# SSE UPDATE

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## SSE – THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

This is the third issue of SSE Update, an e-bulletin for post-primary schools, which we hope will support your continuing engagement with the school self-evaluation process. Issues 1 and 2 are available on the SSE website: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/sse-archive-documents .If you haven't seen them yet, you might like to take a look at them. They cover many of the topics that schools find themselves getting to grips with as they engage with the SSE process. If you're dealing with literacy and numeracy improvement plans, or target-setting, or if you're reviewing your current junior cycle programme, you might find the articles they contain on these and other topics helpful.

In this issue, we're going to concentrate on aspects of the SSE process that are especially relevant to the 2013/14 school year.

Department circular 40/2012 gives information on the SSE process, and sets out what schools are required to do. One requirement is that, by June of this year, all schools will have shared their SSE report and their school improvement plan with their own school community. On page 2 of this issue, you'll find an article with some advice on how to ensure that your SSE report and school improvement plan are 'good to go' to your school community. If you're unsure about what they should contain – and what shouldn't be included – we hope this article will clarify these points.

And we'd be delighted if you would consider sharing your reports and plans with other schools through the SSE website. Please contact info@schoolself-evaluation.ie for details of how to do so.

Next, there are some reflections on the learner outcomes theme in the SSE Teaching and Learning Framework. They focus on how schools can use the assessment *data* that is available to all schools to ensure that it becomes rich and contextualised *information*. We hope that these will provide some food for thought, no matter what your school context is. You'll find this article on page 3.

An article that takes up again some aspects of target-setting is on page 4.

The key skills and statements of learning in the Framework for Junior Cycle will begin to inform the teaching and learning processes in schools from September 2014. Schools may find it helpful to use the SSE process when evaluating the junior cycle curriculum they are currently providing. On page 6 you'll find a suggested approach to reviewing your present curriculum through a subject department reflection task. It might be worth taking a look, in your subject department groupings, at the earlier articles on junior cycle reform in the previous issues of the Update beforehand.

Wishing you and your students success as you head towards the final term.

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

# PREPARING AN SSE REPORT AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

> "Schools should provide a summary report to the whole school community. Such a report will be very short and will provide details of the findings with regard to the strengths identified and the areas the school intends to prioritise for improvement." (*SSE Guidelines*, p.60)

The above statement contains, in a nutshell, what schools need to do by June 2014 with regard to the summary report. There are two key points to note, and schools should try to strike the right balance between them. The first is that the summary report should be very short, and the *Guidelines* recommend that the school report and the summary report should be written in clear, specific, accessible language. The second point is that the summary report has to contain enough detail to give the school community a clear picture of what the school has discovered in going through the first three steps of the SSE process. So, your school has to keep the summary report short and jargon-free, while also ensuring that it answers these four key questions:

➢ What evidence did you gather and why?
➢ What did the analysis of all the data tell you?
➢ What conclusions about strengths and areas for improvement did you draw from it?
➢ What priorities for improvement did you identify?

Put simply, the summary report should tell the story of your school's journey through the process so far, clearly and straightforwardly.

Your summary report should also include a completed checklist indicating the school's compliance with statutory requirements regarding legislation and policies. You'll find a report and checklist template, which you might like to use, on the SSE website: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/ .You'll notice that the checklist attached to the SSE report template for the school community doesn't go into the same level of detail as the checklist for internal use in the school. This is to ensure that the school communicates openly with parents and others while also recognising that certain information is sensitive and ensuring that personal data is protected.

> "A summary of the school improvement plan should be provided to the whole school community." (*SSE Guidelines*, p.61)

On page 61 of the *Guidelines*, you'll find a clear account of what a school improvement plan should contain and how it should be written. It needs to state in clear and practical terms

➢ the SMART[1] targets your school has set
➢ the actions your school has selected to achieve the targets
➢ who is responsible for the actions
➢ what the timeframe for the actions is
➢ how you'll know whether the targets have been achieved

The school improvement plan that you'll share with your whole school community should contain this information, but with one important difference in the case of the third bullet. While the plan that will be used for internal reference should be as detailed as possible about the personnel responsible, the plan to be shared with the whole school community should avoid referring to named individuals in the context of specific responsibilities.

