Are You
READY TO ASSESS
Social and Emotional Development?

SEL Solutions
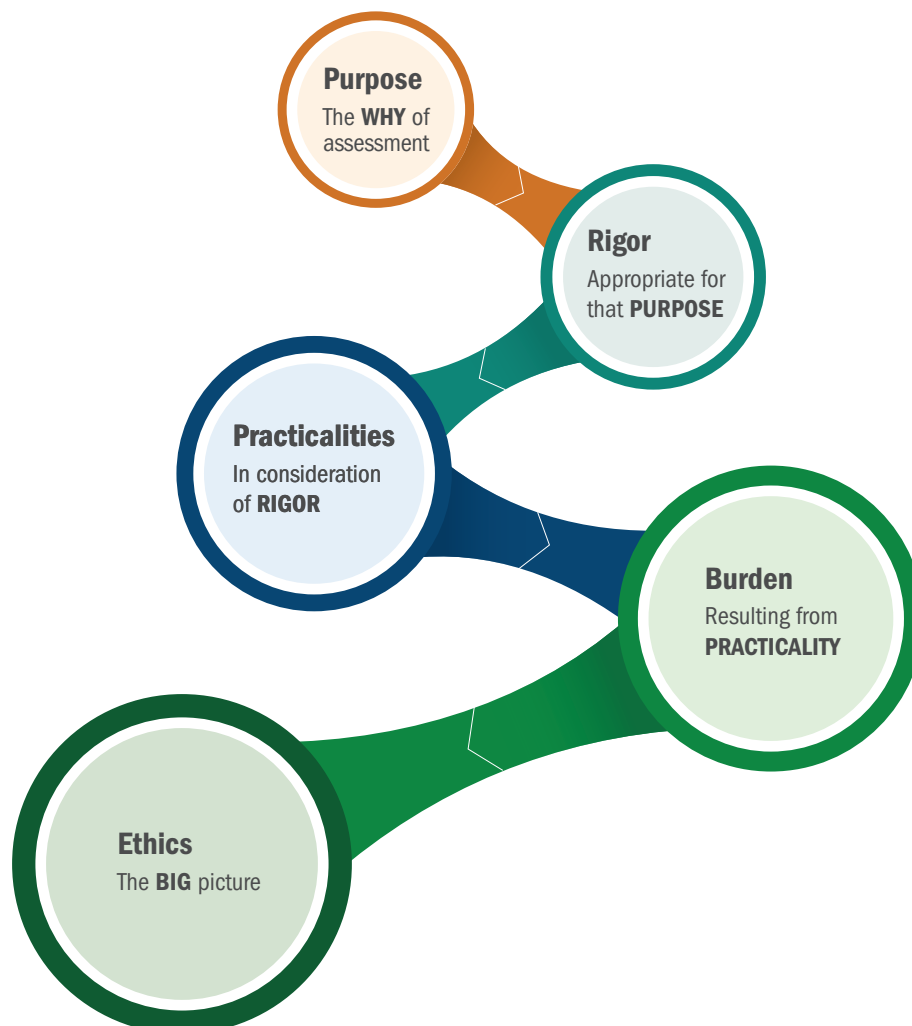at American Institutes for Research ■

