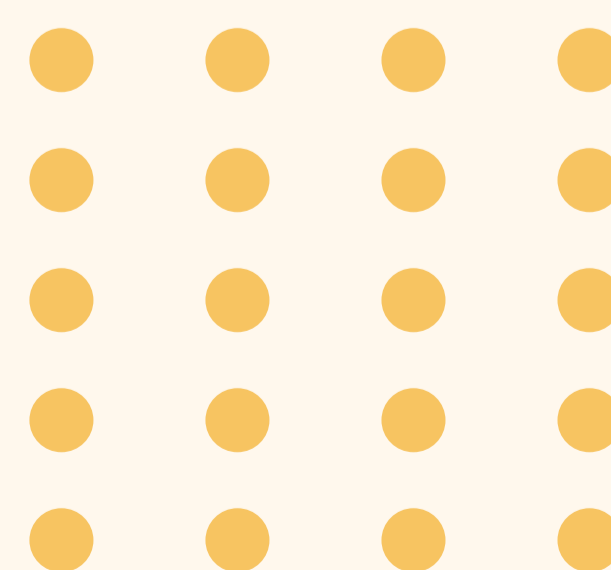




# Building College and Career Readiness for High School Students (TX)

How implementing DESSA is keeping Boerne ISD students in school and engaged



## \* Amplifying Community Support Through Action and Reflection

Seen as a “destination district,” the Boerne Independent School District (ISD), located in Boerne, TX, has a small-town feel but is less than an hour away from America’s seventh-largest city — San Antonio.

Boerne ISD boasts of its supportive community that makes it a place where students can learn, grow, and thrive. With a highly engaged parent population at every level, Executive Director of Whole Child Services Lesa Pritchard believed parents would be interested in additional opportunities to develop their children’s academic and social skills while also preparing older students for college and career readiness with character education.

### The Challenge

Lesla Pritchard hoped to implement a character education program that would prepare students for success after they graduated high school. She hoped to build onto the district’s pre-existing multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework by replacing some behaviors students were showing early on with strength-building activities.

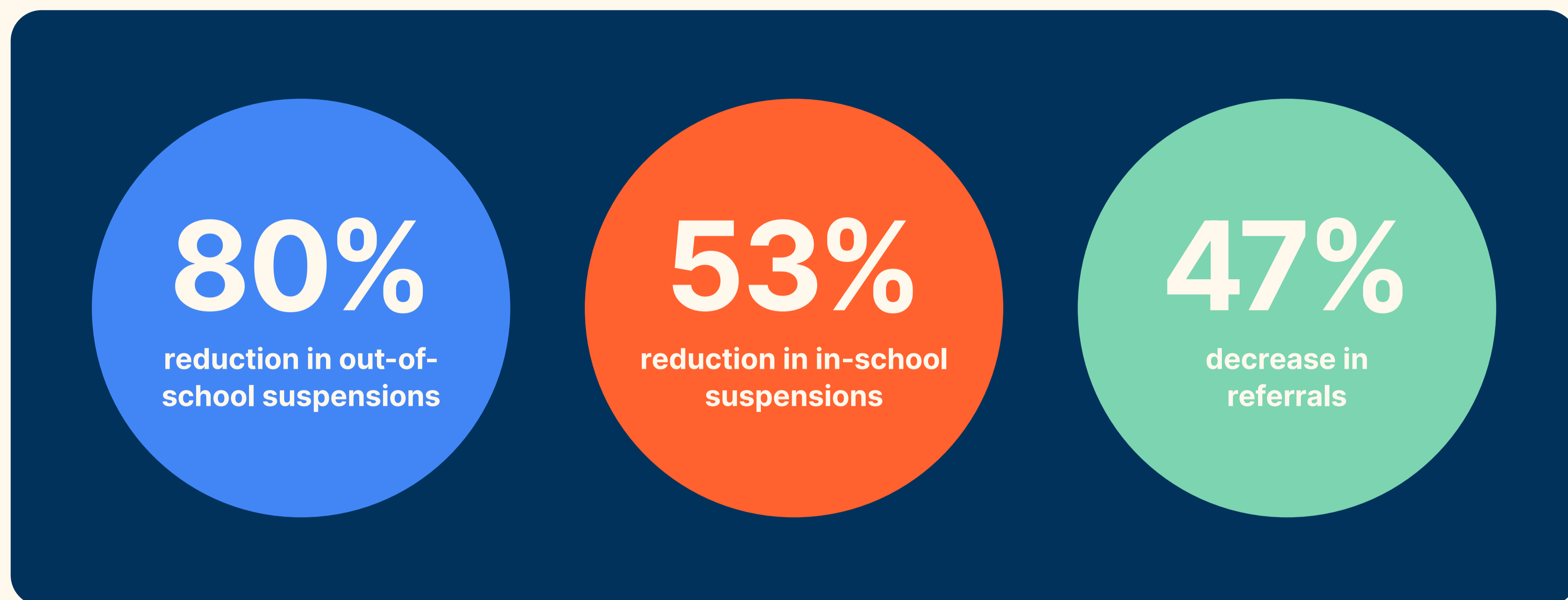
Lesla also knew that to get her ideas surrounding character education into schools and classrooms she needed to prepare for how she presented life skills learning to her administration, educators, and parents alike. She needed to explain how this new initiative would align with pre-existing standards in Texas like the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and the state’s other mental health requirements, in addition to presenting character education in a way that was understandable to educators and parents and in a way that was actionable.

