

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 9 – May 2017

SSE 2016-2020 – THE END OF THE BEGINNING!

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

The first year of the 2016-2020 four-year cycle of self-evaluation is drawing to a close. We suggested in circular [0039/2016](#), and in the new [SSE Guidelines](#) that this year could be seen as an investigation year. In the last issue of the Update, we also drew your attention to our redesigned [website](#). We hope you are finding the material it contains useful in scoping out the specific focus most relevant to planning for improvement in your school. We continue to add new resources to support you as you use the quality framework.

In the last issue, we included two ‘scenarios’ – imaginary schools but real situations! – that looked at how schools in different contexts might use the teaching and learning dimension of the quality framework to inform SSE. One school was focused on using the SSE process and the framework to support the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum, and the other on improving the use of digital technology in learning and teaching. In this edition, the schools move the process forward and begin to plan for improvement.

Circular 0039/2016 indicates that external evaluation or inspection will begin to take account of schools’ SSE processes. The findings of inspections or external evaluations, such as WSE-MLL or curriculum evaluation can be an important base to inform a school’s own SSE process. In this issue, you’ll find an article that looks at how external evaluation complements and supports internal evaluation.

We also take another look at the sometimes thorny business of getting to grips with data, so that you can get the most from the data you already have and reflect on how it can inform your improvement plans.

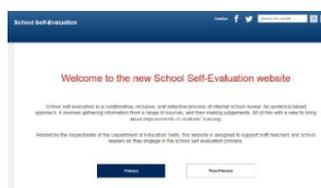
Finally, there’s an article that looks at the new resource allocation model, which gives considerable autonomy to schools to decide how best to use the additional resource to support pupils with special educational needs in their learning. Schools may wish to consider incorporating this area into their SSE process, and we hope you’ll find some useful insights in this article.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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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.



USING THE QUALITY FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT THE SSE PROCESS

In SSE Update 8, we explored two school scenarios and described how those schools were using the quality framework to work through the six steps of the SSE process. We presented their progress with the first two steps of the process, namely *Identify Focus* and *Gather Evidence*. In this issue, we continue their stories and take them to the end of their investigation year. We describe how they use the quality framework to engage with the next two steps, *Analyse and Make Judgements* and *Write and Share Report and Improvement plan*. The purpose of the quality framework is to ‘inform rather than to uniform’ our approach to SSE. As you’ll see, these two schools have made slightly different uses of the quality framework in their own unique contexts.



SCENARIO 1

OAKLEAF PRIMARY SCHOOL

Oakleaf Primary School is a large urban mixed school and their first SSE focus is on using the quality framework and the SSE process to implement the Primary Language Curriculum. Click [Oakleaf Primary School](#) to recap on how they approached steps 1 and 2 in the process.

STEP 3: ANALYSE and MAKE JUDGEMENTS

The school’s SSE committee brought the evidence together from the different sources in preparation for this next step. They met three afternoons after school to analyse and interpret the evidence. They devoted one meeting to the evidence that they collected based on each standard. They used the statements of effective practice from the quality framework as benchmarks to help them to objectively answer the questions:

- How well are we doing?
- What are our strengths?
- What are our areas for improvement?

For example, when they looked at the evidence on the standard *The Teacher selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils’ learning needs*, they used statements of effective practice in the table below to help them make judgements. They examined the statements of effective practice with the evidence and in relation to teaching of oral language in English and Gaeilge.

Statement of Effective Practice	How well are we doing?	What are the strengths?	What are the areas for improvement?
Teachers strategically select and use approaches to match the learning objective of the lesson and meet the needs of pupils.			
Teachers deliver good-quality instruction which is directed at eliciting pupil engagement. Teachers maintain a balance between their own input and productive pupil participation and response.			
Teachers use a range of questioning techniques effectively for a variety of purposes including stimulating substantial pupil responses and facilitating deeper engagement with lesson content.			
Teachers meaningfully differentiate content and activities in order to cater for the varying needs and abilities of pupils.			
Teachers purposefully develop relevant literacy and numeracy skills during lessons.			
Teachers enable pupils to make meaningful links between lesson material and their learning in other subjects and elsewhere.			

