Aperture and MTSS

How the DESSA SEL assessment from Aperture Education can amplify your MTSS program.

APERTURE EDUCATION

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Introduction

Boerne ISD reduced out-of-school suspensions by 80% and in-school suspensions by 53%. They also reduced referrals by 47%. Humble ISD cut referrals by 76% over a two-year period. How did these schools achieve such impressive improvements in student behavior? Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

MTSS is a data-driven framework that provides responsive supports to students based on their needs. The goal of MTSS is to ensure that each student receives the level of support they need to be successful. The MTSS framework has been widely adopted within schools because of its focus on prevention, addressing the needs of all students, and its application across academics, behavior, and social and emotional learning (SEL).

Strength-based screening and assessment of social and emotional competencies is a vital component of MTSS. This guide provides an overview of MTSS and how the strength- and research-based DESSA SEL assessment system from Aperture Education can support your MTSS framework.
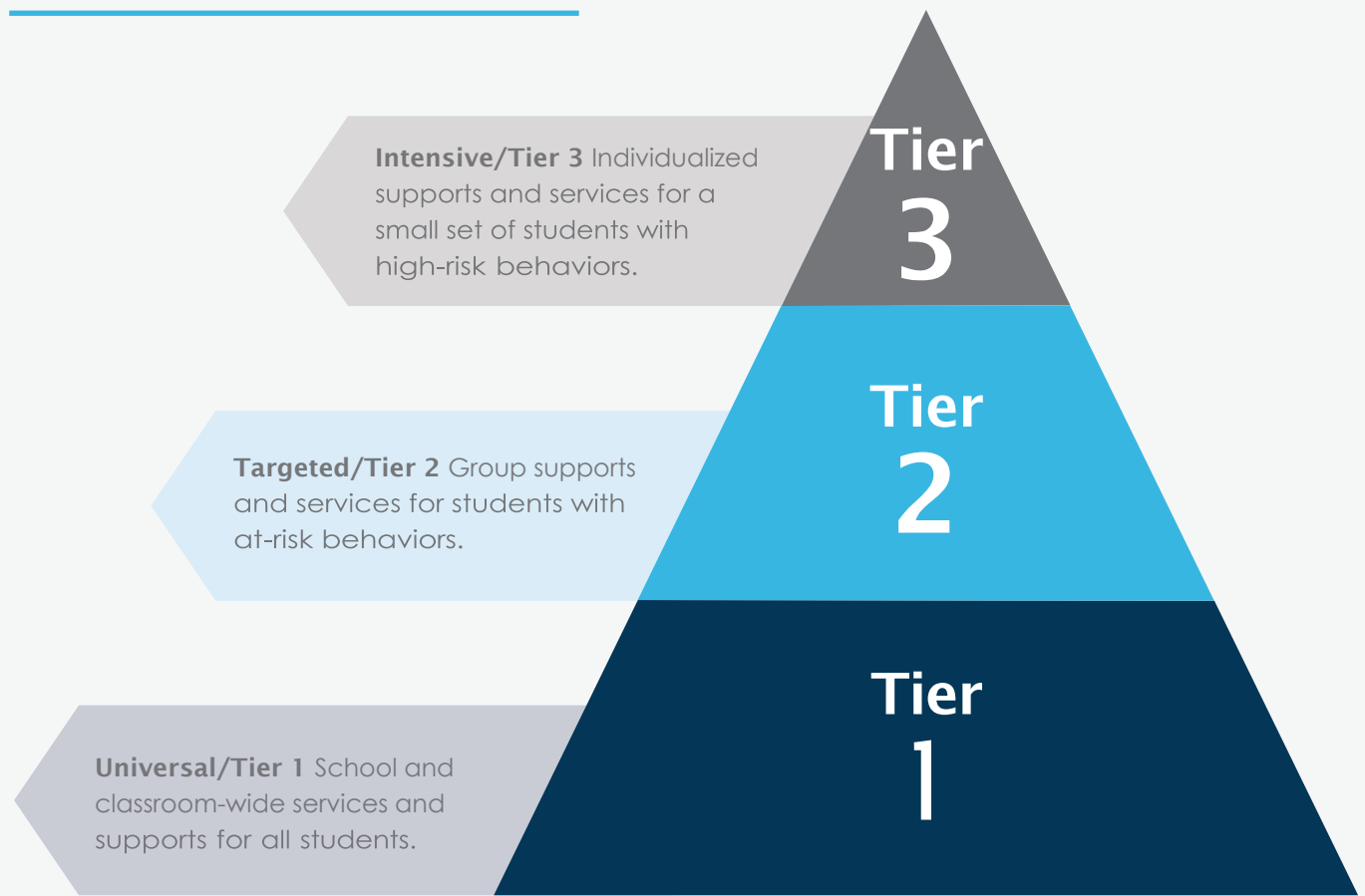
The MTSS Framework

