

SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

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SSE – NEXT STEPS

Welcome to the sixth 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 editions are available on the SSE website: <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/>. If you're not familiar with them, it may be worth taking a look. They cover a number of areas where schools have experience of the SSE process and provide considerable guidance around topics like selecting the third aspect of teaching and learning, DEIS action planning and SSE, and preparing an SSE report, among others.

In this issue we're going to look at two areas that have been highlighted for us by schools during our school support visits in the last number of months: How SSE can contribute to **planning for the new junior cycle in your school**; and how to go about **effective target-setting**.

In junior cycle we'll look in particular at the use of SSE to support the planning of the whole-school curriculum through the lens of the **24 Statements of Learning**. In addition, we'll consider how SSE can provide support for the **8 Key Skills** of junior cycle. Central to this will be considering how to ensure the process of curriculum reform remains manageable for your school while keeping a firm eye on attaining the best outcomes for your students.

Finally, in this edition, we'll look at **effective target-setting**. This is an area that is difficult to get right so we're looking at it again from a slightly different perspective. In this edition we'll consider targets centred on outcomes, but also the sort of process targets that are useful in keeping the SSE process on track and which support monitoring and implementation of the School Improvement Plan.

As always, we hope you have an enjoyable and productive term and a successful school year!

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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USING SSE TO PLAN YOUR SCHOOL'S IMPLEMENTATION OF THE *FRAMEWORK FOR JUNIOR CYCLE*

The new *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* (the *Framework*) gives schools greater flexibility to design and implement their junior cycle programme. The **principles, statements of learning**, and **key skills** at the core of the new junior cycle provide the basis for schools to plan, design and evaluate their programme. The SSE process will support your school as you consider the *Framework* and work to ensure that you open up its full potential for your students.

One of the consistent messages communicated about SSE over the last number of years has been to keep evidence, actions and target-setting manageable and realistic. You will appreciate that this message is even more applicable in the context of junior cycle reform! It is easy to feel swamped by significant curriculum change, but a key message contained in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* should always be kept in mind:

“The changes ... are designed to build on current best practices in the system and to support the further development of effective teaching, learning and assessment practice”

In other words, no school is starting from ‘zero’ in approaching the new curriculum. Instead the SSE process should help you to see where your school already has significant strengths. The next steps for development in your junior cycle curriculum should also become apparent through the process. In this sense, Professor John MacBeath’s statement, quoted in a previous issue, bears repeating:

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

As you begin your whole-school junior cycle journey, remember that it is one which can only be undertaken incrementally - one step at a time. SSE will provide a considerable support in making that journey **meaningful, measurable** and **motivating** for your students and your teachers.

While the two junior cycle articles that follow are presented separately as they deal with the **statements of learning** and the **key skills**, it is not necessary to view this as a linear process, with one review leading to the next. While you might choose to deal with each consecutively, it is equally legitimate to organize separate teams, one to work on overall curriculum organisation (the statements) and one to work on developing teaching and learning of the key skills. It really does depend on your school’s rationale and the particular context in which you operate.

SSE AND JUNIOR CYCLE: THE STATEMENTS OF LEARNING

This article suggests possible routes you might take in applying the now-familiar SSE process to planning the implementation of the *Framework*. It takes your present junior cycle curriculum as a starting point and looks at how you can identify its strengths and possible shortcomings when compared to **the statements of learning** which describe the learning at the core of the *Framework*.

You’ll find the twenty-four statements on page 12 of the *Framework*. You’ll also read there that “Schools will ensure that all statements of learning...feature in the programmes offered to their junior cycle students.” Always bearing this in mind, your school has the flexibility

and discretion to decide what combination of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences will ensure the best learning outcomes and experiences for your students.

The SSE process will help you to highlight aspects of your current curriculum that match the statements, and will also identify areas where your students' learning experiences could be improved. This process will involve the familiar SSE steps: **gather evidence; analyse your findings; draw conclusions** about strengths and opportunities; **complete the self-evaluation report; develop a school improvement plan; and implement and monitor the plan.**

A team or group to lead this junior cycle curriculum review is worth considering. You may have a team that has worked on applying the SSE process to develop literacy and numeracy improvement plans, or improvement plans for another aspect of teaching and learning. And many schools have a board of studies in place to review curriculum provision.

Subject departments will be interested in seeing how certain statements of learning relate to their area, but it would be valuable also for teachers to work in cross-curricular groups. Many schools are developing very good cross-curricular practice to support literacy and numeracy improvement plans.

