DESSA Student Self-Report Guidance

Updated August 2025

The DESSA Student Self-Report (SSR) allows middle and high school students (grades 6-12) to report on their own social and emotional skills. The results provide students with information about their strengths and opportunities for growth, encouraging active engagement and agency in their own social and emotional skill development. The results also give school teams and educators insights into how best to support their students. Actionable information is provided to inform social and emotional skill instruction and support ongoing programming efforts.

Is There Value in Using Both the Student and Educator DESSA Ratings?

Yes! Many schools use both the student and educator completed versions of the DESSA. The value of multiple raters is a more complete understanding of students' social and emotional skills across different contexts and environments. It also provides a foundation for facilitating conversations with students about their social and emotional skills. For suggestions to help prepare for conversations with students about their SSR results, please refer this guide.

Will We See Differences Between Student and Educator DESSA Ratings?

Yes, it is likely that there will be differences between DESSA ratings completed by students and ratings completed by educators.

It is important to keep in mind that each DESSA rating is one source of information, based on the experiences and observations of the rater. A student's rating is based on their self-reported perception of their social and emotional skills likely reflecting all aspects of their lives (home, school, extracurricular or community activities, etc.). An educator's rating is typically based on their interactions and observations of a student in a particular context, often the classroom. For middle and high school educators, this may be just one class a student attends during the day or week, such as an advisory period or science class. As a result, a student and their teacher may provide somewhat different ratings on the DESSA.

This does not mean that one rating is "right" and the other is "wrong." Rather, it forms the basis for a conversation between the student and their teacher to share information about how social and emotional skills are being used across different settings. For example, a student may have reported that they "Almost Always" cooperate with others to solve a problem, while their teacher indicated "Rarely" because over the past four weeks there had been few opportunities for students to work together in groups in that class. During a conversation, the educator might learn that the student participates on the robotics team and regularly works with other students to problem solve mechanical issues they encounter when building robots. Knowing this information provides a more complete picture of how a student may be demonstrating social and emotional skills outside the classroom. You can compare an individual student's SSR and an educator's DESSA rating by clicking on a student's name within the *My Students* report and navigating to their student profile in the DESSA System.

School teams may also observe differences between student and educator ratings when aggregated across groups of students. For example, many schools have observed that a higher percentage of students rate themselves to be in the need for instruction range compared to educator ratings. This difference is likely influenced by the different contexts on which ratings are based. Students are reflecting on all aspects of their lives, not just their behaviors in one classroom. Educator ratings are based on observable behaviors, usually

in one specific classroom. Student ratings can also be influenced by the students' internal state and mental well-being, which could lead students to be harder on themselves when completing their ratings. This does not mean that one set of ratings is right and the other is wrong, or that either assessment tool is inaccurate. Rather, it highlights the importance of collecting data from multiple perspectives and using it as the basis for conversation to better understand and support students. It also suggests the need for a solid implementation plan that adequately prepares both students and educators for completing their DESSA ratings. As recommended in the DESSA implementation guides, ensure all raters understand why the DESSA is being used in the school, how to complete the ratings, and how the data will be used to support students. You can compare all ratings completed by both students and educators during the same rating window by clicking on the *Summary Comparison of Ratings by Educators and Students* report in the DESSA System.

Why Have High School SSR Results Showed Many Students Need Support Over the Past Few School Years?

Since the release of the first edition DESSA SSR for high school students in 2020, many schools across the US observed higher than expected percentages of students reporting a need for instruction on the DESSA SSR. Based on national norms, we expect about 16% of students will report a strength, 68% will report being typical, and 16% will report a need. However, many schools saw results where 5% of students reported a strength, 50% were typical, and 45% reported a need.

These results are consistent with national reports that show adolescents are struggling with social, emotional, and mental well-being.

