

Attendance as a Behavioral Outcome: Addressing the Root Cause of Chronic Absenteeism.

Learning Objectives: NASP CEUs

Participants will be able to:

1. Explain the link between social-emotional competence and chronic absenteeism
2. Recognize early indicators of absenteeism risk
3. Use data to identify students needing social-emotional support
4. Apply strategies to address root causes and improve attendance



Earning NASP CEUs

To collect your CEUs from Riverside Insights, you must...

1. Be present on this **live** session for at least 75% of the run time
2. Fill out and submit the survey that you will receive **tomorrow (Wednesday, March 25)**



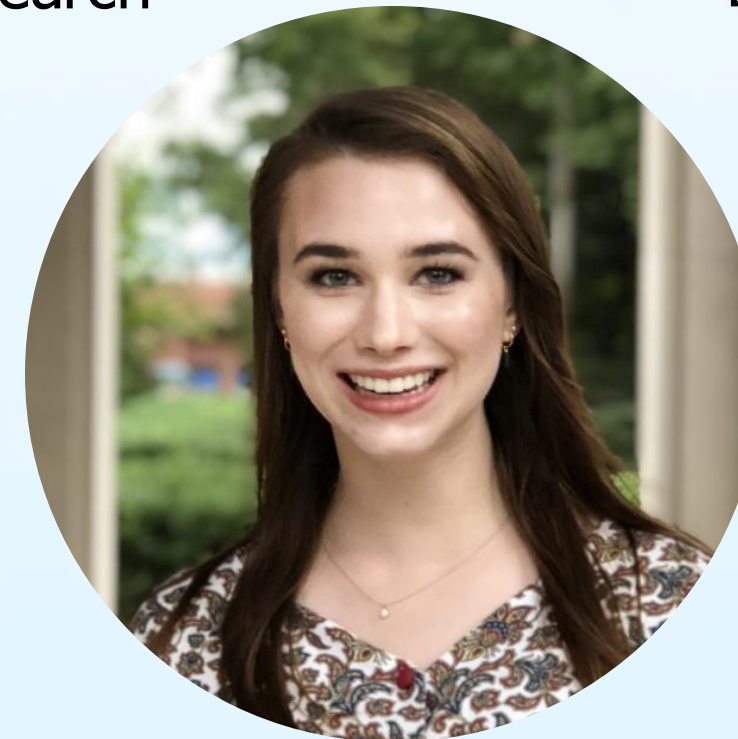
It's Nice to Meet You!



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Vice President, Research



Jennifer Robitaille
Director, R & D



Emily Taylor
Research Associate



Agenda

Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

New Research: Behavioral Skills as Predictors of Attendance

Early Identification: Using Behavioral Data as an Early-Warning System

Translating Research Into Practice

Q&A and Key Takeaways

Chronic Absenteeism = Missing at least 10% of School Days

Approximately 1 in 5 students are chronically absent (Malkus, 2025)



Why schools should care: learning, classroom disruption, and system strain.

Academic Achievement



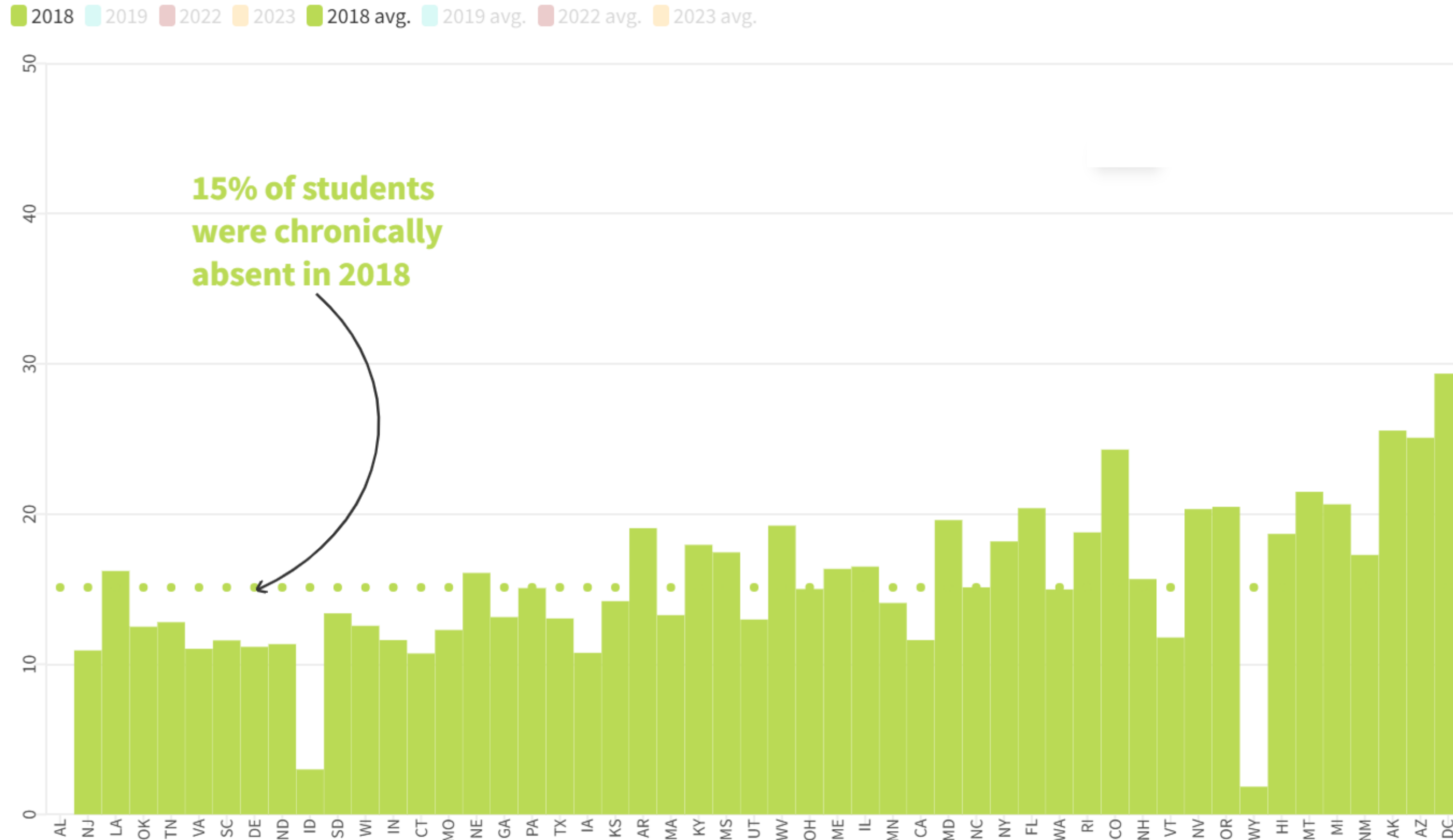
Classroom Disruption



Budget Impact



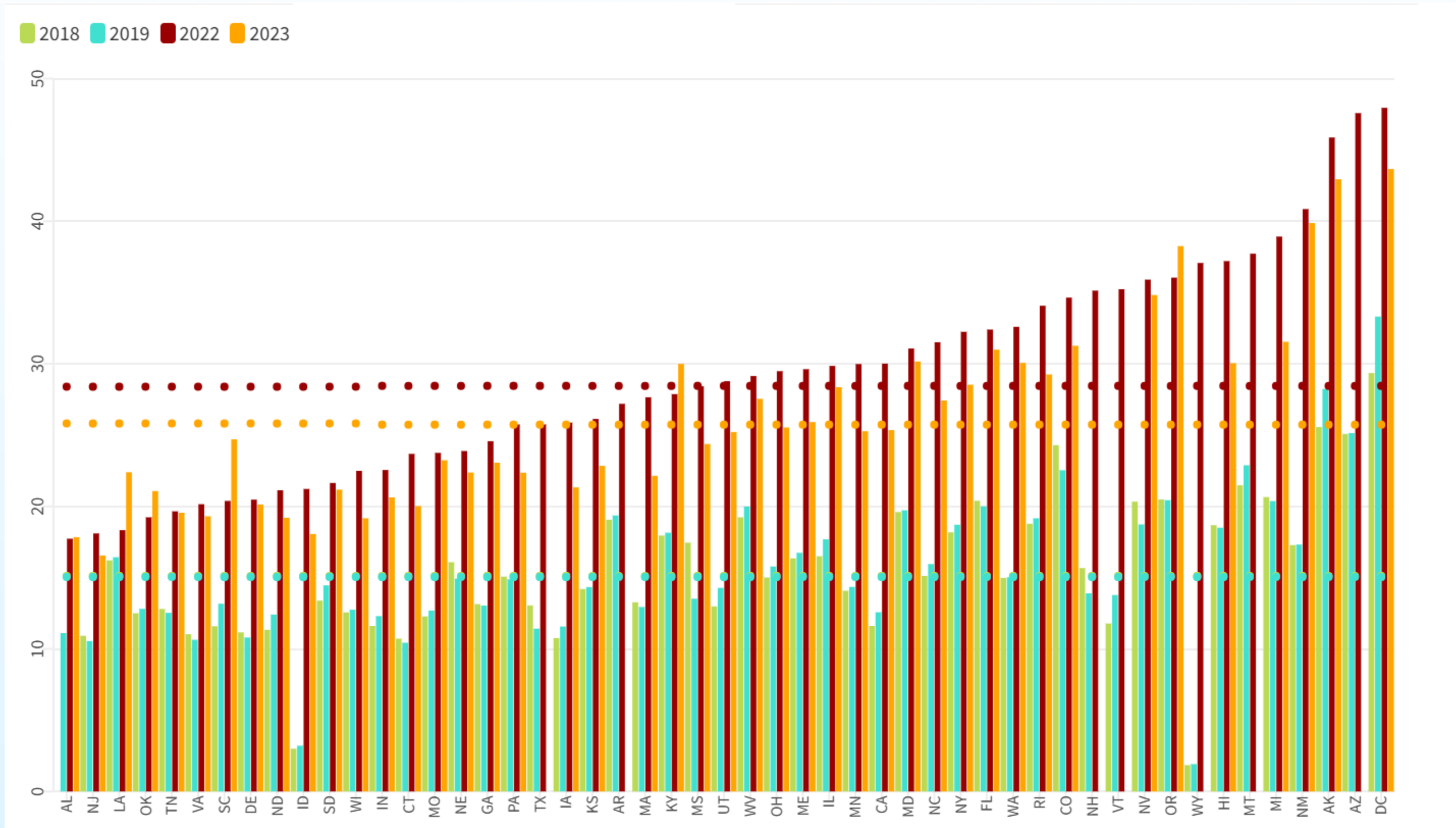
Chronic Absenteeism is a Major School Challenge



