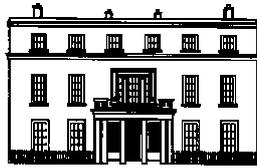


# SSE UPDATE FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS



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# SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 1 – MAY 2013

## Welcome!

This is the first issue of SSE Update, an e-bulletin for post-primary schools, which we hope will support you as you engage with the school self-evaluation process. Through SSE Update, we will provide information and clarification as you manage the SSE process and make it your own. We also hope that the regular appearance of SSE Update on the website will contribute to an e-forum, allowing schools to share effective practices and to gain insights from each other's experiences.

In the course of visiting schools to present the SSE process, we in the Inspectorate emphasised that SSE is, first and foremost, concerned with the core work of schools: teaching and learning. In your school now, you may be considering what aspect of teaching and learning it would be most useful to begin with. Whether you decide on literacy or numeracy or some other aspect – and the choice is yours – we hope that you will find the first two articles helpful, now or in the future. The third article looks at how the SSE process can assist schools to plan and prepare for the reformed junior cycle.

In these articles, you'll find references to *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*; *A Framework for Junior Cycle*; and, of course, the *SSE Guidelines for Post-primary Schools*. You'll find these documents in full on the SSE web site.

You will also find in this issue some authentic accounts from schools of their SSE work to date. We hope you'll find these illustrations of the process helpful – but it's worth remembering that the documents matter only insofar as they provide a record of what is really happening in the classroom!

Finally, in response to your questions and comments on the SSE process, you will find some information and clarifications in the FAQ section on page 8.

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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## LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND THE SSE PROCESS

One of the fundamental principles of school self-evaluation is that the targets and actions set out in the school improvement plan (SIP) will have an impact on the work of all teachers so that SSE is truly a whole-school process. In the same way, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* states that all teachers should be teachers of literacy. In particular, the strategy states that post-primary teachers “should avoid the tendency to teach subject content in isolation from the core communication skills that all young people need to interact with knowledge and life experiences”.

In your school now, you may be preparing to focus on literacy development using the SSE process. As a school, you may have identified in a general way some concerns about students’ literacy skills. You may be concerned about the accuracy and structure of their written work; the extent to which they can engage meaningfully with written texts; or aspects of their speaking and listening skills. The six-step SSE process will help you to identify strengths and areas for improvement in a sound, evidence-based way, to reflect on and adjust teaching and learning practices as you find necessary, to set targets, and to implement and monitor your SIP.

The first step is to **gather evidence** relating to students’ present literacy skills to provide a starting point for a systematic process of improvement. You should find the suggestions and advice on gathering evidence in Chapter 5 of the *SSE Guidelines* useful at this point, along with the sample checklists and templates given in the Appendix. You’ll find a literacy checklist on p.72. A balance of hard evidence (for example, what is the assessment data telling you?) and soft evidence (such as, what are your students telling you about what’s difficult and what’s helpful?) will ensure that your **analysis**, the second step, will be well informed and comprehensive.

The third step involves **drawing conclusions and making judgements about strengths and areas for development** to improve students’ literacy skills. Chapter 3 of the *SSE Guidelines* sets out the teaching and learning quality framework. In making judgements about areas for development, a specific theme (or sub-theme) from the framework may emerge as being particularly relevant to your findings. Chapter 4 of the *SSE Guidelines* contains evaluation criteria and quality statements for each theme. Evaluation criteria specifically relating to literacy can be found for ‘Learner outcomes’ (see p.30) and ‘Teachers’ practice’ (see pp.38, 40). The quality statements for ‘Students’ learning experiences’ (see pp. 33,35,37) give descriptions of literacy-rich learning. Looking at your own practice against these criteria will enable you to answer the key SSE question, “How well are we doing?”

While **your school self-evaluation report**, the fourth step, should be short, it is an important record of your findings and judgements and will also help you to keep the wider school community informed. (In the area of literacy, parents’ awareness and support is especially important.) The resulting **school improvement plan** should set out clearly the SMART targets for literacy development, and the teaching and learning practices needed to achieve them.

All teachers will have a role in **implementing** the SIP for literacy. Students’ speaking and listening skills can be developed in all subjects. Many subjects require students to produce factual writing, such as reports and accounts. As much as possible, subject departments should agree a common structure and layout for these so that students experience consistency and lots of opportunities for reinforcement. In the same way, students will find it very helpful to learn and apply the same reading comprehension strategies across a range of subjects. And helping students to learn better is what SSE is all about.

