

# SSE UPDATE

**PRIMARY EDITION**

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## **SSE – THE NEXT CYCLE**

Welcome to issue seven of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for primary schools. The Update hopes to assist you in your continuing engagement with school self-evaluation as a way of supporting school improvement.

It may be worth your while to take a glance at previous editions if you haven't encountered them before. Previous SSE Updates can be accessed on the school self-evaluation website at <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/index.php/sse-newsletter/>. Topics which have been dealt with in the past include: Target-setting in the SSE process; DEIS action planning and SSE; and preparing the SSE report, among others.

In this issue we'll be examining a number of developments in school self-evaluation, including the move to the next cycle of implementation of school self-evaluation in the period 2016-2020. In particular we'll examine how the SSE process can support schools as they introduce the Primary Language Curriculum.

We'll also be looking at the continued growth of a culture of inquiry in primary schools through a meaningful and manageable SSE process.

Finally, the Update gives some information about the new SSE circular which covers the period 2016-2020, and the supports that will be available to assist its implementation.

As the end of the school year comes into sight we hope you've had a professionally rewarding and productive year. Moving into the next phase of school self-evaluation we look forward to continuing to learn from your experiences and insights as teachers and school leaders!

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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## **SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION 2016-2020 – THE NEXT CYCLE**

The first cycle of school self-evaluation will finish at the end of this school year. In 2012, schools all over the country began to engage with this new process and the various aspects that needed to be addressed. At this stage, it's worthwhile taking a moment to reflect on the journey so far.

Over the past four years you have developed and implemented improvement plans (SIPs) for literacy, numeracy and a curriculum area you selected yourselves. Of course, schools are at different stages of development, with some schools steaming ahead, while others are taking longer to get to grips with all that self-evaluation involves.

Even if the SSE process is not as well embedded in your school as you would like at the end of the first cycle, don't let this discourage you from continuing with your improvement plans. The most important thing to keep in mind and to work on are the changes in practice you've identified to achieve better learning outcomes for your pupils.

Perhaps one of the most useful things schools have learned through their engagement with SSE has been the importance of using evidence to find out how they are doing and where they need to do better. Setting targets has been more challenging for many schools, although as time goes on this too will become more natural and meaningful.

When looking at the third area of focus over the past year or two, more schools have come to realise that targets do not have to be expressed as percentages or as outcomes that can be precisely measured in a numeric way. This knowledge should free up schools to look at areas they might have stayed away from up till now, because they felt that the criteria for success could not be measured in hard figures or standardised tests.

The second cycle of SSE will start in September 2016 and will last till the end of the school year in 2020. The second cycle will reflect new initiatives, such as the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC). It makes sense to apply the SSE process to the introduction of the PLC in your school. The article on page 3 suggests one way of doing this, beginning with where you are now in your school.

A new Circular will issue before the start of the new cycle, explaining what schools need to do over the next four years. The SSE *Guidelines* are being revised to assist schools as they embark on the new SSE cycle. Crucially, they will underline a continuing focus on teaching and learning.

You may recall the quality framework for teaching and learning in the SSE *Guidelines* (2012). The revised *Guidelines* contain a more streamlined quality framework which will enable schools to evaluate their practice against clearly-stated standards.

Paperwork and documentation are not what SSE is about. SSE is all about implementing changes in practice that lead to improvement. In other words, what happens in classrooms is the important thing, not what is produced in a document or written plan. To emphasise this, simplified and more user-friendly templates will be available online for schools who wish to use them.

Schools should ensure that parents and the school community are informed of the SSE process. A summary of the SSE report and SIP should be made available to them. For the second cycle, a much simpler template will be available for schools to use to provide this information in an easy and accessible way to the school community.

SSE is the school's own process. Therefore, the second cycle will give you more flexibility in deciding how you will focus and pace the process in your school. In the next issue of SSE Update, we will have more detail on the new SSE Circular, the revised SSE *Guidelines* and the more streamlined SSE templates.

# USING SSE TO SUPPORT THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE CURRICULUM



The Primary Language Curriculum was developed by the NCCA as an integrated language curriculum, for pupils across all school contexts, with the same structure and strands for English and Irish. Circular 0061/2015 outlines details about the implementation of the primary language curriculum and advises schools to use the SSE process in its implementation. A new SSE circular, to be published shortly, outlines SSE requirements in schools from 2016 to 2020, and introduces a slightly revised 6-step SSE process. This process envisages schools engaging in an investigation phase to scope out and develop the school improvement plan and an implementation phase to enable improvements to become embedded in teachers' practice. The circular advises schools to use the SSE process to introduce new initiatives, including the Primary Language Curriculum. A revised quality framework for teaching and learning will also be published in the near future.

