

# SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 10 – December 2017

## SSE 2016-2020 – looking back and looking forward

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

The second year of the 2016-2020 cycle of self-evaluation has now begun. The current SSE circular [0040/2016](#) and [SSE Guidelines](#) suggest a cycle beginning with an investigation year. That process of investigation – the first three steps of the SSE process – leads to an action plan for improvement, and the second year of the cycle then focuses on implementing that improvement plan.

We know that many schools have followed that path, and are now implementing improvement plans in areas that they have identified as priorities. Even where these priorities arise from national initiatives, such as junior cycle reform, schools have the opportunity, through the SSE process, to introduce these changes in a way that is relevant and meaningful in their particular context.

We also know, however, that some schools for various reasons experienced disruption to their SSE process, and are now able to re-engage on a whole-school basis. If this describes your school's situation, you may find some useful advice on page 2.

Reading the current SSE circular, you'll have noticed the reference to continuing to embed, and regularly review, the literacy and numeracy practices that you implemented in the first SSE cycle. On page 3, you'll find some pointers as to how you might go about doing this.

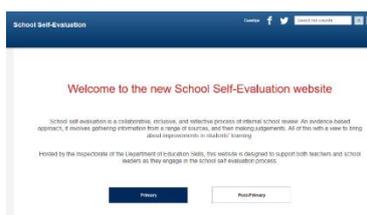


The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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## Connecting, or reconnecting, with SSE as a whole-school activity

The Department has always recognised that, even in the most favourable circumstances, school self-evaluation was going to be a long-term project in most schools. Reflecting on your own practice, and reflecting on whole-school practices, can be very challenging. And, in one of those strange quirks of language, improvement often seems to suggest the negative rather than the positive! Add to that all the consequences of severe economic recession, and it is safe to say that the SSE journey has been bumpy and full of stops and starts.

However, there are many positives that are worth highlighting. You may know that the Inspectorate held two SSE seminars for school leaders in November 2017, and the level of engagement at them was really great to see. We will announce further seminars on the [SSE website](#) in the next term.

Inspectors going to schools on SSE advisory visits have commented on the extent to which schools are very positively disposed to the process, and feel an increasing sense of ownership and empowerment. Some very rich conversations about teaching and learning have happened during these visits. If you haven't had an SSE visit and would like one, please drop an email to [info@schoolself-evaluation.ie](mailto:info@schoolself-evaluation.ie).

What are the important things to bear in mind if, like many schools, you want to give your SSE process a new lease of life? Here are a few pointers which we hope you'll find useful. We're putting these forward mostly for those leading the SSE process. You'll know the best way to ensure that they are shared with every teacher and, in the way you think best, with students and parents as appropriate.

While Circular 0040/2016 sets out requirements for schools regarding SSE, it's safe to say that the SSE process will never thrive until you move it away from the compliance space. As the motivational gurus say, mustivation has to be replaced by wantivation!

Easier said than done, that's true. But this essential change in mind-set will happen when there is a clear rationale for re-thinking current practice and introducing new approaches. Hard information about areas such as attendance and attainment can be very persuasive, and softer information from students about what works best for them can be even more powerful in helping teachers to see both the 'why' and the 'what' of change.

You will not succeed if you create a mountain and ask people to climb it! All you need to do is to surface one aspect of teaching and learning that is meaningful in your school context. That is the first step. Then work through the process of action planning for improvement.

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| ➤ What is the current situation in that aspect?               | Gather baseline data     |
| ➤ Where would you like to get to?                             | Set your target          |
| ➤ What actions / approaches are most likely to get you there? | Develop your action plan |
| ➤ How do you put them into practice?                          | Implement it             |
| ➤ And how will you know that your action plan is working?     | Monitor and measure      |

Use *Looking at Our School* selectively. Focus on one or two standards and statements of effective practice that are relevant to the aspect of teaching and learning that you want to work on.

Dig down into the data you have before you gather any more. In advising schools, inspectors often remind them of the richness of the data that is available at school level. Each school is uniquely placed to use its own data in a powerful way.

Remember that the SSE process is an application, not an end in itself. Apply it to what matters, for example the teaching and learning practices that the new junior cycle requires.

And finally, we really want you to see our inspection reports as an assistance to you – an external eye offering you another perspective on yourselves and some useful pointers on your SSE journey.

## Maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy in SSE

Circular 0040/2016 refers to an important aspect of continuity between the first and second cycles of SSE: that is, the continuing focus on literacy and numeracy. The circular talks about schools “maintaining a meaningful focus on literacy and numeracy” using the SSE process. The illustrative graphic contained in the circular refers to “literacy and numeracy practices embedded, with regular review”. In the course of SSE advisory visits, some schools have asked for guidance in this area.

The first part of this article looks at a continuing focus on literacy and numeracy in the context of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The second part shares some approaches to meaningful ways of embedding literacy and numeracy skills development as a whole-school endeavour.

### Learning for schools arising from the 2017 review of the National Strategy

It’s worth remembering that the focus on literacy and numeracy required in the first SSE cycle came about in order to link the SSE process with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, introduced in 2011. As you probably know, an [interim review](#) of the strategy with new national targets for 2017-2020 was published in March 2017.

