

SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 11 – May 2018

SSE 2016-2020 – what’s been done and what’s next?

Welcome to issue eleven of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-primary schools. The second year of the 2016-2020 cycle of self-evaluation is coming to a close. It’s a good opportunity to reflect on what you’ve done and to think about what’s next in your school improvement process. And one of the most important things to consider is the way in which the SSE process itself is becoming more familiar to you as a school community, so that you can use it effectively to work towards the priorities you’ve identified.

We believe that DEIS schools now have a clearer understanding about where the SSE process fits in with DEIS action planning for improvement. We hope the article on page 2 will add to that clarity.

During the 2017/18 year, inspectors delivered a number of SSE seminars for school leaders. There’s been good engagement and many participants have simply said: “we’re getting the hang of this now.” Maybe the most significant point has been the growing understanding that this is not about plans on paper but about plans in action. The red arrow on the right is pointing to what the SSE Guidelines (page 14) refer to as

‘the key step in the process. It is only when the actions in the improvement plan are implemented that the work of the school can improve.’

Finally in this issue there’s a short piece that considers what ‘generally effective practice’ is and how you might work on it to reach the effective practice described in *Looking at Our School*.

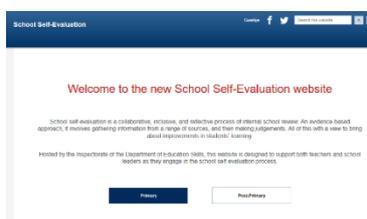
The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit



Contents

| | |
|--|--------|
| DEIS action planning for improvement and the SSE process | page 2 |
| Stepping up from generally effective to effective practice | page 4 |

Keep in touch with developments about SSE through our website and our social media presence. Click on the Icons below to access the relevant link.



DEIS action planning for improvement and the SSE process

The process of school self-evaluation is all about action planning for improvement. For that reason, schools participating in DEIS were ahead of the curve in many ways when SSE was formally introduced in 2012. After all, DEIS schools have always been required to engage in a cycle of development, implementation and review of improvement plans for each DEIS theme. So DEIS schools have become very familiar with the practices of gathering evidence, setting targets, devising actions for improvement, and monitoring progress.

It's fair to say, however, that when school self-evaluation was introduced as a national initiative in 2012, some uncertainty arose in DEIS schools about how the SSE process was intended to apply to them. For this reason, circular [40/2016](#) on the second SSE cycle makes this very clear statement:

Schools in the DEIS programme are required to develop and implement school improvement plans as a condition of their participation in DEIS. **The school's DEIS action plan is its school improvement plan for the purposes of school self-evaluation, and no additional or separate improvement plan is required.**

What this means is that this circular does **not** oblige DEIS schools to operate a parallel planning process, involving one set of plans for DEIS and another set for SSE. Inspectors on advisory visits to schools, and the support services in their interactions with schools, will continue to communicate this message as clearly as possible.

So does the SSE process have *any* relevance to DEIS schools? Yes, it does! Let's look at what circular 40/2016 goes on to say.

DEIS schools should, however, within their own particular contexts take note of the emphasis that the school self-evaluation process places on the core activity of any school: teaching and learning. They should ensure a focus on teaching and learning wherever relevant when planning for improvement in literacy, numeracy, educational attainment, attendance, retention, progression*, and partnership with parents and others.

The crucial point is this: **teaching and learning is the core activity of all schools, including DEIS schools.**

As we noted in an article on DEIS and SSE in [SSE Update 5](#), a lot of DEIS schools have focused on initiatives such as breakfast and homework clubs and a range of extra-curricular activities for their targeted students. DEIS schools also continue to make great efforts to involve parents in their children's education. All these actions have value in supporting students who are at risk of disengaging from school and not achieving their potential.

But tackling educational disadvantage – and that's the central aim of the DEIS initiative – simply isn't possible without also looking rigorously at what these students are experiencing in the classroom. And that's where the SSE lens needs to be applied to the school's DEIS action plans. Therefore, it's essential that DEIS schools look at their own teaching and learning practices and ask themselves:



How do the teaching and learning practices in our school contribute to our DEIS action planning for improvement?

Take a closer look at the question. What is it getting at? And how might you go about answering it? The most straightforward way of getting to grips with this question in your school might be to take a

*The DEIS Action Plan 2017 uses the term 'transitions' rather than progression.

look at your current DEIS plans and see how many targets and actions are directly related to classroom practice. Make a start with the more obvious ones: literacy, numeracy, and attainment. Here are a few questions that you might reflect on.

How many targets and actions in your DEIS plans are directly related to classroom practice?

Are the literacy and numeracy action plans mostly focused on interventions that take place outside the mainstream classroom? For example, you may be using reading programmes that involve intensive work with identified students in your support classrooms or library. It would be worthwhile to consider whether these targeted interventions are reaching into mainstream classrooms where reading skills are necessary in order for students to make progress.