Step 1: Gather evidence

- Teachers in subject-based and/or cross-curricular groups:
 - Look at the twenty-four statements on page 12 of the *Framework* and the descriptions of the learning associated with each statement on pages 51 to 58. Identify the statements of learning relevant to the subject(s) or course that you teach at present. Discuss and share views on how – and how well – the statements of learning are being met at present. Referring to the fuller explanations of the statements of learning on pages 51 to 58 will help you to discuss them in more detail. You'll notice also that they describe learning from the student's point of view, in terms of knowledge and skills acquired.
 - Your school might also include individual teacher reflection in the evidence gathered.
 - Feed back your findings, with regard to your own areas and how they relate to particular statements, to the team leading the review.
- The curriculum review team:
 - You need to consider how best to include the views of teachers, students and parents on both your school's current overall curriculum and new areas they would like to see introduced. Focus groups and short questionnaires could provide rich material.

Step 2: Analyse your evidence

- The curriculum review team:
 - Using the evidence collected from subject-specific and/or cross-curricular groups, you can now benchmark your school's current curriculum against the twenty-four statements of learning, identifying strengths, opportunities and gaps.
 - You can also analyse the information gathered from teachers, students and parents to see what it points up about your current curriculum and what it suggests might be introduced to the curriculum to more fully meet the needs of your students.

Step 3: Draw conclusions

- The curriculum review team:
 - You can now identify which statements are being met, to what extent, and how.
 - You can also identify areas where the curriculum needs to change to encompass all the statements and to enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes.

Step 4: Complete the self-evaluation report

The report is an important part of the self-evaluation process. It's a record of findings, and a means of sharing them with all teachers and with your board of management. It should clearly state the strengths in your current curricular provision, and the areas you will prioritise to meet the requirements of the statements of learning, and the needs of your students. The summary report for your school community will be an acknowledgement to parents of their contribution to the curriculum review process.

Step 5: Develop a school improvement plan

Your school improvement plan with a focus on the *Framework* will be a very significant document for your junior cycle students, teachers, and parents, and the whole school. It must also be **realistic** and **achievable** in the **timeframe** you set out. You have to base it on the priorities you have selected to ensure it's **specific**. In some cases, the outcome will be easy to **measure**: extending subject choices and introducing short courses and learning experiences, for example. But you may have rightly prioritised less straightforward aspects of students' learning: for example, opportunities "to bring an idea from conception to realisation" (Statement 23, pages 12 and 58). The success criterion here is not whether the student has achieved this: that's just too far down the road at this stage. The **measure** of success here is the carefully-planned provision of the opportunity for all students to experience and master this learning. That will require purposeful and co-ordinated action on the part of subject departments, individual teachers, and school leaders and managers.

Step 6: Implement and monitor

Monitoring your progress in implementing the necessary changes will require dedicated time at whole-staff and subject department meetings. The curriculum review team could oversee the overall implementation of the plan. Increasing expertise and experience in the design and implementation of short courses, along with the publication of new subject specifications, will allow your school to continue to shape the curriculum for your students as you embed the Framework over time.

SSE AND JUNIOR CYCLE: THE KEY SKILLS

This article deals with how schools might consider the **eight key skills** identified by the *Framework* and how they might be implemented in the context of their school community. The *Framework* outlines curriculum and assessment arrangements that will provide students with learning opportunities that achieve a better balance between learning subject knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities.

The **eight key skills** are required for successful learning by students *across* the curriculum and for learning *beyond* school. As new specifications are developed the key skills will be embedded in every junior cycle subject and short course. Thus teachers will have a clear understanding of how they fit into a subject, short course or priority learning unit and how to build the skills into classroom planning.

Many of the key skills and their elements will already be familiar to teachers. It is worth noting that two of the key skills – *Being Literate* and *Being Numerate* – have been the focus of the SSE process for very many schools in the last number of years.

In using the SSE process to improve practice in relation to key skills schools should avoid a 'big bang' approach. Rather, as might be expected in school self-evaluation generally, real, incremental improvements, building on and acknowledging the good practice which already exists, should be pursued. The **key skills** and their **elements** are outlined in the diagram overleaf.



Beginning the process:

The school's evaluation of the key skills in junior cycle could be led by an SSE core team, supported by senior management. There are a number of advantages to using a core team to organize the process at whole-school level. The activities of such core teams could include:

- Co-ordinating the SSE process at whole-school level
- Collection and analysis of data (soft and hard)
- Identification of appropriate actions and timelines
- Liaison with subject departments and teachers
- Support for subject departments and teachers in implementing actions

The use of a core team to support whole-school implementation has the benefit of facilitating teacher collaboration so that the experience of key skills can be consistently supported for all students across the curriculum. These crucial skills can thus be reinforced by each teacher and subject department in a manner which ensures every student can achieve their potential in secondary school and in life.

