Are Your Students Truly Life Ready?

A District Leader's Guide to Graduating College, Career, and Life Ready Students

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Table of Contents

About This Guide

In today's world, truly preparing students for college and career goes beyond academics. If your district is not focused on developing students' **life skills**—also known as social-emotional learning (SEL), 21st-century skills, or soft skills—you are missing a critical element to preparing students for adult success.

If you are a superintendent or district administrator looking for new ways to promote students' **college, career, and life readiness**, this guide is for you. You'll learn how other districts are defining and measuring students' life readiness, as well as how to integrate this data into your district and school improvement planning.
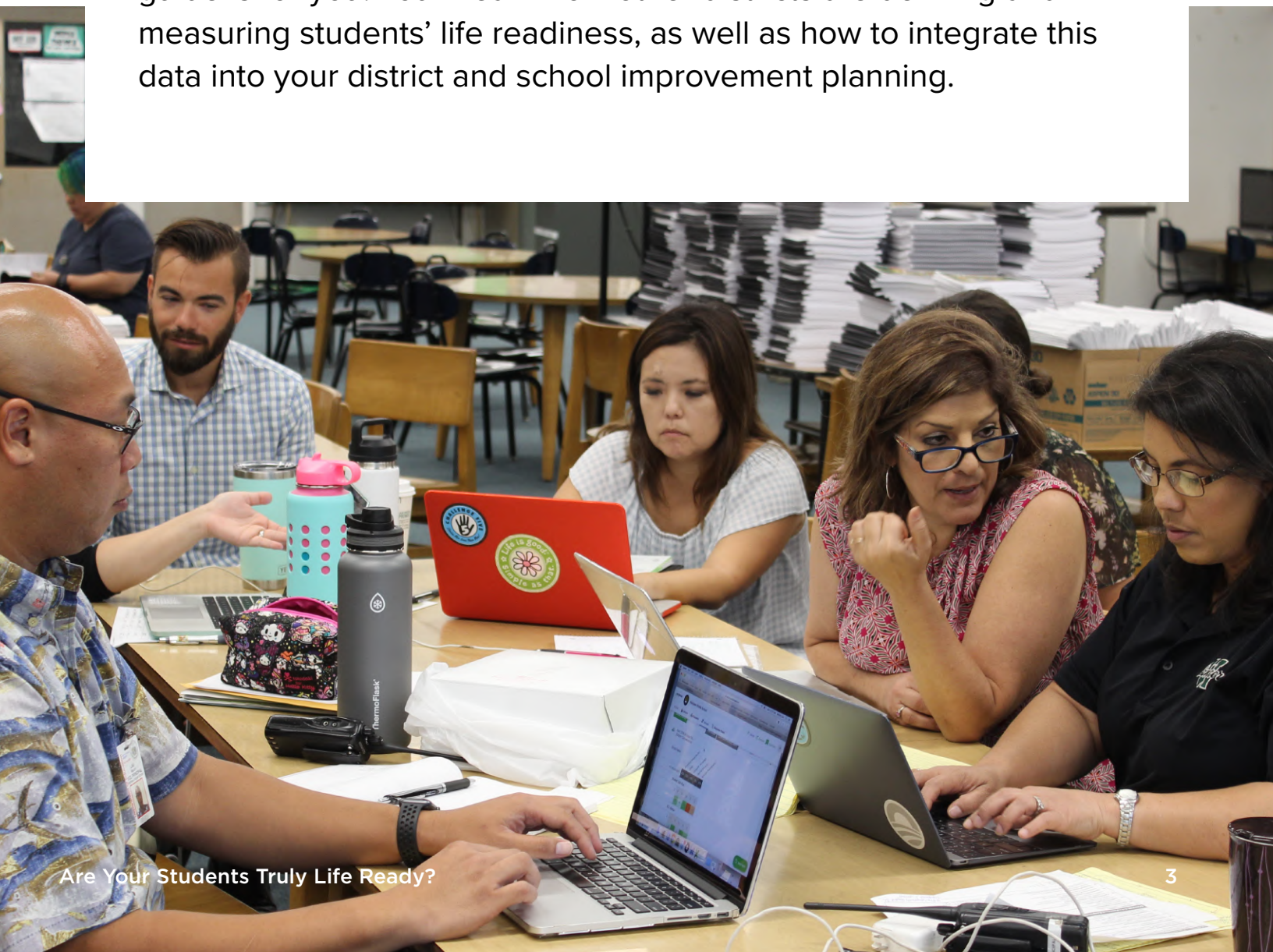
Expanding the Definition of College and Career Readiness

For years, college and career readiness has been a mainstay in state accountability systems. While the specific requirements may vary, more than 40 states have clear college and career ready benchmarks for students across course completion, career pathways, credit accumulation, standardized tests, and attendance.