Decision Tree

Stop

THINK

Act

Introduction

Deciding whether and how to use assessments to evaluate students' social and emotional (SE) knowledge, attitudes, and skills requires the development and critical appraisal of an assessment plan. At the state, district, and school levels, education leaders and staff can benefit from reviewing best practices and using a structured format to arrive at that decision. The *Ready to Assess Brief* lays out, in narrative form, the process for stopping and considering the many elements of a well-constructed assessment plan. Here, we provide a Decision Tree, which can be used as a roadmap to guide your thinking as you proceed along the *Stop, Think, Act: Ready to Assess* framework.
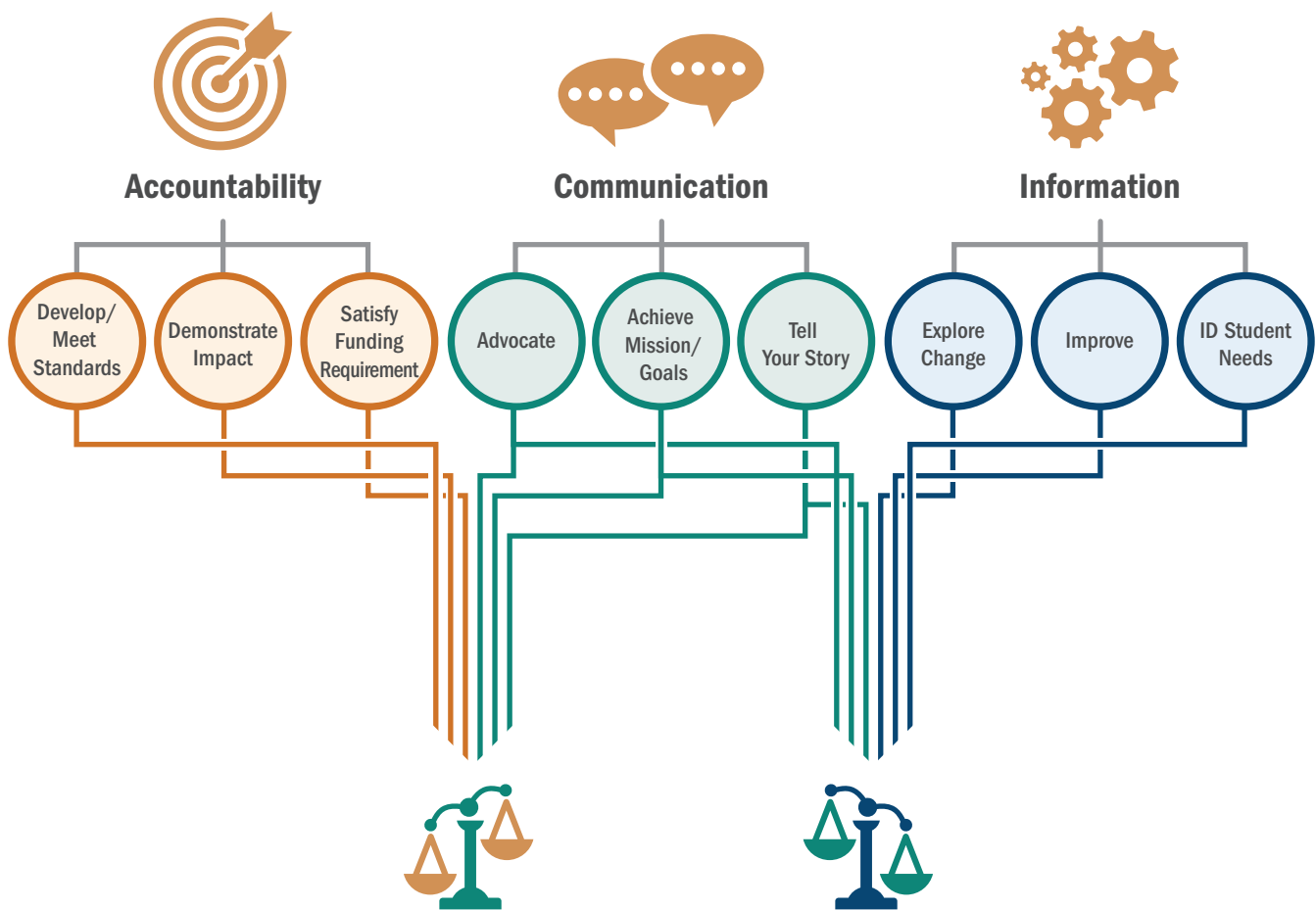
In the sections that follow, we describe a process for making decisions about using assessments in consideration of:

Purpose
The **WHY** of assessment

Rigor
Appropriate for that **PURPOSE**

Practicalities
In consideration of **RIGOR**

Burden
Resulting from **PRACTICALITY**

Ethics
The **BIG** picture

Purpose

The decision to use any assessment must be grounded by a clear and well-founded purpose. Although it might seem obvious at first, the purpose of an assessment may be highly nuanced and can easily become confounded by competing interests, mixed messaging, or mismatched expectations. In some instances, education leaders will find it advantageous to pursue multiple purposes at once, in which case it is prudent to prioritize them and plan accordingly.

