# Examining the Stability of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening Scores

Faith G. Miller[1], Megan E. Welsh[2], Sandra M. Chafouleas[3], T. Chris Riley-Tillman[4], & Gregory A. Fabiano[5]

*University of Minnesota[1], University of California, Davis[2], University of Connecticut[3], University of Missouri[4], University at Buffalo[5]*

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
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## Abstract

- Successful prevention efforts rely on the use of screening approaches to identify students in need of support.
- Limited empirical investigations have been directed to answering questions regarding how often screening should occur for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.
- The purpose of the current study was to evaluate the stability of risk status on three different screening instruments across three administrations over the course of a school year.
- Results indicate that a large proportion of students exhibit stable risk patterns across time points, and that scores are most stable between winter and spring.

## Background

Based upon the current landscape of literature, questions remain regarding the nature of screening for social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Specifically, consensus has not been obtained regarding:

a) How many times a year students should be screened for social, emotional, and behavioral problems and;
b) When the screenings should be performed.

For example, Walker and Severson (1992) recommend screening biannually: once in the fall and once after winter break. However, Lane, Menzies, Oakes, and Kalberg (2012) recommend triannual screenings: six weeks into the school year, before winter break, and prior to the end of the academic year. Thus, clear guidelines have not been developed to help guide practitioners in evidence-based practices around screening. The purpose of the current investigation is to examine biannual and triannual screening results from a large-scale, multi-site investigation of student behavior. To this end, we examined patterns of risk across time points, and investigated the utility of different screening schedules based upon the stability of scores.

## Research Questions

1. What proportion of students are identified at-risk by measure, by time-point?
2. How stable is risk status by measure, across time points?
3. What proportion of students exhibit stable risk patterns across all three time points?

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, no a priori hypotheses were put forth. Instead, our aim was to better understand how risk status changes during a school year as a function of the screening approach used.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 1594 students (80%) had complete screening data across three time points, corresponding to a total of 187 teachers from 22 different public schools located within the Northeastern and Midwestern United States. Free and reduced lunch rates for the schools ranged from 4-84%. Demographic characteristics of the students in the sample are presented in Figure 1. Participating teachers identified as predominately White (96%), female (86%), and reported having a Master's degree (52%).


*Figure 1*: Student Characteristics
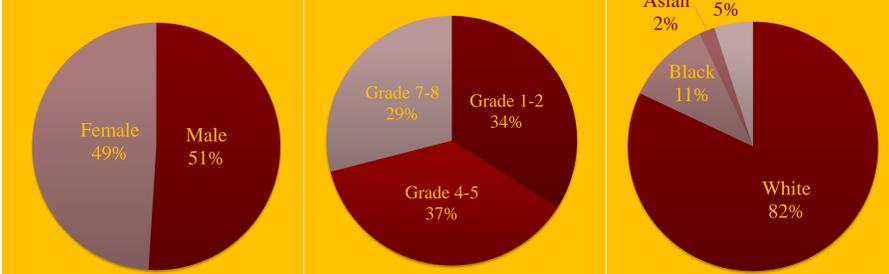
### Measures

- *Direct Behavior Rating – Single Item Scale*
DBR-SIS reflects the teacher's perception of the proportion of time a student is observed engaged in a target behavior (academic engagement, respectful, disruptive) from 0 (never) to 10 (always). A composite score was calculated that ranged from 0-30.
- *Social Skills Improvement System – PSG*
The SSIS-PSG can be used to screen social and academic behaviors of all students in a class. Motivation to Learn and Prosocial Behavior subscales were used for the current study.
- *Behavioral and Emotional Screening System - Teacher Form*
The BESS is a 27 item brief rating scale that can be used to screen for behavioral and emotional strengths and weaknesses in children and adolescents.

### Procedures

Teachers completed behavioral ratings three times during the 2011-2012 academic year on a random sample of 10 students in their classroom. Screenings were conducted in fall, winter, and spring. The assessments were counterbalanced to control for potential order effects. Direct Behavior Rating observations were structured such that five students were rated twice-daily for five days. Upon completion of the first group of DBR-SIS ratings, the teacher subsequently rated the second group of students for five days.

