

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 6 – NOVEMBER 2015

Welcome to the sixth issue of SSE Update, the Inspectorate e-bulletin for primary schools, which we hope will support your continuing engagement with the school self-evaluation process. The previous issues are available on the SSE website: <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/index.php/sse-archive-documents>.

By this stage, all primary schools should have school improvement plans (SIPs) in place for literacy and numeracy. Principals and teachers will be concerned with how these plans are implemented in classrooms over their three-year lifespan. All schools should now be moving to the third curriculum area. Remember that queries relating to the implementation, or indeed any aspect of SSE, can be submitted via info@schoolself-evaluation.ie or through the 'Contact' form on the website.

Giving a meaningful voice to parents about teaching and learning is a new challenge for some schools. We know that schools have really learned from having done so and that that learning now influences teaching approaches. We've tried to capture some of that in the article 'The parent voice in SSE' on page 2.

We then have two articles relating to how schools might approach the third curriculum area. You'll be aware that there are options for the school. In some cases, schools have moved directly to self-evaluating a discrete subject, while in others, schools are looking at teaching approaches across a number of curriculum areas. We hope that the article on page 3 will reflect those varying approaches. We would also like to acknowledge and thank the two schools who provided pen pictures of their work on the third curriculum area.

Is léir go bhfuil roinnt mhaith scoileanna ag obair go dian ar an nGaeilge don tríú hachar FMS. Tá leideanna ar fáil dóibh siúd ar leathanach 5. Cé go bhfuil siadsan dírithe ar scoileanna a fheidhmíonn trí Bhéarla, tá súil againn go mbeadh siad úsáideach i scoileanna Gaeltachta agus i ngaelscoileanna freisin.

As you know, the Inspectorate has been making SSE advisory visits to schools, where requested. You can still request a visit by email at info@schoolself-evaluation.ie. A topic that often arises during these visits is targets. While we have dealt with the issue in previous Updates (cf Update 2), we felt it would be worthwhile addressing the issue again in order to provide clarity on targets and target setting practices.

We hope you find these articles useful. Feedback, as always, is welcome. We'd particularly welcome your views on what should be included in future issues of the SSE Update.

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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THE PARENT VOICE IN SSE

Schools will, by now, be familiar with the SSE six-step process. An integral part of that process is giving a meaningful voice to parents. Parents have lots to say about what goes on in the schools their children attend. They have lots to say about the quality of teaching and about the standards of learning being achieved. Schools shouldn't fear what parents might have to say, or the views they might express. Rather, they should be looking to see how what has been said can ultimately improve teaching and learning. All the evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of Irish parents think their children's school is good. Tapping their views has the potential to make schools even better.

Some schools have gathered really valuable information by giving their parents a meaningful voice. In these cases, some of the assumptions that teachers may have held about their teaching and about pupil learning were challenged – not in a threatening way, but in a way that made the schools really think about the approaches they had been using to date. This is purposeful self-evaluation in action.

The challenge for schools is to make sure they ask the right questions in order to allow the parents to express their views and opinions. So, what are these questions? It's likely that schools have been finding out there's no one solution to that particular problem. The questions will depend on a range of issues including the school context, and the extent to which parents are involved in the life of the school. However, the following are offered as tips that might be useful as schools move on to self-evaluating a third area of the curriculum.

- How did we capture the voice of the parents in self-evaluating literacy and numeracy?

Schools were encouraged to include the voice of the parent in self-evaluating teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy. Schools are now advised to review how effective this process was. If questionnaires were used – did we ask the right questions? Did we ask too many / too few questions? Did we give an opportunity to parents to express their views and opinions by using open questions in our questionnaires? If focus groups were used – did we get a sufficiently broad mix of parents to contribute their views to the focus group? How did we capture the key messages that emerged from the focus group?

- How did we use what we learned from parents about teaching and learning in our school to change our practice in the classrooms?