Three common assessment purposes are (1) accountability, (2) communication, and (3) information. These three purposes can meet several goals, which may be variously high stakes or low stakes in nature. Balancing your assessment purposes and goals to clearly define the stakes involved is the first step in the *Ready to Assess Decision Tree.* However, before engaging with this first part of the Decision Tree, consider whether implementing a new assessment is truly necessary or whether your purposes and goals can be addressed in alternative ways— for instance, by using existing data and assessments or by using a proxy for youth outcomes such as assessing elements of school climate including the quality of teacher practice and other environmental factors supporting SE development.

Accountability
- Develop/ Meet Standards
- Demonstrate Impact
- Satisfy Funding Requirement

Communication
- Advocate
- Achieve Mission/ Goals
- Tell Your Story

Information
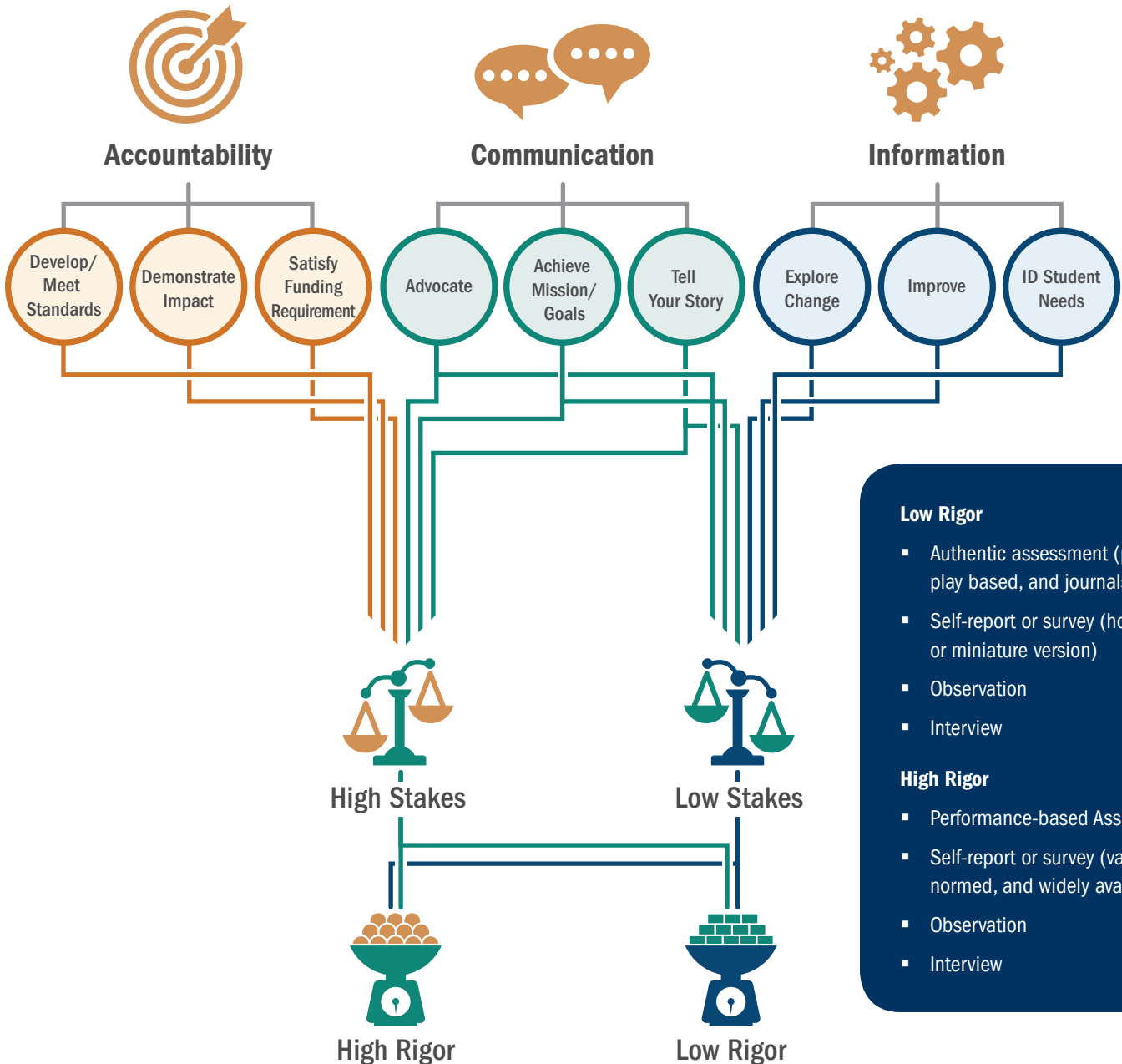- Explore Change
- Improve
- ID Student Needs