Data reported by Return to Learn Tracker
returntolearntacker.net



Chronic Absenteeism is a Major School Challenge



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Chronic absenteeism affects all grades but increases in middle and high school.

Elementary School

Rates vary by grade, but range from about 14% to 23%, with higher levels in PK and K, and lower levels Grades 1-5.

The youngest students face the highest attendance barriers – schools should work with families to make school attendance a priority.

Middle School

Rates vary by specific grade, but have been reported to range from 18% to 24%

Middle school is the beginning of a steady decrease in attendance that continues through high school. The transition to middle school can be challenging for students.

High School

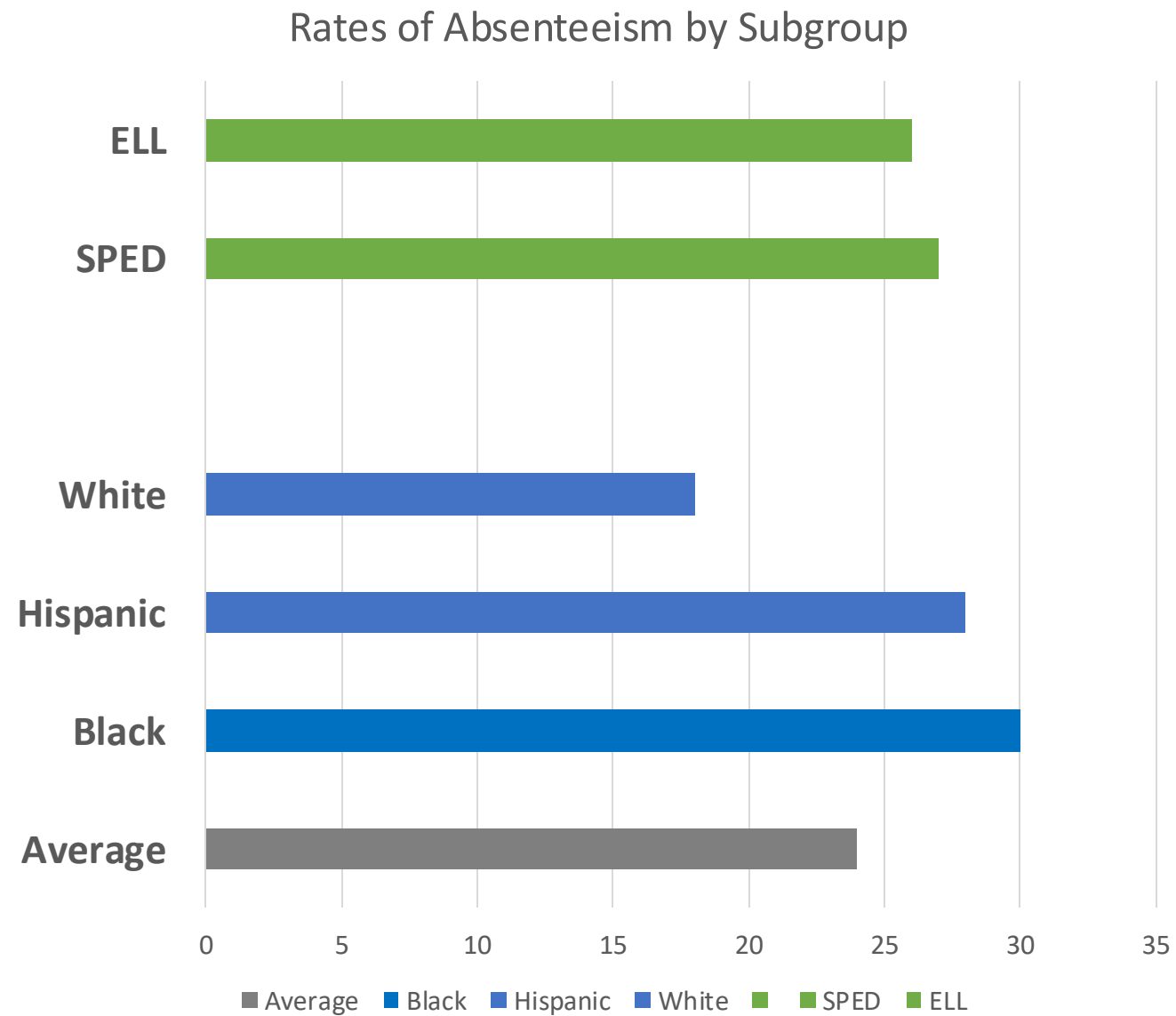
Reported ranges are from 24% to 32%, with the highest rates in grade 12.

High school students have more responsibility for their attendance – making motivation, decision-making and engagement increasingly important.



Disparities in chronic absenteeism exist - and the problem is widespread.

Differences in Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Special Populations for the 2024-25 School Year



National rates of absenteeism are about 23%.



Multiple factors contribute to chronic absenteeism.

Community/Structural Factors

- Neighborhood Safety
- Poverty
- Access to Services
- Housing Instability
- Transportation

School Climate Factors

- School Safety
- Discipline/Behavior
- Relationships
- Low Belonging
- Disengagement
- School/Family partnership

Student/Family Factors

- Health
- Housing instability
- Transportation
- Anxiety
- Employment demands
- Caregiving responsibilities
- Engagement

One important pathway – connection and SEL skills.





What does the research* say about SEL & attendance?

- Absenteeism is linked to **mental health & disengagement**
- Students with stronger **SEL skills attend more regularly**
- SEL programs can reduce absenteeism**
- SEL may act as a **protective factor** for attendance



What do you believe is the biggest driver of chronic absenteeism in your district?

- Mental Health
- Lack of Engagement
- Family Barriers
- Behavior Challenges
- Other





Social and Emotional Competence and Risk of Chronic Absenteeism

Students' social and emotional skills can be screened with...

DESSA 2 mini

- Educator-completed
- Grades K-12
- 8 items, 1 minute per student
- Provides a reliable measure of a student's overall SEC

Aurelia Acevedo
STUDENT ID: 3460976

DESSA 2 mini Form A
Instructions ⓘ

This form describes a number of behaviors seen in some students. Read the statements that follow the phrase: **During the past 4 weeks, how often did the student...** and click on the button underneath the word that tells how often you saw the behavior. Please answer each question carefully. There are no right or wrong answers. If you wish to change your answer, just click on the button for your new choice. Please do not skip any items.

A "Never" response can mean that you have not observed the student engaging in that behavior or that the student does not engage in that behavior.

During the past 4 weeks, how often did the student...	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
1. cooperate with others to solve a problem?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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3. believe they can achieve their goals?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

DESSA Student Self-Report

- Student-completed
- Grades 6-12
- 50 items, 5-10 minutes per student
- Provides a reliable measure of a student's overall SEC & scores for each DESSA competency

DESSA

Do your best to rate yourself.

I can recognize my strengths.