To initially **identify** where to focus the gathering of evidence, subject departments could discuss the current approach to key skills in the school and where further investigation is needed. This will serve to inform teachers about what the key skills are, but will also allow them to consider where they feel the school is doing well and where there may be room for improvement.

Discussion regarding the key skills should be led by questions like:

- How good is our students' understanding of the key skills in the junior cycle programme?
- How do we know? What evidence do we have?
- How can we find out more?
- What are our strengths?
- What are our areas for improvement? How can we improve?

The core SSE team could then use the outcomes of subject departments' deliberations to identify the initial area in which to gather evidence.

The SSE core team should choose to gather evidence regarding one of the identified **key skills** or even one of its **elements**. A tight focus is important at this point, rather than attempting to make large-scale changes in practice that are ultimately unmanageable. Small improvements in practice can lead to big changes for our students over time. In addition, the interlinking nature of the key skills should not be forgotten. Remember – attention paid to one key skill is likely to pay off with regard to other key skills as well.

Having selected the particular key skill or element(s) the SSE process can now move forward in a structured way. It should incorporate the SSE steps which are already familiar to schools: **gather evidence; analyse your findings; draw conclusions** about strengths and opportunities; **complete the self-evaluation report; develop a school improvement plan;** and **implement and monitor the plan.**

Step 1: Gather evidence

The SSE core team should seek to gather evidence with regard to students' development of the key skills or element(s) selected as well as current practice that supports the development of key skills. This might be accomplished through a selection of the following approaches:

- A focus group of students
- A brief questionnaire including an open comment box
- Review of student work
- Observation of students in class
- Guided discussions in subject departments
- Personal reflections by individual teachers
- Traffic light questionnaire regarding teacher practice
- Teacher self-reflection
- Whole-staff small group discussions¹

A limited number of these approaches will be needed to gather a picture of students' experiences and teaching practice supporting the key skill or element(s) being examined – what is working and what could be improved. The outcomes of all of these should then be fed back to the SSE team.²

Note: It is important that the focus of SSE does not move from improving student learning to gathering evidence. A limited range of activities should gather enough evidence to inform **targets and actions.**

¹ Sample questions for focus groups, questionnaires and teacher reflection sheets can be accessed in the appendix of the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools*. Further tools and templates can be accessed at www.schoolself-evaluation.ie. These can be adapted to address the particular key skill or element(s) being examined.

² Additional useful tools to support gathering evidence with regard to many of the key skills and their elements are available as part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Assessment Toolkit* at www.juniorcycle.ie/assessment. In addition, the *Key Skills Teaching Toolkits* available at <http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Key-Skills> will provide valuable ideas.

Step 2: Analyse your evidence

- The evidence gathered of how well students are developing the key skill or element(s) should be discussed by the SSE team and with the wider staff.
- Further discussions should be held within the SSE core team and with the whole staff or subject departments of findings regarding students' learning experiences or teachers' practice that support students in the chosen key skill or element(s).

Step 3: Draw conclusions

- Make judgements with regard to current practice and outcomes for students.
- To guide these judgements relevant quality statements in the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools* will prove useful. These will highlight what might be expected in a school with significant strengths. The school can benchmark their outcomes and practice against these. The quality statements will help the school to judge the quality of its practice on the quality continuum below:



Step 4: Complete the self-evaluation report

The findings which have been arrived at should now be collated and included in a self-evaluation report at whole-school level. This will identify what strengths the school has in relation to the key skills, as well as points for development. The report should detail, in no more than 2/3 pages:

- The theme chosen for self-evaluation (here, key skills)
- A brief account of the school context
- The findings
- Summary of strengths (affirm and celebrate)
- Summary of areas that are the focus of improvement (here, a key skill or element(s))

It is important that the self-evaluation process focuses on school improvement, not paperwork – this should ensure a short, but informative, report is produced.

Step 5: Develop a school improvement plan

- The SSE team should now be able to identify **targets** to be achieved on the basis of baseline data collected regarding learner outcomes in the chosen key skill or element(s).
- The SSE team should also be able to identify **actions** that can be taken to improve students' learning experiences or teachers' practice to support the achievement of these targets.
 - These may be whole-school actions, but should feed through to subject departments (where they may be adapted to meet the demands of the subject) and individual classrooms.
 - A school improvement plan will inevitably include planning for meetings and for internal and / or external CPD to upskill teachers³.
 - The plan will set out a clear timescale for actions to occur as well as a review date.