So you could look at your literacy improvement plans and ask yourselves: *“Do these plans include subject teachers and assist them to reinforce and consolidate the reading skills that students are acquiring in the support setting?”*

What is true for literacy is also true for numeracy, but with an additional factor to consider. While teachers of all subjects accept that they have a role in developing students’ literacy skills, the same can’t be said about numeracy. Inspectors are still finding that the understanding of numeracy is still narrowly focused on Maths in many schools. For a reminder of how numeracy skills can be developed and applied much more broadly across the curriculum, you might take another look at the article in [SSE Update 10](#) on maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy practices as part of the SSE process.

Regarding attainment, ask yourselves what kind of teaching and learning focus you have brought to your improvement plans. If you have set targets for increased uptake of higher level, what teaching and learning approaches have you identified to support the successful engagement of students at higher level? What approaches to assessment have you considered to raise expectations and build students’ confidence? This kind of questioning will ensure that the classroom occupies a central place in your DEIS action planning for improvement.

Two other points made in Circular 40/2016 are worth bearing in mind when you are considering how the SSE lens can be applied to your DEIS action plans. Here’s the first:

DEIS schools should use the self-evaluation process to ensure that their action plans for improvement have a robust evidence base, and are clearly targeted at students requiring specific interventions and supports.

It’s necessary to know why you are doing what you are doing, what beneficial experiences and outcomes for students you expect, and how you will know whether the actions and interventions are working effectively.

What should be included in the summary report and improvement plan for the school community?

The final point relates to reporting requirements, and particularly the summary report and improvement plan for the school community that is a part of the SSE process. This requirement aligns very well with the DEIS theme of partnership with parents, but obviously the full details of your DEIS plan can’t be readily or meaningfully communicated to parents. For this reason Circular 40/2016 says:

When communicating a summarised report and improvement plan to parents and the community, DEIS schools may choose to highlight specific actions for improvement where they consider parental awareness and involvement are particularly relevant.

This allows DEIS schools to select which actions and initiatives it would be useful and helpful to communicate to parents. Your school should not feel obliged to summarise every aspect of your DEIS plan. It makes much more sense to support partnership with parents through giving them information about specific initiatives where they have an important role to play in improving their children’s learning experiences and outcomes.

Stepping up from generally effective to effective practice

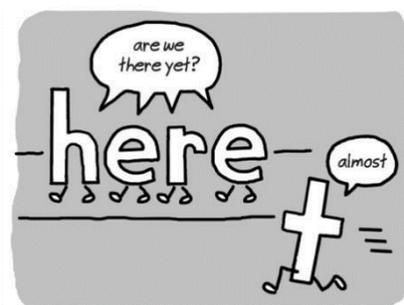
At times in the self-evaluation process the main focus is on making an evaluative judgement. One of these is the end of the investigation phase where you are analysing and then making judgements. What you're evaluating at this point is your practice right now: the current state of play, so to speak, in your school. This is where *Looking at Our School* becomes your reference point, and the statements of effective practice are your benchmark.

Using the standards and statements of practice in this way you can inform your own judgements about the quality of your provision. How does practice in your school compare to what is described in the statements of effective practice that relate to your area of focus?

If you're not there yet, how far have you to go?

Let's look at an example of how you might apply the statements when making a judgement on your current practice. You'll find a similar approach in the [Sunnyhill College scenario, Step 3](#). In that scenario, the school focused on the statements for the standard 'Students grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive'. They used these statements to identify strengths and areas for improvement in their current practice.

In the grid below, taken from the Sunnyhill College scenario, we've added the right-hand column. It contains an evaluation of current practice, benchmarked against the relevant statement of effective practice. We've used the term '**generally effective**' where the evidence has shown a gap between current practice and the level that's described in the statement of effective practice. You can see how this approach can identify changes in classroom practice aimed at bridging that gap.



| Statement of Effective Practice | Strengths? | Areas for improvement? | Evaluation of current practice 'Stepping-up' to improved practice |
|---|------------|---|--|
| Interactions among students and between students and teachers are respectful and positive, and conducive to well-being. | YES | We can build on this strength to address difficulties | Practice is effective . What would make it highly effective? We can come back to this. Right now we need to prioritise areas where we have found our practice is not yet at effective level. |
| Relationships and interactions in classrooms and learning areas support a co-operative and productive learning environment. | YES BUT... | Enough opportunities to co-operate? | Practice is generally effective . To bring it to effective level, we need to harness the existing positive relationships to create more and better opportunities for students to work co-operatively. |
| Students feel able to contribute their opinions and experiences to class discussion. They listen respectfully to the opinions and experiences of their classmates. | YES BUT... | Not always able to express themselves | Practice is generally effective . To bring it to effective level, we need to build students' capacity to express themselves. This means a deliberate focus on extended oral communication – ref. Junior Cycle Statement of Learning 1 |
| They ask questions and suggest possible solutions confidently. They are willing to risk incorrect responses, and accept that mistakes are part of the learning process. | YES BUT... | Confidence is an issue for some | Practice is generally effective . Some able students won't risk mistakes and some struggling students won't say when they're stuck. We need to work on how we look for and react to their responses: "How might you find a solution?" not "Who can tell me the answer?" |
| They demonstrate a sufficient level of motivation to engage and persist with increasingly challenging work. | YES BUT... | Some get disheartened | Practice is generally effective . We need to plan a more structured and graduated approach to new learning so that those students don't lose their way and give up. |