However, despite districts' efforts to meet these standards, evidence shows that students are still not graduating high school prepared for what comes next:

- The **college persistence rate**, or the percentage of students who return to college for their second year, was 74 percent in 2018.

- Overall, students remain below benchmark in academics; the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) recently reported that **scores in math and reading** have been **flat or declining** over the last 10 years.

- There are **gaps** in achievement, college enrollment, and college persistence for **underrepresented student groups**.

These national trends point to an important truth: We need to innovate on what it means for students to be college and career ready. That's why many districts are integrating "life ready"—or social-emotional learning—indicators into their work.

In fact, similar to many district-level definitions, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA)'s Redefining Ready! initiative offers a useful framework that many districts use to define college, career, and life readiness.

College Readiness: Students are college ready if they meet academic indicators (GPA, AP, IB, or dual credit options) and/or standardized testing benchmarks (SAT and ACT).

Career Readiness: Students are career ready if they have identified a career interest and meet behavioral and experiential benchmarks, such as 90 percent attendance, 25 hours of community service, or military options.
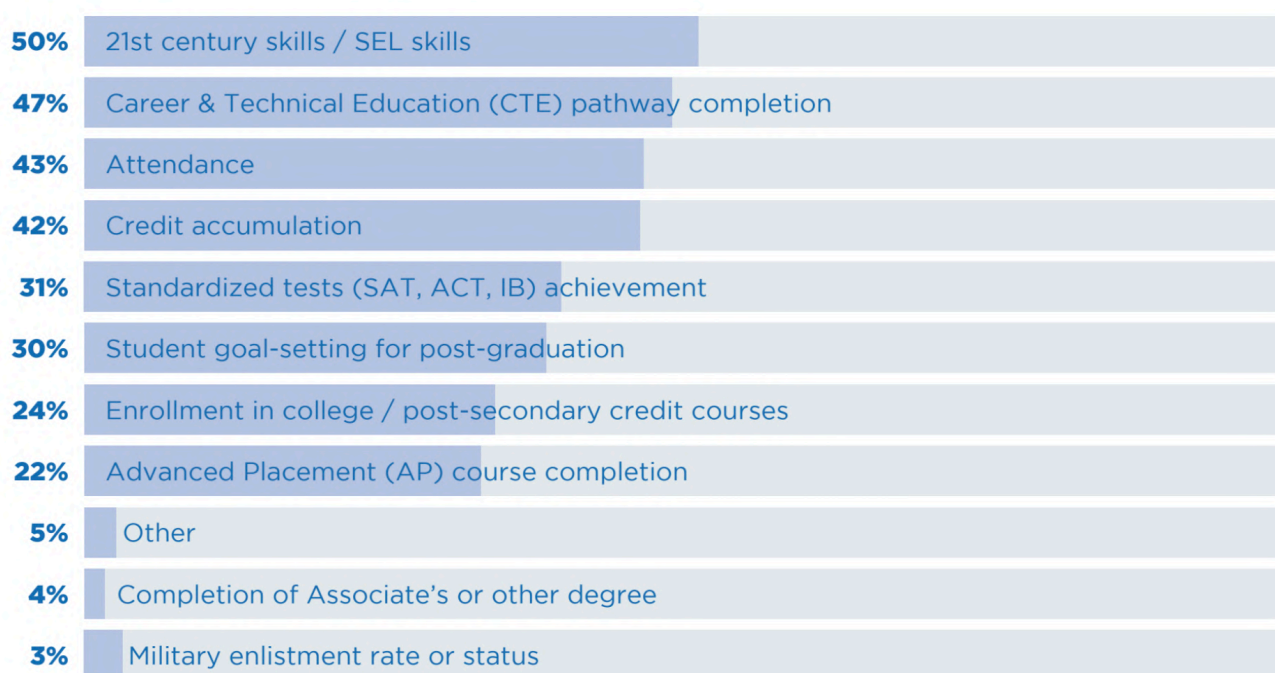
Life Readiness: Students are life ready if they have the grit, growth mindset, and perseverance to achieve their goals, as well as social-emotional skills such as self awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and relationship skills.