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

Almost Always

< GO BACK

NEXT



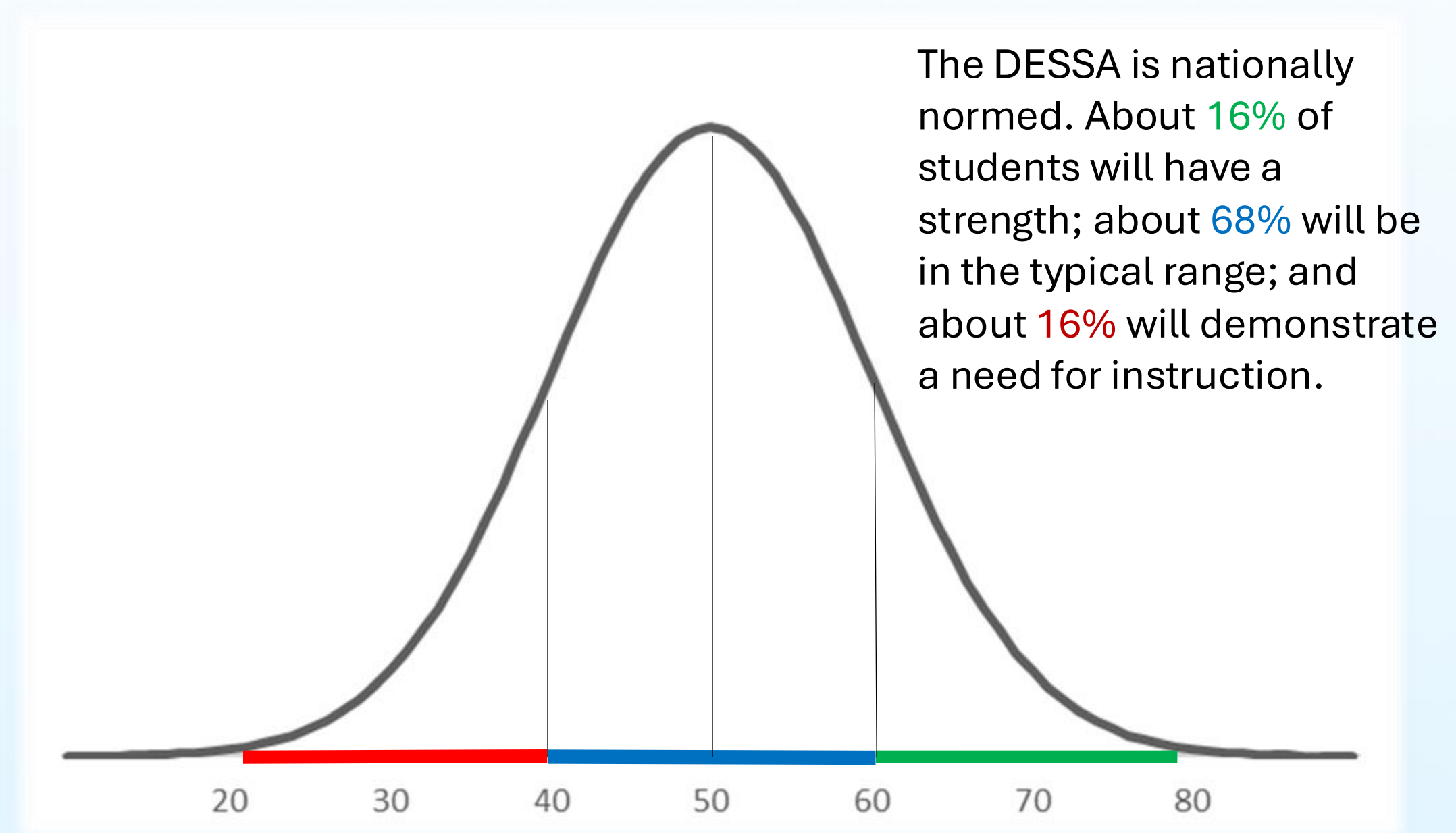
The DESSA assessments report scores on a *T*-scale

- A Social-Emotional Total (SET) or Social-Emotional Composite (SEC) score is provided for each student.
- *T*-scores are categorized into 3 descriptors:

60 – 72 = **Strength**

41 – 59 = **Typical**

28 – 40 = **Need for Instruction**



DESSA Descriptive Categories and Interpretations

Strength: Students likely have well-developed skills.

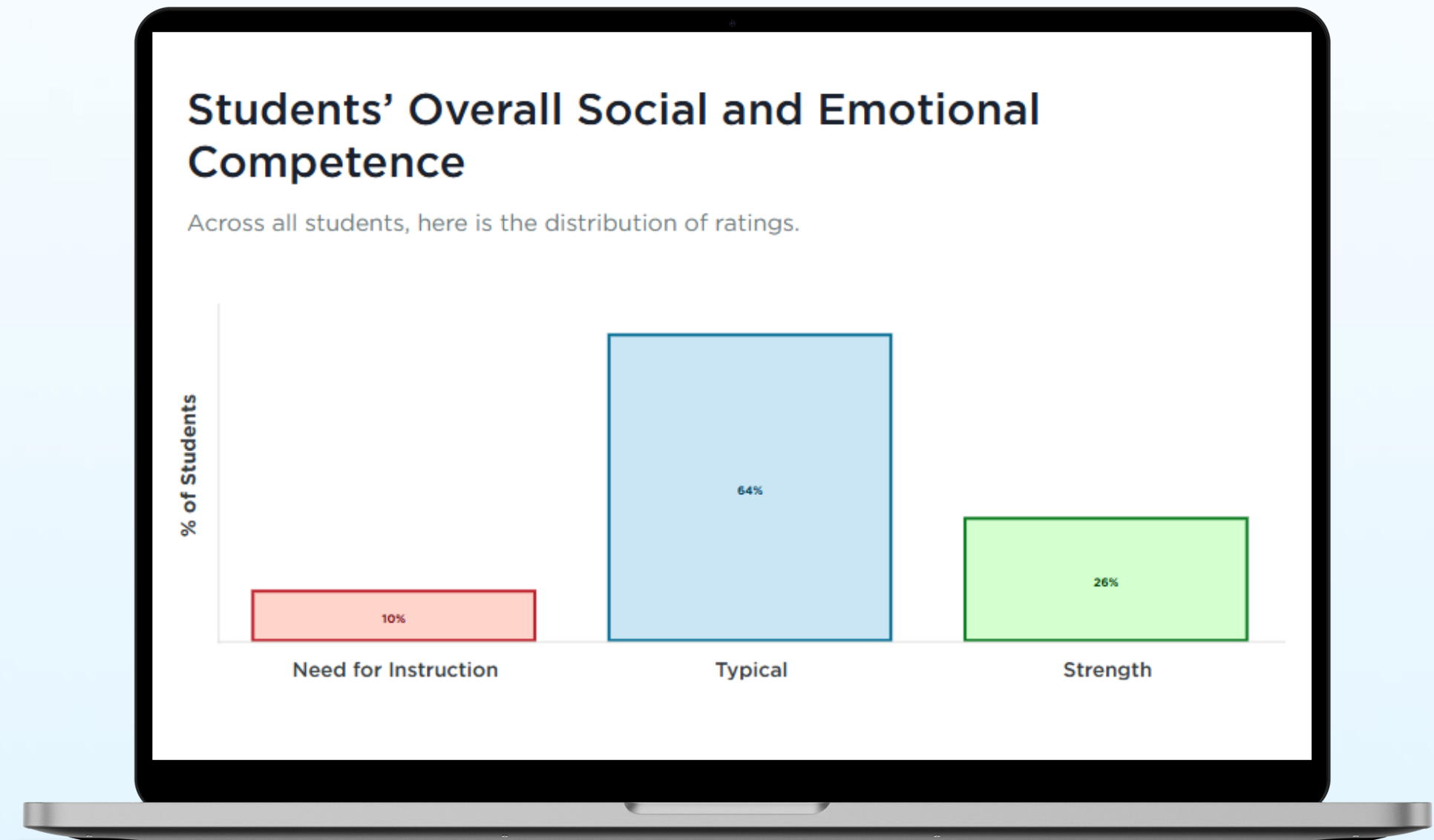
- Continue developing skills to help them thrive and serve as protective factors for navigating future challenges.


Typical: Students are on their way to developing strong skills.

- Continue to strengthen skills with explicit instruction.
- Consider further assessment if *T*-score is < 45 to proactively target skill development.

Need for Instruction: Students need support in developing their skills.

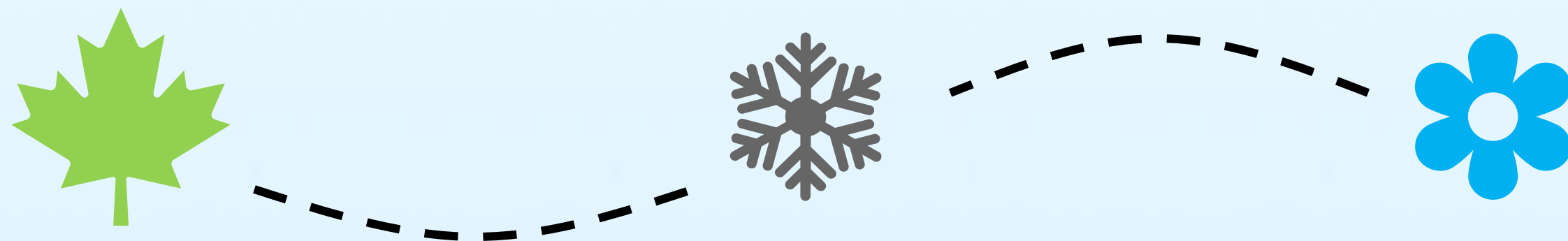
- Assess with the DESSA to identify specific skills to work on; Integrate SEC data with attendance, behavior, academic data.
- Continue universal Tier 1 instruction; consider Tier 2 intervention.





Building students' social emotional skills shows promise as one way to address chronic absenteeism

(Eklund et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2023)



Measuring Social-Emotional Competence

We explored the link between social-emotional competence and chronic absenteeism for **elementary school students** in a large school district in the Southeastern United States.

SEC

?

Chronic
Absenteeism



Elementary Analysis: Overview



Sample

- 2,622 students in grades K-5
- 643 students in grades 4 & 5
- 2017–2018 school year
- Control for gender, race/ethnicity, ELL, SPED



Measurement

- DESSA-mini in Fall



Analysis

- Logistic regression predicting odds of all students being chronically absent
- Logistic regression predicting odds 4th and 5th grade students being chronically absent



Elementary Analysis: Findings for All Students

Students with SEC in the Strength range were **42% less likely** to be chronically absent than all other students.

