

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 5 – MAY 2015

SSE – MAKING THE PROCESS YOUR OWN

This is the fifth issue of SSE Update, an 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>.

The fourth issue of SSE Update covered the SSE seminar for school leaders hosted by the Inspectorate in October 2014. The four principals who generously shared their experience of SSE were especially clear and convincing on one point: the SSE process is not a ‘one size fits all’ model. What they found when leading SSE in their schools was that each school needs to make its own unique way through the process. In his opening remarks, the Chief Inspector spoke of the importance of each school’s individual journey. And Professor John MacBeath expressed the same idea at the conclusion of his keynote address:

“Traveller, there is no road. You make the road by walking.”

You can listen to all the speakers at the seminar by clicking on the SSE seminar link on the SSE website primary homepage.

In this issue, we’ll take our lead from these speakers and focus on ‘making the process your own’.

At this stage, many of you are well on your way with your second area of focus: literacy or numeracy. And many of you are considering how best to manage the implementation and monitoring of your first school improvement plan while developing your second. Drawing on the experience of schools that are now running two (or three) plans in tandem, we give some points to bear in mind on maintaining the process on page 2.

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 the third area of focus for SSE. Now that the SSE process has become more familiar, schools are asking themselves “What area can we identify as the right one for us to focus on?” The *Guidelines* can be a useful resource at this point; see page 4 for more. Agus tá súil againn go bhfaigheadh Gaelscoileanna agus scoileanna Gaeltachta an t-alt ar leathanach 5 úsáideach.

Does your school participate in DEIS? If so, you may have specific questions about the interface between SSE and DEIS action planning for improvement. The article on page 6 looks at what is required of DEIS schools, clarifies some points, and considers how the SSE process can support and strengthen your DEIS action plan.

Wishing you a happy and productive final term and an enjoyable summer break!

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

CONTENTS

Managing and maintaining the SSE process in your school	page 2
Selecting the third area of focus	page 4
An tríú hachar FMS do Ghaelscoileanna agus scoileanna Gaeltachta	leathanach 5
DEIS action planning for improvement and SSE in your school	page 6

MANAGING AND MAINTAINING THE SSE PROCESS IN YOUR SCHOOL



Circular 0039/2012

***“Over a four-year period from 2012 all primary schools should engage in school self-evaluation and produce three-year improvement plans for numeracy, literacy and one curriculum area.*”**

English-medium schools should engage in self-evaluation of literacy in English, numeracy and one curriculum area over the first four-year period. Irish medium schools should engage in self-evaluation of literacy in Irish, literacy in English and numeracy over the first four-year period.”

These extracts from circular 0039/2012 give an overview and timeframe for the first cycle of SSE, from 2012 to 2016. You may remember that the circular acknowledged that schools would probably need to take things more slowly in the initial stages as they worked their way into the SSE process. For that reason, the circular indicated a four-year timeframe to give schools what might be called ‘a long year one’ – up to June 2014 – to complete their first SSE report and school improvement plan. Of course, schools that felt able to move more swiftly were encouraged to do so.

As you know, the circular required schools to produce their first SSE report and school improvement plan (SIP) “no later than the end of the school year 2013/14”. The circular also sets down another time marker which you need to keep in mind: “no later than the beginning of the school year 2015/16, schools should engage in self-evaluation of other curriculum areas.” In doing so, schools are required to *follow a similar process as in previous years*. The timeframe and actions set out in the circular for English-medium schools are represented in the diagram below.

What ↓ When →	Year 1 (2012/13/14)	Year 2 (2014/15)	Year 3 (2015/16)
Select your first area of focus from: <i>Literacy or numeracy</i>	For your first area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria
Select your second area of focus from: <i>Literacy or numeracy</i>		For your second area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan	Implement the plan, monitor progress, and make any changes necessary to targets, actions or success criteria
Select your third area of focus from: <i>Other curriculum areas</i>			For your third area: Select your specific focus, work through the first five steps of the SSE process and produce an SSE report and improvement plan

Once you are clear about what you need to do, and by when, you can begin to consider how best to manage and maintain school self-evaluation as an ongoing cyclical process in your school. As the process becomes embedded in your school’s practice, you’ll find that, in each year, you’ll be

implementing at least two improvement plans and devising one other. What you want to achieve is a workable and sustainable cycle of three-year improvement plans.

The key to making the process your own is the development of reflective practices in the school. This can start with self-reflection on the effectiveness of existing approaches and, ultimately, get to a point where teachers engage in purposeful shared reflective practices. Remember, the important point is to get this process right rather than just getting it done!

Some schools, for example those involved in the piloting of SSE, have had a longer experience of the SSE process. These schools have some helpful pointers to offer others when it comes to getting your second (and third) areas of focus under way, while ensuring that you continue to implement and monitor the improvement plan for your first area of focus¹. Some of these pointers will be very familiar, but they're worth repeating. They are the key to making SSE manageable and meaningful.