The MTSS Framework consists of three tiers of supports for students: Universal (Tier 1), Targeted (Tier 2), and Indicated (Tier 3).

Universal/Tier 1 involves strategies or interventions applied to all students in the classroom, school, or out-of-school time program that are designed to develop, strengthen, or reinforce positive social and emotional skills. The goal of strength-based, Universal/Tier 1 efforts is to promote student well-being, competence, and resilience. These services and supports, which might include SEL strategies integrated throughout the school day or the use of an SEL curriculum, are sufficient to meet the needs of most students (between 80-85%).

Targeted/Tier 2 interventions or strategies are provided to students who need more intentional services and supports to meet their SEL goals. Often based on a more thorough assessment, the goal of Targeted/Tier 2 services is to provide more intensive support – for example, by working with a small group of students – to ensure that students have the social and emotional skills to be successful before problem behaviors begin to emerge or become severe enough to interfere with learning or development. Examples of Targeted/Tier 2 strategies include friendship skills groups or using peer accountability partners. Layered on top of the universal strategies, Targeted/Tier 2 interventions will be sufficient to ensure the success of an additional 10-15% of students (90-95% in total).

The DESSA with a Tiered Approach

Intensive/Tier 3 Individualized supports and services for a small set of students with high-risk behaviors.

Tier 3

Targeted/Tier 2 Group supports and services for students with at-risk behaviors.

Tier 2

Universal/Tier 1 School and classroom-wide services and supports for all students.

Tier 1

Intensive/Tier 3 services provide the individualized and intensive interventions or strategies that are required by the remaining 5-10% of the student population who have not made significant progress based on universal and selective interventions. These students may have already begun to develop significant challenging behaviors that are interfering with learning. Within a strength-based framework, Intensive/Tier 3 interventions identify, honor, and leverage a student's specific social and emotional strengths to help them acquire skills they have not yet learned. The goal is to reduce the frequency and severity of any challenging behaviors and to provide additional competencies and skills that will promote school success, resilience, and mental health.

Supporting MTSS with Aperture and the DESSA

The DESSA System by Aperture Education supports the MTSS framework through universal screening, assessment, and progress monitoring. The data can be used to inform supports for students, program evaluation, and more.

