

SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 9 – May 2017

SSE 2016-2020 – the end of the beginning!

Welcome to issue nine of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-primary schools.

The first year of the 2016-2020 four-year cycle of self-evaluation is drawing to a close. We suggested in the circular [0040/2016](#) and in the new [SSE Guidelines](#) that this year could be seen as an investigation year. In the last issue of the Update, we also drew your attention to our redesigned [website](#). We hope you are finding the material it contains useful in scoping out the specific focus most relevant to action planning for improvement in your school.

In the last issue, we included two ‘scenarios’ – imaginary schools but real issues! – that looked at how schools in different contexts might use the teaching and learning dimension of the quality framework to inform self-evaluation. One scenario focused on raising student motivation and expectation, and the other focused on implementing the new Junior Cycle. We continue these stories in this issue.

In one of these scenarios, the school had recently had a WSE-MLL, and used the findings and recommendations of the external evaluation as part of the evidence base to inform their own process of self-evaluation. In this issue, you’ll find an article that looks at how external evaluation can support and complement internal evaluation, as indicated in circular 0040/2016.

We also take another look at the sometimes thorny business of getting to grips with data, so that you can equip yourselves with rich knowledge to inform your improvement plans.

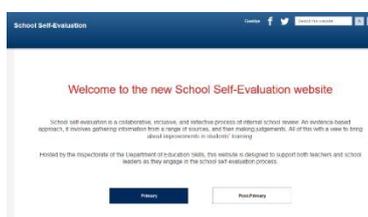
Finally, there’s an article that looks at the new resource allocation model, which gives considerable autonomy to schools to decide how best to use the additional resource to support students with special educational needs in their learning. Schools may wish to consider incorporating this area of provision into their SSE process, and we hope you’ll find some useful insights in this article.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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Using the Quality Framework to Support the SSE Process

In SSE Update 8, we explored two school scenarios and described how those schools were using the quality framework to work through the six steps of the SSE process. We presented their progress with the first two steps of the process, namely *Identify Focus* and *Gather Evidence*. In this issue, we continue their stories and take them to the end of their investigation year. We describe how they use the quality framework to engage with the next two steps, *Analyse and Make Judgements* and *Write and Share Report and Improvement plan*. The purpose of the quality framework is to ‘inform rather than to uniform’ our approach to SSE. As you’ll see, these two schools have made slightly different uses of the quality framework in their own unique contexts.



Scenario 1 – Sunnyhill College

STEPS 1&2 IDENTIFY THE SSE FOCUS AND GATHER EVIDENCE

Sunnyhill College is a co-educational school under ETB management with over 500 students, serving a large country town and its rural hinterland. The school began its work on the second cycle of SSE by linking the process to implementing the new Junior Cycle. They used a whole-school planning day early in the year to look specifically at the phased roll-out of subjects and, in that context, a focus on **Wellbeing** began to emerge. Click [here](#) to recap on how they approached steps 1 and 2 in the process. Here’s some further detail on their evidence gathering.

The school used the student council to gather evidence on students’ views, as this approach would allow each year group to consider how the issues affected their particular stage of learning. Working with the liaison teacher, the student council came up with a few prompt questions about specific learning challenges for the focus group discussions. Questions prompted students to think about what had helped them get to grips with a topic they had had difficulty with, and to make suggestions from their own experience to create a menu of helpful approaches.

Two really important points emerged from the focus group discussions. The first one was the importance of encouragement; students agreed that it was really helpful when teachers said: “Stick at it. You’ll get it”, and told them not to worry about making mistakes. A number of students recalled a teacher reassuring them that “the fella that never made a mistake never made anything!” The second important point was how often students found that help from their classmates was what kept them going and got them over the learning line.

For their part, teachers agreed to keep a reflection record of where students were struggling with their learning in particular areas or topics. Teachers recorded the kind of problems that occurred, how the problems became apparent, and whether they needed whole-class or individual intervention. The school adapted [resources](#) from the SSE website to assist in gathering evidence.