1. Keep it simple

You'll need to think very strategically about exactly what **data** you need. Ask yourselves what is the essential data to give you the baseline information you need. Concentrate on a few key questions; they're likely to be versions of these three: "How are we doing? How do we know? How could we do better?" And it makes complete sense to identify just a small number of worthwhile **targets** that will represent meaningful improvement in teaching and learning in your school.

2. Keep actions few and focused

Staying with the 'keep it simple' approach, you should avoid taking on too many actions. This is where it's really crucial to ensure that you select actions that are clearly linked to the targets (a small number, remember!) that you've identified. Of course, there are lots of initiatives that you'll have heard of, maybe from other schools or from support services. The essential thing is to choose just a few, and choose them on the basis that they're most likely to achieve your targets.

3. Keep everyone on board

It's very likely that each of your school improvement plans will identify different people who are key to its success. These 'drivers' ensure that the process maintains focus and momentum, and they'll have specific responsibilities. However, it's important to ensure that **all** members of staff are aware of the SSE process and of the improvement plans that your school is carrying out. Over time, the actions that are effective and that lead to better learning experiences will be shared and implemented throughout your school.

4. Keep learning

School self-evaluation is a capacity-building process. It isn't about producing reports and plans, helpful and necessary though they may be. It *is* about each school growing as a reflective and collaborative learning community. During SSE advisory visits, sometimes schools have talked about 'mistakes' they made with SSE the first time round. But in those discussions what's really clear is how much schools have learned in the process, and how that learning can then be carried from one year into the next.

¹Videos of personnel from schools involved in the pilot phase of SSE and of principals talking about their experiences of SSE at the Malahide seminar are available on the SSE website.

SELECTING THE THIRD AREA OF FOCUS

Circular 0039/2012 sets out the requirements for schools in relation to school self-evaluation. The circular doesn't specify what an English-medium school has to evaluate having addressed literacy and numeracy, thus offering you a real opportunity to make the SSE process your own. In other words, it allows you to ensure that the process is **meaningful**, in your school, for your pupils.

Remember that the fundamental purpose of school self-evaluation is to improve teaching and learning. Therefore it's worth taking another look at the teaching and learning framework, which is on page 24 of the *Guidelines*. The overview of good practice on page 25 of the *Guidelines* puts a little more flesh on the bones of the teaching and learning framework.

Keeping the framework and overview as points of reference, you might have a general discussion among teachers to surface possible areas for improvement, and then agree on what area needs to be prioritised. The more specific you can be at this point, the better; it makes the process much more manageable. Once you've got your specific focus, you'll need to consider what information you should gather to establish a baseline. The data you gather will assist you in identifying the actions to be implemented in classrooms, and help to ensure that progress is **measurable**.

You might decide that the most appropriate direction for you to take is to engage in self-evaluation of Gaeilge, History, or another specific curriculum subject. On the other hand, the general discussion among teachers might indicate another direction. For example, teachers might decide to evaluate assessment practices across a number of curriculum subject areas. A question such as 'How do we assess pupil attainment and performance in Music and in the Visual Arts?' might lead your school to seek to improve how and what teachers assess in these areas.

Another approach could be to link your third area of focus with work already done in literacy and numeracy. Your school may have already focused on improving pupil outcomes in the higher order skills in literacy, such as inference and deduction, or improving their problem-solving skills in numeracy. You might then decide that it would make sense for your school to see how the development of pupils' problem-solving skills across a number of curriculum areas could be improved. So, in planning a module in Geography, teachers would focus on how they can develop pupils' problem-solving skills using an aspect of Geography as the vehicle.

Finally, 400 or so primary schools have been awarded an Active School Flag, and well done to you all! It might make sense for you to build on the review process you engaged in to achieve the flag by, for example, detailing specific targets and actions relating to improved pupil outcomes in various strands or strand units of the PE curriculum.

Whatever direction you take, the decision is yours, and that should help to make SSE a **motivating** process. Once you've chosen your third area, use Chapter 4 of the *Guidelines* to keep the focus on teaching and learning. You'll find evaluation criteria and quality statements for each sub-theme (shown below) in the teaching and learning framework, and you can use these to identify where you are, and where you'd like to be, with regard to teaching and learning practices in your chosen area.

• Attainment of curriculum objectives

• Learning environment
• Engagement in learning
• Learning to learn

• Preparation for teaching
• Teaching approaches
• Management of students
• Assessment

In moving on with the process, you need to ensure that teachers can engage with the actions required for improvement in the third area, while continuing the work on literacy and numeracy. Agreeing a few key actions in literacy and numeracy and embedding them in everyday practice will help to keep the process manageable.

