

# SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

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## SSE – MAKING THE PROCESS YOUR OWN

This is the fifth 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. The previous issues are available on the SSE website: <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/sse-archive-documents>.

The fourth issue of SSE Update covered the SSE seminar for school leaders hosted by the Inspectorate in October 2014. The four principals who generously shared their experience of SSE were especially clear and convincing on one point: the SSE process is not a 'one size fits all' model. What they found when leading SSE in their schools was that each school needs to make its own unique way through the process. In his opening remarks, the Chief Inspector spoke of the importance of each school's individual journey. And Professor John MacBeath expressed the same idea at the conclusion of his keynote address:

*“Traveller, there is no road. You make the road by walking.”*

You can listen to all the speakers at the seminar by clicking on the SSE seminar link on the SSE website post-primary homepage.

In this issue, we'll take our lead from these speakers and focus on 'making the process your own'.

At this stage, many of you are well on your way with your second area of focus: literacy or numeracy or some other aspect of teaching and learning. And many of you are considering how best to manage the implementation and monitoring of your first school improvement plan while developing your second. Drawing on the experience of schools that are now running two (or three) plans in tandem, we give some points to bear in mind on maintaining the process on page 2.

As you know, the Inspectorate has been making SSE advisory visits to schools where requested. You can still request a visit by email at [info@schoolself-evaluation.ie](mailto:info@schoolself-evaluation.ie). A topic that often arises during these visits is the third area of focus for SSE. Now that the SSE process has become more familiar, schools are asking themselves "What aspect of teaching and learning can we identify as the right one for us to focus on?" The *Guidelines* can be a useful resource at this point; see page 4 for more.

Does your school participate in DEIS? If so, you may have specific questions about the interface between SSE and DEIS action planning for improvement. The article on page 6 looks at what is required of DEIS schools, clarifies some points, and considers how the SSE process can support and strengthen your DEIS action plan.

Wishing you a happy and productive final term, and an enjoyable summer break!

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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## MANAGING AND MAINTAINING THE SSE PROCESS IN YOUR SCHOOL



Circular 40/2012

***“Over a four-year period from 2012, all post-primary schools should engage in school self-evaluation and produce three-year improvement plans for numeracy, literacy, and one aspect of teaching and learning across all subjects and programmes.*”**

In the school year 2012/13, schools should start the process of self-evaluation. In that year they should **select one** of the following options: ***literacy, numeracy, an aspect of teaching and learning***. In subsequent years, schools should select again from the above options so that, within the four-year period, a school self-evaluation report and a three-year school improvement plan for literacy, for numeracy, and for one aspect of teaching and learning across all subjects will be completed.”

These extracts from circular 40/2012 give an overview and timeframe for the first cycle of SSE, from 2012 to 2016. You may remember that the circular acknowledged that schools would probably need to take things more slowly in the initial stages as they worked their way into the SSE process. For that reason, the circular indicated a four-year timeframe to give schools what might be called ‘a long year one’ – up to June 2014 – to complete their first SSE report and school improvement plan. Of course, schools that felt able to move more swiftly were encouraged to do so.

As you know, the circular required schools to produce their first SSE report and school improvement plan “no later than the end of the school year 2013/14”. The circular also sets down another time marker which you need to keep in mind: “no later than the beginning of the school year 2015/16, schools should select a third area for self-evaluation and follow a similar process as in previous years.” The timeframe and actions set out in the circular are represented in the diagram below.

What ↓ When →	Year 1 (2012/13/14)	Year 2 (2014/15)	Year 3 (2015/16)
Select your first area of focus from: <b><i>literacy, numeracy, an aspect of teaching and learning</i></b>	For your first area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria
Select your <b>second</b> area of focus from: <b><i>literacy, numeracy, an aspect of teaching and learning</i></b>		For your second area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria
Select your <b>third</b> area of focus from: <b><i>literacy, numeracy, an aspect of teaching and learning</i></b>			For your third area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan

Once you are clear about what you need to do, and by when, you can begin to consider how best to manage and maintain school self-evaluation as an ongoing cyclical process in your school. As the process becomes embedded in your school's practice, you'll find that, in each year, you'll be implementing at least two improvement plans and devising one other. What you want to achieve is a workable and sustainable cycle of three-year improvement plans.