### The Solution

“We practice a solution-focused, humanistic approach to counseling in the district,” said Lesla. That approach was supported by implementing a character education program based on strengths, reliable data, and stakeholder buy-in. The backbone of this program is the DESSA suite of screening tools and assessments from Riverside Insights. The DESSA is based upon six social and emotional competencies that support students academically and after they graduate high school. Those competencies include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Optimistic Thinking.

What Boerne saw after implementing their strength-based approach was that behavior can be taught through the development of skills and by setting up an environment for students to succeed in.

**These outcomes were supported by data, too.**



“We attribute this to being able to focus more on relationship building instead of what is going wrong. It’s a big win now that we see our principals looking at the students’ skills and teaching skills and not punishing behavior. There are obviously still consequences for behavior and a need for that, but we’re adding in skill instruction, too, with great results,” said Lesa.

Lesla said a driving factor in getting buy-in from administration was that the DESSA screener was data-driven and strength-based.

“With DESSA, we capture all of the students’ competencies. It shows where students may be struggling, but it also catches their strengths in the classroom, too. It doesn’t just identify students who are being sent to the principal’s office for discipline, it captures skills and strengths. I think educators also really loved that as soon as they completed their ratings they got instant feedback through strategies and best practices.”

From there, she introduced her follow-up plans with how this data would be infused into the school’s curriculum.

Administration loved that each skill was tied to a growth strategy that educators could practice with their student in the classroom, but that could also be worked on at home. Parents in the district were really looking to be involved in their students’ learning and they could be after receiving the DESSA data.



## \* Curriculum Alignment

Boerne wanted to ensure a curriculum alignment throughout all their services, which would be fundamental to meeting the district and state's goals. Lesa wanted to use the DESSA-mini, an 8-question screener, three times a year starting four weeks after the beginning of the school year.

"We use the DESSA-mini to screen all students and about 80% of our student population is considered Tier I. You can't move to Tier II or III without a solid Tier I foundation to build from," explained Lesa.

At the elementary school level classes have morning meetings every day. At the secondary level students have class meetings at least one time a week.

"Our counselors teach one DESSA competency per quarter with the expectation that teachers [with training and support] are infusing the competencies into their teaching, too. Our counselors then use the DESSA as a progress monitoring tool to measure student progress. We can't expect our students to develop their skill set in the one guidance lesson they get a quarter. We want educators to take the skills we're teaching and reinforce them. We want to layer in as much instruction as possible to encourage life-long development of their abilities," said Lesa.


They talk about their whole-child approach, but they also want a whole-district approach. Lesa leads lessons with Central Office staff on the same DESSA skills counselors are teaching each quarter to promote district-wide involvement in their character education initiatives.

## \* Informing Parents on Mental Health

The DESSA has helped guide important conversations between parents and educators.

"This year we're continuing to grow our parent involvement through open houses which are in-person, in addition to videos on the DESSA that will live on our district's website. We really want our families to see skills are malleable, that we can teach skills, and when we work together there is no limit to their students' potential." Lesa said each school also sends home a newsletter to parents explaining the strength counselors are focusing on for the quarter. Within the newsletters are ways parents can help students practice the skill at home.

Additionally, educators are now using data from the DESSA in their one-to-one conversations with parents regarding student performance. Lesa said that instead of phone calls home of what needed to be fixed, conversations with parents have been much more positive and centered around supporting students' needs to get them to where they needed to be.



“We are able to present what their strengths are in math and how we’re using their strengths to work on areas they can improve in. We’re also able to show their social and emotional strengths, what we’re helping students work on, and how we plan to improve them through further instruction,” said Lesa.

“We explained to parents that through the DESSA we can identify student strengths and leverage those to develop areas they have growth opportunities in,” said Lesa.

## **\* Improved Outcomes and Beyond**

Boerne ISD is looking forward to continuing to use the DESSA System district-wide. In fact, they are starting to use the DESSA-High School Edition Student Self-Report with students grades 9-12 this fall to elevate their students’ voice and choice as part of a college and career curriculum.

Parents have high expectations of students’ futures. Character education prepares students for college or the workforce by connecting them to skills needed to succeed in either setting.

How does the DESSA System promote educational equity and school success? With a strength-based approach, the DESSA keeps at heart what educators do every day — build relationships. This can be lost with a deficit-based screener. Boerne ISD chose to go forward with a strength-based screener to keep the focus on meeting students where they are and building out supports from there.

“It gets everyone on the same page of what’s important and focusing on those positive traits of students in the classroom. Strength-based screening really fosters those deeper relationships with students.” said Lesa. “DESSA has a unique lens built around resilience...they prioritized skillsets that could be measured independently of each other through research and an equity lens.”

“Our Tier II small group counseling is now based on the full DESSA. We have a ‘self-management’ skill group now instead of a ‘divorced’ group. We’re counseling based on skills rather than situational background. Because the DESSA gives us strategies and language it’s easy for us to build off of. Being able to track students’ progress and praise their skill development has helped destigmatize our small group counseling,” said Marcie Warner, School Counselor.

District leaders feel confident that students will feel prepared for college or entering the workforce upon graduation. “We want students to be happy and supported in whatever they choose to do in life. By building supportive relationships and our focus on resiliency we are helping to do just that,” said Marcie. They’re maximizing that energy by mobilizing their character education initiative so they can continue their legacy of excellence.