

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 10 – February 2018

SSE 2016-2020 – looking back and looking forward

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

The second year of the 2016-2020 cycle of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) is now underway. The current SSE circular [0039/2017](#) and [SSE Guidelines](#) suggest a cycle beginning with an investigation year. That process of investigation – the first three steps of the SSE process – leads to an action plan for improvement, and the second year of the cycle then focuses on implementing that improvement plan.

We know, however, that many schools experienced disruption to their SSE process for various reasons. In the coming months, all schools will be in a position to re-engage with the SSE process on a whole-school basis. A letter should have arrived by now to your school outlining revised expectations for schools as they re-engage with this second cycle of SSE.

Key to this re-engagement will be working through the investigation phase and preparing an improvement plan, based on the school's priorities. For many schools these priorities arise from national initiatives, such as the introduction of the Primary Language Curriculum. Schools have the opportunity, through the SSE process, to introduce such changes in a way that is relevant and meaningful in their particular context. You may find some of the advice on page 2 useful, to support your school as it re-engages with SSE.



In the current SSE circular, you'll have noticed the reference to continuing to embed, and regularly review, the literacy and numeracy practices that you implemented in the first SSE cycle. On page 3, you'll find some pointers as to how you might go about doing this.

During the third term of the 2017/18 school year, we hope to be able to organise some regional seminars to support primary school leaders as they re-engage with SSE. Keep an eye on the SSE website and on our Twitter and Facebook feeds for details on these events.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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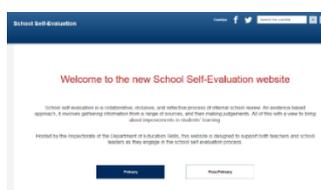
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Keep in touch with developments about SSE through our website and our social media presence. Click on the



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Reconnecting with SSE as a whole-school activity

The Department has always recognised that, even in the most favourable circumstances, school self-evaluation was going to be a long-term project in most schools. Reflecting on your own practice, and reflecting on whole-school practices, can be very challenging. And, in one of those strange quirks of language, improvement often seems to suggest the negative rather than the positive! Add to that all the consequences of severe economic recession, and it is safe to say that the SSE journey has been bumpy and full of stops and starts.

All schools will be in a position to re-engage with SSE from the end of February 2018. To help you prepare for this re-engagement here are some pointers that you may find useful.

- Do a very quick review of your school's SSE journey to date. What were the successes? What was the impact of the process on learning and teaching? Which parts of the process worked well? Which parts of the process were challenging? What would you change?
- Spend some time reacquainting yourself with the contents of circular 0039/2016 and the SSE Guidelines. A good way to do this might be to take a look at some of the more recent [videos](#) on the SSE website. There are also a number of useful [webinars](#) on using *Looking at Our School 2016*, to support the SSE process and on using the process to implement the Primary Language Curriculum.
- In SSE Update 8 and 9 we featured two 'scenario schools' that were drawing on some of the standards in *Looking at Our School 2016* to support their engagement with the Six-Step SSE process. It would be worth revisiting these '[scenarios](#)' to help shape your thinking about leading the process.
- When the time is right, put SSE back on the agenda with staff. Have a discussion about what worked well in the past: the things that have brought about lasting improvement for learners. Open the discussion on identifying the areas of focus that would be useful for your school's unique context.
- Consider requesting an SSE advisory visit. Schools and Inspectors have found these visits a great way to have a conversation about your SSE process and they can help to build and maintain the SSE momentum in your school. If you'd like to avail of an advisory visit, please drop an email to info@schoolself-evaluation.ie.

While Circular 0039/2016 sets out requirements for schools regarding SSE, it's safe to say that the SSE process will never thrive until you move it away from the compliance space. As the motivational gurus say, mustivation has to be replaced by wantivation!

Easier said than done, that's true. But this essential change in mind-set will happen when there is a clear rationale for re-thinking current practice and introducing new approaches. Hard information about percentile scores or levels of attendance can be very persuasive, but softer information from pupils about how they learn best can be even more powerful in supporting teachers to see both the 'why' and the 'what' of change.

You will not succeed if you create a mountain and ask people to climb it! All you need to do is to surface one aspect of teaching and learning that is meaningful in your school context. That is the first step. Then work through the process of action planning for improvement.

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|---|--------------------------|
| ➤ What is the current situation in that aspect? | Gather baseline data |
| ➤ Where would you like to get to? | Set your target |
| ➤ What actions / approaches are most likely to get you there? | Develop your action plan |
| ➤ How do you put them into practice? | Implement it |
| ➤ And how will you know that your action plan is working? | Monitor and measure |

To support your process, use *Looking at Our School 2016* selectively. Focus on one or two standards and statements of effective practice that are relevant to the aspect of teaching and learning that you want to work on.

Use the information and the data that you already have, before you gather any more. In advising schools, inspectors often remind them of the richness of the data that is available at school level. Each school is uniquely placed to use its own data in a powerful way.

And finally, we really want you to see our inspection reports as an assistance to you – an external eye offering you another perspective on yourselves and some useful pointers on your SSE journey.

Maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy

Circular 0039/2016 refers to an important aspect of continuity between the first and second cycles of SSE: that is, the continuing focus on literacy and numeracy. The illustrative graphic on page 3 of the circular refers to “literacy and numeracy practices embedded, with regular review”. Many schools have been asking us for guidance in this area.

The first part of this article looks at a continuing focus on literacy and numeracy in the context of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The second part shares some simple suggestions about how schools can review literacy and numeracy practices for the first cycle and continue to maintain a focus on building learners’ literacy and numeracy skills through SSE.

Learning for schools arising from the 2017 review of the National Strategy

It’s worth remembering that the focus on literacy and numeracy required in the first SSE cycle came about in order to link the SSE process with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, introduced in 2011. As you probably know, an [interim review](#) of the strategy with new national targets for 2017-2020 was published in March 2017.

The review compared the relevant outcomes for primary-age pupils in the National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics (NAERM) in 2014, with the original targets 2011. The review also compared pupils’ mean scores in Mathematics from TIMMS 2015. The outcomes of both NAERM 2014 and TIMMS 2015 indicated that a number of targets had already been met, and so new targets were set. You’ll find the new literacy and numeracy targets on pages 18 and 19 of the review. Here’s an extract from page 18:

National Improvement Targets for Literacy and Numeracy at Primary Level – by 2020

- Build on increases in the percentage of primary pupils performing at Level 3 or higher in reading and Mathematics in second and sixth class, while also significantly reducing the difference between pupils in DEIS Band 1 schools and pupils in all schools – to be measured by the National assessments of English Reading and Mathematics in 2019.
- Build on decreases in the percentage of primary pupils performing at or below Level 1 in reading and Mathematics by the end of primary education, while also significantly reducing the difference between pupils in DEIS Band 1 schools and pupils in all schools – to be measured by the National assessments of English Reading and Mathematics in 2019.
- Across both reading and Mathematics, it will be important to ensure that progress at second class is maintained by the time pupils reach sixth class.

What has happened at a national level with this review is a large-scale example of what you might do in your own school when looking at the progress you’ve made in literacy and numeracy.

If you set ‘percentage increase’ targets in the first SSE cycle – maybe to do with achievement levels in standardised tests – have the targets been reached? If they have, is there evidence that you could raise the targets further, or keep them as maintenance targets? If they haven’t, why not? Were they unrealistic, or do you need to look again at the actions you implemented to achieve them?

There’s another way in which the national review is a useful pointer for “a meaningful focus on literacy and numeracy” at school level. In the above extract you’ll notice references to Level 1 and Level 3. Level 1 is the lowest level of proficiency described in NAERM, and Level 3 is the second highest.

The national targets for 2020 place a particular focus on pupils at what we might call the extremes of the proficiency spectrum. What these targets are emphasising is the need to pay particular attention to low achievers and high achievers – and that means setting discrete targets with these groups in mind. This might well be an approach that you could take in your school in developing and refining your literacy and numeracy practices.

The Educational Research Centre has published a short document with [descriptions](#) of the four levels of proficiency for reading literacy and mathematics used in NAERM 2014. They make interesting reading!

‘Literacy and numeracy practices embedded, with regular review’: what that might look like

Why the continued focus on literacy and numeracy? They are of course gateway skills for learners across the whole curriculum, but they’re also essential life skills. Through the way they experience literacy and numeracy development, pupils can learn to understand and manage choices and options, to be inquisitive and persistent, to tolerate ambiguity, and to work co-operatively.

Building literacy and numeracy skills has always been core work in primary schools. As a result of SSE, many schools identified areas for improvement in learners’ outcomes and experiences, and developed teaching approaches and implemented targeted interventions. We all need to take a critical look from time to time at established practices to see if they’re working as we had intended – that’s of course what ‘regular review’ entails.

Perhaps when your school first introduced an intervention in literacy, you were targeting specific comprehension or writing skills. By now, those skills may be well embedded and leading to the intended outcomes for learners. It may be necessary to reframe or refocus the approaches, so as to move those skills to a greater level of proficiency or indeed to maintain them at their current levels. It may even be time to change the focus of an intervention, to an area that is now of greater need for learners.

The implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC), provides an opportunity to continually consider and review teaching and learning in literacy. As you implement it, consider if agreed practices in literacy have been maintained, and think about the areas where practice needs to change.

Similarly, in numeracy, your school may have agreed a particular approach to how learners experience a topic like place value, or how teachers provide learning experiences in the shape and space strand of the Mathematics Curriculum. Regular review asks questions like:

- Are the agreed actions still happening and are they embedded in teachers’ individual practice?
- Are they still having the desired impact on learning?
- Are they still relevant and effective?

Perhaps the answer to these questions will be yes, but the review process may also highlight the need to remind everyone of the agreed collective practices.

And of course, literacy and numeracy skills are not confined to teaching and learning in English, Irish and Mathematics! As you identify other areas of focus for your school’s SSE, don’t forget to consider the possibilities for embedding literacy and numeracy skills in your other improvement plans. There may well be opportunities to highlight the skills or areas that have been focused on in the first SSE cycle, within the new area of priority. Maybe you have identified Science as a new area of focus, and it may present an opportunity to continue to embed practices in oral language or writing that have already been established. Perhaps the actions in an improvement plan for PE might feature the application of specific numeracy concepts in that subject area.