The key to making the process your own is the development of reflective practices in the school. This can start with self-reflection on the effectiveness of existing approaches and work towards a point where teachers engage in purposeful shared reflective practices. Remember, the important point is to get this process right rather than just getting it done!

Some schools, for example those involved in the piloting of SSE, have had a longer experience of the SSE process. These schools have some helpful pointers to offer others when it comes to getting your second (and third) areas of focus under way, while ensuring that you continue to implement and monitor the improvement plan for your first area of focus<sup>1</sup>. Some of these pointers will be very familiar, but they're worth repeating. They are the key to making SSE manageable and meaningful.

### **1. Keep it simple**

You'll need to think very strategically about exactly what **data** you need. Ask yourselves what is the essential data to give you the baseline you need. Concentrate on a few key questions; they're likely to be versions of these three: "How are we doing? How do we know? How could we do better?" And it makes complete sense to identify just a small number of worthwhile **targets** that will represent meaningful improvement in teaching and learning in your school.

### **2. Keep actions few and focused**

Staying with the 'keep it simple' approach, you should avoid taking on too many actions. This is where it's really crucial to ensure that you select actions that are clearly linked to the targets (a small number, remember!) that you've identified. Of course, there are lots of initiatives that you'll have heard of, maybe from other schools or from support services. The essential thing is to choose just a few, and choose them on the basis that they're most likely to achieve your targets.

### **3. Keep everyone on board**

It's very likely that each of your school improvement plans will identify different people who are key to its success. These 'drivers' ensure that the process maintains focus and momentum, and they'll have specific responsibilities. However, it's important to ensure that all members of staff are aware of the SSE process and of the improvement plans that your school is carrying out. Over time, the actions that are effective and that lead to better learning experiences will be shared and implemented throughout your school.

### **4. Keep learning**

School self-evaluation is a capacity-building process. It isn't about producing reports and plans, helpful and necessary though they may be. It *is* about each school growing as a reflective and collaborative learning community. During SSE advisory visits, sometimes schools have talked about 'mistakes' they made with SSE the first time round. But in those discussions what's really clear is how much schools have learned in the process, and how that learning can then be carried from one year into the next.

