

An Introduction to the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment

DESSA

DEVEREUX STUDENT STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT

K-8TH GRADE

A measure of behaviors related to resilience, social-emotional competence, and school success for children in Kindergarten through the Eighth grade.



Devereux
CENTER FOR RESILIENT CHILDREN



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Dear Colleague:

Enclosed please find information on the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a nationally-normed behavior rating scale designed to assess social-emotional competencies of children and youth in grades K-8. This assessment was developed in response to a number of national trends in our schools and communities including:

- The growing evidence base that students' social-emotional competencies are essential to academic success (Payton et al. 2008).
- The acknowledgment that mental, emotional and behavioral disorders create an under-recognized public health burden of \$247 billion annually and deeply impact the lived experience of one in every five American families (O'Connell, Boat, and Warner, 2009).
- The recognition of social-emotional competence promotion as a credible strategy for the prevention of mental, emotional and behavioral disorders in children and youth (O'Connell, Boat, and Warner, 2009).
- The emerging paradigm shift in pupil personnel services, including school psychology, from a "wait-to-fail" and "test and place" approach to a universal mental health promotion agenda (Doll & Cummings, 2008).
- The practice and policy emphasis on resilience as an organizing framework for the provision of mental health services (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

For practitioners to fully embrace these recent developments in a way that provides the maximum benefit to children and youth, we must first have a scientifically-sound and user-friendly means of assessing each student's social-emotional competencies. Such individualized assessment will allow us to recognize, support, and sustain social-emotional strengths and to allocate resources to address the social-emotional needs of each student. Of equal importance, when these results are aggregated across students, classes, schools/programs, and districts/communities, they enable us to describe the social-emotional health of entire populations and evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of programs designed to promote social-emotional competence.

This brief introduction is designed to provide a basic overview of the content, uses, and psychometric qualities of the DESSA. More complete information can be found in the DESSA manual (LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Naglieri, 2009). More information can also be obtained at the DESSA website, www.studentstrengths.org, by calling 1-866-872-4687, or by emailing us at DESSA@Devereux.org. Thank you for your interest in the DESSA.

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Introduction to the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)

By Paul LeBuffe, Valerie Shapiro, and Jack Naglieri

DESCRIPTION OF THE DESSA

The DESSA is a 72-item, standardized, norm-referenced behavior rating scale that assesses the social-emotional competencies that serve as protective factors for children in kindergarten through the eighth grade. The DESSA can be completed by parents/guardians, teachers, or staff at schools and child-serving agencies, including after-school, social service, and mental health programs. The assessment is entirely strength-based; meaning that the items query positive behaviors (e.g., get along with others) rather than maladaptive ones (e.g., annoy others).

The DESSA is organized into conceptually-derived scales that provide information about eight key social-emotional competencies. Standard scores can be used to calibrate each child's competence in each of the eight dimensions and guide school/program-wide, class-wide, and individual strategies to promote those competencies. For each item, the rater is asked to indicate on a five-point scale how often the student engaged in each behavior over the past four weeks. A partial reproduction of the DESSA is provided in Figure 1. The same form is used for all ages and both parent and teacher raters.

FIGURE 1

Item #	During the past 4 weeks, how often did the child...	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
1	remember important information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	carry herself/himself with confidence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	keep trying when unsuccessful?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	handle his/her belongings with care?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	say good things about herself/himself?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	serve an important role at home or school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	speak about positive things?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	cope well with insults and mean comments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	take steps to achieve goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	look forward to classes or activities at school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	get along with different types of people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	...with her/his best?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

USES OF THE DESSA

The DESSA has been developed to serve a variety of uses including:

- Providing a psychometrically sound, strength-based measure of social-emotional competence in children and youth.
- Identifying children and youth at risk of developing social-emotional problems before those problems emerge.
- Identifying the unique strengths and needs of individual children and youth who have already been identified as having social, emotional, and behavioral concerns.
- Providing meaningful information on child strengths for inclusion in individual education and service plans, as required by federal, state, and funder regulations.
- Facilitating parent-professional collaboration, by providing a means of comparing ratings on the same child to identify similarities and meaningful differences.
- Informing the selection and/or design of interventions for children needing various levels of support (universal, targeted, and indicated).
- Facilitating progress monitoring for individual children, by evaluating change over time at the individual scale level.
- Enabling the evaluation of social-emotional learning and positive youth development programs, by rigorously evaluating outcomes at the student, classroom, school/program, and district/community levels.
- Serving as a sound research tool to advance science and support public policy.
- Providing a common language and approach to those adults involved in promoting positive youth development including: social scientists, policy makers, community members, mental health and social service professionals, teachers, and after-school staff.

