Universal Early Literacy Screening Guidance

Universal Early Literacy Screening is Essential for All Students

Research shows that **74% of students who are poor readers in third grade will be poor readers in ninth grade**,[1] increasing the likelihood of behavioral and social problems, dropping out of school, and entering the correctional system, all of which carry significant costs to our students and society. Therefore, *it is essential to (1) identify struggling readers early through the screening of all students for foundational literacy skills and (2) provide appropriate early literacy intervention.* Research also shows that intervention provided at an earlier age requires less time to remediate skill deficits than waiting to intervene,[2] benefiting students and lessening the demands on schools.

Universal Screening Generally

Using a Universal Early Literacy Screener falls under the practice of universal screening. **Universal screening** is a systematic process for assessing the critical academic skills of **all students** within a given grade, school building, or school district. Universal screening uses concise assessments that provide a holistic view of a student's academic well-being, enabling educators to intervene at the earliest signs of need. Effective universal screening involves selecting and implementing screening tools that are scientifically valid and reliable.

Universal screening is the first essential component to the successful implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, which begins with universal screening of all students at the outset of the school year. Universal screening can be conducted with students one-on-one or as a group by the classroom teacher or other school personnel as determined by the school or district.

Universal Early Literacy Screener

A **Universal Early Literacy Screener** is a brief assessment (typically less than 15 minutes) that assesses a student's foundational literacy skills. The primary purpose of using an early literacy screener is to identify those at risk of reading failure and determine who requires further assessment and additional literacy support. This process entails assessing the academic performance of *all* students in the development of foundational literacy skills to guide decisions regarding overall instruction and intervention.

An early literacy screener is not a diagnostic test or used to monitor progress and will not result in a child being diagnosed with any particular learning disability. An early literacy screener is simply the first step in identifying students who need additional reading intervention, as well as those students who need more in-depth skill evaluation in a broader MTSS framework.

Essential Foundational Literacy Skills to Screen

The skill areas recommended for inclusion in early literacy screenings are listed in the following chart by grade level for students pre-kindergarten through third grade.[3] These skill areas (1) have been identified through research as holding validity as a predictor for future reading achievement, (2) can be assessed briefly, and (3) are areas for which interventions can be prescribed based on the results. If the screener selected by a school does not measure these specified skills, the school must utilize different or additional tools to identify students at risk for reading difficulties.

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Screening Measures by Grade Level

Grades	Screening Measures
Pre-Kindergarten	• Oral language and vocabulary • Phonological awareness • Alphabet knowledge
Kindergarten	• Oral language and vocabulary • Letter knowledge • Phonological (phonemic) awareness • Letter-sound associations • Phonological processing task (Rapid Automized Naming assessment measure) • Spelling (end of kindergarten)
First Grade	• Phonemic awareness segmentation task • Phonological processing task (Rapid Automized Naming assessment measure) • Non-word reading fluency • Word-reading fluency • Oral reading fluency • Spelling
Second Grade	• Word-reading tasks • Oral reading fluency • Spelling
Third Grade	• Oral reading fluency • Spelling

All students should participate in screening for foundational literacy skills three times annually—typically, at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. A list of popular screeners can be found at The National Center for Intensive Intervention. Additional screeners, as well as other resources, can be found in The Dyslexia Toolkit.

Data-driven decision-making from Universal Early Literacy Screeners

Once the Universal Early Literacy Screener is complete, the data collected will provide the education team with information regarding who needs further diagnostic assessments to pinpoint specific skill deficits. The data collected from these further assessments should inform decision-making regarding the need for early literacy intervention and, if needed, interventions tailored to support the specific skill deficit(s).

Additional Screening Considerations for Students

For multilingual students, screenings should be culturally and linguistically responsive. It is important to distinguish between language acquisition challenges and true reading difficulties. Where possible, screeners should be available in the student's first language, or at least account for language differences in the assessment process. For simultaneous bilinguals, it is important to note that students' linguistic assets may not be accurately measured in English or the student's first language alone as their entire linguistic repertoire exists across multiple languages.

Screening tools must be sensitive to diverse student needs, including those with disabilities and bidialectal backgrounds. It is critical to ensure that the tools do not unfairly disadvantage these students and provide a true measure of their reading abilities.

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1   Foorman, Barbara, *et al*. (1998). *The Role of Instruction in Learning to Read: Preventing Reading Failure in At-Risk Children.*

2   Solari, Emily, *et al*. (2021). *Brick by Brick: A Series of Landmark Studies Pointing to the Importance of Early Reading Intervention.*

3   Identifying reading difficulties among older students (those in fourth grade and beyond) requires different approaches than those used in early elementary years, such as screening for vocabulary and reading comprehension, and are not addressed in this guidance memo.