## Results


Proportion of Students At-Risk by Time Point and Measure
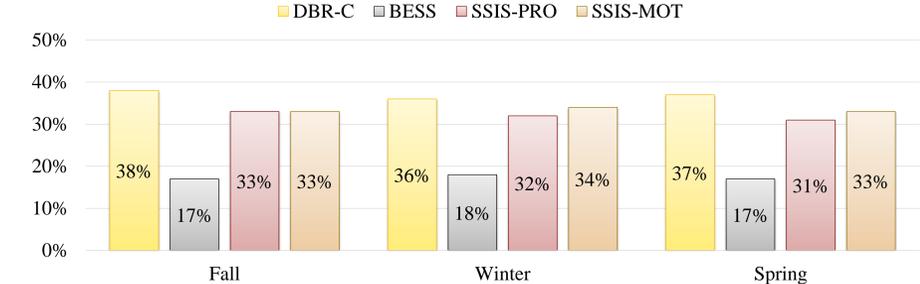
Identification rates of students at-risk for SEB problems varied considerably by measure. Between 17-38% of the sample was identified as at-risk using a particular measure at a particular time point. Across measures, moderate stability coefficients for between-time point risk status were detected ($\varphi = .53$ to $\varphi = .69$), with slightly stronger relationships observed between winter and spring time points across measures ($\varphi = .55$ to $\varphi = .69$). In addition to phi coefficients. proportions indicated that stable risk patterns were most common on the BESS (85%), followed by SSIS-MOT (74%), DBR-SIS (71%), and SSIS-PRO (70%).


Stability of Risk Status
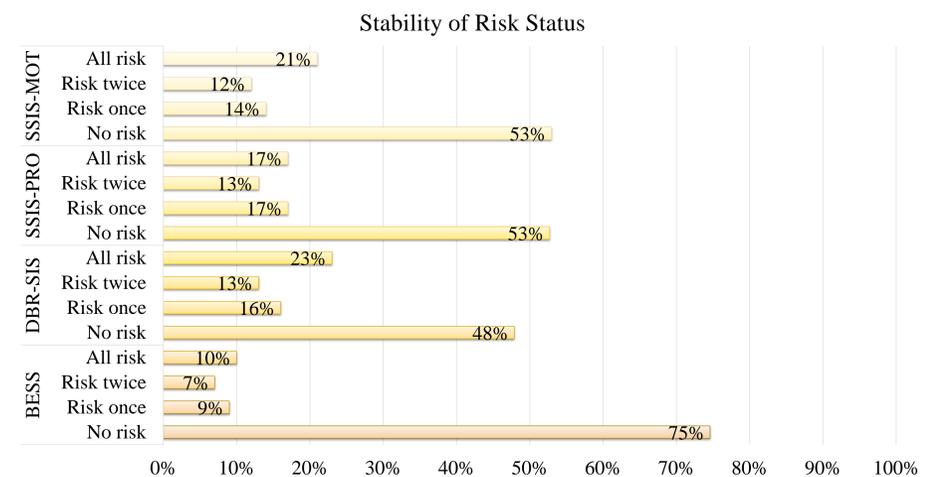
## Conclusions

The stability of risk status was investigated using several different approaches. Phi coefficients indicated student risk status at winter and spring is most similar, followed by fall and winter, and finally fall and spring. Thus, if the goal is to capture changes in risk status, fall and spring screenings or fall and winter screenings may be more beneficial. Further, a substantial proportion of students exhibit stable risk patterns. Thus, screening all students in the fall seems most beneficial, with follow-up screenings for borderline students in the winter or spring.

CE+HD
College of Education + Human Development

School Psychology Program
250 Education Sciences Building
56 E. River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55455
Contact: Dr. Faith G. Miller [fgmiller@umn.edu]