- Youth mental health was already a public health concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The percentage of high school students who report feeling so sad or hopeless that they stop engaging in their regular activities steadily grew from 28% in 2011 to 37% in 2019.[1] This trend was true for all students, regardless of gender or racial and ethnic background.
- The number of children and youth diagnosed with anxiety and depression grew by 29% and 27% respectively between 2016 and 2020.[2]
- The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a new set of challenges for youth, and recent data suggests it may have exacerbated mental health concerns. In 2021, over 40% of high school students nationwide reported persistent sadness or hopelessness. Female students (57%) were more likely to report these feelings compared to their male peers (29%).[1]
- Nearly all youth experienced pandemic-related disruptions to schooling, health fears and concerns, and family economic challenges. They also experienced social isolation during a developmental period where peer interaction, attention, and approval is highly desired and a normal part of healthy social development.[3]
- Many adolescents turned to social media during this time. For some, it provided positive opportunities to connect with friends when face-to-face interaction wasn't possible. For others, the experience was negative. Harmful messages in the forms of online bullying or unrealistic expectations about physical appearance has had a detrimental effect on adolescents' well-being.[4]

Although the SSR is not a mental health assessment, the social and emotional skills measured by the SSR are impacted by the experiences and mental well-being of the youth completing it. Students who completed the high school SSR between 2021-2024 were likely in middle school during the height of the pandemic. This is a time when social and emotional skills tend to decline before increasing again during the high school years.[5] Given all the pandemic-related challenges faced by these students, it is possible they have experienced a greater decline in their skills than what has previously been observed in past cohorts. It is also possible that the expected recovery of social and emotional skills in later adolescence may be delayed.

Collecting student self-report data gives high school teams and educators the chance to better understand and support their students. It provides a window into the lives and minds of students and provides information that isn't always readily observable in the classroom.

Do Middle School SSR Results Look Similar to High School SSR Results?

Since the release of the middle school SSR in Fall 2023, we have observed students in middle schools across the US with slightly elevated rates of students in need (i.e., 20-25%), but not to the extent observed in the high school SSR results. We have three possible explanations for this.

First, current middle school students were in the mid to late elementary grades during the height of the pandemic when schools were forced to close. Recent data suggests that younger children tended to fare better than adolescents in struggles with social, emotional, and mental well-being[6]. Students in middle school between the years of 2023-2025 had likely not yet reached the developmental period where peer interactions and approval are of the utmost importance when the pandemic hit. Immediate family members were still the primary social network for these children.

Second, recent data suggests that younger children (ages 8-12) are using social media less frequently than their older peers (ages 13-18)[7]. The detrimental impact of social media use on adolescent well-being is well documented and has led the Surgeon General to issue guidance urging caution and increased safety around the use of social media throughout adolescence[8]. Given that current middle schoolers have lower social media usage or are just getting started with social media, it follows that they may be less likely to already be experiencing the negative effects to mental health documented for older adolescents.

Third, the middle school SSR normative sample (for which scores are based) was collected during the 2022-2023 school year. Life had essentially returned to normal following the height of the pandemic, and students had settled back into the routine of school for well over a year by then.

Why Did You Update and Re-Norm the High School SSR?

It is best practice to periodically review and revise assessment tools when necessary[9]. The first edition high school SSR was developed and normed in 2016-2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose to update and renorm the high school SSR for three main reasons.

1. To update the normative sample to ensure scores are representative of high school students today. Since the original national norms were collected, the US student population demographics have changed, and youth mental health concerns have increased. The COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated these concerns. The updated sample was collected in Fall 2025 and includes over 50,000 high school students across the US.
2. To update the item content and competencies assessed. Since the first edition high school SSR was developed, education has seen rapid growth in research, curricula, and social and emotional and career readiness standards emphasizing the skills students need to be successful during and after graduation. The updated high school SSR reflects these changes and is now more closely aligned to the middle school SSR.
3. To address areas of improvement identified by students, educators, and professionals. As a result of their feedback, we have revised items that have been identified as confusing or difficult to rate and have simplified the administration for students.

How Will Student Scores Change When We Use the Updated High School SSR?