Meaningful

Measurable

Motivating

AN TRÍÚ HACHAR FMS: GAELSCOILEANNA & SCOILEANNA GAELTACHTA

Leagann Imlitir 0039/2012 amach na coinníollacha do scoileanna i leith féinmheastóireacht scoile (FMS). De réir na himlitreach:

Thar tréimhse ceithre bliana ó 2012 ba chóir do na bunscoileanna uile gabháil d'fhéinmheastóireacht scoile agus pleananna feabhsúcháin trí bliana a chruthú don uimhearthacht, don litearthacht agus do réimse curaclaim amháin.

Tá scoileanna a fheidhmíonn trí mheán na Gaeilge, na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, ag gabháil d'fhéinmheastóireacht ar litearthacht sa Ghaeilge, ar uimhearthacht, agus ar litearthacht sa Bhéarla don tréimhse ceithre bliana. Leagfaimid amach na féidireachtaí do na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge anseo.

Faoin am seo, tá do scoil ag obair ar an dara hachar den fhéinmheastóireacht scoile mar chuid den phlean trí bliana FMS don achar sin. Leanfaimid ar aghaidh le cur i bhfeidhm na gcinntí ón gcéad dá bhliain. Anois, beidh an tríú hachar, litearthacht Bhéarla, le tosú i do scoil don scoilbhliain 2015/16.

Beidh Béarla labartha, scríofa agus léite i gceist don tríú achar seo. Tá na gnéithe sin comhtháite agus tá siad spleách ar a chéile. Is féidir a rá go bhfuil Teanga san iomlán, Gaeilge agus Béarla, comhtháite agus spleách ar a chéile freisin. Cabhróidh an meon seo linn sa phróiseas féinmheastóireachta do litearthacht Bhéarla.

Gan amhras, beidh scoileanna aonair ag leibhéal éagsúla maidir leis an bpróiseas FMS agus cur i bhfeidhm na cinntí. Ar aon nós, beidh an próiseas sé-chéim céanna, a bhain leis an gcéad dá achar, á leanúint agus sibh ag dul ar aghaidh leis an tríú hachar.

Beidh taithí ag do scoil ar fhéinmheastóireacht sa litearthacht Ghaeilge cheana féin. Beidh difríochtaí i dtreise idir Bhéarla agus Ghaeilge, ach beidh cosúlachtaí eatartha freisin.

Baineann dúshlán leis an dualgas atá ag na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge oibriú ar an litearthacht sa dá theanga. Is deis í freisin, áfach, don litearthacht a chur chun cinn i mbealach fíorshaibhir sa Ghaeilge agus sa Bhéarla, sna scoileanna ina bhfuil Gaeilge mar chéad teanga acu.

Seo scéal a léiríonn an pointe seo.

Bheartaigh scoil go raibh cúrsaí foclóra tábhachtach thar na hachair churaclaim uile. Roghnaigh siad saibhreas na teanga a fhorbairt don litearthacht Ghaeilge. Sa dara bhliain, don uimhearthacht, shocraigh siad díriú ar theanga na matamaitice. Bhí súil acu go mbeadh feabhas ar scileanna tuisceana na ndaltaí sa Mhatamaitic trí Ghaeilge. Agus iad ag leanúint ar aghaidh le cur i bhfeidhm na gcinntí ón gcéad dá bhliain, cheap an scoil go ndéanfadh sé ciall dóibh oibriú ar rud éigin eile a bhain le cúrsaí foclóra don tríú hachar, litearthacht Bhéarla. Leis an bpróiseas ceithre bliana leanúnach seo, cabhróidh an bhéim ar scileanna líofachta le dul chun cinn na ndaltaí sa Ghaeilge, sa Bhéarla, agus sa Mhatamaitic.

Bheadh sé tábhachtach a chinntiú go mbeidh na hoidí i do scoil réidh agus ullmhaithe na gníomhaíochtaí a chur i bhfeidhm. Beidh traschur áirithe idir an dá theanga ó thaobh spriocanna de. Cuideoidh sé seo leis an mbrú sin a éascú d'oidí agus do phobal na scoile uile.

THE SSE PROCESS AND DEIS ACTION PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

School self-evaluation and DEIS action planning have a shared focus on improving pupils' educational experiences and outcomes. If your school participates in DEIS, we hope you'll find this article helpful. It describes the interface between DEIS and school self-evaluation, and sets out what DEIS schools are required to do as part of the school self-evaluation process. We've put the key messages in bold.

Action planning for improvement – where DEIS and SSE meet

Systematic action planning for improvement is at the heart of the school self-evaluation process. It is also at the heart of DEIS. That is why **a school's DEIS action plan is also its school improvement plan; no additional or separate improvement plan is required.**

The DEIS action plan requires primary DEIS schools to have three-year action plans for improvement in the following areas: Literacy; Numeracy; Attendance; Retention; Progression; Partnership with parents and others.

