

# Supporting the Well-Being of Your Students:

## DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR Implementation Guide



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# Introduction to the DESSA SSR and DESSA SEIR

This guide was developed for middle and high school teams using the DESSA Screener for Externalizing and Internalizing Risk (DESSA SEIR) and the DESSA Student Self-Report (DESSA SSR) to support their students' well-being and social and emotional skill development. The purpose of this guide is to help educators and school staff access, review, and use the data collected from these assessments to inform their programming and to build the well-being of all students.

The DESSA SEIR and the DESSA SSR are used together to provide a comprehensive picture of a student's overall social and emotional well-being. While the DESSA SSR assesses resilience factors that highlight a student's strengths, the DESSA SEIR identifies risk factors that may indicate the need for additional support. By integrating these measures, educators and school staff gain a comprehensive understanding of both protective factors and potential concerns which can inform data-driven decisions about instruction, intervention, and support.



## The DESSA Student Self-Report (DESSA SSR)

The **DESSA SSR** is a nationally standardized norm-referenced, strength-based behavior rating scale measuring students' social and emotional competence. It can be completed by students in middle and high school (grades 6-12).

Students can complete the DESSA SSR in about 5-7 minutes. Results are immediately available to students in the DESSA System Student Portal so that they can review their strengths and set goals to work on their growth areas.

Educators and administrators can review students' DESSA SSR results in the DESSA System Educator Portal. DESSA results are reported as T-scores (mean of 50, standard deviation of 10). A Social-Emotional Composite (SEC) score and a score for each of the six subscales are reported. As strength-based measures, higher T-scores mean a higher level of social and emotional competence. T-scores are categorized into three descriptive ranges:

- ◆ **Strength** - scores of 60 and above;
- ◆ **Typical** - scores between 41-59; and
- ◆ **Need for Instruction** - scores of 40 and below.

# The DESSA Screener for Externalizing and Internalizing Risk (DESSA SEIR)

The DESSA SEIR is a 10-item criterion-referenced screener that measures internalizing and externalizing concerns. It can be completed by students in middle and high school (grades 6-12). The DESSA SEIR is an optional screener; if used, it will always be paired with the DESSA SSR.

Students can complete the DESSA SEIR in about 1 minute. Results are not reported to students in the Student Portal, because the purpose of the DESSA SEIR is to provide school staff with information about students’ emotional and behavioral risks so that the appropriate follow-up and support can be provided.

DESSA SEIR Scale	Items
Internalizing Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I think bad things will happen to me.</li><li>• I feel lonely.</li><li>• I think no one cares about me.</li><li>• I feel nervous with my classmates.</li><li>• I feel sad.</li></ul>
Externalizing Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I often do things without thinking.</li><li>• I make people do what I want them to do.</li><li>• I do not let others join my group of friends.</li><li>• I fight with others.</li><li>• I break the rules.</li></ul>



Educators and administrators can review students’ DESSA SEIR results in the DESSA System Educator Portal. Results for the two scales are reported as sum scores, which have a possible range of 0 to 15. As a risk-based screener, higher sum scores mean a higher risk of emotional or behavioral concerns. Sum scores are categorized into three concern levels:

- ◆ **No Concern** – indicates students do not require additional attention or support at this time.
- ◆ **Possible Concern** – indicates students may need additional attention and some focused support, along with periodic monitoring of their potential concern(s) to ensure the situation does not worsen.
- ◆ **Concern** – indicates students likely need school professionals’ ongoing support and monitoring, until a comprehensive assessment of their concern(s) can be completed and appropriate support services determined.

Because the DESSA SEIR screens for emotional and behavioral risk, school teams should follow-up with students who score in the Concern or Possible Concern levels **as soon as possible**.



# Section 1. Getting Started with the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR Assessments

To effectively implement the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR, students need to be prepared to complete their ratings, and educators, staff, and school leaders require a clear plan to review and act on the data.