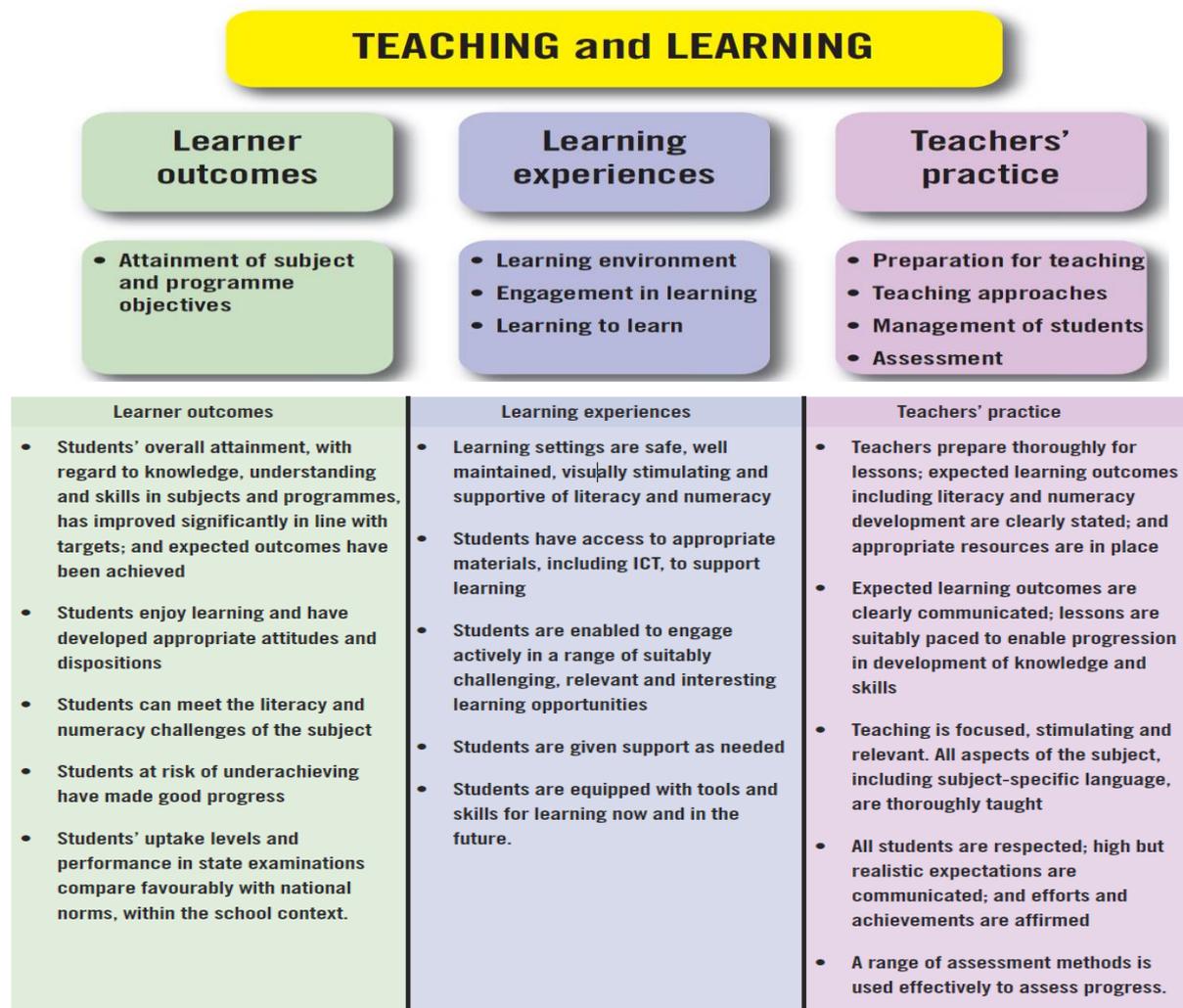
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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Máire Ní Bhróithe, principal of Ratoath College. Her presentation at the SSE October seminar gave very practical advice on maintaining the SSE process. You'll find it on the SSE website.

## SELECTING THE THIRD ASPECT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Because literacy and numeracy were identified as required areas for SSE, many schools chose these as their first and second areas of focus. Now that schools are developing a clearer picture of how the SSE process works, many of you are asking yourselves about how you can best apply the process to aspects of teaching and learning that you've identified yourselves. Indeed, this is a topic that many schools have brought up with inspectors during SSE advisory visits. During these visits, inspectors have referred to the *Guidelines* so that schools can see how they might be used to identify the third aspect of teaching and learning they'd like to work on.

We hope you'll find it worthwhile to use the *Guidelines* in this way now that many of you are scoping out 'the third aspect' that will make most sense in your school's context, to meet your students' needs. Many of the aspects that schools have mentioned in advisory visits are included in the teaching and learning framework, which is on page 24 of the *Guidelines*. The overview of good practice on page 25 of the *Guidelines* puts a little more flesh on the bones of the teaching and learning framework. You can see below how the overview aligns with and expands the framework.



There are a few pointers worth bearing in mind as you begin to think about your third SSE plan. Clearly, the most important thing is identifying and agreeing on an aspect of teaching and learning that will offer your school an opportunity for **meaningful** improvement planning. In other words, in which aspect of teaching and learning will improvement make a real and positive difference to your students? You'll want to be able to say with confidence that implementing your improvement plan *has* made a difference. This means that the impact of your actions has to be **measurable** in some

way. And finally, as school self-evaluation is an ongoing process, it's important to ensure that you keep up the momentum. That means it has to act as a **motivating** force. Obviously, these points are interlinked and complement each other.