The SSE process is a step-by-step approach which focuses on teaching and learning in the classroom. The six steps can be applied to all action planning for improvement, including DEIS action planning. **All areas covered in the DEIS action plan have a teaching and learning aspect**, although DEIS action planning is often focused on interventions and initiatives outside of the classroom. The SSE process can be particularly helpful to DEIS schools as a way of directing attention to what is happening in the classroom.

How will the SSE process and requirements affect DEIS planning?

The SSE circular 0039/2012 requires each school to *"record its own judgement about its performance and the quality of its work, in the form of a concise **school self-evaluation report**. A summary of this report should be made available to the whole-school community"*. The circular states that judgements should refer to strengths and areas identified for development.

In the course of your DEIS planning, it's likely that you record your ongoing findings and priorities for improvement for each of the DEIS themes. However, you may not have recorded your strengths.

Many DEIS initiatives have focused on aspects of school life outside the mainstream classroom: for example, interventions to address specific educational or perhaps behavioural difficulties; breakfast and after-school activities; and home-school supports. However, **the SSE process requires a focus on teaching and learning practices. Therefore, when reviewing your DEIS action plan for improvement, you should include targets and actions relating to learning and classroom practice in relevant DEIS areas.**

You may not have included pupil voice or parent voice in your evidence gathering up to now; this evidence is important within the SSE process, and will support your partnership with parents and your focus on pupil engagement within DEIS.

What do DEIS schools now need to do to meet their SSE requirements?

In order to comply with circular 0039/2012, **DEIS schools should produce an SSE report each year.** This report should reflect where your school is at in its DEIS planning cycle.

If you are beginning a three-year DEIS planning cycle, you will examine your last action plan, identify the areas where you have made progress, review your achievement in relation to targets, judge which actions and strategies were, or were not, effective, and identify areas for improvement. All these steps are already part of good DEIS practice. Now – and this will be new to most DEIS schools – **record your findings in a short SSE report for internal school reference. Then draw up your three-year action plan for improvement. This will be your DEIS action plan and also the school improvement plan for SSE purposes.**

If you are in years two and three of the DEIS planning cycle, in line with good DEIS planning practice, you will review plans at year end, and amend them as required. For example, you might adjust

existing targets or include new ones; you'll retain actions you consider effective, and include new ones where necessary. You then produce a short SSE report recording progress and adjustments, and the DEIS action plan, amended as necessary, is your SSE school improvement plan.

All schools need to complete a legislative and regulatory checklist and policy checklist. This is new for DEIS schools, and you'll find updated checklists on the SSE website (www.schoolself-evaluation.ie).

The SSE circular requires all schools to provide summary reports and summary improvement plans to the whole-school community, briefly outlining the strengths they have identified, and the areas they have prioritised for improvement.² Templates for these summary reports and plans, including a summary legislative and regulatory checklist and policy checklist are available on the SSE website in the 'Resources' section.

DEIS schools often have very detailed improvement plans, so you should keep your summary improvement plan short and meaningful, bearing in mind that your audience is the whole-school community. You should use it to communicate clearly the actions you've planned to improve teaching and learning. It would also be a very useful way to highlight areas where you would welcome parents' support: for example, attendance and punctuality, or encouraging children to read at home. Your summary report and improvement plan could include a number of DEIS areas, or could focus specifically on literacy, numeracy, or other areas that you have selected.

How might DEIS schools approach the third aspect of SSE?

As set out in circular 0039/2012, in addition to literacy and numeracy, all schools are required to produce an SSE report and a school improvement plan for a third curriculum area by 2015/16. Your school might look at DEIS areas such as attendance and retention, and see how targets for improvement in these areas could provide a focus for your third curriculum area. Just keep in mind that what you are looking for is an approach to action planning for improvement that ensures you are giving a central place to your pupils' experience of teaching and learning. Here's one school's experience that may help to illustrate this point.

A school realised that while its overall attendance rates had improved, there was still a problem with persistent non-attendance among a sizeable group of pupils. The school had breakfast club and after-school provision. However, when the school examined who was attending the breakfast and after-school clubs, they found that the pupils with the poorest attendance rates were the ones who were least likely to attend. That spurred the teachers and the principal to review what they were doing in the after-school club in particular. They decided that in order to ensure better attendance rates among those pupils they needed to provide a different type of teaching and learning in that environment. They also decided that they needed to ensure there were better links between the class teachers and what they were doing on an everyday basis and the after-school provision. Regular meetings between class teachers and the teachers working in the after-school club have now been scheduled. The school is in the first year of implementing this approach and it will be subject to review at the end of the school year.

Applying the lens of SSE to DEIS action planning can show that a key area like attendance may involve more than careful record-keeping, and can reach into the very core activity of each school: teaching and learning.

² You'll find an article on completing the summary report and improvement plan in SSE Update Issue 3.