Students with SEC in the Need range had **1.6 times the risk** of being chronically absent than all other students.

Each 1-point increase in SEC T-score reduced absenteeism odds by **3%**.



Elementary Analysis: Findings for 4th and 5th Grade Students

Students with SEC in the Strength range were **68% less likely** to be chronically absent than all other students.

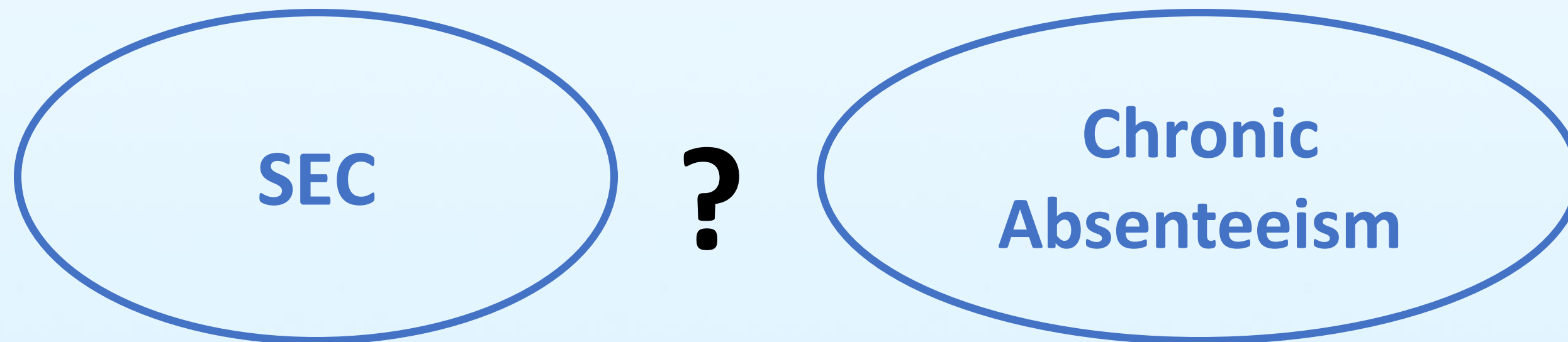
Students with SEC in the Need range had **twice the risk** of being chronically absent than all other students.

Each 1-point increase in SEC T-score reduced absenteeism odds by **5%**.



Measuring Social-Emotional Competence

We explored the link between social-emotional competence and chronic absenteeism for **middle and high school students** in a large school district in the Southeastern United States for the 2023-2024 school year.

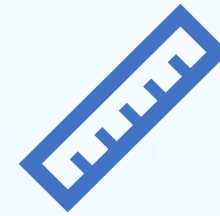


Middle School Analysis: Impact of Growth



Sample

- 8,271 students
- Grades 6–8
- 2023–2024 school year
- 26% chronically absent
- Control for gender, race/ethnicity, ELL, SPED



Measurement

- DESSA-mini in Fall and Spring
- Growth Definition
- High Growth = +5 *T*-score points
 - No Growth = ≤ 0 points



Analysis

- Logistic regression predicting odds of being chronically absent
- Propensity score matching
- Matched on baseline SEC + demographics



Chronic Absenteeism Rates

All Students

14.8%

High SEC Growth

25%

No SEC Growth

Fall DESSA in the Need Range

28.8%

High SEC Growth

48.4%

No SEC Growth



Students with high SEC growth were **41% less likely** to be chronically absent than their matched peers with no growth.

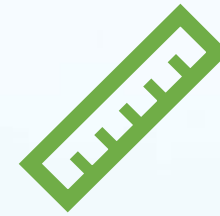


High School Analysis: Impact of Specific Skills



Sample

- 10,085 high school students
- Grades 9–12
- 2023–2024 school year
- 18.6% chronically absent
- Control for gender, race/ethnicity, ELL, SPED



Measurement

- DESSA SSR in Fall

3-Factor Competency Model

1. Intrapersonal Skills
2. Interpersonal Skills
3. Decision-Making Skills



Analysis

- Logistic regression predicting odds of being chronically absent
- GSEM to estimate impact of increase in a factor score on the odds of being chronically absent



SEC Reduces Chronic Absenteeism Risk

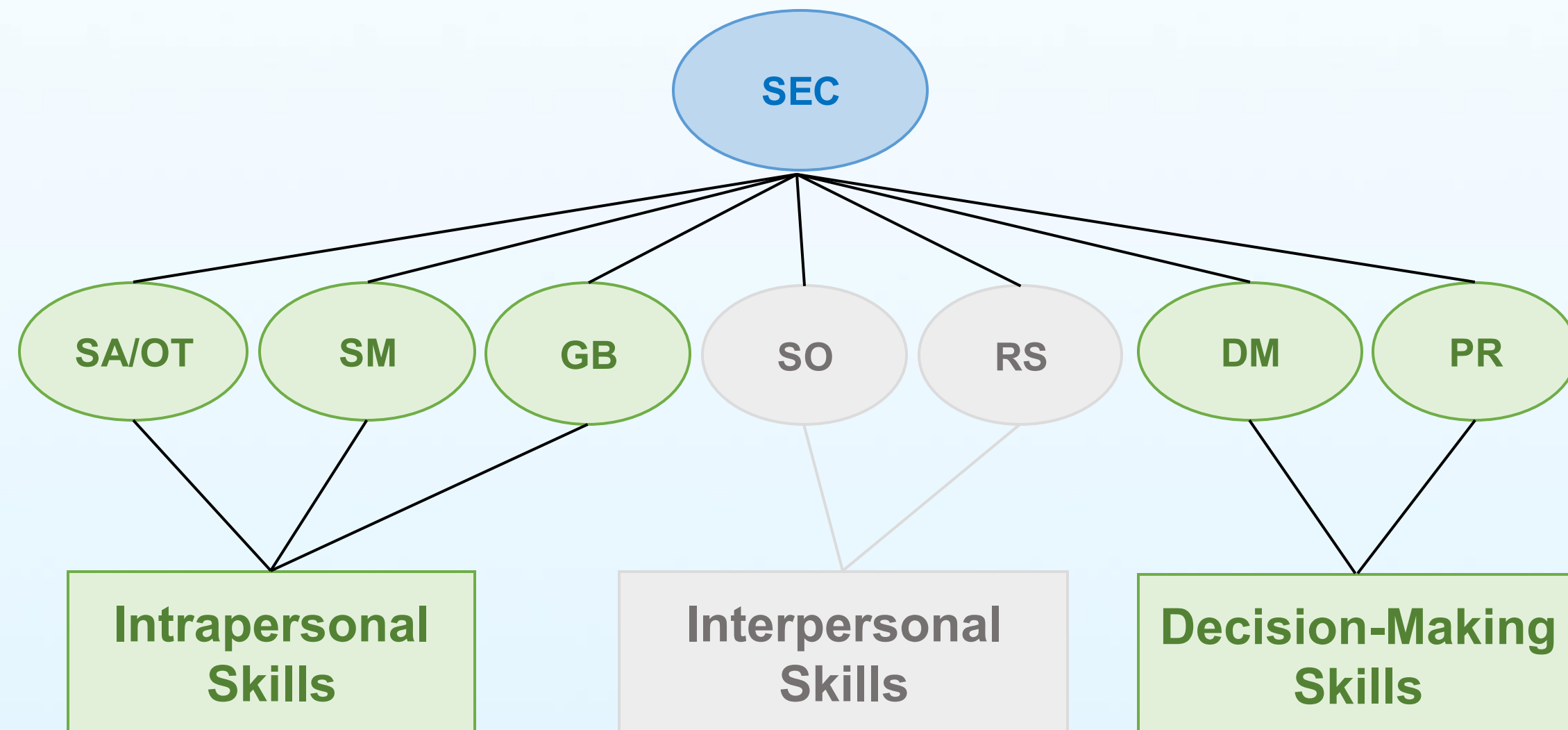
Students with SEC in the Strength range were **33% less likely** to be chronically absent.

Students with SEC in the Need range were **77% more likely** to be chronically absent.

Each 1-point increase in SEC T-score reduced absenteeism odds by **3%**.



Identified Protective Factors against Chronic Absenteeism



Practical Takeaways

Growth in SEC may be especially protective for students with initially low SEC.

Universal screening and progress monitoring are important to identify students at risk for chronic absenteeism. Both initial levels and in-year growth of SEC provide signals of attendance risk.

Students with higher levels intrapersonal skills, and decision-making skills, are less likely to be chronically absent.

SEC data can be used to inform targeted supports for students. High school student data suggests prioritizing supports that strengthen intrapersonal skills and decision-making skills.



Which skill areas do you believe would have the biggest impact on attendance in your schools?