Putting the summary report and improvement plan on a single page will help to show that the plan is your school's response to the priorities identified in the report. Then circulate it with the relevant checklist to the school community in whatever way you feel is most reliable and effective.

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[1] **S**pecific – **M**easurable – **A**ttainable – **R**ealistic – **T**ime-bound – see SSE Update, Issue 2, page 3.

# USING DATA ON LEARNER OUTCOMES IN THE SSE PROCESS
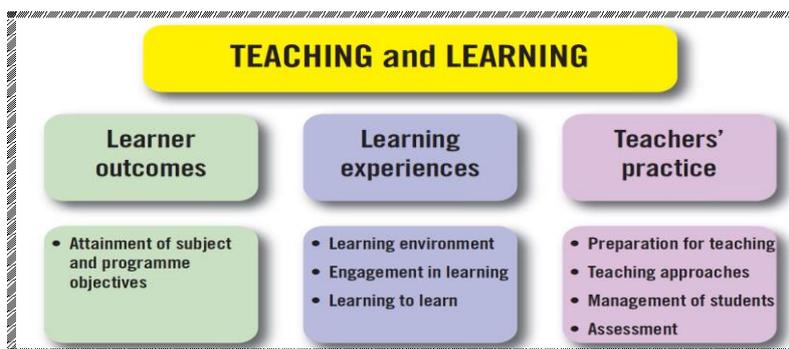


"Learner outcomes" is one of the themes in the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework. It has only one sub-theme: the attainment of subject and programme objectives. On pages 30 and 31 of the *Guidelines*, you'll find the evaluation criteria and quality statements that apply to this theme. These take a broad perspective, and include aspects of students' thinking skills and knowledge development; students' personal and interpersonal skills; students' attitudes and dispositions; specific points regarding literacy and numeracy skills development; and **attainment trends**. The last of these is an area where schools generate, and receive, a great deal of data. This data can provide very rich information to the SSE process, if it is analysed and utilised constructively.

Let's look at the evaluation criteria relating to attainment trends, on page 30 of the *Guidelines*. You'll remember that the evaluation criteria given in the *Guidelines* describe practice which has significant strengths. The first two criteria are:

- The overall attainment of the students with regard to the subject and programme is improving or remains at a high standard
- Students, including those at risk of underachieving, are attaining well and are making very good progress from their prior levels of achievement

They can be applied to the students' work in school in a range of settings. The focus could be on participation and completion rates of classroom tasks, for example. These criteria are also very relevant to homework assignments, because they allow you, and your students, to view homework as evidence of real improvement or of consistently good work. Most obviously, you can apply these criteria when considering the outcomes of all summative assessments throughout the school year, including end-of-topic and end-of-term tests, and house exams. While these are summative events, they also can be a valuable part of assessment for learning. It is very good practice to help students to reflect on the outcomes of these assessments. A few simple questions will set them on their way:

> What parts of this topic do I understand well? What do I need to work on before the next test? What can I do to help myself? What can I ask the teacher to do to help me?

The last two criteria focus on the state examinations as a measure of the attainment of subject and programme objectives.

- High expectations are set for students' achievement in the state examinations
- Performance in state examinations compares favourably with national norms, taking due cognisance of school context

Our inspection reports frequently recommend that schools analyse examination results more closely, to ensure that this valuable data becomes meaningful information. Comparisons to national norms can be enlightening but should not be the only comparative analysis done. Year-on-year comparisons at subject and whole-school level are essential in establishing trends. Looking at a sample of students' outcomes across a range of subjects will also yield rich information. And bear in mind that, from the SSE perspective, the key issue is to use such data to inform your planning for improvement.

# SMART² TARGET SETTING

In the second SSE Update, we outlined some suggestions regarding effective target setting and writing a school improvement plan. Target-setting is widely recognised as being difficult to get right, so it's worth looking again at the basis for good target-setting, along with some examples of good targets, and why they are good – and some targets that won't work, and why they are not good.

So what is a target? **A target is a quantifiable change in performance level to be attained within a specified time.**

Targets:
- are inextricably linked to baseline data, appropriate success criteria and actions.
- should be expressed in terms of improved outcomes and attainment for learners.
- should be quantifiable or measurable. (It's very difficult to determine whether a target has been met if it is not explicit!)