By using the six-step school self-evaluation process to introduce the oral language strand in English and Irish in the Primary Language Curriculum, your school can build on the literacy work you did for the first phase of school self-evaluation. If your school is a Gaeltacht school or a Gaelscoil, you have already worked on literacy in English and Irish, as part of the first phase of your SSE process.

## Investigate

One way to begin this process is to conduct a **whole-school investigation** into the approaches and emphases in the Primary Language Curriculum. This will ensure that you all have a shared understanding and will give you an opportunity to familiarise yourselves with the strands, elements, progression continua and learning outcomes for English and Irish, with particular reference to oral language. In examining your practice as a staff and potential outcomes for your pupils, a good place to begin is by scanning the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines*. Of course *Learner outcomes* are at the core of the business of any school, so this part of the Guidelines could be a good place to start. This will assist in identifying the elements of language teaching that are working well and are consistent with the requirements of the new curriculum and the elements that need to be developed.

How are your pupils currently performing with regard to the *Learner outcomes* in the Guidelines? How might this change with the new language curriculum? What learner outcomes are worth investigating a little more? For example, do any of the following make sense as lines of enquiry when evaluating your pupils' language learning?

- *Pupils' enjoyment in learning is evident and arises from a sense of making progress and of achievement*
- *Pupils demonstrate an enquiring and open-minded attitude towards themselves and those around them.*
- *The overall attainment of the pupils is improving or is at a very good standard in accordance with the learning outcomes of the Primary School Curriculum*



Having conducted an investigation into the main components of the Primary Language Curriculum, including the requirements outlined in circular 0061/2015, and the quality framework for teaching and learning in the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines*, your school should be in a position to establish the area(s) of **focus** for your school self-evaluation process. For example, you might decide to focus on oral language, in either English or Irish and on the domain of learner outcomes.

You are then ready to begin to **gather evidence**. The progression milestones and continua in the Primary Language Curriculum and the four standards outlined within the domain of learner outcomes in the quality framework for teaching and learning will support you as you gather evidence about your current language teaching and your pupils' language learning in English and Irish.

The starting point involves asking "***Where are the children at and where are they going in their language learning in English and /or Irish?***" Working collaboratively, your school can use examples provided in the support materials to reflect on your teaching and assessment methods and your pupils' learning of oral language.

The progression continua and learning outcomes in the curriculum, coupled with the statements of effective and highly effective practice in the quality framework will support teachers in your school as you **analyse the evidence gathered and make judgements** about your school's current strengths and areas for improvement in oral language.

### **Write the plan and put it into action**

At this stage of the investigation phase, your school should be ready to prepare for implementation. This begins with recording what you have done and the decisions you have made in planning for improvement. You should prepare a **short self-evaluation report and school improvement plan**, remembering that the paper work is not the most important element of the process. A summary should be provided to your **school community**, which should set out why you are looking at oral language, what you are going to do, and how you will check to see if it is being done. Your school's **improvement plan** should give clear guidance about:

- the agreed targets to improve oral language with reference to learner outcomes;
- the actions, including changes in teaching, learning and assessment that will be implemented in all classrooms and learning settings to achieve the targets;
- those responsible for the actions, and for monitoring progress and the timescale for improvements to take place.

This will enable the successful **implementation of the improvement plan**.

### **Monitor actions and evaluate impacts**

Over the course of its three-year implementation, arrangements should be in place to **monitor and evaluate** the implementation of agreed actions in introducing the oral language strands for English and Irish of the Primary Language Curriculum and the progress made towards reaching the agreed targets. Changes to targets and actions in light of experience may be necessary to ensure that the new approaches and practices become embedded in the day-to-day learning of pupils. The SSE process allows time for new practice to embed and become a part of 'the way we do things in our school'. SSE is about learning for everyone – teachers and pupils – which is embodied through practice that will make a difference for your pupils.

Ar aghaidh linn ag foghlaim le chéile!

## **AN INQUIRY HABIT OF MIND: MANAGEABLE, MEANINGFUL AND MOTIVATING SSE**

As we move towards the next phase of school self-evaluation, it's a good idea to take time to look back on how the development of a self-evaluation culture in your school has progressed. After all, self-evaluation is all about professional learning and reflection.

In the last four years, most schools have learned a lot from the process of gathering evidence and analysing data, what we call *evidence-based action planning for improvement*. In particular, many schools have learned about data-gathering – the advantages and the pitfalls! For example, it is easy to collect too much data.