School leaders can use the implementation checklist below which highlights key planning, administrative, and logistical steps. Establish and communicate a timeline for completing these items.

## 1.1 DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR Implementation Checklist

Complete these steps prior to the beginning of the school year.

- ☐ **Review district policies on collecting and using student data** to guide your plans, procedures, and timelines. Focus on:
  - ☐ Parent communication and consent requirements, including access to results and opt-out options.
  - ☐ Policies for protecting student data.
  - ☐ Protocols for addressing student mental well-being and existing intervention steps.
- ☐ **Clearly explain how the DESSA SEIR supports your district's strategic goals and vision.** This alignment is key to effectively communicating its value to staff and community stakeholders.
- ☐ **Identify key personnel for a multidisciplinary team**, including administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, special education staff, and teachers. Assess the team's capacity and consider additional support from community partners or external mental health providers if needed.
- ☐ **Form a data team**, including school-based mental health professionals like psychologists, counselors, and social workers. This team will manage student data, receive scores, and handle immediate notifications for students flagged with concern or possible concern scores.
- ☐ **Convene the teams and schedule regular meetings.** Involving key personnel in early planning will help ensure your school is ready to begin this fall. These regular meetings will later be used to facilitate data collection and review, and plan interventions and supports for students.
- ☐ **Create an internal communication plan** with key messages, audiences, timelines, and roles. Highlight the screener's goals and benefits, support for students, and training plan for staff. Plan how you will introduce it to students.
- ☐ **Develop a parent communication plan** aligned with district policies. Use clear, jargon free language to explain the screener's benefits for student well-being, confidentiality measures, and data privacy procedures. Include community mental health resources, if applicable.



### Recommended Resource

For additional resources and guidance, we recommend visiting the National Center for School Mental Health website at: <https://schoolmentalhealth.org/>.

Complete these steps prior to administering the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR.

- ☐ **Ensure school staff have completed relevant DESSA professional learning sessions.** This may include program administrators, site leaders, educators, and other school staff.
- ☐ **Introduce the assessments to your students.** Help students understand the purpose of these tools, emphasizing how they support success in and out of school.
- ☐ **Explain the benefits.** Discuss how feedback on social and emotional skills can help students create goals and grow their skills.
- ☐ **Provide access to the Student Portal.** Make sure students have their login information.
- ☐ **Schedule time to take the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR.** Set up three timepoints (beginning, middle, and end of year) for students to complete the assessments. Provide a quiet environment and allow time for any needed follow-up.

Complete these steps following each administration of the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR.

- ☐ **Review DESSA SEIR results.** Designated school-based mental health professionals or program staff should review results promptly and follow-up with students in the Concern and Possible Concern ranges.
- ☐ **Organize data review for staff.** Schedule time for teachers, staff, and school leaders to review results of the assessments.
- ☐ **Provide time for students to engage in the learning challenges in the Student Portal.**

**Note:** DESSA SEIR results will not be reported to students in the Student Portal. Results can be accessed by program administrators, site leaders, teachers, and other designated staff in the DESSA System. Prompt review and follow-up is needed for students in the Concern and Possible Concern ranges.

## 1.2 Important Implementation Considerations

**Designate Review Team Members.** Ensure a program administrator appoints at least two staff (primary and backup) to review DESSA SEIR results promptly. Members should be:

- School-based mental health professionals or staff familiar with emotional and behavioral health.
- Part of the school's data review team for response planning.

### Implementation Tips

- **Parent/Guardian Consent:** Check with school leadership about parent/guardian consent needs.
- **Timing:** Schedule the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR for days when students will be present for follow-up (avoid Fridays and pre-vacation days).

### Screening Sensitivity

The DESSA SEIR includes 10 items assessing emotional and behavioral risks, but it does not ask about sensitive or self-injurious behaviors. Follow up with students who score in the Concern or Possible Concern ranges promptly (see *Response Guidelines* below).