### *Meaningful      Measurable      Motivating*

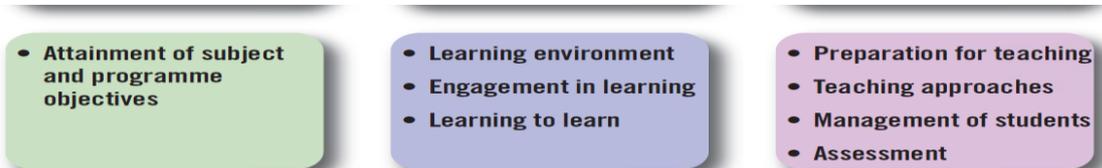
Now let's consider how you can best use the *Guidelines*. Firstly, you can use the framework and overview to consider your present practice, and to discuss and agree on an area for improvement that is relevant and therefore **meaningful** to your school. Once you've done that, the path through the *Guidelines* will be clear. For example, if you have identified *Students' engagement in learning* as a meaningful area for development, you can track it from the framework, to the overview of good practice, and then on to the relevant evaluation criteria and quality statements on pages 34 and 35 of the *Guidelines*. The evaluation criteria and quality statements will give you a more detailed picture of what having significant strengths in a specific area would actually look like in a school.

You can use the criteria and statements initially to help you to gauge where you are and where you would like to be in your chosen aspect of teaching and learning. Used in this way, they'll help you to identify what you might need to have more evidence about. Taking once again the example of students' engagement in learning, you might decide that you need to gather reliable evidence directly from students and teachers about what engages and what disengages students.<sup>2</sup> This data will contribute to your baseline information and help you to evaluate the strengths and areas for development in your present practice. Once you have sound baseline data, you can be confident that the impact of the actions and strategies you select and implement will be **measurable**.

The evaluation criteria and quality statements can help you at step 1 of the SSE process when you're deciding what evidence you need to establish a sound baseline. They can help also at step 3 when you're drawing conclusions about the quality of your present practice. They can help to inform your improvement plan because they describe good practices that you might choose to adopt and make your own. And in due course they can help you to monitor, measure and evaluate the progress you have made with your chosen aspect.

If your school improvement plan is **meaningful** to the teachers and students in your school, and if you have a sound baseline so that progress will be **measurable**, then you have done the most important things to ensure that the process will be a **motivating** force in your school.

We know from advisory visits in schools, and from SSE seminars, that many schools found the *Guidelines* quite daunting at first. However, as you continue to make the SSE process your own, we hope that you'll find the evaluation criteria and quality statements on pages 30 to 45 of the *Guidelines* helpful and useful. In these pages, you'll find a set of evaluation criteria and quality statements for each of the eight sub-themes that appear in the teaching and learning framework.



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<sup>2</sup> You'll find a range of evidence-gathering templates in the appendix to the *Guidelines*, including surveys, for students and teachers, and reflection sheets to assist teacher self-reflection and peer observation.

## THE SSE PROCESS AND DEIS ACTION PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

School self-evaluation and DEIS action planning have a shared focus on improving students' educational experiences and outcomes. If your school participates in DEIS, we hope you'll find this article helpful. It describes the interface between DEIS and school self-evaluation, and sets out what DEIS schools are required to do as part of the school self-evaluation process. We've put in bold the key messages in the article.

- **Action planning for improvement – where DEIS and SSE meet**

Systematic action planning for improvement is at the heart of the school self-evaluation process. It is also at the heart of DEIS. That is why **a school's DEIS action plan is also its school improvement plan; no additional or separate improvement plan is required.**

The DEIS action plan requires post-primary DEIS schools to have three-year action plans for improvement in the following areas: Literacy; Numeracy; Examination attainment; Attendance; Retention; Progression; Partnership with parents and others.

The SSE process is a step-by-step approach which focuses on teaching and learning in the classroom. The six steps can be applied to all action planning for improvement, including DEIS action planning. **All areas covered in the DEIS action plan have a teaching and learning aspect**, although DEIS action planning is often focused on interventions and initiatives outside of the classroom. The SSE process can be particularly helpful to DEIS schools as a way of directing attention to what is happening in the classroom.

- **How will the SSE process and requirements affect DEIS planning?**

The SSE circular 0040/2012 requires each school to "*record its own judgement about its performance and the quality of its work, in the form of a concise **school self-evaluation report**. A summary of this report should be made available to the whole-school community*". The circular states that judgements should refer to strengths and areas identified for development.