Chapter 6 of the DESSA manual provides more detail on these various uses and organizes them within a multi-tiered (universal, targeted, and indicated) prevention framework.

DESSA SCALES

The eight scale names, scale definitions, and sample scale items are as follows:

- Self-Awareness (7 items): A child's realistic understanding of her/his strengths and limitations and consistent desire for self-improvement.
 - ▶ give an opinion when asked?
 - ▶ describe how he/she was feeling?
 - ▶ ask somebody for feedback?
- Social-Awareness (9 items): A child's capacity to interact with others in a way that shows respect for their ideas and behaviors, recognizes her/his impact on them, and uses cooperation and tolerance in social situations.
 - ▶ get along with different types of people?
 - ▶ cooperate with peers or siblings?
 - ▶ forgive somebody that hurt or upset her/him?
- Self-Management (11 items): A child's success in controlling his or her emotions and behaviors, to complete a task or succeed in a new or challenging situation.
 - ▶ wait for her/his turn?
 - ▶ stay calm when faced with a challenge?
 - ▶ adjust well to changes in plans?
- Goal-Directed Behavior (10 items): A child's initiation of, and persistence in completing, tasks of varying difficulty.
 - ▶ keep trying when unsuccessful?
 - ▶ seek out additional information?
 - ▶ take steps to achieve goals?
- Relationship Skills (10 items): A child's consistent performance of socially acceptable actions that promote and maintain positive connections with others.
 - ▶ compliment or congratulate somebody?
 - ▶ offer to help somebody?
 - ▶ express concern for another person?
- Personal Responsibility (10 items): A child's tendency to be careful and reliable in her/his actions and in contributing to group efforts.
 - ▶ remember important information?
 - ▶ serve an important role at home or school?
 - ▶ handle his/her belongings with care?
- Decision Making (8 items): A child's approach to problem solving that involves learning from others and from her/his own previous experiences, using her/his values to guide her/his action, and accepting responsibility for her/his decisions.
 - ▶ follow the example of a positive role model?
 - ▶ accept responsibility for what he/she did?
 - ▶ learn from experience?
- Optimistic Thinking (7 items): A child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding herself/himself and her/his life situations in the past, present, and future.
 - ▶ say good things about herself/himself?
 - ▶ look forward to classes or activities at school?
 - ▶ express high expectations for himself/herself?