A Deepening Focus on Life Readiness

When districts decide to focus on life readiness, this most often means delivering integrated academic, social, and emotional supports for each and every student. Life skills—sometimes referred to as soft skills, 21st-century skills, executive functioning skills, or SEL competencies—are proven to not only increase academic achievement and other outcomes, but also prepare students to be productive citizens in an ever-changing global economy.

In a recent Panorama survey of over 280 superintendents and district leaders, **21st century skills/SEL skills** emerged as the number one focus area for districts looking to improve students' college and career readiness.

Which aspects of students' college and career readiness are you most focused on improving?*

50%	21st century skills / SEL skills
47%	Career & Technical Education (CTE) pathway completion
43%	Attendance
42%	Credit accumulation
31%	Standardized tests (SAT, ACT, IB) achievement
30%	Student goal-setting for post-graduation
24%	Enrollment in college / post-secondary credit courses
22%	Advanced Placement (AP) course completion
5%	Other
4%	Completion of Associate's or other degree
3%	Military enlistment rate or status

*Respondents selected their top three answers.

When asked about the **biggest barriers** to students' college and career readiness, district leaders most often cited a lack of social-emotional learning and life skills.

From your perspective, what are the biggest barriers to students' college and career readiness?

" **Anytime we speak with post-secondary institutions, they are looking for SEL-related skills** "

" **Self regulation** "

" **Perseverance** "

" **We need to do a better job of aligning soft skills with our district curriculum** "

" **Executive functioning skills** "

" **Stress management** "

" **Our shift to critical thinking and life skills has been too slow in our test culture** "

" **Growth mindset and grit** "

Key Takeaway: In today's complex global economy, your district's vision for college and career readiness must include an intentional focus on developing students' life skills.

How Districts Are Defining Life Readiness

How are school districts defining life readiness? There are many different frameworks to consider.

The 4Cs of 21st-century learning, for example, promotes communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies the fundamental life skills as decision making and problem solving, creative thinking and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, and coping with emotions and stress.

On the following pages, explore how leading districts define what it means to be a life ready graduate—from creating an "index" to building a profile of a graduate.