Universal screening

Universal screening is helpful for conducting a school-wide needs assessment, getting a high-level overview of individual student strengths, and identifying students who could benefit from a diagnostic assessment for additional supports. The DESSA-mini has been shown to meet the technical properties desired in a universal screener – it is efficient, reliable, and accurate. The DESSA-mini was designed as a brief, teacher-completed universal screening tool for the measurement of social and emotional competence.
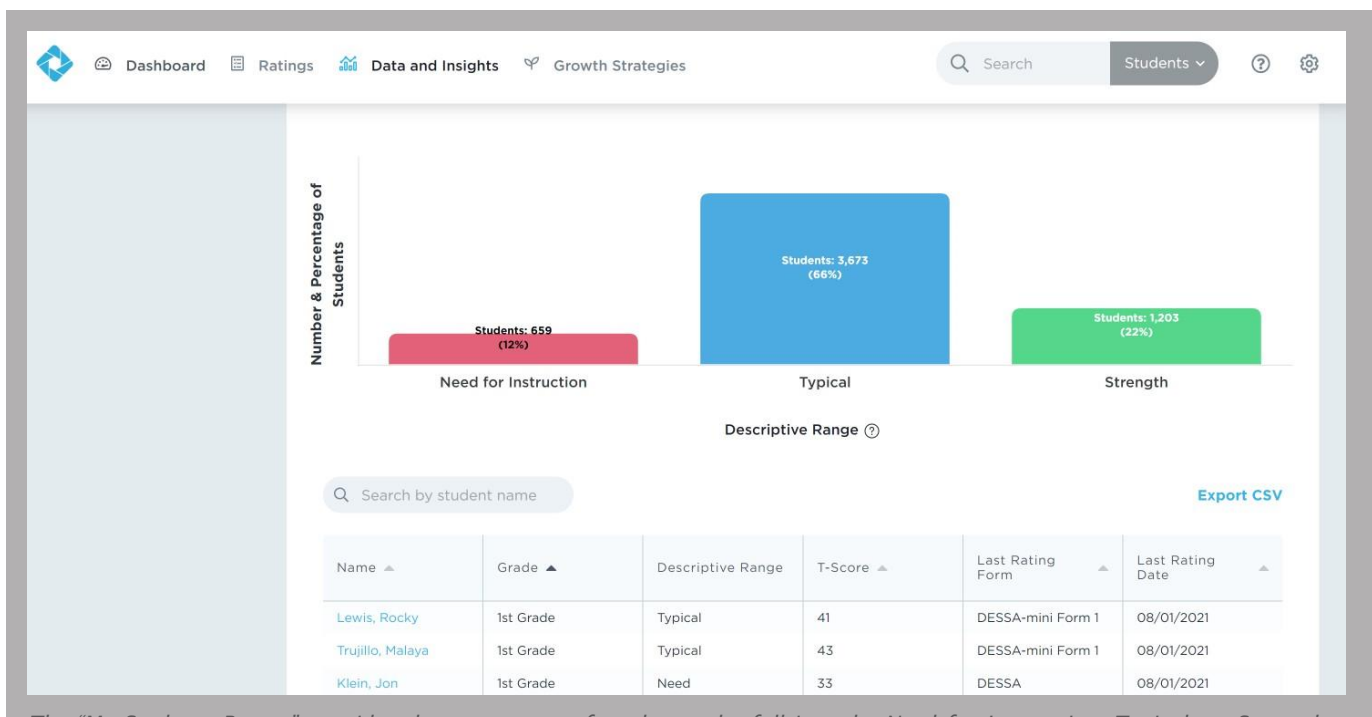
The "My Students Report" provides the percentage of students who fall into the Need for Instruction, Typical, or Strength ranges, as well as a detailed list of student T-Scores and the last rating form completed.
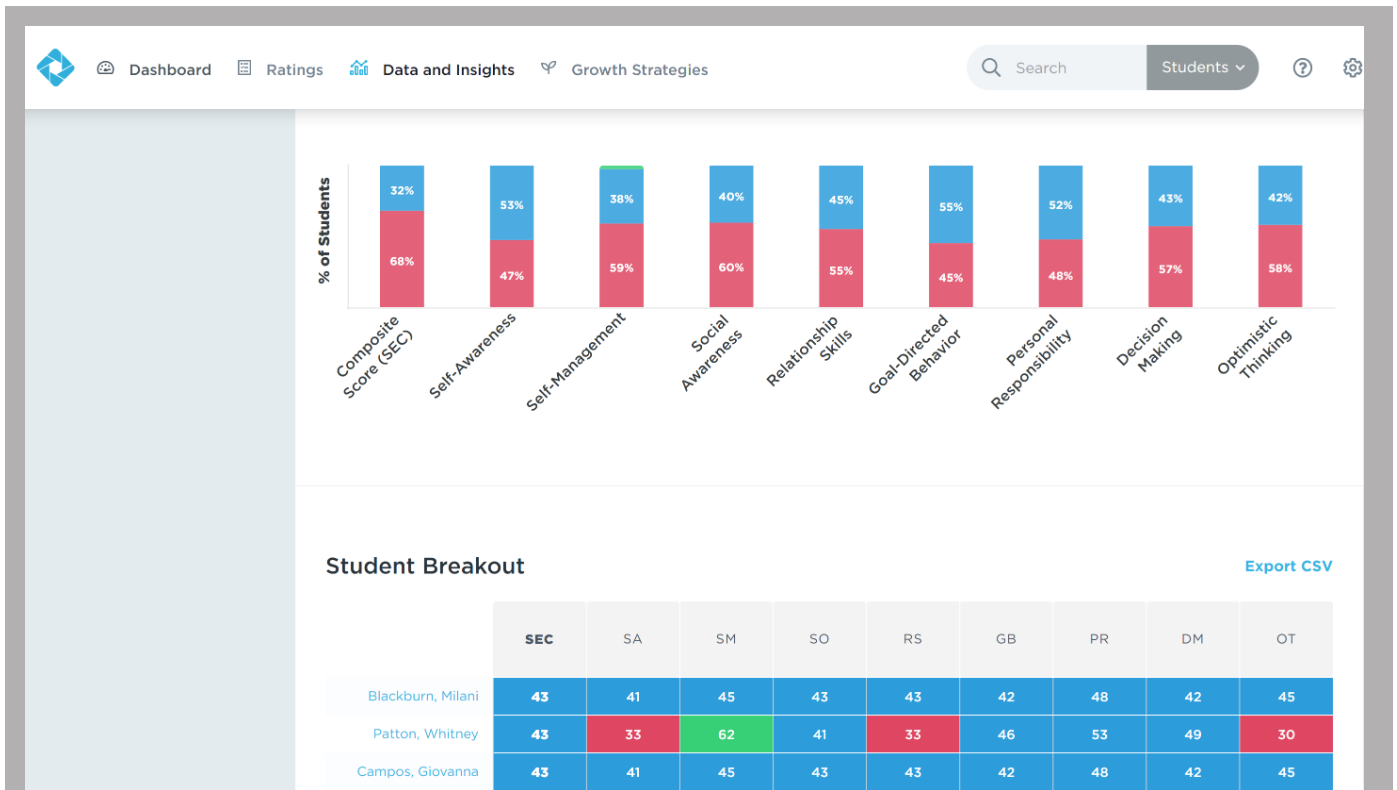
The "Competencies Report" allows you to filter student data by sites, grades, raters, and more. You can view the percentage of students that fall into "Need," "Typical," or "Strength" for each competency, as well as individual student scores.