Early Identification: Using Behavioral Data as an Early-Warning System

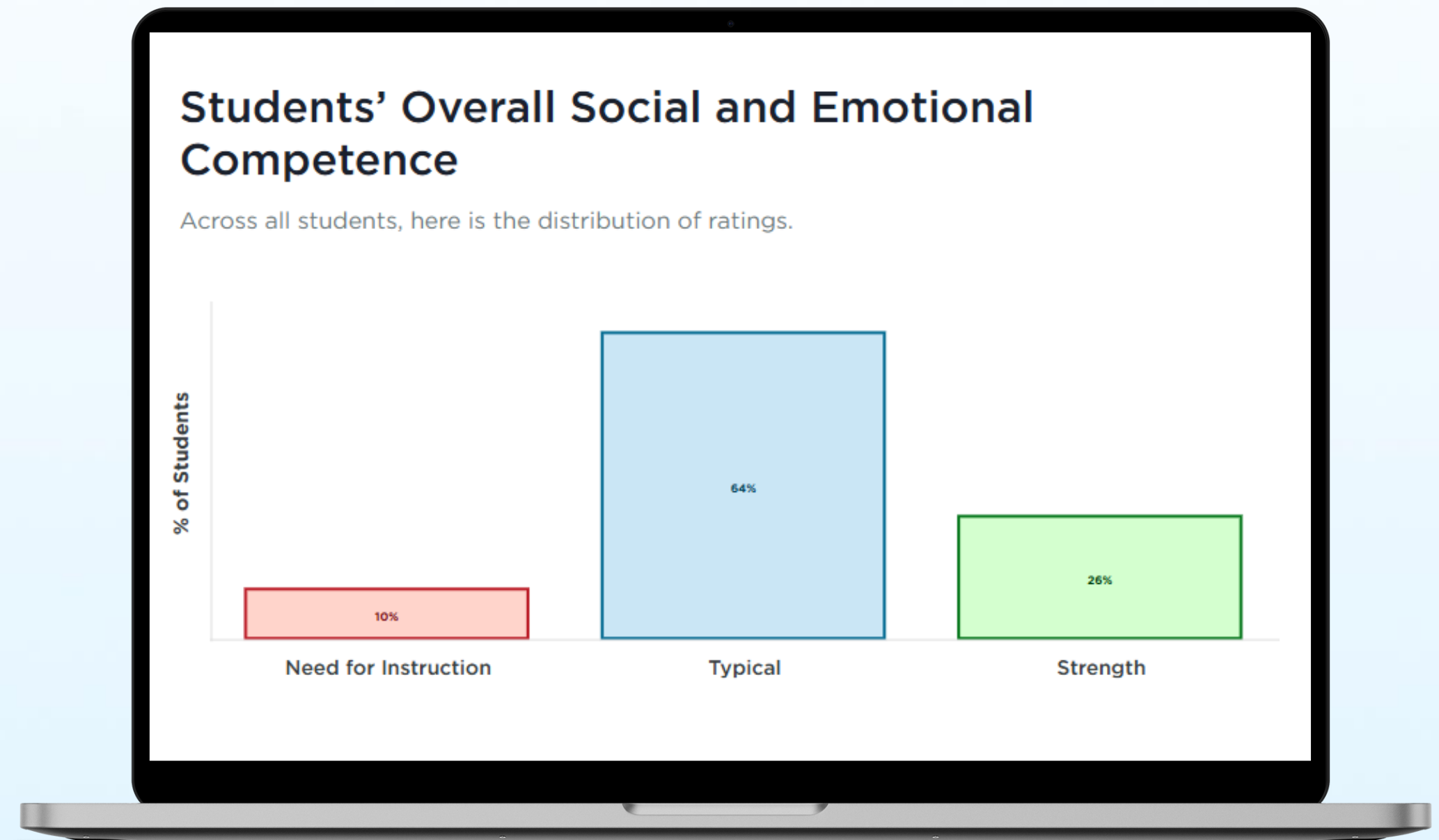
Actionable Insights for Proactively Addressing Behavior

Screen: Gather baseline data across your district to identify students in need.

Assess: For students in need, assess further for competency-specific results that drive instruction.

Instruction: Implement universal lessons and school-wide practices to build skills. Tailor instruction for students needing extra support.

Monitor Progress: Measure growth over time to evaluate effectiveness and inform the supports provided.



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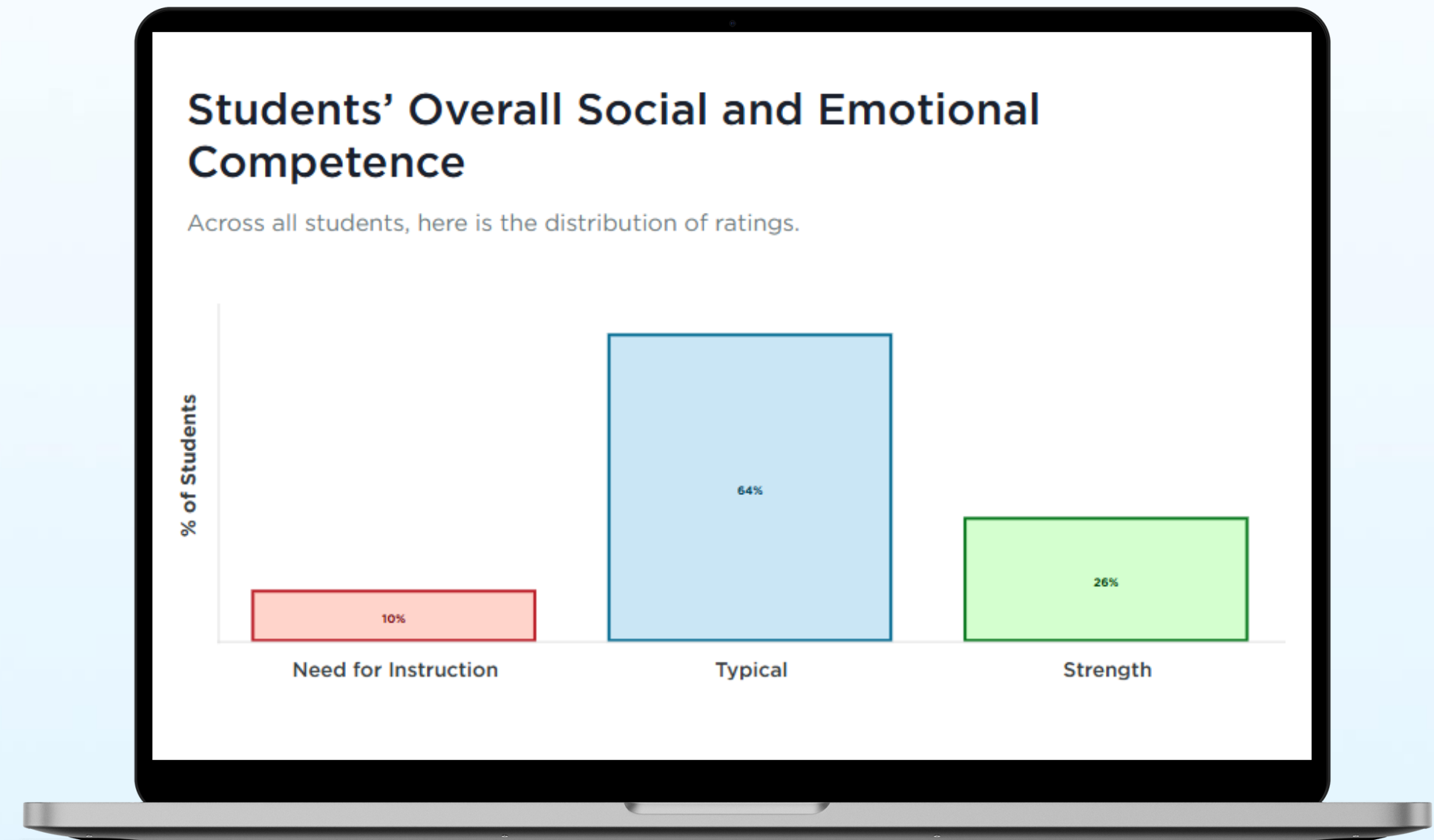
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Need for Instruction: Students need support in developing their skills.