STEP 3 ANALYSE EVIDENCE AND MAKE JUDGEMENTS

Bringing together the evidence gathered from teachers and students, the school could identify strengths to build on, and areas that needed development if they were to help students persist when learning proves difficult. They found many of the statements for the standard ‘*Students grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive*’ from the domain of learner experiences helpful and relevant.

Statement of Effective Practice	Strengths?	Areas for improvement?
Interactions among students and between students and teachers are respectful and positive, and conducive to well-being.	YES	We can build on this to address difficulties
Relationships and interactions in classrooms and learning areas support a co-operative and productive learning environment.	YES BUT...	Enough opportunities to co-operate?
Students feel able to contribute their opinions and experiences to class discussion. They listen respectfully to the opinions and experiences of their classmates.	YES BUT...	Not always able to express themselves
They ask questions and suggest possible solutions confidently. They are willing to risk incorrect responses, and accept that mistakes are part of the learning process.	YES BUT...	Confidence is an issue for some
They demonstrate a sufficient level of motivation to engage and persist with increasingly challenging work.	YES BUT...	Some get disheartened

Strengths included generally very positive relationships between teachers and students, and among students; the very impressive way the student council could channel and articulate students' views; and the willingness of teachers to listen to students and to try new approaches. Looking at areas for improvement, both teachers and students identified the way that new topics were introduced as a potential stumbling point where students lost their way and lost confidence. Students said that learning and using the right subject vocabulary could be difficult. And teachers and students both said that students were sometimes unable to articulate what or where the difficulty was.

STEP 4 WRITE AND SHARE REPORT AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The first part of the report set out the strengths, identified in step 3, which the school could use in its action plan for improvement. This was an important learning point that emerged for teachers: the purpose of identifying your strengths is to use them to improve other areas. Simple but powerful! The next and more challenging step was to identify targeted actions to help students to persist despite difficulties. The SSE co-ordinator and a small team drafted an action plan for improvement to present to the whole staff. They took and adapted a [report and improvement plan template](#) from the SSE website.

The overall aim of the action plan was drawn from the quality framework standard that the school had used in step 3 to evaluate its practice. It was **'to provide an environment that offers all learners the appropriate level of support to enable them meet challenges successfully'**. The plan set out a number of action or process targets. (See the article on targets in [Update 6](#)).

1. All teachers to focus on explicitly teaching the vocabulary and terms relevant to a new topic or concept.
2. All teachers to plan and implement a carefully staged approach to introducing a new topic.
3. All teachers to plan and implement greater use of co-operative learning approaches.

To ensure that the plan would be a helpful reference point when working towards the targets, the SSE team included some pointers for subject departments to develop further. For target 1, they referred teachers to literacy strategies from the previous plan that could be tailored to suit this one. For target 2, they asked subject departments to make explicit links for students between prior and new learning, and to adopt a 'traffic lights' system for students to signal levels of understanding. For target 3, they listed approaches 'brought back' to the school from CPD sessions, from the familiar 'think/pair/share' to placemat work, and strategic pairing to enable more able and less able students to work together.

The principal brought the plan to the board, which approved it and then completed the [regulatory and policy checklist](#). The SSE team then adapted the [template](#) from the SSE website to provide parents and the school community with a useful summary of the SSE plan.

Scenario 2 – Ballymore College

STEPS 1 & 2 IDENTIFYING THE SSE FOCUS AND GATHERING EVIDENCE

Ballymore College is an all-boys school in a long-established suburb. The school had a WSE-MLL three years ago, and is in a position to use this external evaluation as a resource in its self-evaluation process. See the article on page 5 below for more on this approach. To begin its new cycle of SSE, the school has selected a focus on active and reflective learning approaches to raise students' levels of motivation and attainment. The teachers arrived at this focus through reflecting on their own practice using both the WSE-MLL report, and the quality framework, where they homed in on one standard in Learner Outcomes as the most helpful and relevant benchmark for them:

Students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners.

You can recap on steps 1 and 2 of the process they followed [here](#).