DESSA RESULTS: SCORES AND PROFILES

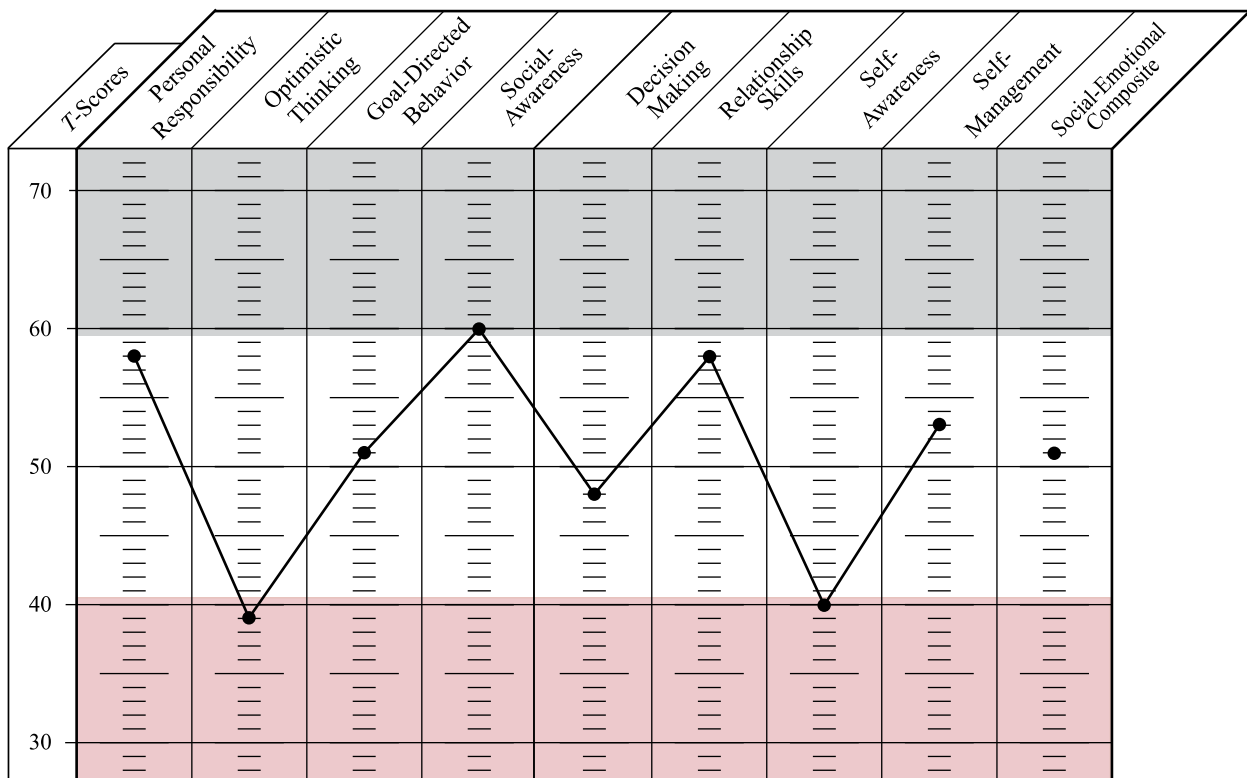
Each of the eight DESSA scale scores is derived from the ratings of the items assigned to that scale. A **Social-Emotional Composite** score is also included, which is based on a combination of the eight scales. This composite score provides an overall indication of the strength of the child's social-emotional competence. DESSA results are reported using *T*-scores and percentile ranks.

In addition to the standard scores, DESSA results are presented graphically using the Individual Student Profile as well as the Classroom/Program Profile. The Individual Student Profile (Figure 2) conveys the strengths and needs of the student compared to national norms. Because the DESSA is a strength-based instrument, high scores are desirable and, on the profile, scale scores that fall in the gray-shaded area (*T*-scores of 60 and above) are described as **strengths**. Scores that fall in the non-shaded area on the profile

(*T*-scores of 41-59 inclusive) are characterized as **typical** scores. Scale scores that fall in the red-shaded area (*T*-score of 40 and below) are described as **needs for instruction**. The Individual Student Profile is very useful in conveying results to parent/guardians or in facilitating discussion in team meetings.

The Classroom/Program Profile (Figure 3) graphically depicts the social-emotional functioning of an entire classroom, program or other group of students. On the Classroom/Program Profile, each student is a row, each social-emotional competency is a column, and scale scores for each student on each scale are color-coded. A green box indicates a strength, a blue box a typical score, and a red box a need for instruction. By examining rows, a teacher or program leader can quickly ascertain the strengths and needs of each student. By inspecting the columns, areas of common strengths or needs can be readily seen.

FIGURE 2: Individual Student Profile



In addition to guiding universal (classroom or program-wide) strategies, the Classroom/Program Profile can also be very useful to counselors, psychologists, social-workers and teachers in

gauging the social-emotional characteristics of the class as whole. Finally the relative prevalence of green, blue, and red boxes can be used in program evaluation.