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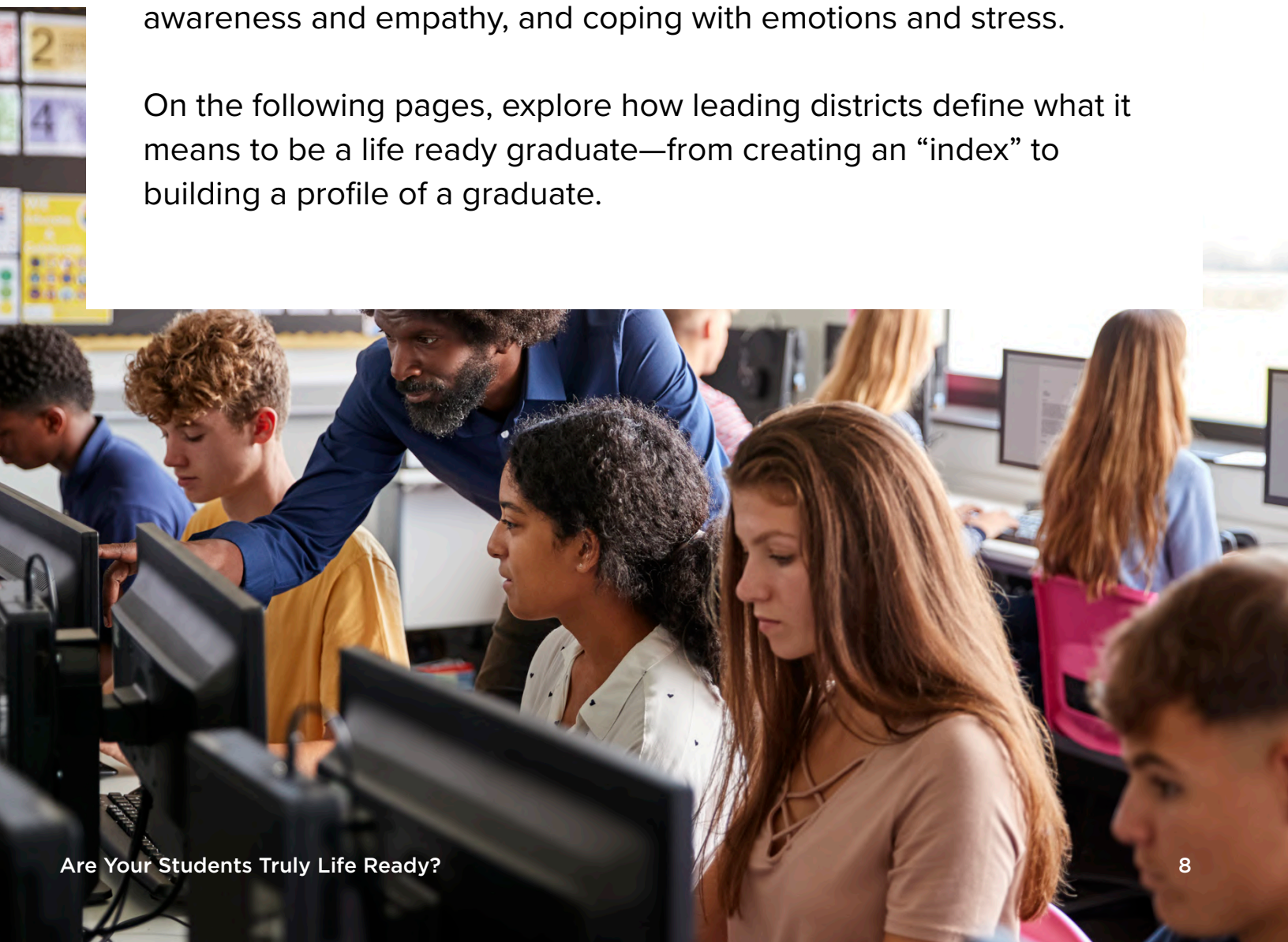
District Spotlights

Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD

15,600 students • Schertz, Texas

In pursuit of graduating college, career, and/or military ready students, SCUC ISD outlines five Traits of a Graduate: Dynamic Leader, Self-Motivated, Skilled Communicator, Service Oriented, and Future Ready. Within this model, the district promotes SEL skills such as self-management, grit, and growth mindset.

Council Bluffs Community School District

9,000 students • Council Bluffs, Iowa

Council Bluffs' Profile of a FutureReady Graduate encompasses both academic and social-emotional indicators of success. The district's social-emotional indicators—aligned to the CASEL framework—include self-management, self awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Everett Public Schools

20,900 students • Everett, Washington

Everett has a strategic goal that each student will graduate ready for college, career, and life with 21st century skills—including citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, and growth mindset. The district integrates these 21st century and social-emotional competencies into its curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems.

🏫 District Spotlights

District of Columbia Public Schools

51,000 students • Washington, D.C.

District of Columbia Public Schools uses the Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Survey—developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education—to gather data towards their district-wide goal of 100 percent of students feeling loved, challenged, and prepared for life.

The district selected Panorama survey topics that align to their Loved, Challenged, and Prepared Index, including Sense of Belonging, Rigorous Expectations, Perseverance (Grit), Self-Management, and Self Efficacy. With the Panorama platform, DCPS is able to:

- See a district-level snapshot of how students are progressing towards attaining these social and emotional attributes.

- Break down reports by school to understand if some communities need more support with SEL implementation.

- Identify expert-sourced strategies in Panorama's Playbook to improve indicators that scored the lowest in the survey.