The updated high school SSR differs from its first edition counterpart in several significant ways. First, about 80% of the items are different from the first edition. Second, the scale structure has been updated to measure six social and emotional competency domains, while the first edition measured seven domains. Third, new norms with a contemporary standardization sample have been developed. Given the extent of these changes, we conducted a study to examine the comparability of scores when students take both the first edition and updated high school SSR. Full details of this study can be found in the DESSA 2 HS SSR technical manual.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that if making comparisons between students' ratings on the first edition and updated high school SSR assessments, it can be expected that in general, Social-Emotional Composite (SEC) scores may be on average about 5 *T*-score points higher when using the updated high school SSR. When considering descriptive score ranges (i.e., Strength, Typical, and Need for Instruction ranges) on the SEC score, most students (approximately 70%) will remain in the same range when comparing between the old and new SSR. Changes to the descriptive ranges are most likely to be observed for borderline scores near the cutoff ranges of 40 (for Need and Typical) and 60 (for Typical and Strength) and will be most likely to move to the next highest range.

When considering aggregated data for all students in your high school, we expect that the distribution of scores on the updated high school SSR to be closer to the expected 16% of students in strength, 68% in typical, and 16-20% in need. For high schools who previously observed very high percentages of students in the need range on the first edition high school SSR (e.g., 40-50%), changes to these distributions during the Fall 2025 when the new high school SSR is first used might cause questions from educators and staff. For these schools, note that observed changes in the overall distribution of scores when directly comparing the first edition and updated high school SSR ratings (for most schools, this comparison will only be made between Spring ratings from the 2024-2025 school year and Fall ratings from the 2025-2026 school year) can be primarily attributed to switching to the new assessment form, rather than changes in students' reported social and emotional competence occurring over the summer.

Finally, we recommend that schools keep in mind that re-norming an assessment does not change whether students are truly experiencing a need for social and emotional skill support. It simply shifts the distribution of the reference group. If the reference group is experiencing high rates of need – which current national reports suggest for adolescents – then re-norming an assessment will adjust the mean (or typical score) to reflect the national data. This doesn't mean that most students are now fine and don't need ongoing social and emotional skill instruction – it just means the distribution has been shifted, and only the students with the lowest scores (greatest needs) will show as being in the need range. We recommend that schools continue to implement universal social and emotional skill instruction and that students in the need and low typical ranges are considered to still need and benefit from additional social and emotional skill support.

What Should We Do If Our SSR Results Suggest Many Students Need Support?

As described above, the higher-than-expected percentages of students reporting a need for social and emotional skill support on the SSR is consistent with national reports that show more adolescents are struggling with social, emotional, and mental well-being. **Collecting student self-report data gives high school teams the chance to better understand and support their students.**

If your school's SSR results indicate high levels of need, your school team can use the data to inform your social and emotional skill programming. You might begin by taking the following steps:

A. **Review additional information with your team to better understand your school's social and emotional needs.** Other sources of information include educator completed DESSA ratings,

observations, and attendance records. Make sure that school counselors or other mental health staff are a part of this conversation.

B. **If your school is new to social and emotional skill instruction and assessment,** lower results may reflect this. Ongoing programming should help students and educators develop positive learning environments.

C. **Review your universal social and emotional skill development program and implementation.** Does your school have a cohesive approach to programming? Do your educators have the support they need for program implementation? Consider professional development to support your school staff.

   To support social and emotional growth for all students, everyone who has access to the DESSA System can use these two resources located in the Strategies tab:

   1. Foundational Practices – These are universal practices that help create a positive learning environment. They are easy to use and implement.
   2. Strategies – These strategies align to the DESSA competencies, and you can use them universally by choosing 1-2 competencies to focus on for all students.

   Students should be guided to use the goal setting, tracking, and strategies included in the DESSA Student Portal. These resources can empower students to be more self-directed and have greater agency in their own social and emotional skill building.

D. Monitor progress. Schedule a mid-year SSR rating. Use the data to continuously improve social and emotional programming implementation and outcomes for you and your students.

The DESSA Middle School Implementation Guide and the DESSA High School Implementation Guide provide detailed recommendations for implementing the SSR and using the data to inform SEL programming.

If you have more questions about your results or would like more information, please contact your DESSA Customer Success Manager or submit a Support request in the DESSA System Support Portal.

References

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