

Conducting a comprehensive review of every student in a school is an effective practice with a strong theoretical foundation. Evidence demonstrates that it is an important component of effective integrated student support, which includes “developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement.”¹ Integrated student support builds on decades of scholarship from diverse fields that emphasize the importance of systemic, comprehensive approaches to student support aimed at meeting the needs of the “whole child.”² The economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic mean greater numbers of families and students are experiencing new or magnified stressors, making comprehensive and universal review of each student even more critical. Across the nation, approaches to “wrap-around,” “comprehensive services,” “full service schools,” “community schools,” “Promise Neighborhoods,” or “collective impact,” are pursuing this aim.

This brief will describe the science, evidence, and best practices related to universal comprehensive review of students, and provide an example of one way a school or district might choose to organize information from these reviews.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE

DEVELOPMENT OCCURS ACROSS DOMAINS. Child development takes place across multiple areas—including academic, social-emotional, health, and family, with each domain impacting all the others.³

STRENGTHS AND RISKS CO-ACT. There is a delicate dialogue between risks and strengths, where a child’s protective resources such as positive relationships, talents, or interests may or may not help to mitigate the impacts of risk factors like deprivation, abuse, or anxiety. The presence of risk factors does not necessarily lead to a negative outcome because of the co-action of a child’s protective factors.⁴

INTENSITY MATTERS. Children experience difficulties and strengths along a continuum of intensity, requiring varying levels of sup-

DEVELOPMENT OCCURS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS. Children develop in multiple places, including their home, school, and community. All contexts play an important role in their development.⁶

DEVELOPMENT OCCURS OVER TIME. Positive and negative childhood experiences affect a student’s success and adjustment during the elementary school years, which, in turn, affect behavior and learning during middle school, high school, and beyond.⁷

EVERY CHILD IS UNIQUE. As a function of differing genetic and environmental circumstances, no two children experience the same developmental trajectory.⁸

DEVELOPMENT CAN BE CHANGED. Exposure to chronic adversity and trauma can lead to toxic stress, which can adversely impact children’s brain development and diminish academic outcomes. In spite of these challenges, developmental science also recognizes the phenomenon of brain plasticity and the malleability of development, which makes it possible to intervene in the course of development.⁹



Researchers theorize that comprehensive resources and opportunities tailored to the developmental needs of each child enhance the brain’s protective factors and reduce risk factors—leading to improved readiness to learn and thrive.¹⁰ Universal comprehensive reviews allow a school to develop a response to changes in each student’s needs and experiences at a point in time. These responses aim to prevent adverse developmental outcomes and foster resilience.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The evidence of impact from integrated student support interventions reinforces this theoretical understanding. Three national research reviews – two by Child Trends and one by Johns Hopkins University – have found that the largest impacts on student outcomes are produced by City Connects, whose core practice includes comprehensive reviews and a tailored plan of resources and opportunities for every child.¹¹

An evaluation of over 7,900 students published in the prestigious American Education Research Journal found that students who attended K-5 elementary schools served by City Connects in Boston experienced significant long-term gains. City Connects students, 86 percent of whom were from low-income families, outperformed comparison-school peers on report card scores in elementary school. After leaving the intervention, they demonstrated significantly higher scores on statewide English Language Arts and mathematics tests than peers who never experienced City Connects in elementary school.¹²

When followed into 12th grade, their high school dropout rate is cut by almost 50 percent.¹³ Separate analyses have also found that these positive effects are occurring for African-American and Latino boys, two groups at especially high risk of dropout.¹⁴ Additional subgroup analyses of elementary school test scores show significant benefits for immigrant students and students learning English.¹⁵

A high school intervention model, Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR), also creates individualized student plans and has evidence of effectiveness according to studies by American Institutes for Research. Compared with students who were not assigned to the intervention, BARR students earned more credits, scored higher on math and reading standardized test, and demonstrated higher rates in passing all courses.¹⁶

The BARR model has been proven to be effective in narrowing academic gaps for students of color and students from low-income families. In one study, after three years of BARR implementation, the failure rate among students of Hispanic origin showed a 50 percent reduction. In the second and third year of implementation, the failure rates of Hispanic students and non-Hispanic students were no longer significantly different.¹⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Recent scholarship finds that because of the dynamic influences that poverty and other out-of-school factors can have on child development and readiness to learn, effective approaches to intervention must tailor to differences across children and across time. In short, one size can never fit all, and reviews of individual students that account for the comprehensive and complex nature of child development are needed. The developmental sciences and the evidence base point to the importance of reviews that are both customized and comprehensive.¹⁸

CUSTOMIZED

Individualized: Optimize each student's healthy development and readiness to learn.