### Response Guidelines by Concern Level

- ◆ **Concern:** These students likely need ongoing support and monitoring, until a comprehensive assessment of their internalizing and/or externalizing concern(s) can be completed and appropriate support services determined.
- ◆ **Possible Concern:** These students may need additional attention and some focused support, along with periodic monitoring of their potential internalizing and/or externalizing concern(s) to ensure the situation does not worsen.
- ◆ **No Concern:** No additional support is needed at this time.

# Section 2. Analyzing Data from the DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR

Once students have completed the assessments, we recommend following these steps to review and analyze the data.

## Step 1. Access the Data

- ☐ Retrieve DESSA SSR results for students from the available reports in the DESSA System Educator Portal.
- ☐ Retrieve DESSA SEIR results using the SEIR Risk Report in the DESSA System Educator Portal.
- ☐ Ensure you have an established process for reviewing DESSA SEIR results.

## Step 2. Review Data at Different Levels\*

- ☐ **School-Level Review:**
  - o DESSA SSR: Examine overall DESSA SSR data to see if the school distribution aligns with expected norms (approximately 16% Strength, 68% Typical, 16% Need for Instruction).
  - o DESSA SEIR: Examine overall DESSA SEIR data for both the internalizing and externalizing risks scales. *Reminder: The DESSA SEIR is a criterion-referenced screener (not a norm-referenced screener). The percentages of students in the three Concern Level ranges will likely vary by school, but the following score distributions were found in the development samples provided in the technical manual: approximately 80-88% No Concern, 7-12% Possible Concern, 5-8% Concern).*
- ☐ **Grade and/or Class-Level Review:**
  - o DESSA SSR and DESSA SEIR: Identify any grades or classes that deviate significantly from school-level data.
- ☐ **Subgroup Analysis:**
  - o DESSA SSR and DESSA SEIR: Disaggregate results by race/ethnicity, gender, and special population group (e.g., ELL, SPED) to support educational equity.
  - o Reflect on whether specific subgroups may need additional support.
- ☐ **Individual Student Review:**
  - o DESSA SSR: For students in the Need for Instruction range, review individual student results.
  - o DESSA SEIR: For students in the Concern or Possible Concern levels, review individual student results.
  - o *Tip: View the snapshot provided at the top of the individual student profile to see a quick summary of a student's DESSA SSR and DESSA SEIR scores together. Section 3 of this guide provides more information about this.*
  - o Examine individual student results in combination with attendance, behavior, academic, or other student data.

\*Refer to the [Site Leader Reports Guide in the Support Portal](#) for instructions on how to access reports.

## Step 3. Use Data to Inform Programming and Supports

Data discussions should focus on the team's efforts to foster a positive learning environment and support students' overall well-being. The reflection process should involve key stakeholders setting goals and developing an action plan for continuous improvement. The data can be used to inform decisions at the school, classroom, and student level. A list of guiding questions (not exhaustive) is provided below.

### School Level

1. Are students developing the social and emotional skills that will help them be successful? Are they making progress over time?
2. Are there patterns of risk factors among students that indicate a need for school-wide interventions?
3. Are students from specific grades or demographics showing higher rates of social and emotional skills? Higher rates of risk?
4. Is there a relationship between risk and social and emotional skill levels and attendance rates across the school?
5. Is the school effectively supporting students at higher risk for behavioral issues?

### Classroom Level

1. Do certain classes or groups show higher levels of social and emotional skills? If yes, why?
2. Are there trends in internalizing or externalizing behaviors across this classroom?
3. How effective is our classroom-based social and emotional programming approach addressing student needs?
4. Are students in this classroom feeling safe and supported by their peers?

### Individual Student Level

1. Is this student showing early signs of risk for academic disengagement?
2. Are there indicators that this student may benefit from additional mental health support?
3. Have this student's social and emotional skills improved over time?
4. Are specific stressors impacting this student's ability to engage in learning?