Rigor

After firmly establishing the rationale for using an assessment and the stakes involved, it is important to match your purpose with the appropriate level of assessment rigor. The term, *rigor,* in the context of the *Ready to Assess Tools,* refers to how comprehensive the assessment is and the degree to which the assessment is a well-established, valid, and reliable measure of SE competencies. Whether the assessment purpose and goal are high stakes or low stakes often determines whether to use a relatively higher- or lower-rigor assessment. However, higher-rigor assessments may be used for low-stakes purposes where there is a capacity to do so along with minimal added burden and a potentially higher return on investment. In the case of high-stakes purposes, sometimes lower-rigor assessments can add depth to the assessment results. Ultimately, deciding whether to use higher- or lower-rigor assessments—or some combination—may require an iterative process, taking into account the entire scope of the *Ready to Assess Decision Tree.* Here, some common choices for assessment rigor are presented based on the assessment purpose and the stakes involved.

Validity: The degree to which an assessment measures what it is supposed to be measuring (e.g., communication skills) instead of another construct (e.g., mathematics ability).

Reliability: The degree to which an assessment can be expected to produce the same results after being administered multiple times to the same population.

Accountability

- Develop/ Meet Standards
- Demonstrate Impact
- Satisfy Funding Requirement

Communication

- Advocate
- Achieve Mission/ Goals
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Information

- Explore Change
- Improve
- ID Student Needs

High Stakes

Low Stakes

High Rigor

Low Rigor

Low Rigor

- Authentic assessment (portfolios, play based, and journals)
- Self-report or survey (homegrown or miniature version)
- Observation
- Interview

High Rigor

- Performance-based Assessment
- Self-report or survey (valid, reliable, normed, and widely available)
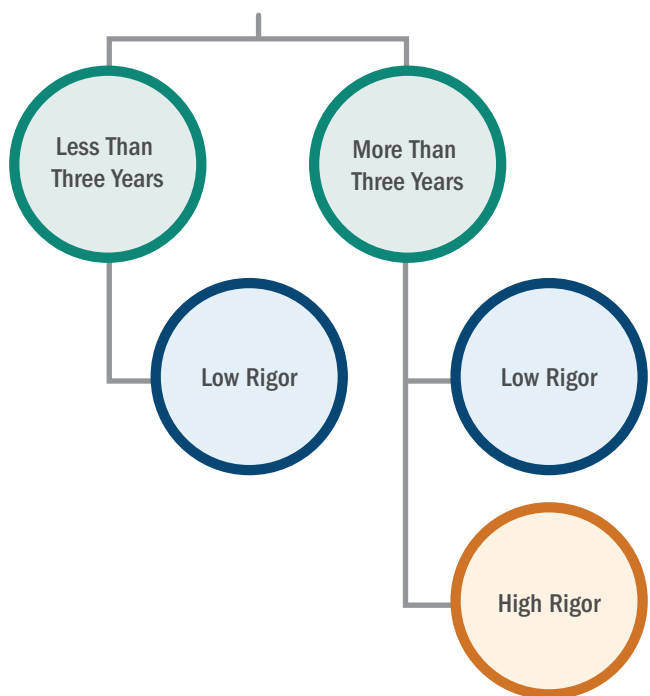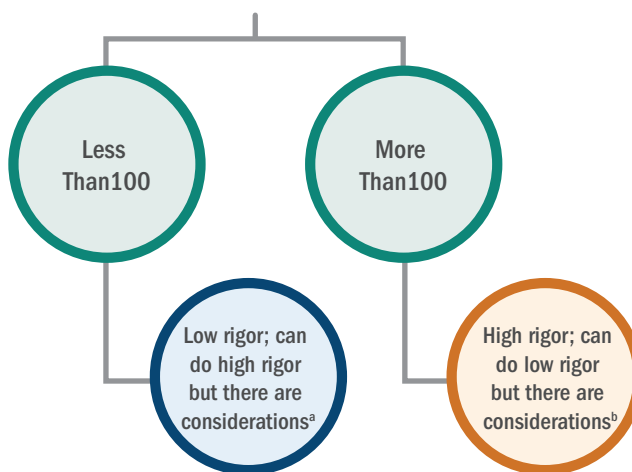- Observation
- Interview