Universal: Assess each student in a school.

COMPREHENSIVE

Whole Child: Assess both strengths and needs across all developmental domains – academic, social-emotional, health, and family.

Multi-tiered: Evaluate the intensity of support required in each domain – from preventive to intensive – which may differ for each child in each domain.



All schools review students individually in some way, often regarding academics, attendance, and other domains for a subset of students. Since students' readiness to learn and thrive is also impacted by developmental domains such as social-emotional, health, and family, understanding and responding to students' strengths and needs across these domains is key to enhancing academic outcomes. To gain a comprehensive understanding of every student's strengths and needs, schools can build on and expand the existing student review structure.

Part of a comprehensive review of each student can include an assessment of a child's global educational risk, sometimes captured in "tiers of risk" through approaches like a multi-tiered system of student support. Based on an individual student's strengths and needs, teachers and coordinators can place a student within a tier that most accurately reflects their perception of student risk across all of the developmental domains. One approach is to categorize risk along a continuum of little or no risk to mild or moderate risk to intensive risk in one or more areas.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

CITY CONNECTS

These insights from the developmental sciences were operationalized by City Connects during a two-year co-design process that engaged researchers from Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development, educators from the Boston Public Schools, families, and community agencies.¹⁹ The core practice that was developed has since been successfully adapted to 100 schools in 13 cities and six states. The practice is primarily implemented in PreK-Grade 8 settings.

Each fall, every teacher in a City Connects school meets with a master's-level City Connects coordinator, usually a social worker or school counselor, to discuss every child in their class. Together, the coordinator and teacher assess global educational risk for each student as a way to think holistically about the class and begin a more in-depth discussion of each student. Using questions and prompts informed by developmental science, the coordinator taps into the teacher's knowledge and observations regarding each student's strengths and needs across multiple domains of development (academic, social-emotional, health, and family).

Based on the profile of the child that emerges from the teacher's feedback and observations, and in consultation as needed with the family and school staff, every child then receives an individualized support plan detailing the tailored services, resources, and opportunities needed to optimize the child's readiness to learn. The coordinator is responsible for ensuring that each plan is implemented. To meet children's needs, City Connects establishes partnerships with community providers in order to access resources outside of the school. These partnerships collectively provide a range of prevention, early intervention, crisis intervention, and enrichment services.



THE BARR CENTER

Embodying these same scientific principles, the BARR Center provides schools with a comprehensive approach to meeting every student's needs across developmental domains, including academic, social, emotional, and physical development. The BARR model has been successfully implemented in more than 80 schools across 13 states and the District of Columbia, serving 9th grade students.²⁰

Applying the "whole student" approach, educators in the BARR model identify every student's assets and challenges across academic, emotional, social, and physical domains. Ninth grade students are divided into cohorts with shared teaching teams for core subjects. Cohort teacher teams and BARR coordinators hold weekly meetings to discuss every student's assets, challenges, and academic progress. Using real-time student data, the cohort teacher teams agree upon interventions that individual students may need. The interventions' effectiveness is monitored in subsequent meetings. Students who constantly exhibit academic, attendance, or behavioral problems are referred to risk review teams, which include coordinators, school administrators, and other student support staff. The risk review teams identify additional supports for students at higher risks, and monitor their progress on an ongoing basis.²¹

ACTION STEPS

Identify a comprehensive set of domains important to you. This may include domains such as academic-cognitive; social-emotional; peer relationships; social functioning; behavioral; physical health; wellbeing; college and career; and family. Identify individual student data that you are already generating, and which may be accessed to assist in conducting a comprehensive review of each student.

Create a process for conducting comprehensive reviews of every student that will build upon existing data and structures, and allow for a more complete picture of student strengths and needs to be understood and become actionable.

Below is an example of how a school could capture some pertinent information about an individual student's strengths and needs.

Name:	
Teachers:	
Grade:	
Academic	Domain 2
Strengths:	Strengths:
Needs:	Needs:
Support ideas:	Support ideas:
Domain 3	Domain 4
Strengths:	Strengths:
Needs:	Needs:
Support ideas:	Support ideas:
Domain 5	Domain 6
Strengths:	Strengths:
Needs:	Needs:
Support ideas:	Support ideas:

CITATIONS

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