🏫 District Spotlights

Racine Unified School District

18,800 students • Racine, Wisconsin

A North Star Vision in RUSD states all students will graduate career and/or college ready, with key benchmarks monitored across academics, SEL, and career/life skills. Aligned to this vision, RUSD focuses on self-management, social awareness, growth mindset, self-efficacy, grit, and emotion regulation. After administering the Panorama SEL Survey, RUSD learned that emotion regulation was a specific area for growth in elementary schools. Here's how they took action on this data:

- **Second Step program:** RUSD uses Second Step's SEL curriculum, which provides educators with resources for teaching skills, such as emotion regulation, in the classroom.

- **Mindfulness exercises:** Students participate in "STAR breathing" exercises to navigate stressful situations. At one school, the principal holds STAR breathing sessions over the PA once or twice a day so that students can practice this skill.

- **Lunch groups:** Educators identify students who need similar Tier 2 supports and bring these students together for small-group SEL lunch sessions.

Take inspiration from these examples, but remember to **engage your own community** when creating your district's definition for college, career, and life readiness.

Actively seek input from your district board, community partners, families, teachers and staff, and students. This will ensure that your definition is authentic to your district, and that the community ultimately buys into the vision.

So, once you know which life skills are most important to your district, how do you assess whether students are achieving those skills? The next section addresses this question.

Key Takeaway: Take time to reflect on what life readiness means to your district. What are the skills that your students will need to succeed in life after high school?

4 Keys to Measuring Life Readiness in Your District

What gets measured matters. If you have strategic goals around building students' life skills, it's critical to develop a strategy for measuring and tracking progress in this area.

Fortunately, taking a data-driven approach to life readiness is not just an aspiration. Districts across the country are already measuring students' life skills at scale. By asking students to reflect on their own skills and mindsets through short surveys, you can gather valid, reliable data to guide your district's programs and interventions.

Here are the key steps that Panorama's partner districts have found essential when measuring students' life readiness.

1. Select a research-backed assessment aligned to your goals or profile of a graduate.

2. Invest the district community in measurement and launch the survey.

3. Explore and analyze the results.

4. Develop a district plan and take action.

Step 1: Select a research-backed assessment aligned to your goals.

Once you've defined life readiness for your students, consider the type of data you'll need in order to track progress towards that vision.

Identify a [research-backed survey](#) that contains content aligned to the social-emotional and life skills that your district prioritizes. Alternatively, you might develop a survey instrument in house. Use this [survey design checklist](#) to ensure that your instrument is set up to gather valid, reliable feedback from students.
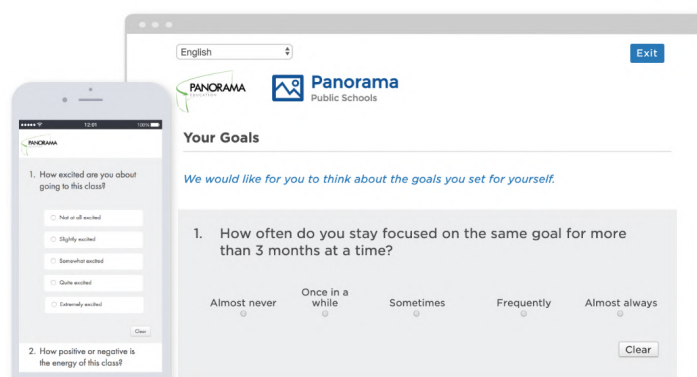
Step 2: Invest the district community in measurement and launch the survey.

Generally, this stage will take about two to four weeks. This is when you'll finalize the survey content, continue to build investment in the survey, and open the survey window.

To ensure that students fill out the survey with care, encourage school administrators and teachers to talk to students about the survey. Have teachers ask student leaders from different groups to talk up the survey with their peers.

Teachers and families also need to understand the importance of this survey process. Strategies for building community buy-in include:

- **Be transparent about the purpose of the survey.** Explain what the data will help you learn and how the survey connects to the district's vision for graduating college, career, and life ready students. For example: "Relationship skills and growth mindset are important skills within our Portrait of a Graduate. This reflection process will help us understand what we can do better to help students build these skills."

- **Issue a targeted communication to families.** Notify families about the survey by sending letters home with students, emailing, or calling. Here is a customizable sample letter you can use to communicate with families.