The point of talking to parents is to find out what they think about teaching approaches and the standard of learning in the school. Some schools learned things they hadn't previously considered. In these cases, parents expressed views about teaching approaches in some subjects that surprised the schools. They were challenged to examine the points raised by parents and to ensure that the issues were addressed in classrooms. Schools should now review how effectively relevant parental opinions influenced approaches to literacy and numeracy.

- How do we communicate our findings about SSE to parents?

While schools may not previously have had a formal 'communications with parents' strategy, they do communicate regularly with parents about many aspects of school life, for example through the school website. One of the SSE requirements set out in Circular 39/12 is for schools to make summaries of their SSE reports and SIPs available to the school community. Schools are advised to continuously monitor the manner in which they communicate with their school community, including parents. A sample summary SIP on the SSE website suggests that schools communicate clearly their strengths in the area that has been subject to self-evaluation, the aspects of teaching and learning that need to be improved and, crucially, how parents might assist in that regard.

SSE THIRD AREA OF FOCUS – TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Schools have started to focus on a third curriculum area for school self-evaluation (SSE). Having covered Literacy and Numeracy in the first two years, most schools have chosen another curriculum area for year three. Some schools, however, have decided not to focus on one curriculum area, but instead to take a cross-curricular approach. Often, this has been prompted by something that cropped up during the first two years' work. For this article, we asked two schools who have taken different approaches to this to tell us about their experiences.

1. Focus – Physical Education (PE)

At St Clare's Primary School, Harold's Cross, Dublin 6W, we chose Physical Education (PE) as our third area of focus for SSE. We were very aware of the growing problems of children's lack of exercise and childhood obesity. This led to the school working towards an Active School Flag. Achieving this goal prompted us to focus on PE for SSE.

We at St Clare's felt that questionnaires for parents and pupils played a particularly useful part in gathering evidence. The school felt that focusing on PE was less intimidating, as parents didn't feel they needed the kind of teacher-like knowledge that might be necessary to talk about Literacy and Numeracy. Therefore they were more enthusiastic and more involved in the SSE process. Parents not only provided valuable information about their children's exercise habits, but they offered very practical suggestions for increasing physical activity in the school.

We wanted to clearly set out SSE targets in a way that teachers, parents and pupils could understand. The first key target was to increase every pupil's participation in PE - as we put it: *to achieve excellence every day for every child.*

Another target was to ensure that each strand of the PE curriculum was covered at each class level. This meant, for example, that dry land aquatics would be emphasised in those classes not engaged in formal swimming lessons this year.

In St Clare's, we decided to instigate a ten-minute exercise session each morning before school starts, called *Wake Up & Shake Up*. Another exercise session we started was *Run a Mile*, where children run a mile with their teachers and SNAs - parents join in on occasion too. *Run a Mile* takes place on Wednesdays and Fridays at 8am in September and October, and from March to June.

These innovations have proven to be very successful and have had a number of positive knock-on effects. School attendance and punctuality have significantly improved, for example, as pupils are very keen to participate in this fun activity at the beginning of each day.

The *Spring Olympics* is a week-long non-competitive event in February, where each group comprises pupils of mixed ability from junior infants to sixth class. In addition, we organise extra-curricular sports for each class level, with emphasis on parental involvement in the delivery of these activities.

Another agreed action was the insistence that teachers and pupils change into appropriate sportswear for PE activities. Seeing their teachers changing too has had a powerful effect on pupils, as they see that everyone is participating and that it is a joint effort. Thus, the dynamics between staff and pupils have greatly improved, with teachers much more involved and actively participating in each PE lesson.

Peer observation has played an important part in monitoring the implementation of agreed actions. This has included peer review of teachers' plans and programmes, to ensure that everyone is kept on track. More importantly, however, it has involved teachers observing each other's PE lessons in a non-threatening way. For example, teachers with particular expertise in PE have observed, assisted and advised colleagues who are not as confident in this area.

The implementation of a cyclical spiral curriculum in the school makes monitoring actions and assessing the effectiveness of the interventions easier to manage. Staff, parents, pupils and board of management are united in their commitment to sustaining and further developing the work done so far.

