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Resolution 3 (SY21-22)

Resolution asking for changes to the administration of the Devereaux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)

Sponsor: Stephen Stowe, Vito LaBella

Resolution passed 11/9/21 (8 Yes, 0 No, 1 Excused, 2 Vacancies)

WHEREAS, the Department of Education is administering a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) screener called the Devereaux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) provided by a company called Aperture Education pursuant to a 3 year, \$18.2 million DOE contract¹.

WHEREAS the Council supports the overall goal of the screener which is to assess students SEL skills including personal responsibility, optimistic thinking, goal-directed behavior, social awareness, decision-making, relationship skills, self-awareness and self-management².

WHEREAS the full roster of questions on the DESSA has not been made publicly available. Our knowledge of the questions is derived from screenshots posted online and time-limited visual inspection on DOE computers.

WHEREAS teachers are responsible for completing the DESSA for every student in their class based on their knowledge and observations of every student. Teachers are not trained in administering these types of assessments and may not be able to recognize their own biases (including, but not limited to the “Halo” and “Horn” Effects) when evaluating students. The screener includes many questions which are highly subjective including asking whether the student “shows good judgement”, “think before he/she acted” and “follow the advice of a trusted adult”.

WHEREAS standard mental screening typically requires a smaller number of initial questions with a full battery of questions typically reserved for respondents indicating a particular need.

WHEREAS the negotiated agreement between the UFT and DOE calls for 4 hours to complete the screener (40+ questions per student) per class³. This equals approximately 8-10 minutes per student assuming a class size between 25-30 students. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has clearly registered its objections to the length and complexity of the screener⁴.

WHEREAS while some schools have offered to discuss student SEL needs during parent-teacher conferences, the detailed results of the DESSA will not be made available to parents.

1. https://www.checkbooknyc.com/contracts_pending_exp_landing/yeartype/B/year/122?expandBottomContURL=/minipanel/pending_contract_transactions/contract/CT104020229260645/version/0
2. <https://info.apertureed.com/nycfags>
3. <https://www.uft.org/news/uft-doe-agreement-on-social-emotional-screening>
4. Ibid.

WHEREAS parents have the ability to opt-out of the DESSA, this requires proactive decision-making on their part. Many parents may not have been fully informed or aware of the opt-out procedures. In some cases, parents wishing to opt-out are asked to provide a letter. It is not clear if this requires a physical letter or an email.

WHEREAS the DOE is intending to administer follow-on versions of this screener in subsequent months and years

WHEREAS it is now November 9th and the process of administering the DESSA is already underway, making any content-related changes (i.e. length / number of questions) impractical at this time.

The Community Education Council for District 20 hereby resolves that the DOE:

1. Disclose immediately the full roster of questions for this screener. Furthermore, the DOE should disclose the full roster of questions for any future screeners at least 3 months in advance and post them in a readily accessible online location
2. Clarify that any parent wishing to opt-out may simply send an email to a designated point of contact at their child's school
3. Make the full results of the DESSA available to parents and clearly indicate who has access to the results and where the results are stored
4. Allow parents to remove the DESSA screener from their child's record at any time, now or in the future
5. Reduce the number of questions on future screeners, enabling teachers to provide more thoughtful and relevant answers