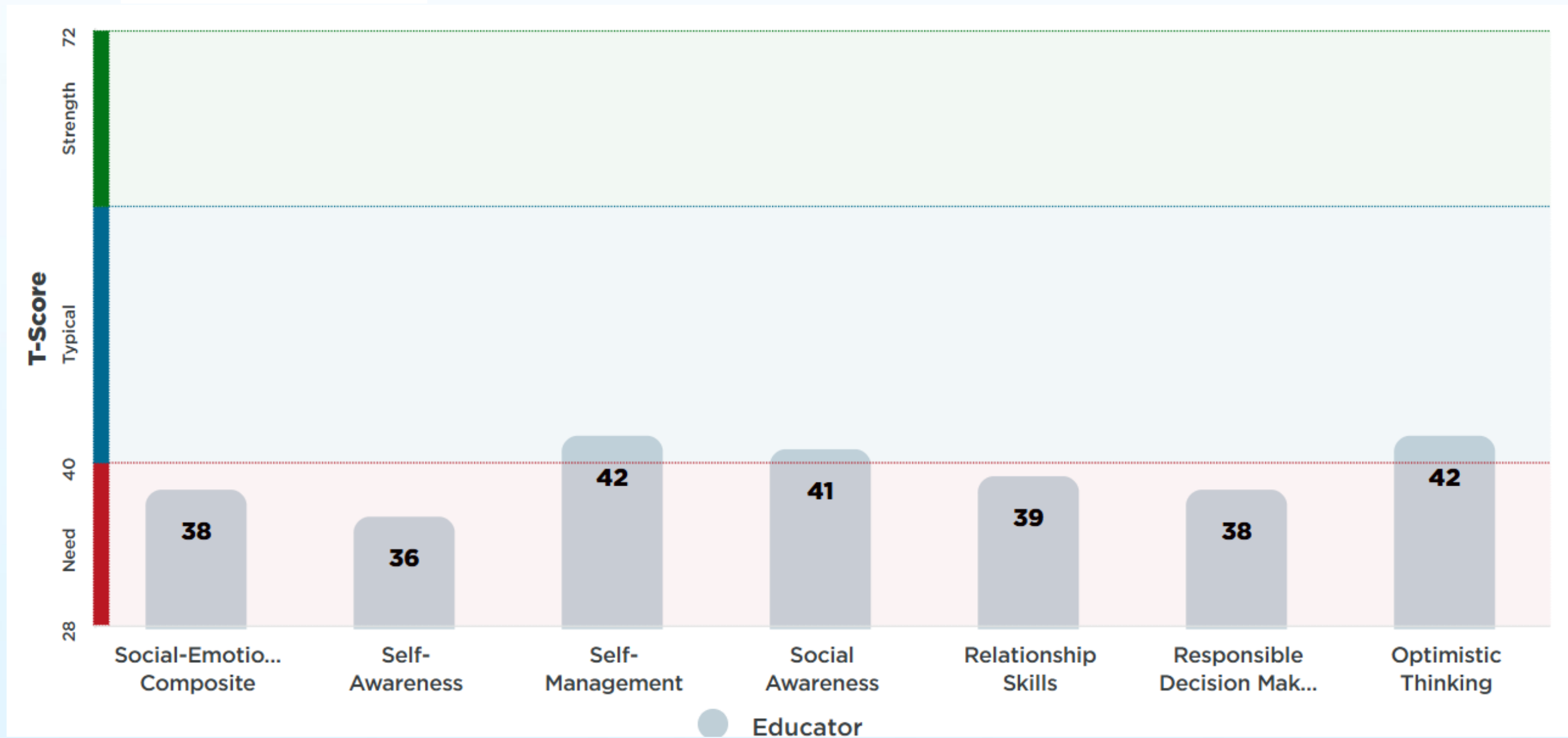
- Assess with the DESSA to identify specific skills to work on; Integrate SEC data with attendance, behavior, academic data.
- Continue universal Tier 1 instruction; consider Tier 2 intervention.



Assess with the educator or student-completed DESSA for competency-specific results that drive instruction

Aurelia Acevedo

STUDENT ID: 3460976



- Deeper understanding of each student's unique strengths and needs
- Align with other available data
- Guide targeted skill instruction



Use the DESSA assessment data to drive instruction for groups of students

	SEC	SA	SM	SO	RS	RDM	OT
Kuller, Boony	31	34	39	28	28	36	35
Valdes, Rina	32	40	28	33	39	34	30
Bordman, Leora	33	36	31	41	35	34	33
Wensley, Merrielle	33	37	44	29	28	34	42
Adamini, Sheffy	33	40	37	31	34	36	32
Gurdon, Lew	34	28	28	51	50	34	28
Lindro, Kristen	34	37	39	35	39	34	35
Streatley, Stanwood	34	37	34	35	34	36	42
Bourthoumieux, Vail	35	43	32	39	41	36	33
Gromley, Moshe	35	36	39	33	30	40	44

■ Need for Instruction
 ■ Typical
 ■ Strength

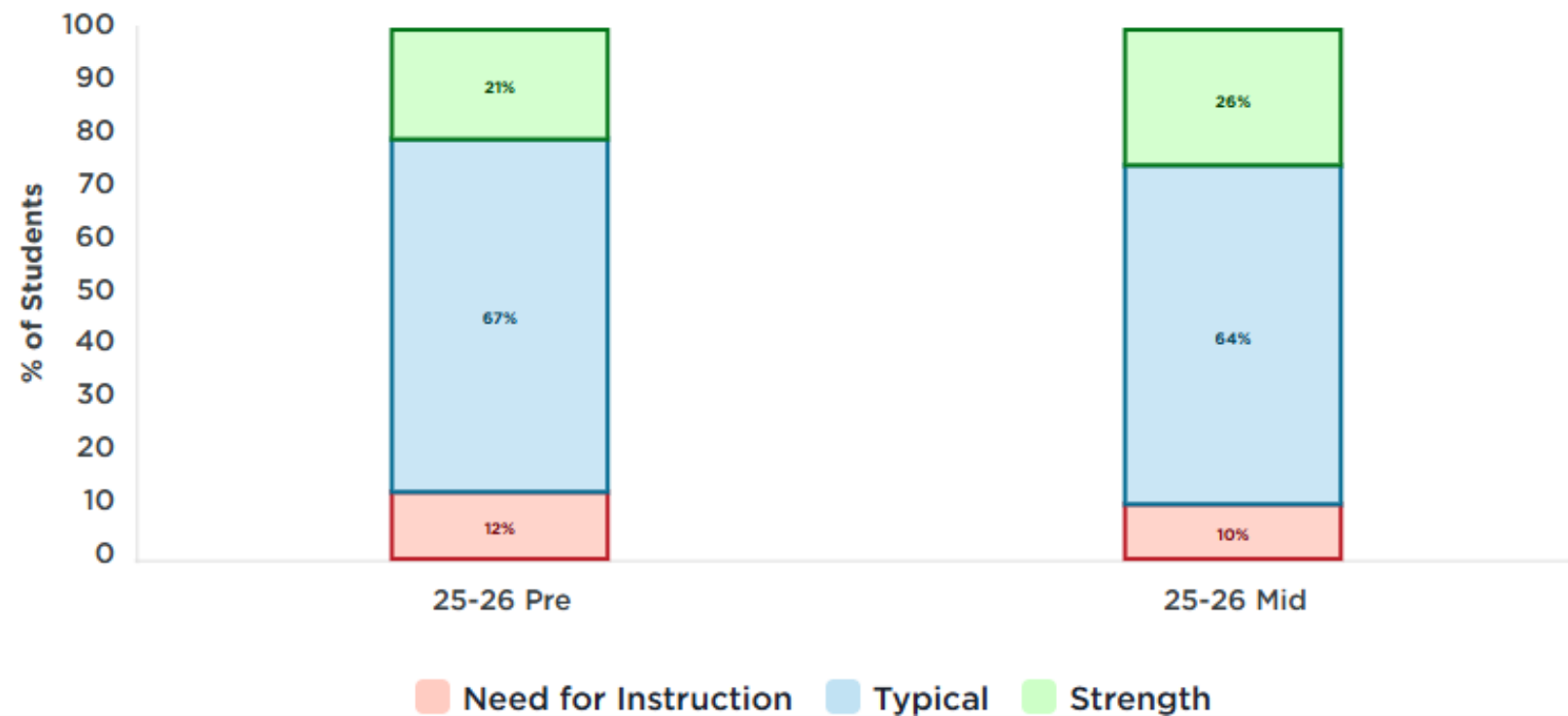
- Identify common areas of strengths and needs
- Select universal classroom lessons
- Identify students for small group instruction
- Guide targeted skill development



Monitor Student Progress and Growth with the DESSA Assessments: Universal Level

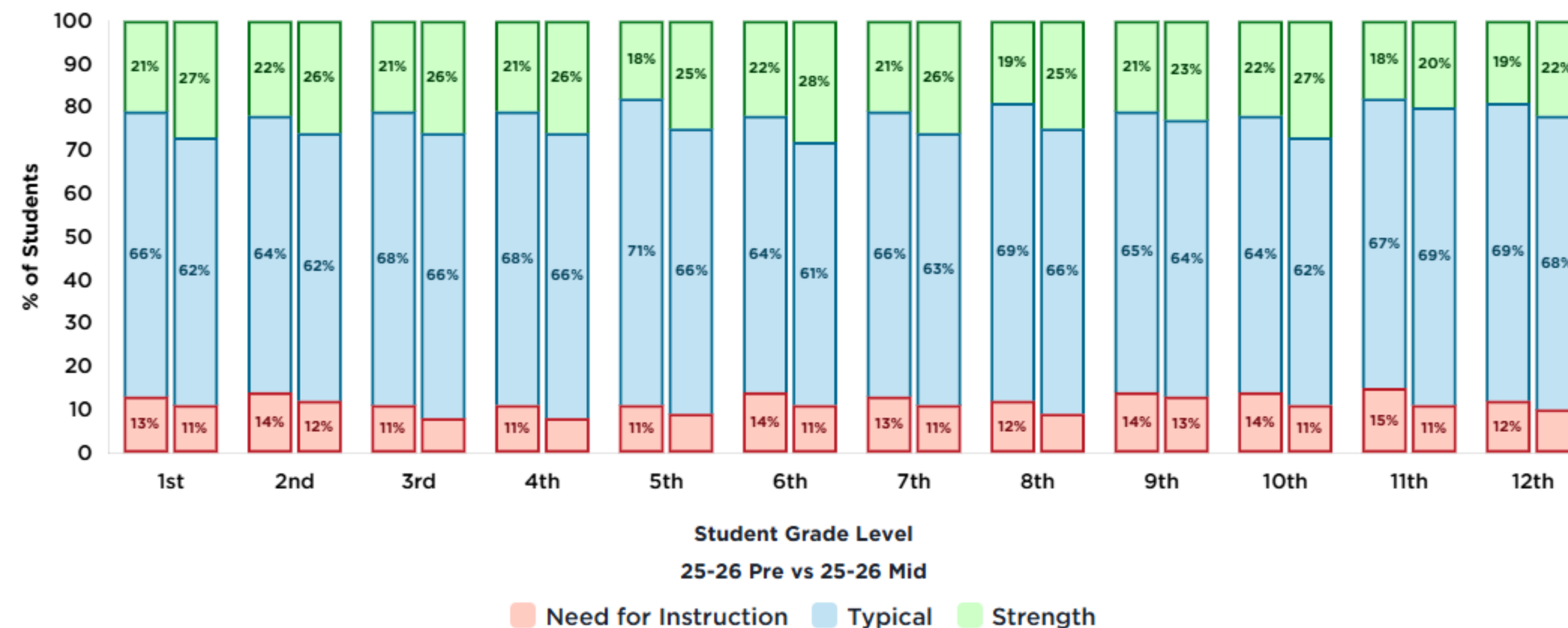
Change in Students' Overall Social and Emotional Competence