They followed the same process when they analysed the evidence for the other two standards they had selected:

- *Pupils demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the primary curriculum.*
- *Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices.*

By the time they had analysed their evidence they were in a very good position to commence step 4.

STEP 4: WRITE AND SHARE REPORT AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN

From their work on step 3, the school was able to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, as outlined in the table below.

Strengths	Areas for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pupils have good vocabulary in English and in Gaeilge and this is confirmed in their achievement in standardised tests, teachers' reflections and parents' observations. ▪ Most pupils are achieving well with regard to the oral skill of retelling. They can confidently recall and retell things that they have experienced. ▪ Many pupils can structure their oral language in basic well-constructed sentences. ▪ The teaching of reading and writing has become more skill focused in recent years. ▪ All teachers plan and teach at least one discrete oral language lesson each week. ▪ All teachers have attended training on the Primary Language Curriculum and feel that they understand its key messages and structure. ▪ Parents are very happy with the teaching of literacy in the school. ▪ Almost all parents read with their children every night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many pupils are not able to orally elaborate on events and experiences beyond basic recall in English. ▪ Some pupils are not achieving at the levels expected for their age and stage of development in oral language with regard to learning outcome four (sentence structure and grammar). This is particularly true in Gaeilge. ▪ Teachers are not currently preparing for teaching of oral language using the Primary Language Curriculum. ▪ The teaching in oral language is not focused as well as it could be on specific skills. ▪ The assessment of oral language in English and Gaeilge is an area that teachers would like to develop. ▪ Pupils are rarely provided with homework that involves oral activities.

As they prepared to write their report and improvement plan, the SSE committee reflected on the findings. The committee found the wording of the standards helpful as they grappled with writing targets that were meaningful and SMART. They decided to set three initial targets and linked each one back to the standards that they had used when gathering evidence. They agreed that these targets would be reviewed at the end of year one and at that stage, they would reframe them as required.

1. To improve the achievement levels of pupils in English and Gaeilge in relation to learning outcomes four and eleven of the Primary Language Curriculum.
2. To ensure that teachers are preparing for teaching oral language using the Primary Language Curriculum in English and Gaeilge and that they broaden the range of teaching approaches used during language lessons to make learning more skill focused.
3. To develop a shared, whole-school approach to the assessment of pupils' skills and achievements in oral language in English and Gaeilge.

The SSE committee drafted the combined evaluation report and improvement plan using the [template](#) on the SSE website. Beside each target, they listed the actions that would need to happen and who would be responsible for them. Because the Primary Language Curriculum is only for pupils up to 2nd class at the moment, some actions were listed for teachers from infant to 2nd and other actions were listed for teachers from 3rd to 6th. The committee presented it to the staff who discussed and amended it. The principal then took the agreed final report and improvement plan to the Board of Management who also commented on it. At the same meeting, board members discussed and agreed the [annual checklist](#). The principal prepared a [summary of the school self-evaluation report and improvement plan](#) and shared it with the school community on the school's website and through the school's end of year newsletter.

To read further about the progress made by the school on SSE, see the [Oakleaf Primary School](#) page of the SSE website.

SCENARIO 2

BALLYMARTIN NS

In autumn 2016, the principal and teachers of Ballymartin NS, a rural primary school, embarked on their second four-year SSE cycle. One of the aspects selected by the principal and staff for investigation in the current school year was the use of digital technology in teaching and learning. To recap on how the school approached steps 1 and 2 of the SSE process click on [Ballymartin NS](#).

STEP 3: ANALYSE AND MAKE JUDGEMENTS

In step 2 of the SSE process, one of the evidence-gathering instruments that the staff had generated was a checklist of learner outcomes for the junior half of the school. Each teacher was given this checklist and asked to indicate beside each learner outcome whether it was a strength or an area for improvement in their own class. However, when the staff convened to discuss the checklists, all of the teachers reported the same problem. They didn't have sufficient knowledge of the pupils' competences in the area of digital technology to complete the checklist. This highlighted a gap in the teachers' practice with regard to identifying learner outcomes in digital technology and assessing the extent to which the pupils were achieving these.

It was clear to the staff that the domains of teachers' collective/collaborative practice and teachers' individual practice had to become their focus.