The eight-item DESSA-mini can be completed in less than a minute per student with real-time scoring and reporting at the individual student, classroom, school, and district level. Students who receive ratings in the "Need for Instruction" range may benefit from a more in-depth assessment of their social and emotional competence with the DESSA. The DESSA-mini can also be used to inform schoolwide SEL programming needs. Based on the national normative sample, 16% of students are expected to receive ratings in the "Strength" range; 68% in the "Typical" range; and 16% in the "Need for Instruction" range.

To obtain a comprehensive picture of the social and emotional strengths and needs for all students in a district, school, classroom, or out-of-school time group, some teachers and schools have opted to use the DESSA on a universal basis. Although the most common implementation model is to screen with the DESSA-mini and reserve assessment with the DESSA for those students who require additional information, completing a full assessment on every student can provide a detailed and thorough review of student strengths and needs. To learn more about different uses for the DESSA, download the DESSA manual.

Aperture reporting provides a detailed matrix of scores in which each row is a student and each column a social and emotional competency measured by the DESSA. Each cell is color-coded. Green represents a "Strength" for the student on that particular DESSA scale. A blue cell signifies a "Typical" score. A red cell denotes a "Need for Instruction." By scanning down the columns and noting the number of green, blue, and red cells, the user can quickly determine the DESSA scales that have the most students falling in each of the three ranges to inform targets for Tier 1, classroom-wide, universal supports.