- **Share how the benefits outweigh the costs.** Emphasize how much district and school administrators, teachers, and students will learn from this process. Highlight the benefits while underscoring the small cost of taking the survey. For instance: "It will take just a couple of minutes for students to complete the survey, and we will learn significantly more about how to support them."

We recommend that schools administer the survey to students during class time, such as during homeroom, to maximize response rates. Be sure to schedule make-up sessions for absent students. In addition, provide clear instructions and scripts for the teachers or proctors who will be administering the survey.

Step 3: Explore and analyze the results.

Once the survey has closed, it's time to explore the results. How do students perceive their skills and competencies? As a district leadership team, stay low on the Ladder of Inference. Start by simply noticing the data without leaping to conclusions. This will help you identify areas of focus and understand the results more deeply.

If you use the Panorama platform, you can easily break down your results by topic, by question, and by demographics. You can also see how your results stack up against other districts nationally or against districts with similar characteristics as yours.
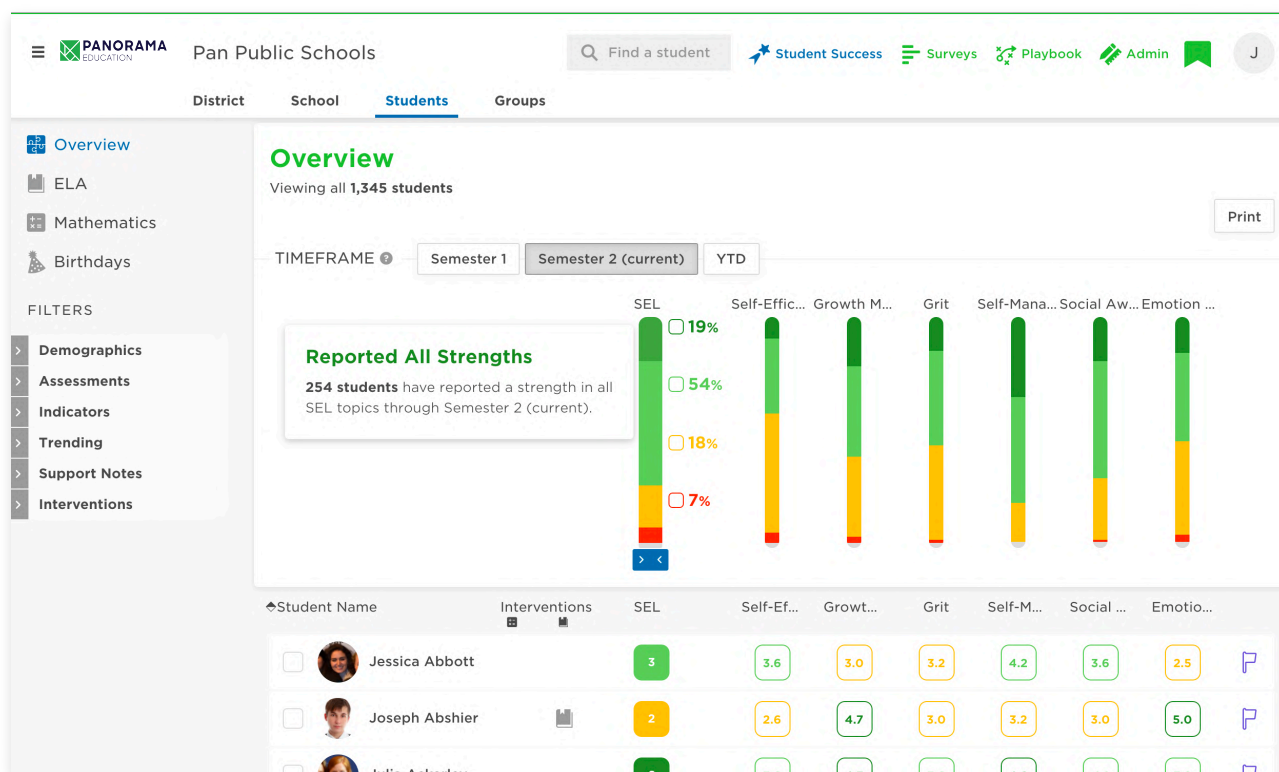
Looking at the data, ask yourself these questions:

- What are students reporting as their biggest strengths?