Together, the principal and teachers discussed each of the standards in the domains of teachers' collective/collaborative practice and teachers' individual practice, with a view to judging if their practice in each standard comprised a strength or an area for improvement. To support their judgement the teachers went through the statements of practice relating to each standard and discussed whether their overall practice in the standard was highly effective, effective or less than effective.



The principal and teachers began by discussing their practice in each of the four standards of the domain of teachers' individual practice.

Teachers' individual practice	
Standard	Strength or area for improvement?
The teacher has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills.	Strength
The teacher selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning.	Area for improvement
The teacher selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objective and to pupils' learning needs.	Area for improvement
The teacher responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary.	Area for improvement

While the staff saw three of the four domains as areas for improvement, they were of the view that if the second standard could become a strength then the third and fourth would follow. In other words, if the teachers became more successful in identifying learner outcomes and assessing the extent to which learner outcomes were achieved, then this would significantly support improvements in the quality of teaching approaches and differentiation.

The staff then turned their attention to the four standards in the domain of teachers' collective/collaborative practice.

Teachers' collective/collaborative practice	
Standard	Strength or area for improvement?
Teachers value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration.	Strength
Teachers work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum.	Area for improvement
Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices.	Area for improvement
Teachers contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise.	Area for improvement

When analysing and making judgements regarding teachers' collective/collaborative practice, the principal and teachers noted that the key standard that they had identified in the domain of teachers' individual practice would provide an effective focus and vehicle for collaboration. It was becoming clear that if their improvement agenda started with this, it would more than likely lead to more effective practice in both domains, and ultimately to better learner experiences and outcomes. Overall the teachers agreed that using the quality framework as a constant reference point enabled them to have a 'bird's-eye' view of the actions that were required to bring about improvement.

STEP 4: WRITE AND SHARE REPORT AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Having made their judgements and identified priorities, the principal and teachers were in a good position to write their SSE report and they knew the direction that the improvement plan needed to take. In a search for the most useful format, they looked at samples of improvement plans on the [SSE website](#). They ended up generating their own template, which they felt combined the best aspects of those on the website and also grounded the plan in the relevant domains and standards of teaching and learning.

They spent some time debating targets and felt that the standards and statements of effective practice could be used to guide the improvement. They set just one initial target in the domain of teachers' individual practice and outlined four actions as the table below shows.

TARGET
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> That teachers' individual practice in developing of pupils' use of digital technology will accord with the statements of <i>effective practice</i> for the standard below as set out in <i>Looking at Our School 2016</i> (p18) <p><i>This target is in the domain of teachers' individual practice</i> <i>Standard: The teacher selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning.</i></p>
ACTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers to agree a list of learner outcomes in the use of digital technology for each two-year class level within the school. Teachers to agree how pupils will be expected to demonstrate the learner outcomes and use this as a basis for formative and summative assessment Teachers to agree the most useful set of teaching approaches to enable pupils to achieve the learner outcomes. Teachers to share expertise and discuss progress <p><i>These actions are in the domain of teachers' collaborative/ collective Practice</i> <i>Standards:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Teachers value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration.</i> <i>Teachers work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum.</i> <i>Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices.</i> <i>Teachers contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise.</i>

Once the board of management had approved the report and improvement plan, the principal prepared a [summary of the school self-evaluation report and improvement plan](#) and displayed it on the parents' noticeboard and sent it to all families by e-mail.

To read further about Ballymartin NS's progress see the [Ballymartin NS](#) page of the SSE website.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION AND SSE – A SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER PIECE

What's the connection between external evaluation and SSE?

As schools engage and become increasingly familiar with the SSE process – the cycle of evidence-gathering, identifying and implementing actions for improvement, monitoring progress and reporting on the process – it's worth looking a little more closely at the connection between the evaluation work of the Inspectorate and the school's self-evaluation work.

Take three significant documents that were published by the Department in 2016. They are:

- the SSE circular: [0039/2016](#)
- the SSE guidelines 2016-2020: [SSE Guidelines](#)
- *A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools*: [Guide to Inspection](#)

In each one, you'll find an almost identical statement about external evaluation and SSE. Here's the statement on page 4 of *A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools*.