Verbs such as "to understand, to know, to learn" are not useful when setting targets as they are hard to measure. Verbs such as "to increase, to raise, to decrease" are more useful when setting targets as they are quantifiable. Quantifiable targets are straightforward: you'll find some clear examples on the next page. And remember that targets always need success criteria. Success criteria are the measurable outcomes of the targets: how you will know that the targets have been achieved.

Once you have set measurable targets, you can decide on the actions your school needs to take to achieve them. As mentioned in the last SSE Update, actions generally relate to changes in students' learning experiences and teachers' practice. **The golden rule is that actions identified should be clearly related to meeting a specific target.**

What are the common pitfalls when you are trying to set SMART targets? Not surprisingly, there has been a lot of research in this area. A look at some of this research points to four potential problems to watch out for.

1. The problem of setting too many targets. Better two or three that you can really work on than ten that it will be impossible to manage.

2. The problem of setting inappropriate targets. This is very likely to happen if you haven't gathered baseline data or if you haven't analysed it carefully.

3. The problem of setting targets but not ensuring that they really are SMART. Putting in percentages isn't enough to make a target SMART. A target is achievable and realistic only when you can say HOW it's going to be achieved in your school, for your students.

4. The problem of confusing actions or processes with targets. This is the other side of the coin from the last point. There, the problem is targets without actions; here, it's identifying an action without identifying in SMART terms what you hope to achieve by the action. Because this happens so often, it's worth giving some examples that might be recognisable. A school might set as a target 'to develop a school library' or 'to display posters illustrating applications of numeracy'. These are actions with a purpose; they are not targets. In these cases the school needs to ask: "Why are we doing this? What do we want to achieve?" If the school can answer these questions in measurable terms, they will then have relevant targets and will be able to state appropriate success criteria.

On the following page are six sets of targets, with a short commentary under each set. (Some of the effective targets come from actual school improvement plans.) We'd be interested to hear if you find these examples useful when working on your own targets. Please let us know at info@schoolself-evaluation.ie .

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[2] A SMART target is specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound

**Sample Targets 1**

• Increase the percentage of students who check their work for mistakes from 25% in 2013 to 35% in 2014

• Increase the proportion of second year students who say they like maths from a quarter to a half over 3 years

• Increase the percentage of students who attempt higher level mathematics in Junior Certificate from 40% to 45% by June 2014

• Decrease the number of students who think reading is boring from 35% to 25% over 3 years

• Improve standards in effective writing (thoroughness of detail) among fifth year students from 43% to 53% by June 2015

• Increase the number of Junior Cycle students using digital technology to express, share and present opinions from 43% to 75% over 3 years

*These are effective targets. They are specific, measurable and timebound. As the school gets used to setting targets and reviews progress at the end of year one of implementation, it can check the targets and adjust them if necessary.*

**Sample Targets 2**

• A 10% improvement in student attainment when retested using X standardised test

• A 50% improvement in interest in reading [from baseline data previously gathered]

*If the timeframe for achieving these targets is outlined in the improvement plan, then these are good targets. They are specific and measurable. Review of progress at the end of year one of implementation will help to ascertain if they are attainable and realistic.*

**Sample Targets 3**

• 75% of third year students will perform at higher level in Mathematics by 2015.

• 80% of all students will demonstrate competent use of fractions and decimals at the end of $1^{st}$ year.

• 70% of all JCSA students will demonstrate the ability to make connections between what they know and new information by the end of third year *(Managing information and thinking)*

*Assuming these targets represent an improvement in students' knowledge and skills from current baseline data as outlined in the SSE report, then these would be good targets.*

**Sample Targets 4**

• To increase the number of students who use higher-order questions in pair work and class work*(Communicating)*

• To develop and improve school wide literacy

*Why are these not good targets? They are not time bound or measurable. They could become SMART targets if written as follows: "To increase/improve ………. by X% within Y years" and if the increase was related to evidence-based data.*

**Sample Targets 5**

• To ensure that every subject plan would make reference to using good group work practice and teachers will increase the time spent at group work.

• To link the student engagement project with the principles of the new Junior Cycle programme.