In-Depth Assessment

A diagnostic assessment should be conducted to inform specific, targeted supports for students. For students who receive ratings in the "Need for Instruction" range on the DESSA-mini, an

assessment with the DESSA should be completed. The DESSA provides a much more in-depth look at a student's social and emotional competence across eight CASEL-aligned competencies – Self-Awareness, Optimistic Thinking, Self-Management, Decision Making, Goal-Directed Behavior, Personal Responsibility, Relationship Skills, and Social-Awareness. The reports populated through the Aperture System provide a by-student visual that allows teachers to consider each student's strengths and areas of need to structure small groups or Tier 2 programs. This information can also be aggregated to the classroom, school, or district level to identify common areas of strengths or needs to inform SEL programming efforts.
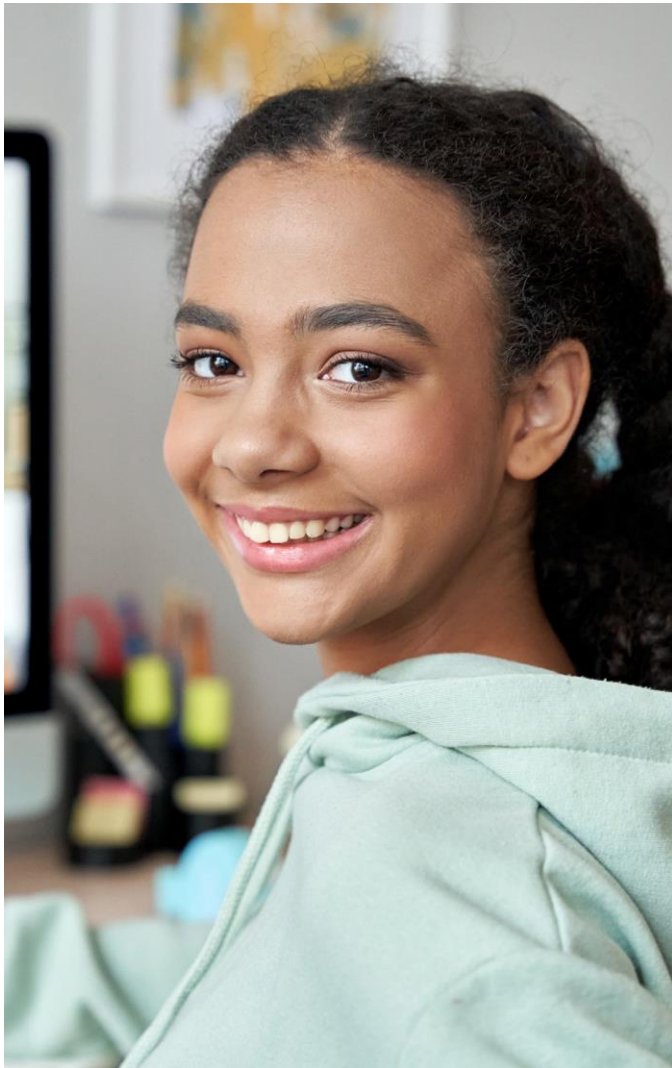
Progress monitoring

Waiting until the end of the year to evaluate the effectiveness of SEL interventions is inefficient. At that point, if a student has not made progress in response to an intervention, opportunities for modifying instruction have been lost. Conversely, if the student has made significant progress,

continuing to provide Tier 2 or 3 services throughout the entire year may have been unnecessary. To maximize the number of students benefiting from instruction, and minimizing unnecessary services, more frequent status checks are needed. The DESSA-mini alternate forms can be used for this purpose. Form 1 can be used as the universal screening tool early in the year, and Forms 2, 3, and 4 can be used in sequence approximately every two months to gauge response to SEL instruction.