## NUMERACY DEVELOPMENT AND THE SSE PROCESS

*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* explains that 'numeracy encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings'. Being numerate means being able 'to think and communicate quantitatively, to make sense of data, to have a spatial awareness, to understand patterns and sequences, and to recognise situations where mathematical reasoning can be applied to solve problems'. Because numeracy skills are so wide-ranging, they have an impact on students' progress in all subjects. This means that numeracy development needs a whole-school approach that gives students every possible opportunity to acquire, apply and consolidate numeracy skills.

If your school is considering numeracy development as the first aspect to focus on in SSE, you as a staff have probably reflected on how students are doing in this area. You may already have discussed some concerns about students' numeracy skills: for example, difficulty with interpretation and presentation of graphs; or with accuracy in calculation and measurement. The 6-step school self-evaluation (SSE) process provides a systematic way to set evidence-based targets for improvement and to identify actions that will bring it about.

A good starting point for self-evaluation of numeracy is to look at learner outcomes. (Remember that these include not just students' knowledge and skills but also their attitudes and dispositions towards numeracy.) You may then need to consider how aspects of teachers' practice or students' learning experiences could be changed to improve outcomes.

You can **gather evidence** about learner outcomes, teachers' practices and students' learning experiences in many different ways. Some will be familiar. Many schools already use questionnaires and comment sheets to discover students' and parents' views. Most schools examine student uptake of levels in Mathematics, and the certificate examination results. Consider the evidence the school already has and what the school needs to know before using tools to acquire additional information. The *SSE Guidelines* includes samples of these tools in the Appendix. You'll find a numeracy checklist on page 73. It's important to gather relevant information only, or the process will become unmanageable.

What evidence about numeracy do you already have? Since September 2012 all schools have baseline data, the STen results, for incoming first-year students. You also have data relating to student performance in the certificate examinations in Mathematics. What other evidence might you gather? Surveying or interviewing students will give you valuable 'soft' evidence about students' attitudes to Mathematics and numeracy. Subject departments could identify the numeracy concepts and skills relating to their subject and the methodologies they use to teach and apply them, and could share this information with the whole staff.

The next step is to **analyse the evidence**. The evaluation criteria in the *SSE Guidelines* will provide you with a framework and language for discussing what is working well and what needs to be improved.

The third step is to **draw conclusions about the quality** of learner outcomes and the quality of teaching and learning practices so you can identify areas for improvement. The *Guidelines* provide exemplar quality statements and evaluation criteria for each sub-theme to help you in this process. Evaluation criteria specifically relating to numeracy can be found for 'Learner outcomes' (see p.30) and 'Teachers' practice' (see pp.38, 40). The quality statements for 'Students' learning experiences' (see pp. 33, 35, 37) give descriptions of numeracy-rich learning. Drawing conclusions about quality enables you as a school to celebrate good work in relation to numeracy as well as highlighting aspects that require improvement. Using the quality continuum also helps to provide an overall assessment of quality.

This article has taken you through the first three steps of SSE of numeracy development. In the next edition we'll look at numeracy and the final three steps of the SSE process.

## JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM AND THE SSE PROCESS

The SSE process is intended to help schools to examine their own teaching and learning practices, to identify strengths and areas for development and improvement, and to share this information with their school community. Above all, it should enable schools to set targets to improve learner outcomes, and to plan and implement actions to achieve those targets. Each school's improvement plans - one for literacy, one for numeracy, and one for another aspect of teaching and learning in the first four-year phase of self-evaluation - will fulfil the requirements in the Department's circular on school self-evaluation and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. School self-evaluation will also be an important support in implementing curriculum change and achieving improved outcomes for junior cycle students.

*A Framework for Junior Cycle*, launched in October 2012, sets out a radical vision for the sort of educational experience that students should have in lower secondary education. It accepts the need for fundamental changes in our approach to curriculum and assessment to ensure that students' needs are at the core of teaching and learning.

The framework describes the learning at the core of junior cycle in twenty-four statements. These state what students should know, understand, value and be able to do at the end of junior cycle. The framework highlights the importance of developing eight key skills, including literacy and numeracy, which are crucial for learners to access the curriculum and for their future life chances.

