DESSA Student Self-Report Guidance

Updated June 2023

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 SEL. The results also give school SEL teams and educators the chance to consider how to best support their students. Actionable information is provided to inform SEL instruction and support ongoing SEL efforts.

Why Are High School SSR Results Showing Many Students Need Support?

Recently, we have seen higher than expected percentages of high school students reporting a need for SEL support 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, over the last two years, we have seen SSR results from several sites 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. Current high school students 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. 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 SEL 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.

Will Our Middle School SSR Results Look Similar?

We do not expect results of the middle school SSR to show the same high rates of students in need. There are three reasons why.

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] Current middle school students 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.

Is Aperture Planning to Re-norm the High School SSR?

The high school SSR normative sample (for which scores are based) was collected during 2016-2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We plan to re-norm the assessment over the next few years, in accordance with professional testing standards.[9]

However, it is important to understand that re-norming an assessment does not change whether students are truly experiencing a need for SEL 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 okay – 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. Students in the low typical range would still need additional SEL support.

Why Are There Differences Between High School Student and Teacher DESSA Ratings?

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

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.). A teacher's rating is typically based on their interactions and observations of a student in a particular context, often the classroom. As a result, a student and their teacher may provide somewhat different ratings.

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" serve an important role at home or school, while their teacher indicated "Never" because they haven't observed the student taking on an important role in their classroom or at school. During a conversation, the teacher might learn that the student is responsible for getting their younger siblings off the bus each day and taking care of them until mom gets home from work. Knowing this information provides a more complete picture of how a student may be demonstrating social and emotional skills outside the classroom.

School SEL teams may also observe differences in student and teacher ratings when aggregated across groups of students or for all students in the school. For example, we have seen higher than expected percentages of students reporting a need for SEL support on the high school SSR but not on the high school teacher form of the DESSA. This is the result of the different contexts on which ratings are based. High school students are reflecting on all aspects of their lives. Their ratings are also influenced by their internal states and mental well-being. High school teacher ratings are based entirely on observable behaviors, usually in one specific classroom such as English or science class. It is not surprising that high school SSR ratings are showing higher rates of needs compared to teacher completed ratings. Again, it doesn't mean that one is right and the other is wrong, or that either assessment tool is inaccurate. Instead, it highlights the importance of collecting data from multiple perspectives and using it as the basis for conversation to better understand and support students.

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 SEL support on the high school 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 SEL teams the chance to better understand and support their students.

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

A. **Review additional information with your team to better understand your school's SEL needs.** Other sources of information include teacher completed DESSA ratings, observations, and attendance records. Make sure that school counselors or other mental health staff are a part of this conversation.

A. **If your school is new to SEL and assessment, lower results may reflect this.** Ongoing SEL programming should help students and teachers develop positive learning environments.

A. **Review your universal SEL program and implementation.** Does your school have a cohesive approach to SEL programming? Do your teachers have the support they need for SEL implementation? Consider SEL professional development to support your school staff.

To support social and emotional growth for all students, everyone who has access to the Aperture 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 Aperture Student Portal. These resources can empower students to be more self-directed and have greater agency in their own SEL.

A. **Monitor progress.** Schedule a mid-year SSR rating. Use the data to continuously improve SEL implementation and outcomes for you and your students.

The Aperture Middle School DESSA Implementation Guide and the Aperture High School DESSA 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 Aperture Customer Success Manager or success@apertureed.com.

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