School self-evaluation and external evaluation are complementary processes, both focusing on improvement. The school self-evaluation process gives schools a means of identifying and addressing priorities, and of ensuring a whole-school focus on improving specific aspects of teaching and learning. External evaluations take note of schools' identified priorities and assess their teaching and learning practices. Given this common focus on improvement, the Inspectorate will take account of schools' engagement with, and the outcomes of, self-evaluation in the course of its evaluations while remaining sensitive to the individual context factors of schools at varying stages of SSE development.

What exactly does "...the Inspectorate will take account of ..." mean?

Put simply, this means that inspectors will include the school's self-evaluation process where it's relevant to the focus of the particular inspection. It's helpful to look at the *Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools*, which describes all the models of inspection and refers in each description to where the school's self-evaluation process might be relevant to the evaluation focus of that model. The fact that the focus of a school's self-evaluation process is always an aspect of teaching and learning makes it potentially relevant to all models of inspection where there is evaluation of teaching and learning. How the SSE process is led and managed is clearly relevant to whole-school evaluations, and to DEIS evaluations in which DEIS action planning for improvement is the school's SSE process.

Inspectors will also look at compliance with the requirements of the SSE circular. Schools should maintain SSE as a continuous process, develop and implement improvement plans, and use *Looking at Our School 2016* as a benchmark when evaluating their teaching and learning practices. The circular requires schools to produce a short internal report and improvement plan, with a policy checklist to be completed by the board, and an accessible and meaningful summary of the report and improvement plan for parents and the school community.

Where does *Looking at Our School 2016* fit in with external evaluation and SSE?

Looking at Our School 2016 makes the same kind of statement as the three documents mentioned above.

The quality framework sees external and internal evaluation as complementary contributors to school improvement and capacity-building. It maintains that the most powerful agent of improvement is a well-integrated system of evaluation that combines the external perspective with the reflective and collective insights of school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

It's important to be aware that inspectors will use *Looking at Our School 2016* as a benchmark when evaluating practice in schools. What that means is that *Looking at Our School 2016* provides a common reference point and a common language when schools and inspectors are engaged in professional discussions about quality and effective practice.

Reporting to parents: how much detail and what's essential?

Parents should know four things: what you investigated; how you found out what's working well; what you're now going to work on; and what they can do to help. And why not share some information about key school policies? We've created a template that you might like to use or adapt. You'll find it [here](#).

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH DATA!

There's a well-known acronym that perhaps has become so familiar that it's lost some of its punch. The acronym is **DRIP**, and it stands for **Data Rich, Information Poor**. While it might look like yet another example of corporate-speak cleverality, it actually makes a very worthwhile point, which is this: just because you have the facts and figures, it doesn't mean that you are well informed.

The word 'data', no matter how it's pronounced, doesn't exactly set pulses racing in Irish primary schools. A lot of the often negative feeling toward the word among teachers comes from a belief that schools are too complex and multi-dimensional to be reduced to a set of figures and tables. And that's absolutely right! All the human situations and interactions that are part of every school can't be represented in all their variety on any spreadsheet known to man. However – and here's the rub – in order to address some of the complex realities that exist in every school, you have to look closely and in detail at certain facts and figures. In that way, you are ensuring that **data** becomes **information**.

I trust my gut,
Our project is too complex
for logic and evidence.



Take for example the tricky area of attendance. It's obvious that if pupils aren't in school regularly, they'll have difficulty making progress and there will be significant gaps in their learning. So it's likely enough that looking at attendance patterns could be part of action planning for improved learner outcomes. All primary schools complete the daily *rolla*, with many now recording it using an electronic database. Some even record the times that pupils arrive into school. This information is a data source that often goes unused. The figures themselves are of little value until they are analysed, and patterns and trends emerge, so that raw data becomes meaningful information. Once you've done that – you may be quite surprised by what you find! – you have the wherewithal to identify what actions are necessary to bring about measurable improvement.

An area where schools have lots of potentially rich data is in the area of standardised tests or indeed other tests that the school administers regularly. While many schools carry out an analysis of results every year, the analysis may often only entail a general comparison with the national figures, which is of fairly limited use. The important thing to ask yourself about any set of information is: *'What can we find out from this, and how can we make best use of that knowledge?'*



Using the results of these tests, schools can make greater sense of the data than anyone else. You, collectively, know the individual pupils and the characteristics of class groups in a way that no-one else does. What this means is that you can look at outcomes for individuals and for class groups and make a good judgement on the extent to which **expectations** have been met, have not been met, or indeed have been exceeded. You can also use this data to look at whole-school trends. For numeracy you can compare the skill areas of application / computation and problem-solving. In literacy, you might do an

analysis of comprehension. You can consider how consistent attainment is. And you can do a year-on-year analysis to identify emerging trends and take action either to strengthen or to combat them.