Implementing the sort of teaching, learning and assessment practices envisaged in the new junior cycle implies significant changes, not only to what we teach but also to how we teach, how students learn and how that learning is assessed. Assessment will have a more integral role in learning activities (rather than coming solely at the end). The SSE process will help teachers to examine how they are teaching, to share practice with each other, and to co-operate closely as they assess students' learning.

SSE is ideally suited to evaluating current junior cycle practices and to managing the changes in the curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment that are envisaged at junior cycle. Many schools are already considering the inclusion of an aspect relevant to the new junior cycle – assessment for example – as the third area that they will examine using the 6-step SSE process.

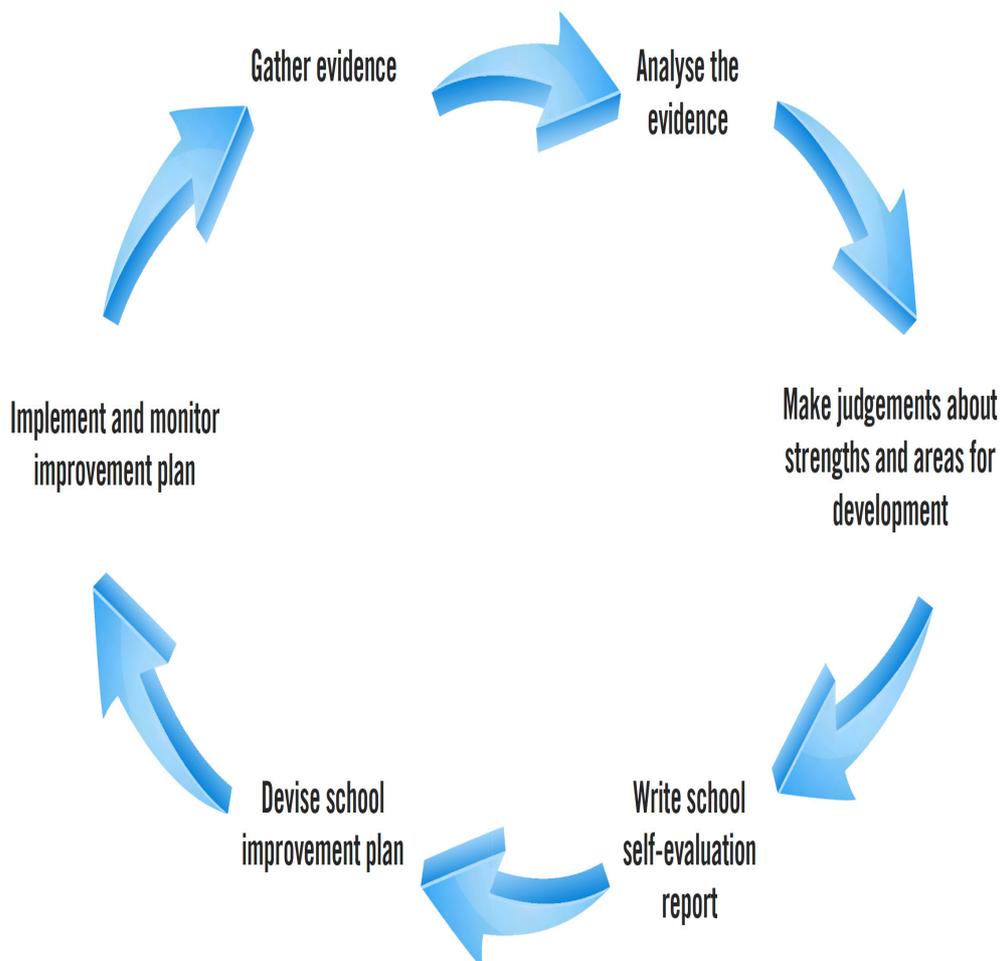
Schools should take a whole-school approach to **gathering evidence** about their current curriculum provision: for example, the subjects offered; the time given to each subject; teaching approaches and students' learning experiences across the curriculum; and assessment practices in the various subject departments. Collecting and considering the views of students, parents and teachers about the suitability of the curriculum to the needs of students will also be important. A range of tools is available in the *SSE Guidelines* to ensure that all relevant voices are included. Schools will also need to review their available resources, including the skills and expertise of staff.

The statements of learning, the eight key skills and the assessment approaches outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* and in the subject specifications (as syllabuses will now be called) will assist schools when **analysing** current curriculum provision, learning experiences and assessment practices. So will the evaluation criteria in the *SSE Guidelines* for sub-themes such as students' engagement in learning, learning to learn, teaching approaches and assessment. By benchmarking current practice in these core areas of work against the SSE criteria and the junior cycle expectations, **schools will be able to draw conclusions** about what will remain the same and what they need to change in the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. They will also be in a position to make judgements about the professional development needs of teachers and management.