2. Focus – Assessment

At St Patrick's National School, Glencullen, Dublin 18, we chose to approach the third area for SSE in a different way. Arising from a recommendation in our recent whole-school evaluation (WSE) report, and as part of our own ongoing school review, Assessment was identified this year as an area still lacking continuity in our whole school approach and an area where staff would like guidance and professional development.

One of our main means of gathering evidence was through an online questionnaire for teachers. Questions focused on both Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL). Teachers were asked to outline which methods of assessment were being used and which were not. They were also asked to consider why certain forms of assessment were chosen above others.

Analysis of current class assessment files at a staff meeting identified the most useful records of assessment for a whole school approach. It was noticed that not every teacher's assessment folder was the same. While we already had an Assessment Policy in the school, the SSE process had clearly shown the need for a more co-ordinated approach.

Three specific targets were set: to engage in a whole school approach to Self-Assessment through adoption of the Self-Assessment Learning Folders (SALF) programme across the whole school; to develop and maintain a Class Assessment File, with specific records to be kept by every class, which would ensure greater coordination in assessment practices across the school. This information will then be passed on yearly to the next teacher; and to pilot an approach to maintaining a digital assessment portfolio in Visual Arts for each pupil in fourth class.

One of the actions agreed was to decide on the key elements that were essential for each teacher's assessment folder. For example, every teacher would include: the results of standardised tests; individual education plans (IEPs); individual pupil learning profiles (IPLPs); staged approach differentiation targets at Stage 1; SSE pupil evaluations; and other core information, on each pupil.

Another action at St. Patrick's NS was to get each pupil, from junior infants onwards, to start a self-assessment folder. These folders would ensure that pupils themselves were involved in a very practical way in the SSE process. Teachers modelled both self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies for their pupils. Our school's board of management ensured that CPD training was provided for teachers in SALF, while the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) were contacted to provide training in general assessment strategies.

A crucial aspect of our monitoring of the implementation of the SSE actions has been to monitor the *quality* of the new assessment practices. We believe that this is essential to ensure that the information gathered is useful and is having an impact on our teaching and learning. Thus, our SSE process has retained a clear focus on the core purpose of SSE, which is of course to effect school improvement.

LEIDEANNA DO SCOILEANNA ATÁ AG DÍRÍÚ AR GHAeilGE DON TRÍÚ HACHAR FMS

Tá scoileanna ag díriú ar an tríú hachar féinmheastóireachta scoile (FMS) sa scoilbhliain 2015/16. Is cosúil go mbeidh go leor scoileanna ar fud na tíre ag smaoineamh ar Ghaeilge a roghnú don tríú hachar.

Beidh Gaeilge labartha, scríofa agus léite i gceist don FMS. Is féidir le scoileanna díriú ar ghné amháin díobh siúd, más mian leo. Is curaclam comhtháite atá ann, ar ndóigh, le snáitheanna atá spleách ar a chéile. Is fiú freisin, mar sin, smaoineamh ar ghné a bhaineann leis na snáitheanna uile.

Gan amhras, beidh ionchur na dtuismitheoirí agus na ndaltaí cabhrach sa tréimhse ina mbítear ag bailiú fianaise. Tabharfaidh na tuismitheoirí agus na daltaí eolas macánta don scoil faoi na tuairimí atá acu faoin nGaeilge. Ina theannta sin, áfach, beidh ar an scoil na gníomhartha teagaisc agus foghlama a bheidh ag teastáil le FMS a chur i gcrích a chinntiú.

Tá urcharphointí leagtha amach thíos, chun cabhrú le scoileanna leis an bpróiseas FMS don Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn go praiticiúil:

- Mar thúsphointe don FMS, caithfear machnamh a dhéanamh ar na torthaí foghlama atá oiriúnach don rang uile. Sin iad na clocha míle atá sroichte ag formhór an ranga agus na céimeanna chun cinn atá glactha ag céatadán suntasach an ranga. Beidh an machnamh seo tábhachtach le fianaise a bhailiú agus a anailísiú.
- Is gá réamhullmhúchán a dhéanamh ina mbeifear ag déanamh cinntí maidir le ceisteanna bunúsacha – Cén téama a roghnóimid? Cén teanga atá le múineadh? Cad iad na frásaí, na nathanna cainte agus an foclóir a bheidh le foghlaim? Cén bhéim a leagfar ar fhoirm (briathra, aimsirí, úsáid an tséimhiú &rl)?
- Is gá smaoineamh ar na gníomhaíochtaí atá le cleachtadh chun gur féidir leis na daltaí an teanga atá múinte a shealbhú, mar shampla drámaíocht nó rólímirt.
- Caithfear cinntí a dhéanamh freisin faoi na dúshláin bhreise atá ag daltaí le cumas teoranta teanga agus le cumas maith teanga. Cad iad na háiseanna nó fearas a úsáidfear don teagasc?
- Is fiú smaoineamh ar na céimeanna atá molta do cheacht teanga. Is iad sin: múineadh na sprioctheanga; cleachtadh agus sealbhú na teanga; leathnú agus saibhriú na teanga. Cabhróidh an cur chuige seo le creat a chur ar theagasc sna seomraí ranga.
- Is gá a chur i gcuimhne go bhfuil tábhacht ag baint le teagasc cinnte, céimniúil, struchtúrtha agus cruthaitheach a chur i bhfeidhm. Ní féidir athrú nó feabhas a chinntiú gan díriú ar mhodhanna múinte agus ar ghníomhartha sa rang. Ba chóir go mbeadh an cur chuige roghnaithe ag na hoidí agus aontaithe ag pobal na scoile.
- Is fiú spriocanna faoi leith a leagan amach don chaint leanúnach. Chuige sin, is gá fócas a chur ar an struchtúr atá le forbairt chun go mbeidh daltaí ábalta an teanga a shealbhú agus a chruthú as a stuaim féin.
- Sa tuairisc féinmheastóireachta scoile agus sa phlean feabhsúcháin scoile, tabharfar cur síos soiléir ar fhócas na FMS, le láidreachtaí sa Ghaeilge agus gnéithe le forbairt aitheanta. Leagfar béim ar na réimsí feabhsúcháin, áfach, agus ar na gníomhartha a bheidh ag teastáil chun na spriocanna aitheanta a bhaint amach.
- Tá monatóireacht ríthábhachtach sa phróiseas FMS. Moltar don scoil machnamh a dhéanamh ar na bealaí gur féidir a chinntiú go bhfuil na cinntí á gcur i bhfeidhm agus an dul chun cinn á mheas agus á thomhais. Is fiú díriú ar cheisteanna sainiúla soiléire, mar shampla - An bhfuil na daltaí ábalta abairtí a chumadh ag baint úsáide as an aimsir chaite, aimsir láithreach &rl? An bhfuil daltaí ábalta scéal a athinsint? An bhfuil na daltaí ábalta an fhuaim “ch” a úsáid i gceart?

Nuair a chuireann sibh na pointí seo san áireamh, beidh sé níos éasca FMS don Ghaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm i mbealach a bheidh tairbheach don scoil.

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 pupils 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 pupils. To know whether any progress and improvement has taken place for our pupils as a result of our actions we need to know our starting-off point ... a baseline.

The baseline could be to do with pupils' oral language skills that you want to raise, and your measure might be the number of pupils who have reached a specific standard in oral language development. Here you might decide that it's possible to set a definite numerical target in percentage terms, based, for example, on the Drumcondra English Profiles or other similar assessments. So, a target of this type might read:

- We will increase the percentage of pupils who have attained Indicator 5 in the Drumcondra English Profiles, by the end of third class, from 40% to 50% by June 2017.

Sometimes, however, you may approach the question of targets in a different way. This will almost certainly be necessary, for example, when considering curricular areas other than English and Mathematics. Even with oral language skills, as above, however, you may decide that targets not based on percentage improvements are more suitable for your school:

- Our pupils will demonstrate measurable improvement in their ability to talk clearly and audibly to a variety of audiences in the school environment (individuals, groups, own class) by June 2017.

A clear timeframe is set out, but the target poses a question: how will pupils 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?