Obviously, what this article has focused on so far is what might be called **hard data** – facts and figures. But as you know, they're not just facts and figures when they're attached to the individuals and groups that are your pupils. Looking at them honestly and critically, you can draw a great deal of information from them which you can apply to the core business of supporting and developing pupils' learning experiences and outcomes in your school.

Finally, a word about **soft data**, relating to less tangible but hugely important areas, such as pupils' dispositions towards learning, how they see themselves as learners, and the approaches that help them to learn better. **Pupil surveys** and **focus groups** have, we know, surfaced very valuable insights, which have helped to shape, inform and, ultimately, improve learner experience and outcomes.

SSE AND THE NEW RESOURCE ALLOCATION MODEL

Circular [13/2017](#) sets out the Department's Resource Allocation Model (RAM) for children with special educational needs. By now, every school will have received notification of its allocation of resources to assist them in meeting the needs of those pupils. This article seeks to reassure schools that the SSE process can be useful for them in identifying, meeting and reviewing the learning needs of children. Indeed, some schools may well choose RAM as one of their areas of focus in this second cycle of SSE. As you examine the [Guidelines](#) which have been produced to assist schools in the implementation of the new allocation model, it's likely that you'll notice how many of the approaches suggested are already in place in your school because of SSE. For example, the *Guidelines* include a [Self-Reflective Questionnaire](#) (p. 45) designed to help you to address the following key questions:



- How can we **identify** pupils' needs?
- How can we **meet** these needs?
- How can we **monitor and report** on progress?

These key questions are particularly relevant to standards within the domains of learner outcomes and teachers' collective / collaborative practice in the quality framework. This questionnaire is for use by all teachers in your school and is designed as a dynamic, developmental document to inform implementation of the revised RAM. The questionnaire itself should serve as a stimulus for reflection and discussion. The six steps of the SSE process could be used as outlined below:

Step 1 Identify Focus

Using the key questions from the self-reflective questionnaire as a menu, choose an area that is most relevant to the school's needs.

- For example, you might choose, *How can we identify pupils' needs in order to address them?* as a focus.

Step 2 Gather Evidence

Use the prompt questions from the focus area in the Self-Reflective Questionnaire to establish the existing practices in the school collaboratively. For example;

- *How do we use the Continuum of Support and Student Support Files to provide a documented and staged-approach to identifying and meeting pupils' needs?*
- *When do our class teachers decide to initiate Classroom Support Plans?*
- *Do we consider individual needs across a broad range, including academic, social, communication, emotional, and behavioural needs?*
- *Do we identify environmental and contextual issues which need modification (visual, hearing, physical, sensory)?*

Step 3 Analyse and Make Judgements

Use the evidence that you have gathered from the self-reflective questionnaire to identify the strengths of the existing provision as well as the key areas for improvement in how the school identifies pupils' needs.

Step 4 Write the Improvement Plan

You should give some consideration to who will be responsible for drafting and completing the plan. We've stated consistently that the focus of SSE is not on the paperwork, but it's necessary to clearly outline, agree and share the actions and improvement targets needed to identify and address pupils' needs more effectively.

Step 5 Put Improvement Plan into Action

For this step, the SSE mantra of '*every teacher, every room, every day*' is important. It really has to be about all of the teachers in your school consistently implementing the approaches agreed to meet the identified needs of pupils through the Continuum of Support.

Step 6 Monitor Actions and Evaluate impact

You need to think about and plan how you're going to monitor the effectiveness of the agreed actions as they are implemented in classrooms. At agreed intervals, the school should review progress on how its pupils' needs are identified again regarding the questions first used at step one of the process.

We hoped in this article to show that while the Resource Allocation Model may be viewed as a new initiative, the approach to implementing it should draw upon and develop the SSE process that schools are becoming very familiar with. The ultimate aim of the model is to assist teachers and school leaders in implementing the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches for all pupils.