As with the school self-evaluation reports on literacy and numeracy, a **short self-evaluation report** on elements of junior cycle reform will enable schools to keep a record of their findings while at the same time keeping parents and other relevant members of the school community informed. The report will identify the elements of current provision that are already aligned with junior cycle requirements while outlining what needs to be changed, developed or improved.

The resulting **school improvement plan** might include the subjects to be offered and how subject choices will be organised; the short courses and learning experiences they will offer; how key skills will be developed; and how the school will meet the required time allocations for each subject and short course. It will set out the targets and approaches on which the school has agreed to bring about changes and improvements in teaching, learning and assessment. Finally, the SSE process will assist schools **to implement and monitor these improvement plans**.

## THE SIX-STEP SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS



## THE SSE STORY SO FAR IN TWO SCHOOLS

How does SSE work in real schools? How do schools engage with each step of the 6-step process? These school profiles describe that real context and show how schools have grappled with SSE. These schools have their own story to tell, their own unique perspective on SSE. The profiles highlight the challenges faced by the schools in implementing SSE on a whole-school basis and emphasise the need to ensure that all voices, including parents', are heard.

Other authentic accounts from schools, along with SSE reports and school improvement plans, will be available in the School Profiles section of the SSE web site. This will, we hope, develop as a useful way for schools to share their experiences of the SSE process.

### PEN-PICTURE 1

Here is a brief pen picture of one school's engagement with the SSE process so far.

The school opened in 2005 in an area of very rapidly-growing population. It moved to new purpose-built accommodation in 2007 and now has over 800 students. In further describing the school context in its SSE report, the school states that it is involved in a number of educational initiatives and that a WSE-MLL took place in 2010/11. Prior to the WSE-MLL, the school had conducted its own survey of all students. One statement it asked students to respond to was:

*I enjoy going to my lessons and learning*

The school compared the responses to this statement with the responses to two statements in the WSE-MLL survey:

*I enjoy going to my lessons* and *My lessons are interesting*

The school found a close correlation between the responses in its own survey and the WSE-MLL. Furthermore, it found that these responses did not compare favourably with the students' responses to statements about the atmosphere in the school and how well they got on with other students. These initial findings suggested that students' attitudes to their schoolwork merited further exploration.

The school gathered more detailed evidence from a variety of sources. Each subject department carried out investigations into the level of student engagement in the subject, using closed and open questionnaires. The school also developed a peer observation process, with agreed protocols and templates to help to identify the classroom approaches that created the highest levels of student engagement.

As the school's SSE report puts it: "*These findings created the rationale for the theme of Students' engagement in learning to be selected for SSE...*"

The school summarised the strengths found:

- + excellent ICT facilities which help to promote student engagement
- + many students report that they find their subjects interesting
- + there is a good relationship between students and teachers

The school prioritised the following areas for improvement:

- greater use of peer and group work in classrooms
- lesson content to have greater relevance to students' lives
- improving the quality of feedback to students

To address these areas, the school has devised a school improvement plan (SIP), setting out improvement targets and the actions required to achieve these targets.

## PEN-PICTURE 2

Here is a brief pen picture of one school's engagement with the SSE process so far.

The school is the only post-primary school in its town. It is co-educational and has an open admissions policy. A minority of the students have had an educational assessment at some time since they began primary school.

The school decided to focus on the literacy attainment of its students as the first aspect of teaching and learning to be evaluated. So far in 2012/13 the school has completed the first four steps of the SSE process.

The school **gathered and analysed evidence** from a variety of sources. All first-year students completed a cognitive ability test (CAT) and this information was compared with the students' STen results obtained from the primary school. Trends in uptake of English at higher and ordinary levels over the past five years at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels, and student performance at these levels were examined. In addition the performance of the class of 2012 in Junior Certificate English was compared with their performance in the CAT on entry in 2009.

Third-year students were surveyed in relation to their attitudes to speaking in class and making oral presentations. The survey results were analysed and collated with the analysis of testing of oral competence over the past two years. In the oral test, students spoke for one minute on a topic of their choice and were marked on a scale of one to five. Performance was rated at one if speech was very inarticulate, very unclear, very hesitant, very incoherent and very broken sentences were used. If speech was clear, articulate, continuous, coherent and full sentences were used, performance was rated at five.