## Step 4. Monitor Progress

The DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR can be administered between 3-4 times during the school year. Results can be reviewed at school, grade, class, and student levels to monitor changes over time, including disaggregated data to assess equitable growth across student groups. There are several reports in the DESSA System Educator Portal that will help you monitor progress – we recommend logging in to the system to [access all the reporting features](#) available.

## Section 3. Individual Student Case Studies

Together, the DESSA SEIR and the DESSA SSR provide a comprehensive picture of a student's overall social and emotional well-being. While the DESSA SSR assesses resilience factors that highlight a student's strengths, the DESSA SEIR identifies risk factors that may indicate the need for additional support. Combining these insights will help educators make data-driven decisions about instruction, intervention, and support.

Example case studies are provided to illustrate what the data review process might look like.

### Aniya Abbott

Aniya is in 7th grade and completed the DESSA SSR and the DESSA SEIR. Aniya's scores are:

Scale	Score	Descriptive Range
DESSA SSR Social-Emotional Composite	51	Typical
DESSA SEIR Internalizing Risks	8	Possible Concern
DESSA SEIR Externalizing Risks	3	No Concern

Aniya's DESSA SSR score shows that she has typical levels of social and emotional competence, indicating she has well-developed protective factors to support her well-being. Although her DESSA SEIR Externalizing Risks score is showing no concern, her Internalizing Risks score indicates a possible concern. This means that she should receive additional attention and some focused support for her internalizing concern behaviors, along with periodic monitoring to ensure that her situation does not worsen. She should also continue to receive universal social and emotional skill development to keep strengthening her protective factors.

### Leif Andersen

Leif is in 10th grade and completed the DESSA SSR and the DESSA SEIR. Leif's scores are:

Scale	Score	Descriptive Range
DESSA SSR Social-Emotional Composite	38	Need for Instruction
DESSA SEIR Internalizing Risks	4	No Concern
DESSA SEIR Externalizing Risks	4	No Concern

Leif's DESSA SSR score shows that he has low social and emotional competence, indicating a need for instruction. However, his DESSA SEIR scores are in the no concern range for both risk scales. Leif likely needs targeted social and emotional instruction to improve his protective factors; reviewing his Individual Student Report will provide more information on specific competencies or behaviors to focus instructional efforts. He would also benefit from routine monitoring of his internalizing and externalizing risks to ensure they do not worsen over time.



	Scale	Score	Descriptive Range
<b>Madalyn Alvarez</b> Madalyn is in 8th grade and completed the DESSA SSR and the DESSA SEIR. Madalyn's scores are:	DESSA SSR Social-Emotional Composite	62	Strength
	DESSA SEIR Internalizing Risks	10	Concern
	DESSA SEIR Externalizing Risks	4	No Concern

Madalyn's DESSA SSR score shows that she has strong levels of social and emotional competence, indicating she has well-developed protective factors to support her well-being. She is also showing no concerns in the DESSA SEIR externalizing risks domain. However, her internalizing risks score is in the concern range. This means that she likely needs support from a school-based mental health professional and continual monitoring until a comprehensive assessment of her internalizing concerns can be completed and appropriate support services determined.



## Conclusion

The DESSA SEIR and DESSA SSR are used together to promote a “risk and resilience” approach to supporting students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Together, these tools help:

- Screen for risk by highlighting emotional and behavioral concerns.
- Identify strengths that contribute to resilience and positive development.
- Provide insights into areas that can be leveraged for growth and those that may require targeted intervention or support.
- Design targeted interventions that build students’ social and emotional skills (resilience).
- Document students’ progress over time to ensure timely and effective supports are provided.
- Assess the impact of programs by evaluating changes in students’ risk and resilience factors.

By integrating these “risk and resilience” tools, schools can effectively take a proactive, preventive, universal approach to supporting students’ overall well-being.