FIGURE 3: Classroom/Program Profile

Teacher's Name: Susan Osborne Date: April 2009

First	Last	Birth Date	PR	OT	GB	SO	DM	RS	SA	SM	SEC
A	R	12/29/2002	49	47	51	52	48	48	41	48	48
A	S	4/16/2003	59	55	52	60	52	59	52	52	56
A	M	7/6/2003	44	40	43	49	46	50	38	43	44
B	C	9/15/2002	54	55	55	54	50	59	50	53	54
C	Y	12/12/2002	38	39	38	41	41	43	40	42	39
E	E	6/4/2003	45	51	48	38	45	45	46	44	45
E	X	9/21/2002	54	53	57	51	48	53	48	50	52
H	L	4/17/2003	48	62	62	66	54	56	63	50	58
J	V	7/18/2003	46	40	40	47	48	44	35	39	42
J	K	6/19/2002	46	40	40	47	48	44	35	39	42
J	A	3/13/2003	42	42	47	47	47	47	42	41	44
K	B	12/11/2002	61	57	57	64	59	59	57	56	59
K	L	10/15/2002	50	45	45	52	48	54	44	49	49
K	D	2/26/2003	54	53	48	54	48	53	50	52	52
K	V	10/27/2002	38	37	37	41	46	40	33	43	38
P	X	3/30/2003	54	45	61	62	57	53	42	58	54
P	O	12/2/2002	54	57	52	62	52	59	46	50	54
V	C	4/27/2003	54	53	51	54	57	59	55	54	55
Y	M	9/18/2002	61	57	69	66	54	58	61	58	60
A	M	4/10/2003	53	57	55	58	54	59	52	53	56
			PR	OT	GB	SO	DM	RS	SA	SM	SEC
Number of children GREEN			2	1	3	6	0	0	2	0	1
Number of children BLUE			16	14	13	13	20	19	13	18	17
Number of children RED			2	5	4	1	0	1	5	2	2

COLOR CODING LEGEND

GREEN - scale scores 60 and above
BLUE - scale scores between 41-59
RED - scale scores 40 and below



SCALE LEGEND

PR - Personal Responsibility SO - Social Awareness SA - Self-Awareness
 OT - Optimistic Thinking DM - Decision Making SM - Self-Management
 GB - Goal-directed Behavior RS - Relationship Skills SEC - Social-Emotional Composite

BASIC INTERPRETATION OF THE DESSA

Interpreting DESSA results is a three-step process proceeding from the most general indicator of the student's social-emotional functioning to specific behaviors that provide both a detailed understanding of the student's strengths and needs, and also serve as the basis for planning individualized strategies to support the development of social-emotional competencies.

The first step is the examination of the **Social-Emotional Composite**. This scale gives an overall indication of the child's social-emotional competencies. This scale is the most reliable and valid overall indicator of strengths within the DESSA. Because it characterizes the child's social and emotional strengths with a single number, the Social-Emotional Composite is particularly useful in outcome measurement and program evaluation.

Step two consists of **examining the eight separate DESSA scales** and noting the *T*-scores and corresponding strength, typical, and need for instruction ranges. Examination of the separate DESSA scale *T*-scores provides useful information about the specific strengths and needs of the child. For instance, the scores can suggest whether a child's strengths or needs are primarily intrapersonal (as evidenced by high or low scores on the Self-Awareness and Self-Management Scales) or interpersonal (as shown by high or low scores on Social-Awareness and Relationship Skills). Examination of the DESSA Individual Student Profile on the DESSA Record Form is particularly useful at this step, as the visual depiction of the scale scores can make patterns easier to discern.

Step three, **Identification of specific strengths and needs**, involves a method called **Individual Item Analysis**. Any item can represent a need for instruction if the rating the child received is substantially lower than the rating given to children who have typical scores. Similarly, any item can represent a strength if the rating is substantially higher than that given to children with typical scores. This approach can be used to identify specific, focal strengths (scores greater than or equal to one SD above the mean of the standardization sample) as well as specific needs for instruction (less than or equal to one SD below the mean).

The primary advantage of this method is that it allows for identification of specific behaviors that can be leveraged (strengths) or remediated (needs for instruction) by specific interventions. Individual item identification facilitates the development of goals and objectives for IEPs and intervention plans that are individualized and behaviorally grounded. The identification of specific strengths and needs is an important step in linking DESSA assessment results to interventions.

The individual item scores for both strengths and needs are provided on pages 4 and 5 of the DESSA Record Form (see Figure 4). On those pages, the item raw score boxes that are square, shaded in red, and connected by horizontal lines are in the need for instruction range. Item raw score boxes that are square and have a black border are in the typical range. Item raw score boxes that are hexagons and shaded in grey are in the strength range.