Progress is evaluated by determining the amount of change in T-scores between successive DESSA-mini administrations. Research using the DESSA suggests that increases in scores on the DESSA-mini reflect the impact of interventions rather than development alone. Using Cohen's d-ratio as a guide, changes of 2–4, 5–7, and 8 or more T-score points are interpreted as reflecting small, medium, and large changes, respectively. Recent research studying children in K-2 indicates that these estimates reflect reasonable progress
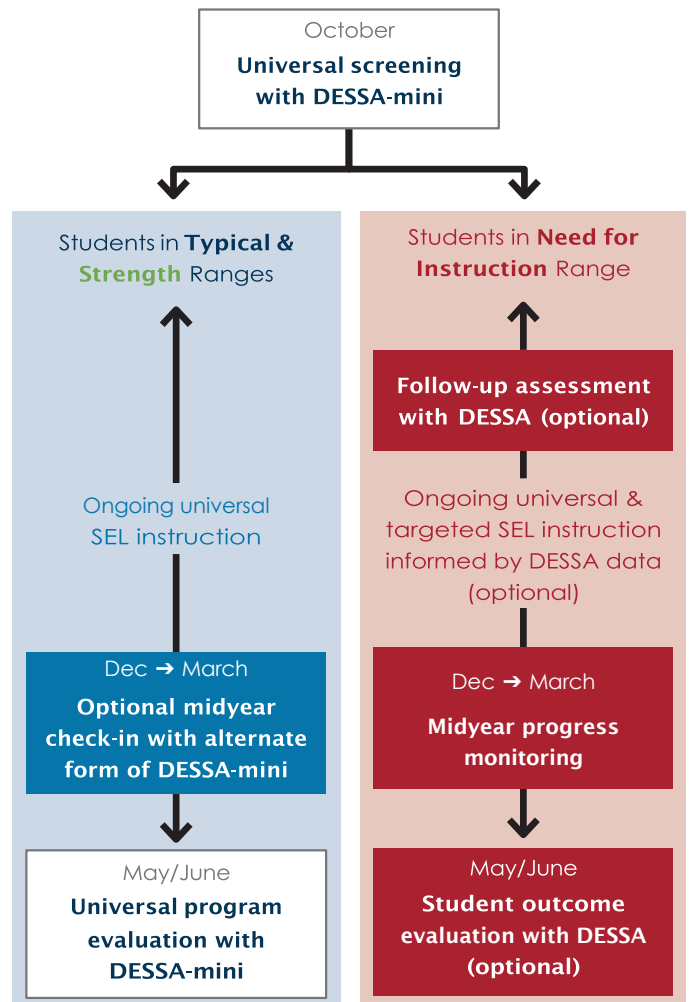
Program planning and evaluation

The DESSA-mini, when used as a universal screener, can also provide information on the school's overall SEL program results. The "Impact Report," available within Aperture's technology platform, compares T-scores obtained at the beginning and end of the school year. This report can be aggregated across the school, grade, or classroom to determine whether the universal SEL program is having a positive impact.

The "Competencies Report" can also be useful at Tier 2 by identifying groups of students with a "Need for Instruction" in a particular competency area. These students can then receive additional services and supports through pull-out groups or more intensive instruction. For instance, a school

of children who begin the year in the "Need for Instruction" range (as identified by the DESSA) and are exposed to a well-implemented, evidence-based SEL program (Shapiro et al., Under Review).

The DESSA-mini manual provides further guidance on how SEL instruction may be modified based on these results. For example, if the T-score change is small, or will not support the student's growth to the "Typical" range, the user is encouraged to increase the frequency or intensity of the intervention and/or consult with student assistance personnel for alternative strategies. Ideally, students who scored in the "Need for Instruction" range at the beginning of the school year will show progress that will help them end the year with their final SET score in the "Typical" or "Strength" range.

October
Universal screening with DESSA-mini

Students in **Typical & Strength** Ranges

Students in **Need for Instruction** Range

Follow-up assessment with DESSA (optional)

Ongoing universal SEL instruction

Ongoing universal & targeted SEL instruction informed by DESSA data (optional)