Practicalities

After selecting a level of rigor that matches your purpose and the stakes involved, it is essential to consider two key practical considerations: (1) the age of the initiative (program, intervention, and framework) and/or (2) the number of youth served. In some cases, this evaluation may require revising the level of rigor previously chosen or building capacity to meet those practicalities. While the purpose and goal of assessment may align with a given level of rigor, practical constraints related to statistical limitations and available infrastructure (technology, labor, and time) may restrict the utility of the corresponding assessments.

Age of the Initiative (Program, Intervention, or Framework)

- Less Than Three Years → Low Rigor
- More Than Three Years → Low Rigor / High Rigor

Number of Youth Served

- Less Than 100 → Low rigor; can do high rigor but there are considerations[a]
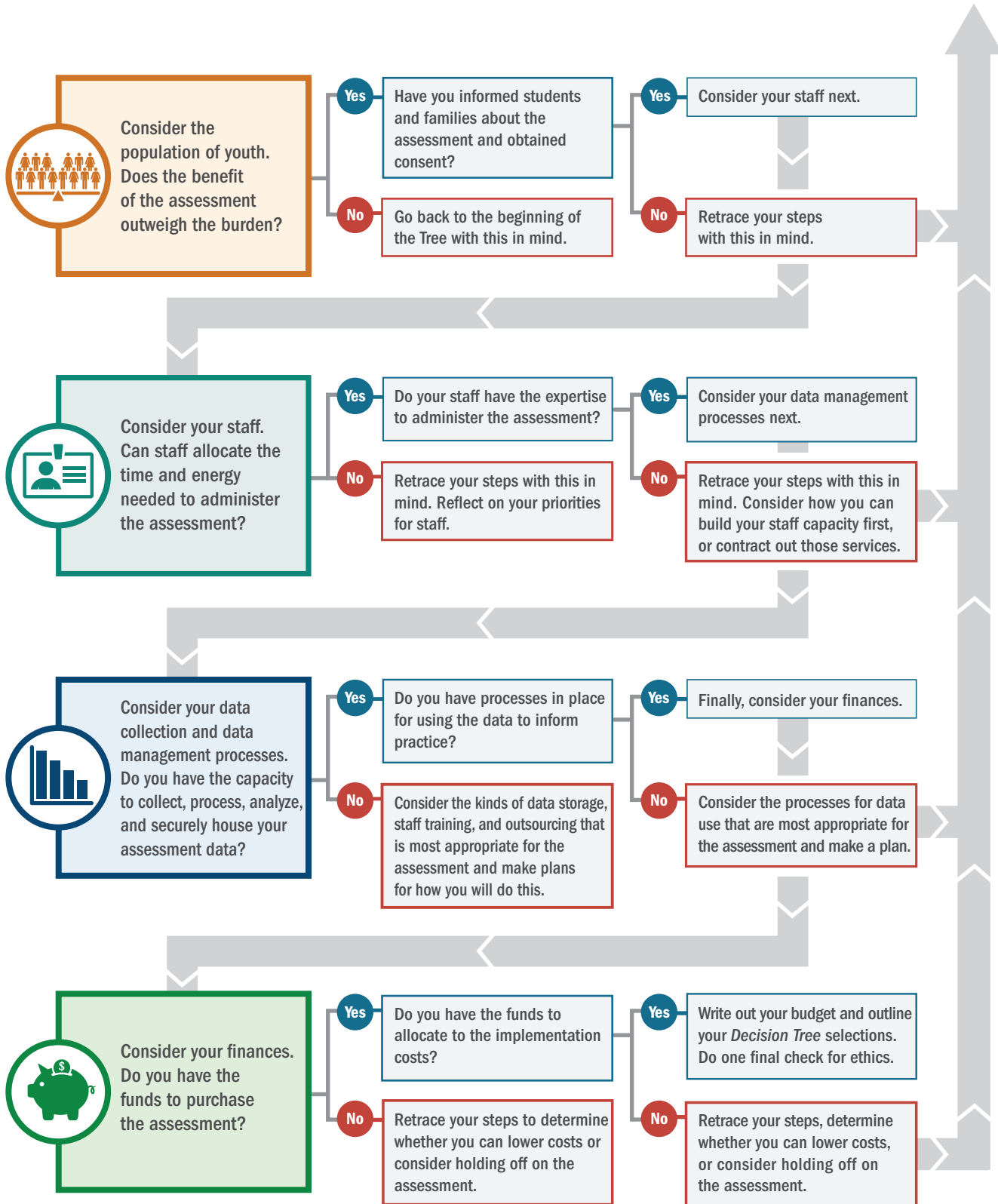- More Than 100 → High rigor; can do low rigor but there are considerations[b]