Displays changes over time in the distribution of descriptive ranges for students



Change in Students' Social and Emotional Competence by Grade Level

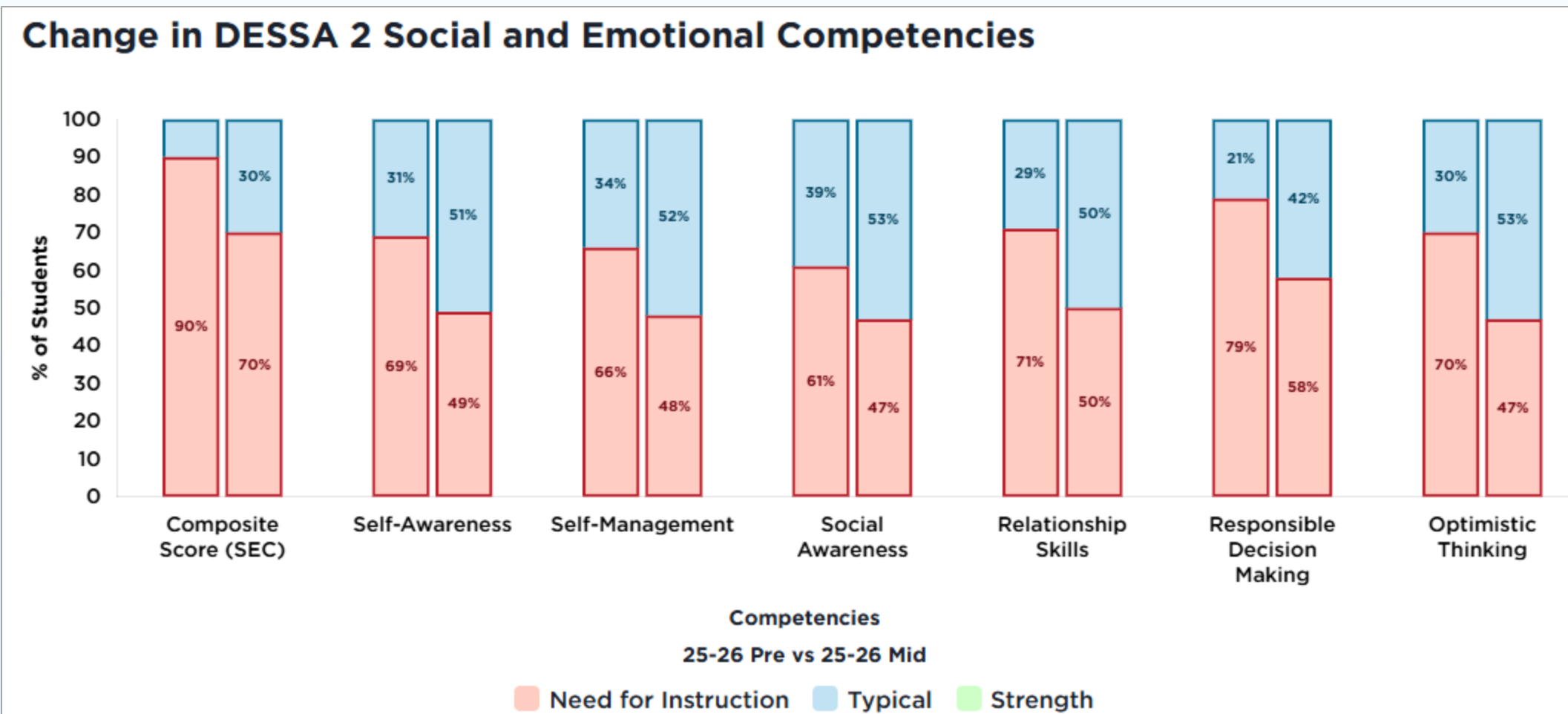
Current grades as of 03/20/2026



- Is the universal instruction effective?
- Are we seeing growth across schools, grades, classrooms?
- Is growth equitable for different groups of students?
- Do we need to make any adjustments?



Monitor Student Progress and Growth with the DESSA Assessments: Tier 2/Small Group Level

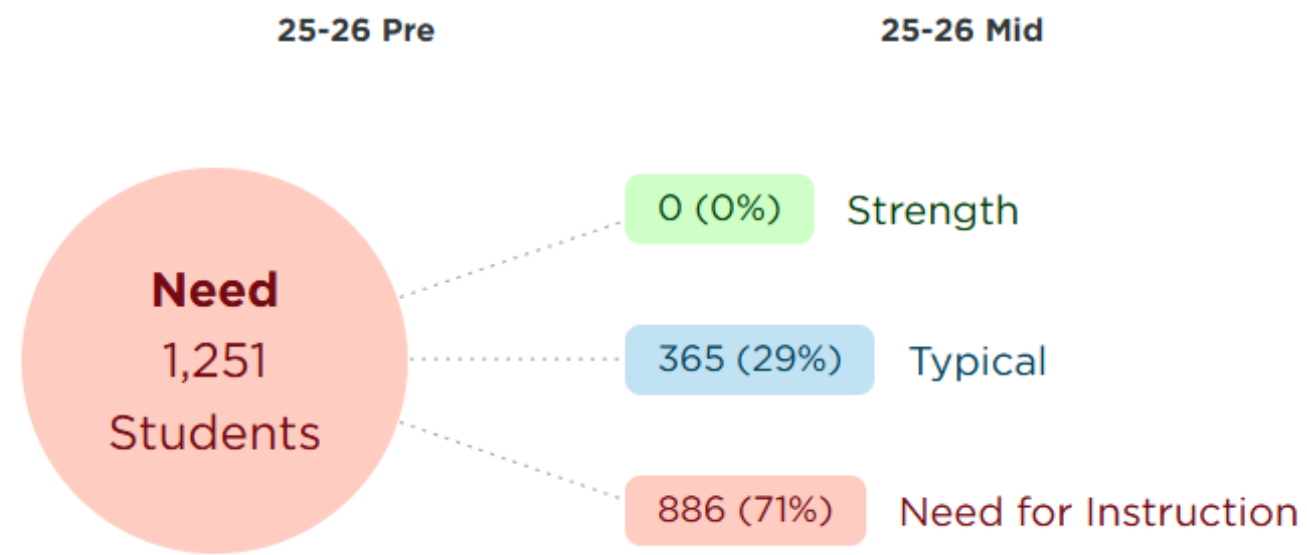


- Is the targeted instruction effective?
- Is growth equitable for different groups of students?
- Who might need more support?
- Do we need to make any adjustments?



Student Movement

See where students changed in descriptive range from first rating window to second rating window



Monitor Student Progress and Growth with the DESSA Assessments: Individual Student Level

- Are students responding to targeted instruction?
- Who needs more support? What adjustments can we make?
- Are students previously in the Typical/Strength ranges showing declines in scores?

Student Movement

See where students changed in descriptive range between two rating windows.

Initial Descriptive Range

New Descriptive Range

Need for Instruction



Need for Instruction



Apply

Export CSV

25-26 Pre

25-26 Mid

Name	Rating Date	Rating T-Score	Rating Date	Rating T-Score	Amount Changed	Magnitude
Abbott, David	08/01/2025	31	01/01/2026	39	8	Large
Acosta, Kiana	08/01/2025	40	01/01/2026	40	0	No change
Adamini, Sheffy	07/31/2025	30	12/31/2025	33	3	Small
Agglione, Nerti	07/31/2025	29	12/31/2025	34	5	Medium
Ahmed, Wallace	08/01/2025	31	01/01/2026	35	4	Small
Ahrenius, Celinda	07/31/2025	31	12/31/2025	36	5	Medium
Aishford, Norina	07/31/2025	34	12/31/2025	34	0	No change
Alderman, Salome	07/31/2025	34	12/31/2025	34	0	No change





Translating Research Into Practice



Foundational Practices



- Students are shaped by both personal development and the environment.
- It's difficult for students to feel engaged and like they belong if the environment doesn't support it.
- Consider starting with a set of foundational practices that create a positive, inclusive, and caring environment.



Foundational Practices

Positive Climate

Academic Integration

Equity & Inclusion

Schools and Family Relationships

Trauma-Informed Practices

Student Voice & Engagement

Daily Classroom Greetings

Purpose

This practice offers tips for establishing a positive classroom greeting routine.



Why This Matters

Greeting students enhances teacher–student relationships and improves student engagement, belonging, and social interactions. It helps promote a culture of respect and academic success.