Dec ➜ March
Optional midyear check-in with alternate form of DESSA-mini

Dec ➜ March
Midyear progress monitoring

May/June
Universal program evaluation with DESSA-mini

May/June
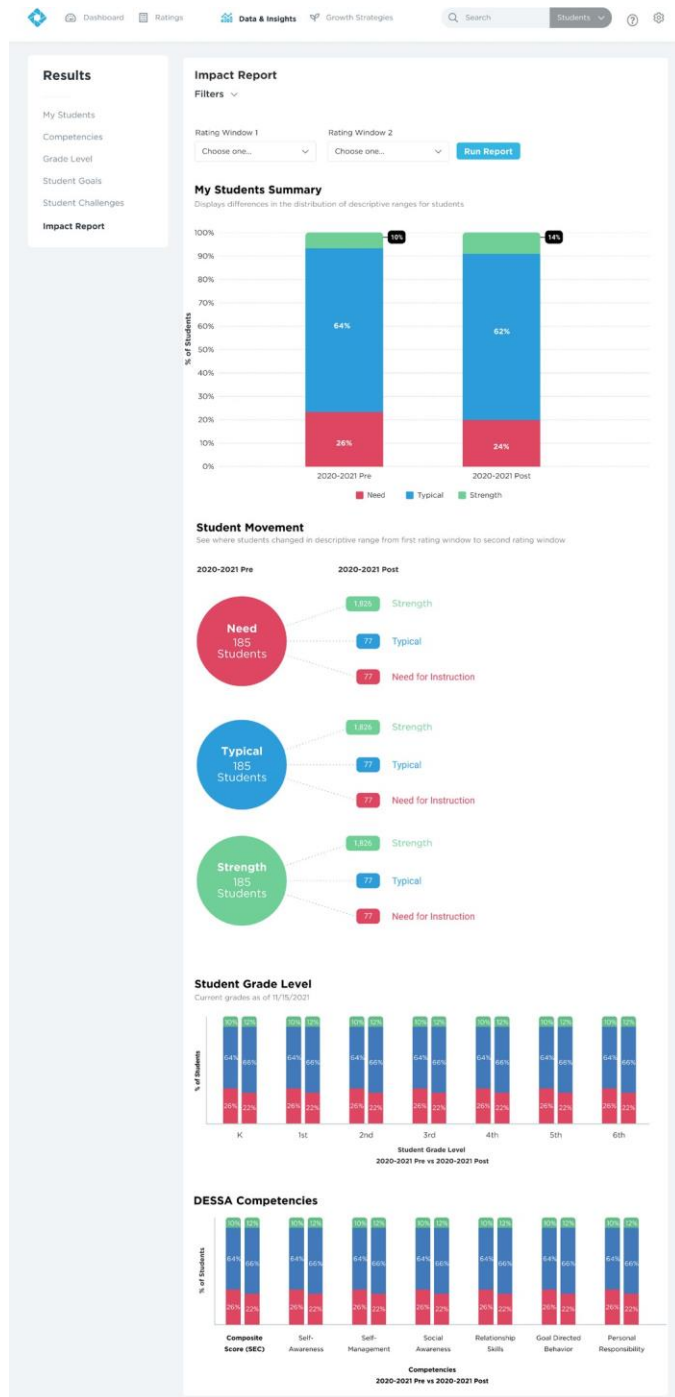**Student outcome evaluation with DESSA (optional)**

The DESSA-mini and DESSA can be used together to screen and assess social and emotional competence across the school year.

social worker may identify those students who were rated in the "Need for Instruction" range in Relationship Skills and invite them to join a friendship skills group. This approach is being widely used by student assistance personnel. Follow-up assessments with the DESSA not only provide information about an individual

student's progress, but when aggregated across students, can indicate whether the Tier 2 program is successful.

At the individual student level, the Individual Student Rating Report of the DESSA determines if individual students or small groups receiving targeted or intensive support have shown significant growth, no change, or a significant decline on each of the eight social and emotional competencies. This information can inform the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 SEL programs.

The "Impact Report" enables you to compare student scores from the beginning and end of the year to understand change over time and program impact.

SEL in Action: DESSA Scores Inform Need for Optimistic Thinking

In the first year of DESSA use, the principal of North Star Elementary in Anchorage, Alaska, noted that, on average, his students were making progress on all competencies measured by the DESSA except Optimistic Thinking. When he examined the DESSA data, he discovered that for many of the Native Alaskan boys in his school, the T-scores on this scale were decreasing over time. Optimism seemed to him to be a logical predictor of dropout, which was notably high among this demographic group. In response, he made optimism an overarching theme of the following school year. This meant that optimism became the focus of school assemblies, the emphasis of featured library books, the focus of teachers' lesson plans, and the topic of hallway decorations and messages. DESSA scores in the second year showed significant improvement in Optimistic Thinking, the percentage of students falling in the "Need for Instruction" range declined, and the school made annual yearly progress for the first time, a trend that continued for the next two years. Read more.

MTSS and the DESSA: What Does the Research Say?