As the process has developed, many schools have refined their approach to data-gathering to ensure that relevant information is gathered that gives a clear view of teaching and learning in the school. In one County Louth school, for example, the use of regular teacher team conferences for different areas of inquiry, as well as the inclusion of parents in the SSE process as much as possible, have been central parts of their learning about effective self-evaluation:

*Our teacher conferencing idea came about as a response to the need to discuss Assessment for Learning tasks in small teams of the teachers involved. The conferences allow teachers to talk about their experience of implementing specific teaching strategies in their classrooms. The Literacy or Numeracy Co-ordinator, for example, will then lead the discussion and look at what future action is required to make more effective use of resources and to ensure that the children's learning journey does not stop, but continues to develop.*

*The teacher conferences are particularly useful because they give the team of teachers the opportunity to meet in a professional and relaxed manner and to share best practice. They can say "this worked for me", or "we wanted to do this, but it didn't work".*

*Obviously, some things work in one class, but may not work in another. Teachers sharing their experiences from the classroom leads to other teachers proffering advice or suggestions on how things might be done differently to ensure success next time. We have found that small changes in methodology can have a huge impact on the learning of a child.*

- Co. Louth Teacher.

*We have included parents at every stage of the SSE process. A major part of this has been to get feedback from parents about how things are going. As part of our focus on Literacy, for example, parents were given some poems to read at home, so that the child would have some experience of poetry before learning about it at school.*

*Some parents came back to us and said that they thought it was too ambitious, or that their child didn't feel comfortable with the work they were expected to do, or that it was too difficult. The teachers then factored that in and modified their programme to make it more accessible. Sometimes the teachers agreed to leave a particular poem for the moment and revisit it when the child was more ready.*

- Co. Louth Teacher.

What is particularly enticing about the sort of approaches used by schools like this is that everyone in the school community is directly involved in talking about the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

The SSE report is another means of sharing the findings of the SSE process with all members of the school community. It can show how everyone has a role to play in helping to improve learning – board of management, teachers, parents and pupils. The SSE report is also an important way for schools to tell, and celebrate, their own stories.

The process of data-gathering can sometimes lead to more questions about what is really going on! Quantitative information regarding a particular area can lead to digging down to find out what is

happening beneath the surface of an initial survey or analysis of results. One way of digging down is through focus groups, where the voices of teachers, parents and pupils can be heard in greater detail.

The *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* highlight this aspect of SSE as 'it facilitates repeated cycles of analysis or a return to a previous stage of the cycle as required'. This means that we don't just dig deeper to find new areas to improve. It also means that we might return to an area we've already looked at in SSE, to further refine practice. This constant search for areas of practice to improve is what Earl and Timperley (2008) describe as an *inquiry habit of mind*.

We all know that SSE is about improving practice in the classroom, arising from the effective use of the data gathered. The careful analysis of data and implementing what this analysis suggests is a key part of a successful SSE process. Sometimes, however, we might be tempted to do things that are not necessarily linked to the data gathered - to 'get on with it'. There is a need to avoid what have been described as *activity traps* (Katz, Earl and Jaafar, 2006). We can be busy doing things, but are they things that improve learning?

The most important aspect of SSE, and the only way its effectiveness can be judged, is the quality of learning that results from its implementation. This learning should not just be about pupils' experience in the classroom, but on teachers' experience as well. If teachers are committed to continuing to learn, and implementing new practices based on their learning, then pupils will benefit too.

With this in mind, it's important to remember that learning is best achieved by doing. In other words, it is through the implementation of new ideas that their effect will be felt. Trying something out is the only way we can see if it works – and if it doesn't, then we should see how we can do it differently to ensure success. Constantly monitoring, evaluating and reflecting on new practices will ensure that the SSE process is manageable, meaningful, and motivating for everyone in the school community.

## **SUPPORTS FOR SSE 2016-2020**

- A new Circular will issue in June 2016 to set out the requirements for school self-evaluation, 2016-2020.
- Revised SSE *Guidelines* will also be published in June.
- A revised quality framework will be included in the *Guidelines*.
- Revised templates for schools to use for SSE reports and improvement plans will be available on our SSE website, [www.schoolself-evaluation.ie](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie). These will include a simplified report and plan which you can use when communicating with parents and your school community.
- The SSE website has an increasing amount of video material from schools, giving an insight into key aspects of SSE practice. The website is being redesigned to make content more accessible and relevant, following a survey of a sample of schools which have used it. All SSE materials for 2016-2020 will be published on the website.
- We will continue to publish the SSE Update, making it more of an e-zine to provide you with options on the level of detail you can engage with, and providing better links to other relevant resources and materials.