FIGURE 4

Item #	During the past 4 weeks, how often did the child...	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently	PR	OT	GB	SO
1	remember important information?	0	1	2	3	4	4			
2	carry herself/himself with confidence?	0	1	2	3	4		1		
3	keep trying when unsuccessful?	0	1	2	3	4			3	
4	handle his/her belongings with care?	0	1	2	3	4	3			
5	say good things about herself/himself?	0	1	2	3	4		1		
6	serve an important role at home or school?	0	1	2	3	4	1			
7	speak about positive things?	0	1	2	3	4		3		
8	cope well with insults and mean comments?	0	1	2	3	4				4
9	take steps to achieve goals?	0	1	2	3	4			3	
10	look forward to classes or activities at school?	0	1	2	3	4		3		
11	get along with different types of people?	0	1	2	3	4				4
12	try to do her/his best?	0	1	2	3	4				4
13	seek out additional knowledge or information?	0	1	2	3	4			3	
14	take an active role in learning?	0	1	2	3	4			1	
15	work independently?	0	1	2	3	4				4
	...with his/her classmates?									

ADVANCED INTERPRETATION OF THE DESSA

One of the goals of the DESSA is to provide professionals with tools to enhance their practice and improve outcomes for students. Two of these tools are **Rater Comparisons** and **Pretest-Posttest Comparisons**. In both instances, the DESSA manual includes tables that indicate how much of a difference needs to exist between two ratings to conclude that there is a significant difference in the scores. In the case of rater comparisons, this enables the DESSA user to compare ratings obtained from two teachers, two parents, or a parent and a teacher to determine if they are perceiving the same strengths and needs in the student. This can result in more meaningful interpretations of the student's behavior, better coordination of strategies across classrooms and the home, and greater collaboration between the teachers/staff and parents. This approach can also be used in non-school settings to compare ratings of staff to each other or to parents/guardians.

The same approach is used in pretest-posttest comparisons to determine if the change in scores between the two administrations of the DESSA is reliable. That is, has the student shown significant improvement in his/her social-emotional competencies? In both rater and pretest-posttest comparisons, the determination of significant change can be made for each of the eight social-emotional competencies as well as the Social-Emotional Composite. This enables the professional to determine not only if the raters agree, or if the child has shown improvement, but in what specific areas. This information can then be aggregated across students, classroom/programs, schools, districts/communities to evaluate programs and inform quality improvement efforts. These advanced interpretation techniques also support data-driven practice and provide solid practice-based evidence of program/curriculum effectiveness.

BASIC PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES OF THE DESSA

The DESSA was developed to meet or exceed professional standards for a high-quality, well-developed assessment instrument. The standardization sample; internal, inter-rater, and test-retest reliabilities; and content, construct, and criterion validity evidence are discussed at length in the DESSA manual. Some of the most important findings are presented below:

Standardization Sample

The DESSA standardization sample consists of 2,500 children who are representative of the United States population with respect to gender, race (see Table 1), Hispanic ethnicity, region of residence, and poverty status.

TABLE 1: Standardization Sample Characteristics by Race & Geographic Region

	American Indian/ Alaska Native		Asian		Black/ African American		Native/ Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander		White		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Northeast	9	1.7	7	1.3	190	35.6	0	0	327	61.4	533
South	16	1.8	22	2.5	200	22.3	3	0.3	424	47.3	665
Midwest	3	0.6	12	2.2	71	13.0	2	0.4	453	83.1	541
West	13	2.6	24	4.7	20	3.9	9	1.8	354	69.8	420
Total	41	1.9	65	3.0	481	22.3	14	0.6	1,558	72.2	2,159
U.S. %¹		1.2		4.0		15.4		0.2		76.3	

Note: The U.S. race data are based on the 2006 figures for 5- through 14-year-olds only in "Resident Population by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: 2000 and 2006, Table No. 8," Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2008 (127th edition): U.S. Census Bureau, 2008.

¹U.S. figures do not add up to 100% due to "Two or more Races" not being included.