STEP 3: ANALYSE AND MAKE JUDGEMENTS

The school gathered evidence from three sources: the WSE-MLL report; an analysis of uptake of levels, and outcomes, in the Junior Certificate; and a survey of first-year students on their experiences of learning.

The **analysis of the WSE-MLL report** identified the positive aspects of teaching and learning that teachers could reflect on, share and develop, so as to improve practice. The report had commended practice in practical lessons observed, for eliciting high levels of engagement from students, establishing high expectations regarding students' attitudes to preparedness for work and application to the task, and providing opportunities for students to critique and improve their work. The report noted some very good questioning techniques that gave students an opportunity to reflect on lesson material and deepen their understanding. The team reported that these were the key strengths identified, and should now be fully exploited.

A **three-year analysis of Junior Certificate results** yielded rich information. The WSE-MLL had raised concerns that uptake of higher level, and outcomes in general, indicated low expectations, and that low junior cycle attainment was affecting senior cycle aspirations. The school's analysis focused on investigating patterns and trends, and also on results from a representative sample of students. It found that:

- Uptake of higher level in core subjects had risen, with improved outcomes from a low base in Maths and Irish.
- Science was an area where outcomes were on a steeply upward curve, and 'fails' were not occurring.
- Other subjects were not improving, and the sampling of individual students' results showed that even good students performed less well in certain subjects.

The principal and a junior cycle year head worked on the analysis. They highlighted the Science results and the WSE-MLL finding of good practice in practical subjects, and suggested a possible correlation.

The **survey of first years** served very usefully to corroborate the findings of the mini-survey of the previous first-year cohort. These surfaced three key points:

- Students feel that they learn better when learning is linked to or arises from an activity
- Students need to articulate their learning; explaining their learning is a key part of the process
- Students are better motivated when they feel they can achieve something good

STEP 4 WRITE AND SHARE REPORT AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The whole thrust of the report and improvement plan was to enable all teachers to capitalise on the strengths identified, to map out how these strengths could be applied in their own subject areas, and to work together to improve outcomes for their students. They took and adapted a [report and improvement plan template](#) from the SSE website.

The report and plan referenced the Learner Outcomes standard they had initially focused on, and added another from the same domain to inform how they would address the areas identified for improvement. Their two guiding standards were:

Students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners.

Students attain the stated learning outcomes for each subject, course and programme.

Linking with the first of these standards, the plan identified a number of process or action targets aimed at raising students' levels of enjoyment, motivation, and expectations for achievement. Building on the good and successful practice identified, these included:

- the incorporation of an enquiry-based approach into at least one key topic in each term or unit
- regular opportunities for students to explain their learning, both to consolidate subject learning and to develop good oral communication skills

Linking with the second of these standards, the plan set out targets for increased uptake of higher level and improved outcomes in a range of subjects. These were generally, but not always, expressed in percentage increases, and related to school-based figures more than national norms.

The principal brought the plan to the board, which approved it and then completed the [regulatory and policy checklist](#). The SSE team then adapted the [template](#) from the SSE website to provide parents and the school community with a useful summary of the SSE plan.

External evaluation and SSE – a short question and answer piece

What's the connection between external evaluation and SSE?

As schools engage and become increasingly familiar with the SSE process – the cycle of evidence-gathering, identifying and implementing actions for improvement, monitoring progress and reporting on the process – it's worth looking a little more closely at the connection between the evaluation work of the Inspectorate and the school's self-evaluation work.

Take three significant documents that were published by the Department in 2016. They are:

- the SSE circular: [0040/2016](#)
- the SSE guidelines 2016-2020: [SSE Guidelines](#)
- *A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools*: [A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools](#)

In each one, you'll find an almost identical statement about external evaluation and SSE. Here's the statement on page 4 of *A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools*.

School self-evaluation and external evaluation are complementary processes, both focused on improvement. The school self-evaluation process gives schools a means of identifying and addressing priorities, and of ensuring a whole-school focus on improving specific aspects of teaching and learning. External evaluations take note of schools' identified priorities and assess their teaching and learning practices. Given this common focus on improvement, the Inspectorate will take account of schools' engagement with, and the outcomes of, self-evaluation in the course of its evaluations while remaining sensitive to the individual context factors of school at varying stages of SSE development.

