



## UNLOCKING STUDENT STRENGTHS

This Frequently Asked Questions guide highlights best practices for using the DESSA to support students with disabilities.

### 1 What is the benefit of completing the DESSA for students with disabilities?

The DESSA is a strength-based assessment that highlights what a student does well, and indicates areas for growth. DESSA results allow educators to leverage the student's strengths to build skills that are less well developed. With DESSA data, educators can design individualized instruction to better meet the unique needs of the students they serve.

### 2 What are some tips for rating students with disabilities?

1. Become familiar with the DESSA competencies and items. This will help you observe your students' skills and help you create opportunities for your students to practice and demonstrate these skills.
2. Consider what accommodations or modifications a student might need to demonstrate a skill. For example, the DESSA item "show appreciation for others" could include saying or signing "thank you" or it could include working with the student to create a picture to give to someone they are grateful for.
3. DESSA items are written as observable behaviors. Consider using a spreadsheet or notes to keep track of your observations in the weeks before the rating window opens.

### 3 How does DESSA data inform IEP development?

The Individual Student Report and the Individual Item Analysis give you detailed information about a student's strengths and areas for growth. A strengths-based approach encourages leveraging a strength to develop areas of need.

For example, a student may have a relative strength in Optimistic Thinking and show a need for instruction in Self-Management. The student's ability to think positively and to have confidence in themselves can be used to help them break larger tasks into smaller steps, to use a strategy, and to celebrate small successes.

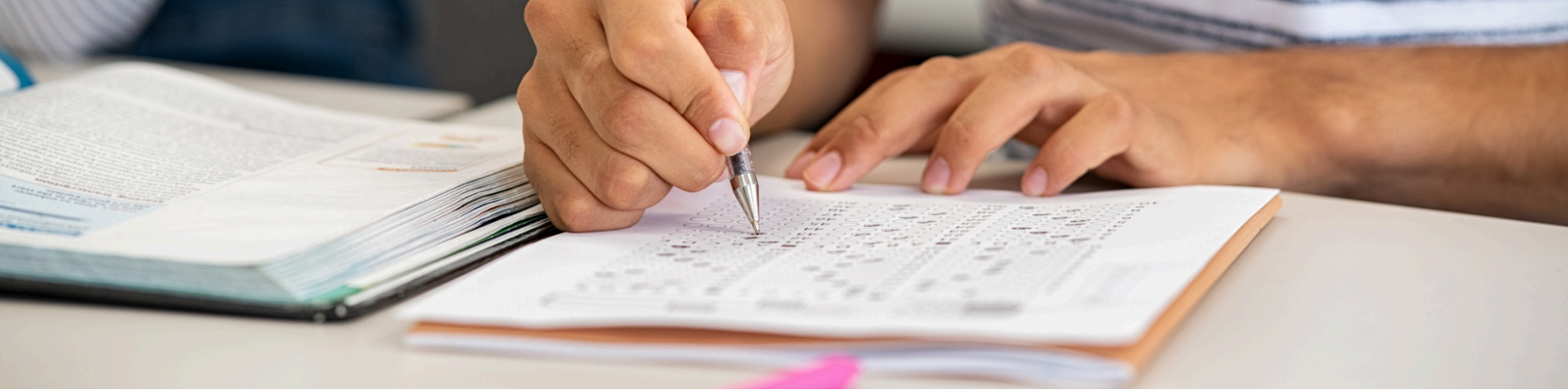
The IEP goal and objective might look something like this:

Marlowe is an optimistic thinker, who can focus on the positive side of things, and who can focus on his strengths. He needs support setting goals, initiating steps to achieve goals, and persevering during setbacks.

Provide Marlowe a goal setting strategy, to break down larger goals into manageable chunks. Begin goal setting work by leveraging his optimistic thinking – have him imagine what success looks like, have him create an 'if-then' plan for overcoming obstacles, use positive affirmations to celebrate small successes along the way. Emphasize that his effort will make a difference.

**“All students  
can benefit  
from ongoing  
social and  
emotional  
competence  
building and  
instruction.”**





#### 4 How can I use DESSA data to inform my Tier 3 program?

At the individual student level, DESSA results should be used to identify areas of strength to be leveraged to support areas of need.

Across your Tier 3 program, you can use DESSA data to create small groups, to design the focus of your interventions, and to review the results across students who receive Tier 3 support.

For more detailed information, see our [Implementation Guide](#).

#### 5 Can the DESSA be modified for students with disabilities?

If each question of the DESSA assessment is not answered, it will not produce an accurate score. Therefore, each question should be answered during every rating period.

Between rating windows, an educator can choose to monitor a student's progress on a small set of DESSA items after reviewing the Individual Item Analysis Report. This doesn't produce a standardized score, but does allow educators to monitor a student's development of skills.

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## How can teachers help students successfully demonstrate and practice these skills?

Teachers can create a positive learning environment by following the Foundational Practices included in the Educator Portal. Foundational Practices are simple, daily activities that create positive learning environments and give students the chance to practice skills included on the DESSA.

Teachers can also explicitly teach these skills using the Strategies included in the Educator Portal.

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## How can educators give students with disabilities the opportunity to build and practice their skills?

Students with disabilities might need more targeted instruction, and they might need more opportunities to practice their skills.

Teachers can use the Strategies and/or Tier 2 intervention programs with students that need this level of support.

Using the available instructional materials, a teacher can then consider how the student can practice the skill in the special education, general education or other setting to help them be successful.

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## Are there any resources that can help educators plan their DESSA implementation to support students with disabilities?

Click [here](#) to access additional planning resources for your DESSA implementation.