Using an evidence-based assessment allows you to confidently make informed decisions for the students you serve. The DESSA-mini and DESSA assessments can help you: 1) establish baseline needs and inform SEL programming for your school or district, 2) make good decisions to guide intervention strategies for individuals and groups of students, and 3) measure intervention/program outcomes. Below are just a few examples of studies that show how the DESSA supports MTSS.

Supporting Large-Scale Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning Programs Through Screening, Assessing, Planning, and Monitoring

The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) Comprehensive System: Screening, Assessing, Planning, and Monitoring, Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology

Learn how the DESSA measures came to be, the DESSA and DESSA-mini psychometric properties, and how the DESSA results have been used to inform practice decisions in a variety of environments through this comprehensive overview of the DESSA.

Identifying Students for Accelerated Preventative Interventions for Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Problems

Protective Factor Screening for Prevention Practice: Sensitivity and Specificity of the DESSA-mini, School Psychology Quarterly

Read how students screened as having a Need for SEL Instruction were **450% more likely to have a record of serious disciplinary infraction at the end of the school year** and how the DESSA-mini showed excellent internal reliability, consistent scoring to the full DESSA assessment, and reliable predictive validity in one district-wide SEL implementation.

Refining Classroom-Level Interventions and Targeting Implementation Supports to Scale Preventative Interventions

Multilevel structural equation modeling for social work researchers: An introduction and application to healthy youth development. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*

Teacher social and emotional competence (SEC) has a major impact on student SEC. Learn how the DESSA was used to evaluate the impact of implementation, teacher SEC, and classroom-level interventions on student SEC.

SEL in Action: The DESSA Supports MTSS in Schools Across the Country

Boerne ISD, Boerne, TX

Boerne ISD in Texas hoped to implement a SEL program that would prepare students for success after they graduated high school and to build onto the district's pre-existing multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework by replacing some behaviors students were showing early on with strength-building activities. After implementing their strength-based approach informed by the DESSA, the Boerne staff saw that behavior can be taught through the development of skills and by setting up an environment for students to succeed in.

These outcomes were supported by data, too. **There was an 80% reduction in out-of-school suspensions which kept kids in school. In school suspensions reduced by 53%. There was also a 47% decrease in referrals.**

Read more.

Rowe Middle School, Chicago, IL

The staff at Rowe Middle School in Chicago, IL, use DESSA data when creating and executing their Tier 1 SEL instruction. They apply information from a student's DESSA strategically to their lessons to ensure they are building their skills in the areas where they need them. They also use the information to leverage their students' strengths so they can place them in opportunities that can help them thrive. Rowe staff also use the DESSA to identify their students who require Tier 2 and Tier 3 support through SEL competency groups, led by their Behavioral Health Team. This ensures students are getting intentional skill building in these areas so they can ensure they are prepared for high school and beyond!

Read more.

Humble ISD, Humble, TX

Humble ISD sought to provide educators in its district with greater access to SEL endeavors that would help to create behavioral learning opportunities for students, resulting in spending more time in class with their peers and the academic content. This meant finding a program that aligned with their pre-existing frameworks — MTSS and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), something that was CASEL-aligned, and that incorporated the skills children need to be successful as identified in Paul Tough's, "How Children Succeed."

When it compared data from the first two years of the program, one of its pilot schools reported that **discipline referrals had been cut by 76%**. Humble ISD is continuing to expand its program by using the DESSA-mini as a universal screener in every classroom and the DESSA-High School Edition for its 9-12 students.

Read more.

Interested in learning more about how the DESSA and Aperture Education can support your MTSS program? Download the DESSA Manual or contact our team today.

APERTURE EDUCATION

Aperture Education empowers over 3,000 schools and out-of-school time programs across North America to measure, strengthen, and support social and emotional competence in K-12 youth and educators. Aperture enables education leaders to make strategic, data-based decisions about SEL within their organizations. Aperture includes the DESSA suite of strength-based assessments, CASEL-informed intervention strategies, and robust reporting, all in one easy-to-use digital platform. Aperture has supported over one million students in their social and emotional growth and continues to develop strength-based, innovative solutions to bring the whole child into focus. To learn more, visit www.ApertureEd.com.