What exactly does "...the Inspectorate will take account of ..." mean?

Put simply, this means that inspectors will include the school's self-evaluation process where it's relevant to the focus of the particular inspection. It's helpful to look at the *Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools*, which describes all the models of inspection and refers in each description to where the school's self-evaluation process might be relevant to the evaluation focus of that model. The fact that the focus of a school's self-evaluation process is always an aspect of teaching and learning makes it potentially relevant to all models of inspection where there is evaluation of teaching and learning. How the SSE process is led and managed is clearly relevant to whole-school evaluations, and to DEIS evaluations in which DEIS action planning for improvement **is** the school's SSE process.

Inspectors will also look at compliance with the requirements of the SSE circular. Schools should maintain SSE as a continuous process, develop and implement improvement plans, and use *Looking at Our School 2016* as a benchmark when evaluating their teaching and learning practices. The circular requires schools to produce a short internal report and improvement plan, with a policy checklist to be completed by the board, and an accessible and meaningful summary of the report and improvement plan for parents and the school community.

Where does *Looking at Our School 2016* fit in with external evaluation and SSE?

Looking at Our School 2016 makes the same kind of statement as the three documents mentioned above.

The quality framework sees external and internal evaluation as complementary contributors to school improvement and capacity-building. It maintains that the most powerful agent of improvement is a well-integrated system of evaluation that combines the external perspective with the reflective and collective insights of school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

And it's important to be aware that inspectors will use *Looking at Our School 2016* as a benchmark when evaluating practice in schools. What that means is that *Looking at Our School 2016* provides a common reference point and a common language when schools and inspectors are engaged in professional discussions about quality and effective practice.

Reporting to parents: how much detail and what's essential?

Parents should know four things: what you investigated; how you found out what's working well; what you're now going to work on; and what they can do to help. And why not share some information about key school policies? We've created a template that you might like to use or adapt. You'll find it [here](#).

Getting to grips with data!

There's a well-known acronym that perhaps has become so familiar that it's lost some of its punch. The acronym is **DRIP**, and it stands for **Data Rich, Information Poor**. While it might look like yet another example of corporate-speak cleverality, it actually makes a very worthwhile point, which is this: just because you have the facts and figures, it doesn't mean that you are well informed.

The word 'data', no matter how it's pronounced, doesn't exactly set pulses racing in Irish schools. A lot of the often negative feeling toward the word among teachers comes from a belief that schools are too complex and multi-dimensional to be reduced to a set of figures and tables. And that's absolutely right! All the human situations and interactions that are part of every school can't be represented in all their variety on any spreadsheet known to man. However – and here's the rub – in order to address some of the complex realities that exist in every school, you have to look closely and in detail at certain facts and figures. In that way, you are ensuring that **data** becomes **information**.



Take for example the sometimes tricky area of **attendance**. It's obvious that if students aren't in school regularly, they'll have difficulty making progress and there will be significant gaps in their learning. So it's likely enough that looking at attendance patterns could be part of action planning for improved learner outcomes. But it can be quite surprising how often schools don't carry out really careful gathering of attendance data. Absences may not be recorded for each lesson, or may not be collated, even where very good technology is available to assist with this. And then the figures themselves are of little value until they are analysed, and patterns and trends emerge, so that raw data becomes meaningful information. Once you've done that – and you may be quite surprised by what you find! – you have the wherewithal to identify what actions are necessary to bring about measurable improvement.