The review compared the relevant outcomes of PISA 2015 for Ireland with the original targets set in 2011. The PISA outcomes indicated that a number of targets had already been met, and so new targets were set. You’ll find the new literacy and numeracy targets on pages 18 and 19 of the review. Here’s an extract from page 18:

National Improvement Targets for Literacy and Numeracy at post-primary – by 2020	
➤	<i>Build on increases in the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or above Level 4 in PISA reading and mathematics assessment while also significantly reducing the difference between students in DEIS schools and students in all schools.</i>
➤	<i>Build on decreases in the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or below Level 1 in PISA reading and mathematics assessment while also significantly reducing the difference between students in DEIS schools and students in all schools.</i>
➤	<i>Increase the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or above Level 5 in PISA reading and mathematics assessment. This is a new target to focus attention on the higher achieving students, while also decreasing the difference between students in DEIS schools and students in all schools.</i>
➤	<i>Consolidate and further increase the number of students taking higher level Mathematics in the junior cycle and Leaving Certificate examination to reach the targets set in 2011 in a measured way by 2020.</i>

What has happened at a national level with this review is a large-scale example of what you might do in your own school when looking at the progress you’ve made in literacy and numeracy.

If you set ‘percentage increase’ targets in the first SSE cycle – maybe to do with uptake of levels, or outcomes, in certificate exams – have the targets been reached? If they have, is there evidence that you could raise the targets further, or keep them as maintenance targets? If they haven’t, why not? Were they unrealistic, or do you need to look again at the actions you implemented to achieve them?

There’s another way in which the national review is a useful pointer for “a meaningful focus on literacy and numeracy” at school level. In the above extract you’ll notice references to Level 1 and Level 5. Level 1 is the lowest level of proficiency described in PISA, and Level 5 is the second highest.

The national targets for 2020 place a particular focus on students at what we might call the extremes of the proficiency spectrum. What these targets are emphasising is the need to pay particular attention to low achievers and high achievers – and that means setting discrete targets with these groups in mind. This might well be an approach that you could take in your school in developing and refining your literacy and numeracy practices.

The Educational Research Centre has published a short document with [descriptions](#) of the six levels of proficiency for reading literacy and mathematics used in PISA 2015. They make interesting reading!

### 'Literacy and numeracy practices embedded, with regular review': what that might look like

Why the continued focus on literacy and numeracy? They are of course gateway skills for learners across the whole curriculum, but they're also essential life skills. Through the way they experience literacy and numeracy development, students can learn to understand and manage choices and options, to be inquisitive and persistent, to tolerate ambiguity, and to work co-operatively.

Various ways of building literacy and numeracy skills in the classroom are now widespread and well on the way to being embedded. But you need to take a critical look from time to time at established practice to see if it's working as you intended – that's of course what 'regular review' entails.

Take for example the very widely-used 'key words' approach. These come from a wide range of contexts: words that are subject-specific and quite technical; words students find hard to understand, spell and use; or words encountered in reading. To optimise the key words approach, it's worth looking closely at how you select them, and how you help students to understand them and build familiarity with them to the point where students 'own' them and can use them confidently.

Experts in vocabulary development talk about words belonging to one of three tiers: Tier 1 words are basic words that name familiar objects and actions; Tier 3 words are very specialised and used in specific contexts; and in between are Tier 2 words, described as high-frequency words for mature language users. These are probably the most useful words to select for the key words approach. Here are some typical Tier 2 words:

*abolish, banish, chamber, deliberate, exceed, frequent, genuine, hospitable, initiative*

To get lasting value from the key words approach, you need to build in opportunities for students to encounter the words in context. Modelling the use of the words when you're speaking to the class; getting students to use the words in their speaking and writing; exploring related words with students so they develop a sense of how these words belong to various areas of knowledge; all these approaches help to extend students' usable vocabulary and add to their expressive skills.

Turning to numeracy, often called mathematical literacy, it's worth mentioning again the modelling strategy mentioned above. What attitudes to Mathematics do teachers model? Many teachers who wouldn't dream of saying they have difficulty with reading and writing will cheerfully tell students that they're hopeless at Maths! This may be very honest, but what it's actually conveying to students is that you can be a successful adult and be mathematically illiterate. And that's not helpful, and in fact it isn't true. It comes from a narrow and negative experience of Mathematics.

So what are the real mathematical skills for life? The ability to estimate, to calculate, to use logic, to problem-solve, to look critically at data and say whether it's real or just 'fake news'; our students need these skills perhaps now more than ever. Giving students opportunities across the curriculum to build and reinforce mathematical literacy skills certainly presents challenges. But the impact on students of such a whole-school approach is potentially life-changing.

Here are a few strategies that could be applied in a very wide range of subjects:

***Estimate. Calculate. Check!*** Where 'how much?' or 'how many?' questions arise, reaching for the calculator doesn't have to be the first response. Invite students to make an estimate, which is a guess – but not a wild guess. They can then do the calculation, and finally use the calculator to check if they're correct. Being able to make a reasonable estimate, or a good guess, is a valuable skill.

***5 ways to present information – choose!*** Many subjects involve presenting information. Get students thinking of ways to present this information, and choosing the best. Remind them that information can be shown in words, pictures, graphs, tables, and symbols. Which best suits their purpose? Why?

***Solving problems or problem-solving?*** There's the world of difference! Traditionally, solving problems in Mathematics meant finding the right answer, and the right answer was known and undisputed. Problem-solving, however, focuses on the process of working towards a solution, or solutions. It requires thinking outside the box, and demands creativity as well as logic: highly transferable skills!