in our schools. This approach empowers school support personnel to gather insightful data on students' social-emotional needs, particularly among secondary students. It assists in identifying internalizing behaviors that are easily masked by students in their day-to-day interactions with staff.

Just as schools systematically assess students' academic strengths and deficits to tailor interventions, they now can do the same for social-emotional skills using data from universal screeners such as the BIMAS-2.

The introduction of data-driven screening transformed our previous approach, enabling us to pinpoint students' specific social-emotional needs and tailor interventions accordingly.

An integral feature of the BIMAS-2 is its ability to assess thoughts of self-harm, providing real-time data on students' emotional well-being. By administering self-assessments to all students in grades 6-12, schools can promptly identify at-risk students and triage them for assessment, parent contact and referral based on the severity of their responses.

Historically, assessing for self-harm or suicidality relied on students self-disclosing or others expressing concern about friends. However, the use of a universal screener represents a novel approach, as exemplified in our district's important decision to directly ask students about their social-emotional well-being and thoughts of self-harm.

Positive Connections



our data show the interventions have had a positive impact on our students' social-emotional learning scores.

Interviews with school psychologists and counselors revealed initial skepticism about the BIMAS-2, but we saw a clear shift toward embracing universal screening after staff recognized its potential to identify students in need of support. By fostering connections with students and families, support staff can address concerns and provide targeted interventions within the MTSS framework.

The integration of universal social-emotional behavioral health screening has fundamentally transformed how schools support students' mental health needs. By prioritizing holistic student well-being and strengthening connections within the school community, schools can effectively support at-risk students and create a supportive learning environment for all.

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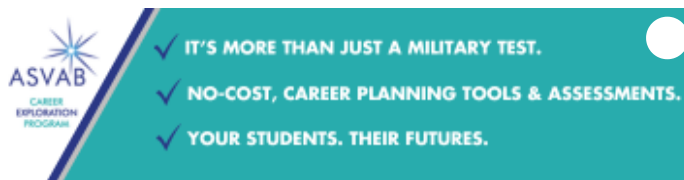


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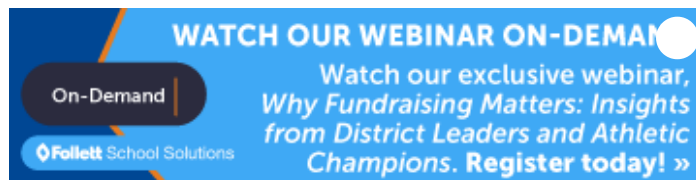
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