

Devereux Student Strength Assessment (DESSA)

FAQs

Whether supported in the classroom, school community, or the neighborhoods in which your families and students reside, social and emotional well-being is critical for both students and adults. The information below aims to support your efforts in developing meaningful partnerships and two-way communication that invites families to experience, understand, inform, and support their child's social and emotional development.

What is the purpose of the DESSA?

Connecticut defines Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as the process through which children and adults achieve emotional intelligence through the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL is an integral part of the educational curriculum. The DESSA is a strength-based assessment tool that helps schools gauge the overall social-emotional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students and helps determine how the school can develop and implement strategies to best support them.

How should we describe the DESSA to parents/guardians?

When describing the DESSA to parents, highlight that it is:

- A strength-based social-emotional observation tool that teachers use to capture how frequently they have observed a student demonstrating positive behaviors (e.g., getting along/working well with others) rather than inappropriate ones (e.g., annoying/not working positively with peers). A focus on strengths can build students' self-efficacy and help them persevere when they face difficulties. Observable items in the DESSA include:
 - How often did the child keep trying when unsuccessful?
 - How often did the child offer to help somebody?
 - How often did the child get things done in a timely fashion?
 - How often did the child work well in groups?
- Used by teachers to identify each student's social-emotional competence that, in turn, will help teachers better support their student in feeling connected to school, confident, successful, and engaged in learning.



Share the [Sample Parent Letter](#) to provide parents with more information about Connecticut's SEL assessment initiative and the DESSA.

Do parents have to provide consent for a social-emotional universal screening using the DESSA assessment?

Parental consent for universal screening of social-emotional skills is not required by the state or by Aperture Education. However, it is not uncommon for districts to seek passive consent (e.g., sending a letter to the parents or guardians explaining the DESSA).

Districts often think of this screening and assessment in the same way as other beginning-, middle-, and end-of-the-year academic skill screening and assessments. Districts should follow the same protocols used in similar situations for other assessments.

What are the best practices for sharing results with parents/guardians?

When sharing results with parents, it is important to always start the conversation with a description of the purpose of the DESSA, how the information is being used, and that the DESSA is supported by years of research. Use the [Sample DESSA Results Parent Letter](#) for specific language to use when sharing results with parents.

Before sharing results with parents, reflect on the rating process and write a few thoughts about your confidence in the ratings you are going to share and their relation to the overall social-emotional competency score of the student. Provide brief examples of your observations, and let the parents know that you will be looking at areas of strength, areas that are typical, as well as areas where there is a need for instruction.

We recommend that you focus on the student's strengths. Both the DESSA and the DESSA-mini are strength-based assessments, meaning that all the behaviors measured on the assessments are positive behaviors we would want to see in students. By first starting with the student's identified strengths, parents are often more at ease and comfortable during the meeting. Next, the student's typical areas should be shared with parents. Finally, any identified areas of need should be shared with the parents. It is important to discuss any supports from which students would benefit, such as additional instruction, but not present them as deficits.

A good DESSA conversation and plan should build on strengths; address needs; and leave students, parents, and teachers with a sense of direction, confidence, and optimism.

Is the DESSA a psychological or clinical assessment?

No, some parents may be concerned that the DESSA is a psychological or clinical assessment, which it is not. These fears are often mitigated by sharing the DESSA questions with the concerned parent. It is very important to be mindful of the language used in any conversation with parents and to avoid using language that sounds clinical or deficit-based. Most importantly, it should be stressed that the purpose of the DESSA is not to categorize or label students but to identify their strengths and instructional needs so that parents and teachers can work together to help the student acquire social and emotional skills that are essential to success in school and life.

What resources are available for parents/guardians?

Aperture has readily available resources to support parents in understanding how the DESSA is used to support their student, including:

- Sample Introductory Letter: districts, schools, or teachers can send home these letters to share information about the DESSA, the plan for its use in the school, and benefits for their student. See the [Sample Parent Introductory Letter](#) on the CSDE SEL page.
- Sample Parent DESSA Results Letter: districts, schools, or teachers can send home these letters to share information about the DESSA process, a reminder of how it was implemented, and the results and plan for their child. See the [Sample DESSA Results Parent Letter](#) on the CSDE SEL page.
- Home strategies: are suitable to be sent home with students and encourage a connection between school and parents/guardians in building social-emotional competence in their child.