- What are their areas for growth?

- How do the results differ by demographics? By grade level? By school?

- Were there any areas in which the results differed significantly from what we expected?

Step 4: Develop a district plan and take action.

Effective school and district leaders know that data alone isn't enough to improve student outcomes. It's crucial to build educator capacity for taking action on data, and for answering the question: What's next? Here is a framework for helping your schools take data-driven action to promote students' life readiness.

Select a Priority → **Set Goals** → **Plan and Take Action**

Select a Priority

As a leadership team, determine which survey insights are most relevant, impactful, and actionable given your college, career, and life readiness goals. Panorama's partner districts find that selecting one to two priority areas is a good protocol.

Putting this into context: Let's say that **growth mindset**—defined as how much students believe they can change the factors that are central to their performance in school—is included in your district's profile of a graduate (among other key life skills).

When you look at your data, you notice that students are self reporting a lower growth mindset compared to other skills. Only 35 percent of students report having a growth mindset—and the data is even lower for females compared to males. These insights may prompt you to select growth mindset as a priority area.
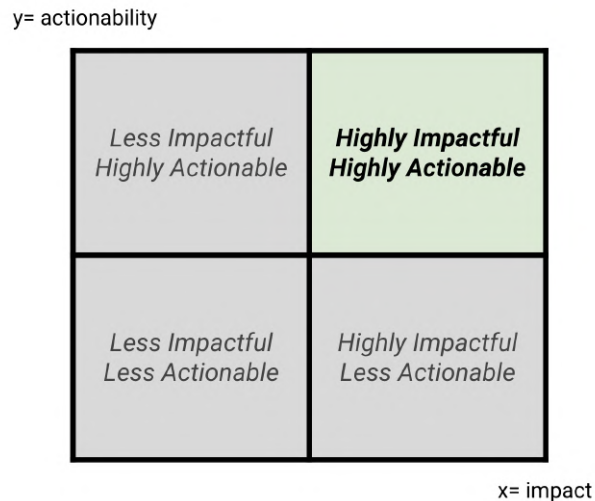
Set Goals

What defines success for your priority area(s)? Commit to an ambitious, specific, and measurable goal. In addition to having a district-wide goal, you might ask schools to create subgoals based on their own data.

Here is an example of a specific, measurable goal related to improving students' growth mindset:

> **"Increase students' favorable responses from 30% to 50% for the Growth Mindset survey question, 'In school, how possible is it for you to change: how easily you give up?'"**

Plan and Take Action

What strategies and resources will you share with staff to meet your goal(s)? Research says that selecting one to three next steps is most likely to drive improvement. Focus on interventions that belong in the **"highly impactful and highly actionable"** box in the matrix below.

y= actionability

Less Impactful Highly Actionable	**Highly Impactful** **Highly Actionable**
Less Impactful Less Actionable	Highly Impactful Less Actionable

x= impact

For instance, to improve growth mindset, will you:

- Introduce a program in which students learn about the science of the brain through videos?

- Have teachers implement the Rose, Bud, Thorn exercise in class?

- Implement WOOP goal setting for students?

Key Takeaway: Establish a scalable process to collect data on students' life skills, engage in data inquiry, and take data-driven action across schools to meet goals.

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Connecting the Dots: College Ready, Career Ready, and Life Ready

Chances are, life readiness is just one element of your district's vision for college and career readiness. The next step is to align your college, career, and life indicators so that educators have access to the data they need to support students on the path to academic and life success.

Panorama Education is a leading data analytics tool for monitoring and measuring how students are doing across academics, behavior, attendance, and social-emotional learning. For the first time ever, district and school teams can have a real-time view of students' college, career, and life readiness and coordinate supports to keep each student on track.

LEARN MORE

About Panorama Education

Panorama helps educators monitor how students are doing across academics, attendance, behavior, and college readiness, and then coordinate action to support each child. Panorama's platform also helps educators collect data about non-academic factors that are key to each child's success in school and in life, such as social-emotional skills, safety, and family engagement. Today, 2,000 school systems serving 15 million students trust Panorama, including the New York City Department of Education, Dallas Independent School District, and San Francisco Unified School District.

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