

Equitable Assessment of SEL Competencies: The Critical, but Often Overlooked Importance of National Norms

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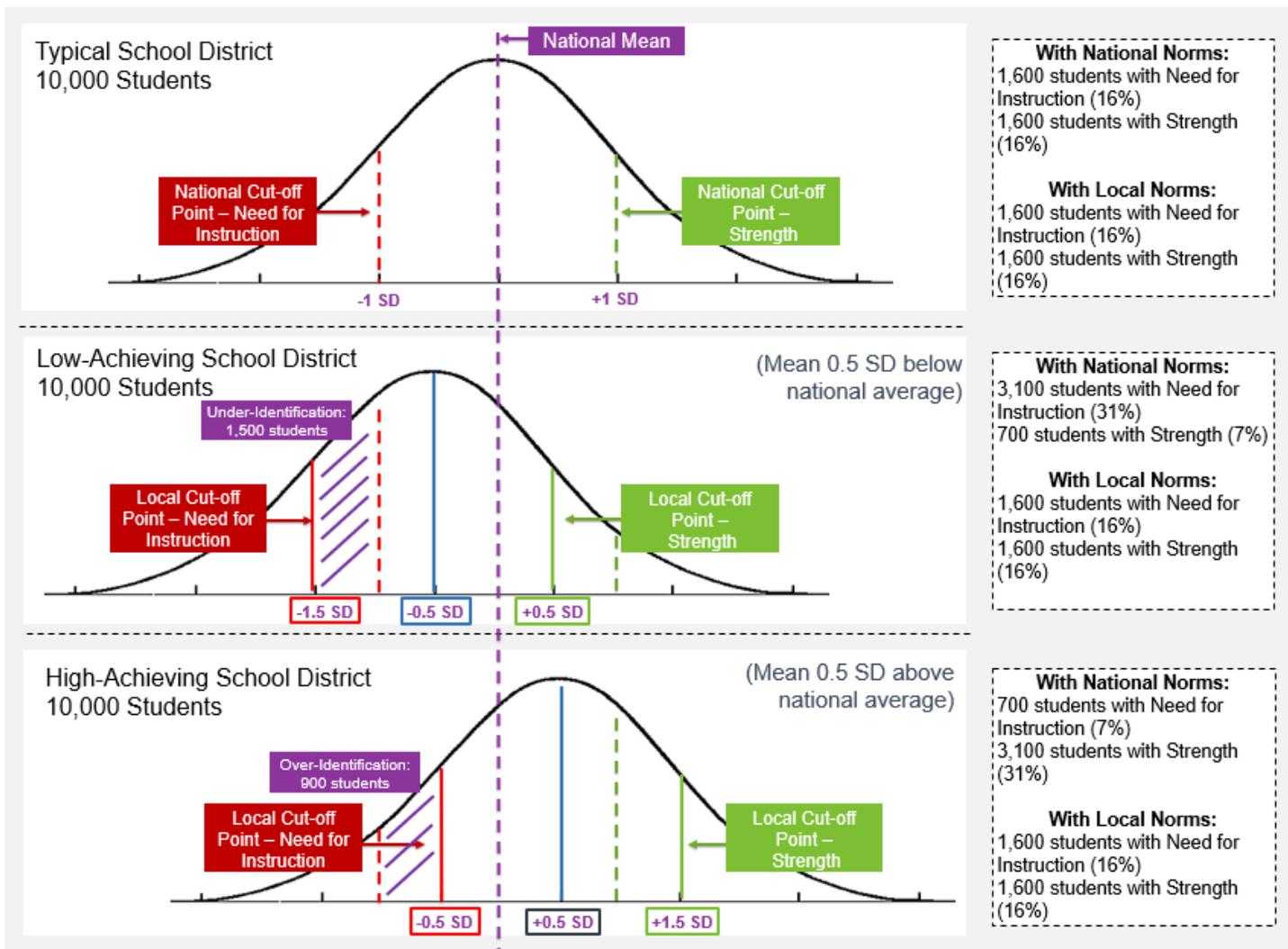
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Background:

- The American Psychological Association defines a norm as, “a standard or range of values that represents the typical performance of a group or of an individual (of a certain age, for example) against which comparisons can be made” (APA Dictionary of Psychology).
- *National norms* compare an individual’s performance to a nationally representative group of their peers, while *local norms* compare an individual’s performance to a group comprised of their local peers (for example, comparing a student solely to other students at their school district).
- A critically important, but seldom thoughtfully considered decision in the use of standardized assessments of S/E competence is the use of national norms vs. local norms.
- The choice of norm reference group has theoretical, value-based, and practical implications for students. Using one S/E assessment (the DESSA) as an example, we explore how the use of local norms may have an unintended adverse impact on equity.

Impact of Local vs. National Norms on Social-Emotional Assessment Score Interpretation:

- The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA; LeBuffe, Naglieri, & Shapiro, 2009/2014) is a strength-based, behavior rating assessment of social-emotional competence of children in K-12th grade that provides national norms based on a standardization sample of 2,494 students.
- The DESSA categorizes scores 1 SD above the national mean as *Strengths* and scores 1 SD below the mean as indicating a *Need for Instruction*. Students identified as having a Need for Instruction are typically identified for Tier 2/Tier 3 S/E support. The simulated data on the next page presents how local vs. national norms inform the interpretation of a student’s score.
- In a *typical school district*, where the distribution of students’ S/E competence mirrors the national population, the choice of national vs. local norms *does not impact score interpretation*.
- Among *lower-achieving districts*, local norms lower the lower raw score cutoff for descriptive score ranges. When using local norms, about 48% of students who would have been scored in the Need for Instruction range via national norms now fall within the Typical range. *Students are under-identified compared to the national sample.*
- Among *higher-achieving districts*, local norms raise the lower raw score cutoff for descriptive score ranges. When using local norms, about 56% of students who would have been scored in the Typical range via national norms now fall within the Need for Instruction range. *Students are over-identified compared to the national sample.*



Implications and Additional Considerations

- The essential question in norm selection is: to which group is it most appropriate to compare students' performance?
- At first, the use of local norms may seem to be more "culture fair" or appropriate among lower-achieving communities; however, this can actually further disadvantage students.
- By inflating the number of students in high-achieving districts identified for social emotional support, and deflating the number of students in low-achieving districts identified for social emotional support, the use of local norms can have an unintended adverse impact on equity by exacerbating gaps in S/E skills.

References:

LeBuffe, P. A., Naglieri, J.A., & Shapiro, V. B. (2009/2014). *The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment K-8th Grade (DESSA)*. Fort Mill, SC: Aperture Education.

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