In the course of your DEIS planning, it's likely that you record your ongoing findings and priorities for improvement for each of the DEIS themes. However, you may not have recorded your strengths.

Many DEIS initiatives have focused on aspects of school life outside the mainstream classroom: for example, interventions to address specific educational and behavioural difficulties; breakfast and after-school activities; and home-school supports. However, **the SSE process requires a focus on teaching and learning practices. Therefore, when reviewing your DEIS action plan for improvement, you should include targets and actions relating to learning and classroom practice in relevant DEIS areas.**

You may not have included student voice or parent voice in your evidence gathering up to now; this evidence is important within the SSE process, and will support your partnership with parents and your focus on student engagement within DEIS.

- **What do DEIS schools now need to do to meet their SSE requirements?**

In order to comply with circular 0040/2012, **DEIS schools should produce an SSE report each year.** This report should reflect where your school is at in its DEIS planning cycle.

If you are beginning a three-year DEIS planning cycle, you will examine your last action plan, identify the areas where you have made progress, review your achievement in relation to targets, judge which actions and strategies were, or were not, effective, and identify areas for improvement. All these steps are already part of good DEIS practice. Now – and this will be new to most DEIS schools – **record your findings in a short SSE report for internal school reference. Then draw up your three-year action plan for improvement. This will be your DEIS action plan and also the school improvement plan for SSE purposes.**

If you are in years two and three of the DEIS planning cycle, in line with good DEIS planning practice, you will review plans at year end, and amend them as required. For example, you might adjust existing targets or include new ones; you'll retain actions you consider effective, and include new ones where necessary. You then produce a short SSE report recording progress and adjustments, and the DEIS action plan, amended as necessary, is your SSE school improvement plan.

**All schools need to complete a legislative and regulatory checklist and policy checklist every year.**

This is new for DEIS schools, and you'll find updated checklists on the SSE website.

**The SSE circular requires all schools to provide summary reports and summary improvement plans to the whole-school community, briefly outlining the strengths they have identified, and the areas they have prioritised for improvement.** <sup>3</sup>

DEIS schools often have very detailed improvement plans, so you should keep your summary improvement plan short and meaningful, bearing in mind that your audience is the whole-school community. You should use it to communicate clearly the actions you've planned to improve teaching and learning. It would also be a very useful way to highlight areas where you would welcome parents' support: for example, attendance and punctuality, or encouraging children to read at home. Your summary report and improvement plan could include a number of DEIS areas, or could focus specifically on literacy, numeracy, or other aspects of teaching and learning that you have selected.

- **How might DEIS schools approach the third aspect of teaching and learning?**

As set out in circular 0040/2012, in addition to literacy and numeracy, all schools are required to produce an SSE report and a school improvement plan for a third aspect of teaching and learning by 2015/16. Your school might look at DEIS areas such as examination attainment, attendance, and retention, and see how targets for improvement in these areas could provide a focus for your third aspect of teaching and learning. Just keep in mind that what you are looking for is an approach to action planning for improvement that ensures you are giving a central place to your students' experience of teaching and learning. Here's a true story that may help to illustrate this point.

*A school realised that there was an attendance problem with a number of fifth-year students. They weren't badly behaved or in dire personal difficulty – but they were clearly switched off school. The year head noticed that one of them had been given a mark of 12% in her Christmas exam in one subject, without any indication of how to improve. She was suddenly struck by how demoralising and demotivating the Christmas exams must be for this student. She clearly saw how negative feedback could even further discourage a student from coming to school, and summed it up vividly: "After all," she asked herself, "who's going to get out of bed in the morning for 12%?" The year head decided that one of their attendance improvement strategies would be to provide constructive feedback to show students how to improve their work, thereby helping them to develop confidence in their abilities – and decide that school was worth coming to!*

Applying the lens of SSE to DEIS action planning can show that a key area like attendance may involve more than careful record-keeping, and can reach into the very core activity of each school: teaching and learning.

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<sup>3</sup> You'll find an article on completing the summary report and improvement plan in SSE Update Issue 3.