³ Valuable resources to support in-school CPD in key skills can be accessed through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Key Skills Teaching Toolkits* available at <http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Key-Skills> and the *Assessment Toolkit* available at www.juniorcycle.ie/assessment. Further valuable resources and support can be accessed at www.jct.ie the [website of the Junior Cycle for Teachers \(JCT\) support service](http://www.jct.ie).

Step 6: Implement and monitor

The school should implement the actions it has planned and monitor the necessary changes set out. In essence this amounts to asking the questions:

- How are we doing?
- How do we know?

The implementation and monitoring of the plan should be informed through whole-staff meetings, subject department meetings, teacher reflection, classroom observation by teachers and discussion. These should feed back to the SSE core team which should oversee the implementation and monitoring of the plan. Some examples of school plans can be accessed at www.schoolself-evaluation.ie. The key question throughout the implementation of this school plan will remain – ‘how does our curriculum impact on student learning and how can we improve this?’

A final note

Schools should avoid viewing SSE, junior cycle key skills, assessment, and improvements in students’ literacy and numeracy as belonging in separate boxes. The reform of the curriculum and of the wider education system has been designed to ensure synergies exist between all of these areas. Such synergies should be recognised and pursued.

ANOTHER LOOK AT TARGET SETTING IN THE SSE PROCESS

In previous SSE Updates, we've talked about targets and target setting. It's well known that this can be one of the most challenging areas of action planning for improvement, especially in the field of education, where so many factors come into play.

During the course of evaluations and SSE advisory visits, we've heard about the kind of difficulties that target setting can sometimes present for schools. And what we've learned prompted us to take another look at target setting in this article by addressing some of the recurring questions and issues.

To begin, do targets have to be numerical? The answer is, not always. It does, however, make sense for schools to set a numerical target they know is SMART. But a numerical target that is plucked out of the air is of very little value. A numerical target that isn't firmly based on where your school and teachers are at now isn't going to work. And a numerical target that can't be measured in a way that is meaningful in the context of your school and your students isn't helpful.

Another question we are frequently asked is whether targets need to be related to a baseline. The answer to this question is yes! First, a baseline is important. SSE is all about improving learning experiences and outcomes for students. To know whether any progress and improvement has taken place for our students as a result of our actions we need to know our starting-off point ... a baseline.

The baseline could be to do with student expectations that you want to raise, and your measure might be the number of students now opting for foundation instead of ordinary level, or ordinary level instead of higher level. Here, you might decide that it's possible to set a definite numerical target in percentage terms for improved uptake, based on your knowledge of your students' potential. So, a target of this type might read:

- We will increase the percentage of students who attempt higher level mathematics in the Leaving Certificate from 40% to 45% by June 2016

Sometimes, however, you may look at students' learning and approach the question of targets in a different way. In considering, for example, whether students have developed a deep understanding of a particular aspect of the curriculum, or even a greater understanding of their own approach to learning, a different type of target may be of use. This type of approach can lead to very rich conversations and a process whereby your school can begin to rigorously analyse how you measure the depth of your students' learning. Consider the following target, based on one of the elements of a key skill in junior cycle:

- Our students will demonstrate measurable improvement in their ability to reflect on and evaluate their learning by June 2017

A clear timeframe is set out, but the target poses a question: how will students demonstrate this learning so that you can know it has happened? A range of options could be considered - possibly in a focus group, through the use of simple reflection templates or in oral presentations in a range of subjects – any of these might be sensible ways to measure the improvement being sought.

PROCESS TARGETS

But targets can also focus on actions, as well as outcomes. Think of these process targets as signposts on a journey, where the outcomes your school is seeking are the final destination. Process targets are linked to actions that will support the improvements you are looking for. After all, there is no point in identifying an area where improvement is needed and then

implementing actions that are unconnected to that area or only marginal in the impact they will have.

In planning the actions you will implement along the journey to your identified target then, there are a number of questions to ask along the way, from the initial first step to the end of the plan and the beginning of a new SSE process. Some of these might include:

- Is this action clearly linked to the improvement you are looking for?
- How do you know this area needs improvement?
- How do you know the actions you have identified to take place in teachers' practice are actually happening?
- Are the actions to take place to improve learning clear to everyone in your school community?
- How will you know the improvement you are looking for has taken place and how will you link this to the actions for improvement that you have identified?