The school also devised a template for assessing samples of students' written work. At least one subject other than English gathered evidence from a range of students of varying ability. In this way, information about students' competence in spelling, syntax, punctuation and clarity in writing was gathered and analysed. Teachers' views of students' attitudes to, ability in, and performance in literacy were also ascertained. Feedback from the WSE-MLL in 2011 in relation to teaching and learning also formed part of the evidence base.

Following the analysis of all the data, the school **made judgements** in relation to students' literacy skills and **drew conclusions**.

The school summarised the strengths found:

- Uptake of and attainment in higher level English in the Leaving Certificate examination is consistently above national average
- At Junior Certificate, uptake of and attainment in higher level English is consistently at or just below the national average
- The standard of teaching is good or very good (as described in the 2011 WSE-MLL)
- The school has a print-rich environment

The school prioritised the following as areas for improvement:

- At Junior Certificate, uptake of level appropriate to ability as indicated by CAT outcomes
- Students' confidence and competence in oral expression
- Accuracy and correctness of expression in students' written work

The school is currently devising a school improvement plan which will be implemented from September 2013.

## THE SSE PROCESS – YOUR QUESTIONS

In the course of our SSE presentations to schools, you have asked some questions about the process. We've noted three specific areas where you have looked for clarification. We'll continue to respond to your questions in the next issue and hope that our clarifications will be helpful in your ongoing engagement with SSE.

**Q.** *What timeframe should we be following for the various stages of the SSE process?*

**A.** All schools should now be engaging in the SSE process. Many schools have gathered and analysed the evidence they require to make judgements about what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed. Some of these schools will have completed an SSE report and developed a school improvement plan by the end of the 2012/13 school year. If so, they'll be ready to implement their actions and strategies for improvement by September 2013.

Other schools are still in the process of gathering or analysing their evidence to help them draw conclusions about their areas of focus for improvement. As soon as they have identified their strengths and areas for improvement, they should complete an SSE report and develop a school improvement plan.

**The final date for all schools to complete their first report and plan is the end of the 2013/14 school year.** As soon as the SSE report and school improvement plan are completed, a summary of these should be provided to the school community. The board of management should decide how best to ensure that all members of the school community receive these.

**Q.** *How should DEIS schools manage the SSE process while also engaging in the targeted planning required for DEIS?*

**A.** DEIS schools should be well placed to engage in the SSE process. They are required to develop action plans to improve a range of aspects of school life, including literacy and numeracy. The SSE process will help them to ensure that the targets in their action plans relate to areas for improvement that have been identified from the analysis of reliable evidence. DEIS schools that already have three-year improvement plans in place for literacy and numeracy should review these plans as part of their ongoing monitoring of implementation and make necessary changes based on evidence as required.

The SSE process will also help DEIS schools to ensure that all improvement plans include, wherever relevant, a focus on teaching and learning. They should use the SSE process, referencing the teaching and learning framework and evaluation criteria, when reviewing and implementing plans already in place; examining new areas of focus; completing new reports; and developing new action plans for improvement.

Using the SSE process to focus on aspects of teaching and learning, such as teaching approaches or student engagement in learning, should lead to improvements in the quality of student experiences in the classroom. This, in turn, should assist in improving attendance, retention and attainment, which are the focus of ongoing planning for improvement in DEIS schools.

DEIS schools should provide a summary of their SSE report and their action plan for improvement to their school community in the same time frame as all other schools.

**Q.** How should schools use the legislative and regulatory checklist and the policy checklist in the SSE Guidelines?

**A.** These checklists are provided to assist boards of management to use the SSE process to examine and report on school policies and practices. Evaluating these aspects of school life each year will enable boards to assure their school communities that the school is being managed effectively so that students can learn.

Each year, the board should set time aside to review its practice in the areas listed. It should ensure that board members are familiar with the content of the relevant legislation, rule, regulation or guideline. The board will then be in a position to determine if its practice is consistent with requirements. Where requirements are fully met, the board need only confirm this using the 'yes' box. Aspects for development should be noted in the relevant column of the checklist.

Targets and actions to address aspects of practice for development should become part of the school improvement plan.

The board should provide a modified version\* of the completed checklists to the school community on an annual basis, as an appendix to the summary SSE report and school improvement plan.

\*A suitable template for this purpose is available in the Resources section of the SSE website.