Reliability

As shown in Table, 2, the internal consistency (alpha coefficients) of each scale as well as the Social-Emotional Composite, for both teacher/staff and parent raters, exceeds the recommended standard of .80 for a scale and .90 for a total scale (i.e. the Social-Emotional Composite) recommended by Bracken (1987). In fact, the alpha coefficient for the Social-Emotional Composite is .98 for parents and .99 for teachers/staff.

TABLE 2: Internal Reliability (Alpha) Coefficients for the DESSA Scales by Rater

Scales	Raters	
	Parents	Teachers/Staff
Social-Emotional Composite	.98	.99
Personal Responsibility	.86	.92
Optimistic Thinking	.82	.89
Goal-Directed Behavior	.88	.93
Social-Awareness	.84	.91
Decision Making	.85	.92
Relationship Skills	.89	.94
Self-Awareness	.82	.89
Self-Management	.86	.92

Test-retest reliabilities are also high with correlation coefficients ranging from .79 to .90 for parents and from .86 to .94 for teachers/staff. Inter-rater reliabilities are also quite good, with median scale correlation coefficients of .725 for parents and .735 for teachers/staff.

Validity Data

A variety of validity studies are reported in the DESSA manual. Some of the more important findings are:

- In a criterion validity study comparing DESSA scores of students who had already been identified as having social, emotional, or behavioral disorders to their non-identified peers, each DESSA scale showed significant mean score differences (all p values < .01), with a median effect size of .80, which would be characterized as a large difference between the scores. The effect size for the Social-Emotional Composite was 1.31. These results show that the DESSA is very effective in differentiating between students with and without social, emotional, and behavioral problems.
- Using only the Social-Emotional Composite score, the group membership of 70% of students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and 76% of their non-identified peers could be correctly predicted.
- The scales on the DESSA can be considered protective factors within a risk and resilience theoretical framework. High scores on DESSA scales were associated with significantly fewer behavioral problems for students at both high and average levels of risk.
- Nickerson and Fishman (2009), in an article published in the *School Psychology Quarterly*, reported strong convergent validity of DESSA scores with BASC-2 and BERS-2 scores.

This is just a sampling of research findings with the DESSA. More details on these and other studies are found both in the DESSA manual and at the DESSA website, www.studentstrengths.org.

THE DESSA-MINI

Ideally, all students in grades K-8 will be assessed with the DESSA to determine their social-emotional strengths and needs. However, completing a 72-item behavior rating scale on a universal basis may be impractical due to limited human, financial, and time resources. A short form of the DESSA, known as the DESSA-mini, is being developed to meet this need for a brief, economical, and efficient screener for social-emotional competence. Slated to be published in the fall of 2009, the DESSA-mini consists of four equivalent 8-item forms. The DESSA-mini yields one total social-emotional competence scale score that correlates highly with the Social-Emotional Composite on the full 72-item DESSA. The DESSA-mini can be used as a universal screener for social-emotional competence. In addition, the four equivalent forms allow for repeated measurement and make the DESSA-mini ideally suited for use in a response to intervention (RTI) framework addressing social-emotional competence.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM OF STRENGTH-BASED ASSESSMENTS PUBLISHED BY THE DEVEREUX CENTER FOR RESILIENT CHILDREN

The DESSA is the fourth in a series of strength-based assessments grounded in resilience theory to be published by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children. All of these assessments have as their overarching goal the promotion of social-emotional competence, resilience, and school and life success for all children. All can be completed by both parents and teachers. These assessments span the age range from 1 month through the 8th grade and include:

The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Infants and Toddlers (DECA-I/T) for ages 1 month to 36 months.

The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers (DECA) for ages two through five years.

The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers - Clinical Form (DECA-C) for children ages two through five years with behavioral concerns.

The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment for students in Kindergarten through the 8th grade.

THE DEVEREUX CENTER FOR RESILIENT CHILDREN

The Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC), which was founded in 2009, has as its mission, promoting social-emotional development, fostering resilience, and building the skills for school and life success in all children and the adults who care for them.

The staff of the DCRC value collaboration with community partners who share our mission. We are especially interested in opportunities for collaborative research and model program development. Interested researchers and other professionals can contact the DCRC through Paul LeBuffe at plebuffe@Devereux.org. For more information on the DCRC, visit our website, www.centerforresilientchildren.org, or call 866-872-4687.

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