Another area where schools have lots of potentially very rich data is the area of **examination attainment**. While many schools carry out an analysis of results every year, the analysis may often entail only a general comparison with the national figures, which is of fairly limited use. The important thing to ask yourself about any set of information is: *'What can we find out from this, and how can we make best use of that knowledge?'*



In the case of exam results, schools can bring a much more knowledgeable eye to the data than anyone. You, collectively, know the individual students and the characteristics of the year group as a whole in a way that no-one else does. What this means is that you can look at outcomes for individuals and for the whole cohort and make a good judgement on the extent to which **expectations** have been met, have not been met, or indeed have been exceeded. You can consider how consistent attainment is across the range of subjects. And you can do a year-on-year analysis to identify emerging trends and take action either to strengthen or to combat them.

Obviously, what this article has focused on so far is what might be called **hard data** – facts and figures. But as you know, they're not just facts and figures when they're attached to the individuals and groups that are your students. Looking at them honestly and critically, you can draw a great deal of information from them which you can apply to the core business of supporting and developing students' learning experiences and outcomes in your school.

Finally, a word about **soft data**, relating to less tangible but hugely important areas, such as students' dispositions towards learning, how they see themselves as learners, and the approaches that help them to learn better. **Student surveys** and **focus group meetings** have, we know, surfaced very valuable insights, which have helped to shape, inform and, ultimately, improve learner experience and outcomes.

SSE and the new Resource Allocation Model

Circular [14/2017](#) sets out the Department's Resource Allocation Model (RAM) for children with special educational needs. By now, every school will have received notification of its allocation of resources to assist them in meeting the needs of those students. This article seeks to reassure schools that the SSE process can be useful for them in identifying, meeting and reviewing the learning needs of students. As you examine the [Guidelines](#) which have been produced to assist schools in the implementation of the new allocation model, it's likely that you'll notice how many of the approaches suggested are already in place in your school as a result of SSE. For example, the Guidelines include a Self-Reflective Questionnaire designed to help you to address the following key questions:

- How can we **identify** students' needs?
- How can we **meet** these needs?
- How can we **monitor and report** on progress?

These key questions are particularly relevant to standards within the domains of learner outcomes and teachers' collective / collaborative practice in the quality framework. This questionnaire is for use by all of the teachers in your school and is designed as a dynamic, developmental document to inform implementation of the revised RAM. The questionnaire itself should serve as a stimulus for reflection and discussion. The six steps of the SSE process could be used as outlined in the example below:

Step 1 Identify Focus

Using the key questions from the self-reflective questionnaire as a menu, choose an area that is most relevant to the school's needs.

- For example, you might choose "How can we identify students' needs in order to address them?" as a focus

Step 2 Gather Evidence

Use the prompt questions from the focus area in the Self-Reflective Questionnaire to establish the existing practices in the school collaboratively. For example;

- *How do we use the Continuum of Support and Student Support Files to provide a documented and staged approach to identifying and meeting students' needs?*
- *Do we consider individual needs across a broad range, including academic, social, communication, emotional, and behavioural needs?*
- *Do we identify environmental and contextual issues which need modification (visual, hearing, physical, sensory)?*

Step 3 Analyse and Make Judgements

Use the evidence you have gathered from the self-reflective questionnaire to identify the strengths of the existing provision as well as the key areas for improvement in how the school identifies students' needs.

Step 4 Write the Improvement Plan

You should give some consideration to who will be responsible for drafting and completing the plan. We've stated consistently that the focus of SSE is not on the paperwork, but it's necessary to clearly outline, agree and share the actions and improvement targets needed to identify and address students' needs more effectively.

Step 5 Put Improvement Plan into Action

For this step, the SSE mantra of 'every teacher, every lesson, every day' is important. It really has to be about all of the teachers in your school consistently implementing the approaches agreed to meet the identified needs of students through the Continuum of Support.

Step 6 Monitor Actions and Evaluate impact

You need to plan how you're going to monitor the effectiveness of the agreed actions as they are implemented in lessons. At agreed intervals the school should review progress on how its students' needs are identified again with reference to the questions first used at step one of the process.

We've attempted in this article to show that while in itself the Resource Allocation Model may be viewed as a new initiative, the approach to implementing it should draw upon and develop the SSE process that schools are becoming very familiar with. The ultimate aim of the model is to assist teachers and school leaders in implementing the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches for all students.