*Why are these not good targets? The main reason is that they do not relate to enhancing learner outcomes.*

**Sample Targets 6**

• By the end of 2016 all students will have good reading skills

• By the end of 2015 all students demonstrate the ability to use ideas in different contexts by clearly and precisely supporting them with personal knowledge/experience

*Do you think these are good targets? Two questions could be asked in relation to these targets.*

1. *Is it realistic to expect "all students" to attain the target?*

2. *In the case of the first target, what is meant by "good"?*

# USING THE SSE PROCESS TO PLAN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE JCSA

The SSE process can support your school in implementing the new Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA). Using the six steps, you can examine the Framework and, in particular, you can consider the statements of learning and how they might be implemented in your school. This reflective process will enable you to highlight the aspects of your practice that match the statements of learning and to identify opportunities to extend students' learning experiences, where statements of learning are currently not being met.

Taking this approach, you would **gather evidence** by looking at your school's present junior cycle curriculum – programmes, subjects, courses, and all the learning opportunities you offer – through the lens of the requirements of the Framework. You would use the same approach also to look at your current teaching, learning and assessment practices. You would **analyse your findings** by comparing your current curriculum with the Framework's requirements, and subsequently **draw conclusions** about strengths and opportunities. You would then **plan for improvement** or development, which would include aligning your curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment with the Framework.

By following this process, you would actually be engaging in an evaluation of your own curriculum, benchmarked against the statements of learning. Perhaps the easiest way to begin this process is to start at subject department level, and then broaden your evaluation to whole-school level. You'll see, in looking at the outline below, that you need to evaluate both **what** you are teaching and **how** you are teaching it.

**Step 1: Gather evidence**
- Firstly, subject departments could examine the twenty-four statements of learning to:
    a) Determine which statements of learning are being met by the current syllabus, specification or course plan they are working with. This would involve looking at the learning outcomes outlined in these and linking them with specific statements of learning wherever possible.
    b) Look at the elaborations of these statements of learning (pages 30-38) of the Junior Cycle Framework and ascertain which components of the elaborated statements are being met by their subject or course.
    c) Determine how each of the elements of the statements of learning are being met. This could entail individual teacher reflection and subsequent discussion at subject department level of individual teaching approaches and of students' learning experiences.

**Step 2: Analyse your evidence**
The members of the subject department would then:
    a) Benchmark the learning outcomes they are currently working with against the elaborated statements of learning. Note that this links to **what** you are teaching.
    b) Benchmark teachers' practice against appropriate evaluation criteria in the *SSE Guidelines*, for example the evaluation criteria for the sub-theme *Teaching Approaches* (p.40).
    c) Benchmark students' learning experiences against appropriate evaluation criteria in the *SSE Guidelines*, for example evaluation criteria for sub-theme *students' engagement in learning* (p.34). Note that b) and c) link to **how** you are teaching.

**Step 3: Draw conclusions**
The subject teachers would now be able to:

a) Identify **which statements** are being met, **to what extent** they are met and **how** they are being met, (for example, the teaching approaches used and the learning experiences offered)
b) Identify the strengths and weaknesses in relation to teachers' practice and students' learning experiences

**Step 4: Complete the self-evaluation report**

Each subject department would then record its findings and share them with the whole staff. At whole-school level a designated person or team would merge the findings into a report. This would allow the school to identify what statements are being met at whole-school level, to what extent they are being met and how they are being met. It would also allow the school to identify any gaps in the curriculum in relation to the statements of learning.

The school would:

a) Record the statements of learning that are being met, the extent to which they are met and how they are met. Record the strengths in these areas.
b) Record the statements of learning that are not being met, and the opportunities for development in each of these areas.
c) Outline the strengths in relation to teachers' practice and students' learning experiences, and also the areas for development they have identified.

**Step 5: Develop a school improvement plan**

The school would now devise a plan which sets targets to provide for the extended statements of learning that are not currently provided for on the curriculum. The targets should relate to learner outcomes. Actions to meet these targets could include for example

o The introduction of new subjects, short courses or learning experiences
o The introduction of new teaching methodologies to ensure that the statements of learning are being met to the extent that is required by the Framework

The plan would include timeframes set over the three years of junior cycle.

**Step 6: Implement and monitor**

The plan to provide for the statements of learning would be implemented over the period of the three years of junior cycle. Subject departments should monitor and review their progress in meeting the statements of learning and should consider how successful the strategies being used are. The findings of these subject meetings would then feed into discussion at whole-school level, thus facilitating ongoing monitoring.