[a]Smaller numbers of youth make it more challenging to draw conclusions from the data gained via assessment because of a lack of statistical power.

[b]Lower rigor assessments—especially authentic assessments—frequently require more staff and time; it is challenging to implement this type of assessment with larger groups.

Burden

After matching the purpose and rigor of your assessment plan and performing a check for practicality, it is time to evaluate the burden, or implementation costs. One must assess the risks, benefits, capacity, and costs to students and families, staff, infrastructure, and finances.

Consider the population of youth. Does the benefit of the assessment outweigh the burden?

- **Yes** → Have you informed students and families about the assessment and obtained consent?
  - **Yes** → Consider your staff next.
  - **No** → Retrace your steps with this in mind.
- **No** → Go back to the beginning of the Tree with this in mind.

Consider your staff. Can staff allocate the time and energy needed to administer the assessment?

- **Yes** → Do your staff have the expertise to administer the assessment?
  - **Yes** → Consider your data management processes next.
  - **No** → Retrace your steps with this in mind. Consider how you can build your staff capacity first, or contract out those services.
- **No** → Retrace your steps with this in mind. Reflect on your priorities for staff.

Consider your data collection and data management processes. Do you have the capacity to collect, process, analyze, and securely house your assessment data?

- **Yes** → Do you have processes in place for using the data to inform practice?
  - **Yes** → Finally, consider your finances.
  - **No** → Consider the processes for data use that are most appropriate for the assessment and make a plan.
- **No** → Consider the kinds of data storage, staff training, and outsourcing that is most appropriate for the assessment and make plans for how you will do this.

Consider your finances. Do you have the funds to purchase the assessment?

- **Yes** → Do you have the funds to allocate to the implementation costs?
  - **Yes** → Write out your budget and outline your *Decision Tree* selections. Do one final check for ethics.
  - **No** → Retrace your steps, determine whether you can lower costs, or consider holding off on the assessment.
- **No** → Retrace your steps to determine whether you can lower costs or consider holding off on the assessment.

Ethics

Evaluating whether an assessment is ethical is the final step on the *Decision Tree.* This step requires carefully retracing the choices selected from the *Decision Tree.* An assessment of any kind should not be taken lightly, and an assessment of an individual's SE knowledge, attitudes, and skills is no exception. In today's climate of accountability, individuals in subsidized programs are subject to more assessments than ever and staff members are highly burdened with the requirements of administering multiple assessments over time. Before you decide on an assessment strategy, make sure you are ready by considering the purpose, rigor, practicalities, and burden of the assessment to ensure that you get what you need from your assessment at the lowest possible cost to those involved. You can use the *Ready to Assess Tools* periodically to reexamine your assessment needs as the circumstances and contexts evolve.