How to Implement This Practice

- 1. Greet students daily.** Greet each student by name every day. Use their preferred name if different from their given name. Tailor your greetings to make them personal.
- 2. Develop a class motto.** Collaborate with students to create a short, simple, and aspirational class motto. Examples are “Learn every day,” “Dream big, work hard,” or “Do my best.” Refer to the motto regularly to reinforce shared goals and a sense of purpose within the classroom.
- 3. Have students greet each other.** Encourage quick opportunities to greet one another, such as doing a one-minute mingle, simple high five or handshake, or a “tell your neighbor something good” activity.
- 4. Be consistent.** Make greeting your students a daily routine, even when the school year becomes busy. Students will appreciate the consistency of knowing you are looking out for them and seeing them every day.



Foundational Practices

Positive Climate

Academic Integration

Equity & Inclusion

Schools and Family Relationships

Trauma-Informed Practices

Student Voice & Engagement

Get to Know Me

Purpose

This practice provides simple activities for students to get to know themselves.

Why This Matters

Incorporating "Get to Know Me" activities strengthens connections with students, boosts student engagement, and fosters a positive classroom environment.



Encourage Student Voice and Choice

Purpose

This practice provides ideas for encouraging students to have a voice and choice in their learning.

Why This Matters

Encouraging voice and choice in the classroom increases student engagement, motivation, and ownership of learning. It also helps develop decision-making, self-management, and leadership skills, which lead to improved academic outcomes.

How to Implement This Practice

- 1. Co-create expectations for learning.** Collaborate with students at the start of the school year (or a new unit) to establish classroom norms and learning goals. This builds a sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect.
- 2. Regularly offer choices.** Giving choices caters to diverse strengths and interests. Provide options for how students can showcase their understanding of a lesson or unit. Examples include written essays, presentations, artistic projects, or multimedia creations.
- 3. Offer extension-of-learning activities.** These give students the opportunity to dive deeper into an aspect of a lesson or unit. They encourage curiosity and provide a pathway for self-directed learning.
- 4. Incorporate student feedback.** Regularly seek input from students about their interests and preferred learning topics, and ask students about what helps them learn. Integrate students' suggestions into your teaching practices to improve outcomes and show students that their voices matter.



Where to Start with Foundational Practices



Select 1-2 evidence-based practices

- Implement them schoolwide.
- Set an implementation goal (e.g., daily) – consistency is important.
- Share successes, challenges, and any needed supports.
- Reflect and adjust as needed.
- Select additional practices when ready and repeat these steps.



Explicit Instruction of Social and Emotional Skills



Self-Awareness



Self-Management



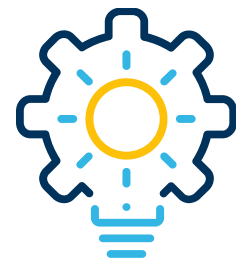
Social Awareness



Relationship Skills



Responsible Decision Making



Optimistic Thinking

- Research supports that these skills can serve as protective factors for students.
- Are important for a variety of outcome, including academic achievement, engagement, and well-being.
- Evidence-based universal programs available.
- Short, effective lessons and classroom strategies available.



DESSA Instructional Strategies

Universal Lessons for Tier 1 Instruction

90 grade-banded instructional strategies address each of the **6 DESSA Competencies**:



Self-Awareness



Self-Management



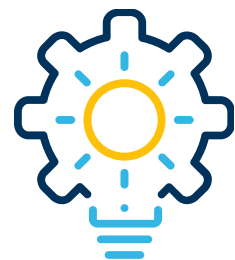
Social Awareness



Relationship Skills



Responsible Decision Making



Optimistic Thinking

Strategies are designed to be integrated into daily practices and include:

- Instructional steps for implementation
- Active learning opportunities
- Research base
- Suggestions for expansion or individualization



Explicit Instruction of Social and Emotional Skills



Self-Management

PERSEVERING THROUGH CHALLENGES

Strategies to Persevere Through Challenges

In response to my challenging situation or obstacle, I can use each of the following:

Self-Talk

Self-talk is described as the words we use to describe ourselves or the environments around us. It can be our private speech (in our heads) that others can't hear.

Examples:

- "It's OK. I don't have to get this 100% correct. I can focus on giving my best effort."
- "I can do this! I know I can!"
- "I can do hard things!"
- "It's OK to be worried because it's hard to do."
- "I can ask for help when I need it."

Identify My Strengths

Consider using strengths reported from DESSA.

- Ask yourself, "What am I good at? What features do I have?"
- How can I use my strengths to overcome this challenge?

Break the Problem into Smaller Pieces

Identify the problem and work to break the problem into smaller pieces.

Example: I have a research project due in two weeks.

- Step 1: Pause and think about the situation.
- Step 2: Think about the options I have.
- Step 3: Ask a friend or adult for help.

Seek Support from a Friend or Adult

Reach out to a friend or trusted adult to talk about the challenge. They may be able to offer advice that would help you overcome the challenge.

Take a Moment to Reflect

Take some time away from whatever is challenging you. Think through your challenging situation and how you can overcome it.

PERSEVERING THROUGH CHALLENGES

Elementary School

Students learn strategies to help them persevere through challenging situations and build resilience.

Duration: 20–25 minutes; this strategy may need to be implemented across multiple class periods.

Activity Overview

We all experience different challenges throughout our days. Sometimes, these challenges can overwhelm us and make us want to give up. This activity teaches multiple strategies to help students persevere through challenging situations.

Implementation Considerations

- Consider implementing this strategy with the Optimistic Thinking strategy, *Positive Self-Talk*.
- Consider implementing this strategy with the Responsible Decision Making strategy, *Generating Solutions*.
- *Italicized text* is recommended language to lead the conversation or activity with your students.

Why this Works

SUPPORTING PERSEVERANCE

To successfully navigate through challenging situations, students can use perseverance strategies such as positive self-talk² and identifying their strengths.^{3,4}

Purpose

- Students learn perseverance strategies and explore examples.
- Students learn perseverance strategies they can use during challenging situations.

Materials

- Strategies to Persevere Through Challenges (included below)
- Chart paper or method to record student responses

DESSA Theme

Setting and achieving personal and collective goals



Explicit Instruction of Social and Emotional Skills



WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME?

What's Important to Me Worksheet

What's Important to Me (My Values)	How this Helps Me Make Responsible Decisions

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME? Elementary School

Students consider their personal values and how they support and influence responsible decision making.

Duration: 15–20 minutes.

Activity Overview

This strategy teaches students about values and how they can use their values to support decision making. Using an activity, students review the different influences on their decisions and learn how to intentionally apply their personal values to guide their decision making.

Implementation Considerations

- This activity gives students the opportunity to collaborate with each other. Consider reviewing your classroom expectations before implementing this strategy.
- Consider implementing this strategy with the Responsible Decision Making strategy, *Making Positive Decisions in Difficult Situations*.
- Italicized text* is recommended language to lead the conversation and activity with your students.

Why this Works

INCORPORATING VALUES INTO DECISION MAKING

Students' decisions can be influenced by their peers and by how rewarding something is, as well as by their own abilities to self-regulate.¹ Students can learn to use their values to guide their decisions in positive and productive ways.^{2,3}

Purpose

- Students understand what values are.
- Students identify values that are important to them and learn how they influence responsible decision making.

Materials

- List of Values Table (included below)
- What's Important to Me Worksheet (included below)

DESSA Theme

Ability to make careful, reliable, and constructive choices



DESSA Tier 2 Interventions

20 Grade-Banded, Multi-Week Programs



Self-Awareness & Emotional Regulation

Tier 2 Intervention Program

This program helps students develop self-awareness, understand their thoughts and feelings, and create a plan to enhance emotional regulation and self-awareness.

Upper Elementary School

Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation Program

Lesson Twelve Guide

Regulating Emotions

In this lesson, students learn about ways to calm big emotions (emotional regulation strategies).

Sequenced, intensive lessons to develop student skills with a focus on:

- **Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation**
- Social Awareness and Behavior Regulation
- Social and Emotional Skill Development integrated with Academic Intervention
- **Responsible Decision Making**
- Relationship Skills



District Action Planning: Considerations

How are we currently identifying students at risk for absenteeism?

What behavioral or or SEL data do we have available?

Which protective protective skills should we prioritize?





Q&A



Insights from the Research

- Attendance is a **behavioral behavioral outcome**
- Social-emotional skills can **predict absenteeism risk risk**
- **Growth in these skills reduces absenteeism**
- Screening and progress monitoring allow **earlier intervention**





Thank you!
you!





Riverside is Growing!

Introducing Move This World

move
THIS WORLD



Turning Insight Into Districtwide Impact



DESSA provides industry-leading insight.

Move This World ensures that insight becomes consistent, daily practice.



Stronger Together: DESSA + Move This World

The DESSA identifies student needs.

Move This World helps teachers respond.

Together they create a complete system of mental health and behavioral care.

With the DESSA

- Trusted screening
- Clear data on student needs
- Progress monitoring

With Move This World

- Daily skill-building instruction
- Engaging classroom experiences
- Practical implementation

Together:

- Assessment identifies skill gaps
- Instruction reinforces those skills
- Progress can be monitored over time



DESSA and Move This World together create an ongoing cycle that helps schools respond to student needs and continuously refine support.

From Insight to Action: A Continuous Cycle of Support

