

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 13 – October 2019

Welcome to issue thirteen of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for primary schools. We know from talking to schools over the past year or so that they have once again begun to build momentum with SSE. Schools are telling us about their successes with the process and how they are using it to make incremental improvements in teaching and learning.

We're entering the final year of the second SSE cycle. Circulars 0039/2016 and 0016/2018 bring schools and the system to the end of June 2020. Over the course of the cycle, schools have become more confident with the process and we know that many schools have really taken ownership of it, using it to focus on the things that are really important in their context at that particular time.

There are three articles in this edition of the Update. The first article looks at SSE as a way of working and it explores how SSE is a way for schools to manage priorities and use the process in both a formal and informal way to progress those identified priorities. The second article looks specifically at STEM. Many schools are interested in providing these kinds of learning experiences for pupils, and this article makes some suggestions about using the SSE process to support this work. The final article takes a short look at the sixth step in the SSE process – Monitor actions and evaluate impact.

Inspectors are continuing to provide SSE advisory visits in schools. These are non-evaluative visits from an inspector, at a time that is convenient for the school. The goal of these visits is to support schools with their process, so that it is having the impact that they want. Many schools are using these visits as an opportunity for the principal and members of the school's in-school management team to have a conversation that provides an external perspective on their process. It's helping them to refine their process and in many cases make it more manageable and sustainable. To request a visit simply e-mail info@schoolself-evaluation.ie with your school name and roll number.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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SSE as a Way of Working

As we approach the end of the second cycle of SSE, it's a good time to reflect on the longer-term vision for SSE. From the outset, the vision for SSE in the system was for schools to really take ownership over the process and build their own culture of collaborative review and self-reflection. It's designed to help schools answer three fundamental questions:

What is working well?
What is not working as well as we'd like?
How can we improve things?

It was always intended that SSE would become a 'way of working' in schools, rather than an 'event'! Over time, schools have become more and more confident and are beginning to use the process flexibly and in formal and informal ways. SSE is not primarily about paperwork or plans, it is really about what is happening in classrooms – and it's important not to lose sight of that. It's about the small changes that we make in teaching and the learning experiences available to learners that can have a big impact on learning.

Progressing priorities

SSE has been promoted as *the* process to help schools reflect and manage change across the entire system. The six-step SSE process is now very familiar to schools, so it makes sense that the process is used by schools in a variety of ways. SSE is suggested to schools as the way that they can reflect and plan for improvement when they are implementing new curricula, such as the Primary Language Curriculum. Schools participating in DEIS and in the Scéim Aitheantais mar Scoil Ghaeltachta are encouraged to use the six-step process when creating their action plans. The process is also well-suited to examining other important topics, such as Digital Learning, STEM and Creativity. We've been really encouraged by the ways schools are using the process in their context.

The important message is that it's about prioritising. Circular 0039/2016 provides flexibility for schools to focus on things that are important for them at that particular time. Schools are busy places – lots of things are important – but not everything can be a priority. It's about asking the question 'What is the priority for our school and our pupils' learning at this point in time?' and this is key to step 1 in the process.

Formally and Informally

We all want learning to be as good as it can be for the pupils in our schools. Since the introduction of SSE in 2012, we have been very much about encouraging schools to embrace SSE as a process, rather than on compliance. You'll remember in [SSE Update 10](#), we talked about the terms used by motivation guru Maarten Vansteenkiste, 'mustivation' and 'wantivation' and many schools are certainly in the space of really wanting to use the six-step process for the benefits it brings to teaching and learning. So while on the one hand, circular 0016/2018 asks schools to engage with one or two areas of focus by June 2020, on the other we know that many schools are using the process to help think about additional areas, sometimes in a less formal way.

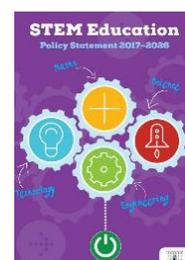
We've encountered schools that have used the process for their one or two identified priority areas. They had developed improvement plan(s) and of course they were devoting most of their energy to that work, because those were their priority development areas. At the same time, these schools had started to use the process in a less formal way – because for them it was a tried and tested way of reflecting on things. In many cases they didn't take it as far as creating a formal improvement plan, but they used the logic of the process to help them think their way through it. They identified one or two key actions and agreed them with the whole staff and began to implement them.

They were meeting the 'requirement' placed on them by the circular, but were realising the potential of SSE and making it their way of working, their way of reflecting and their way of bringing about improvement.

STEM learning and SSE

There has been a lot of discussion about learning in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines or STEM Education as it has become commonly known, both internationally and in Ireland. There is much focus on STEM-based careers and it's worth reflecting on one projection – that 60% of the pupils in our classrooms today will be working in careers in the STEM sector, many of which don't currently exist! The rate of change in technologies over the past decade or so has been unprecedented and it's likely to continue. Not too long ago, technologies like autonomous vehicles, augmented reality and artificial intelligence were the stuff of science fiction. Now we are fairly sure that they will be part of all of our futures.

The Department of Education and Skills has developed a [STEM Strategy](#) to support the development of STEM Education up to 2026 across the whole system. Of course the foundations for STEM Education start in early-years settings and primary schools. The role of STEM Education is to help children and young people to be adaptable and open to new possibilities. Learning in the STEM area is about enabling pupils to be inquisitive, to explore possibilities, to design and make, and to develop their problem-solving and creative thinking skills in an active and collaborative way. In primary schools it takes place in an integrated way across the curriculum. It obviously draws on Science and Mathematics, but can and should be a way to integrate learning across lots of other subject areas. Play-based learning, inquiry-led learning and digital technologies all play an important role in STEM learning.



Some primary schools that we've met have prioritised STEM learning as one of their areas of focus for SSE. Here, we take a look at how the six-step SSE process can be applied to STEM Learning and surface some of the things that might arise.

Step 1: Identify focus

As with any area of focus, spending some time with the statements of effective and highly effective practice in *Looking at Our School 2016* (LAOS) to think about STEM Learning is a good place to start. This might happen in small groups at a staff meeting. The statements can spark questions and discussion that help decipher the particular area of focus that will be of benefit for the pupils in your school. Possible areas that might emerge could include: skill development; play and inquiry-based learning; thematic learning; coding and computational thinking; collaborative learning; or STEM design projects.

Step 2: Gather evidence

Based on the identified focus and drawing on the standard in LAOS, the next step will be to gather relevant evidence on what provision is currently like in your school. There may well be lots of evidence available in the school already. Examples of some possible sources of evidence are included the box below.

A teacher reflection sheet on skill development	A school-designed assessment task
A teacher reflection sheet about integrated learning	Teacher reflections on current STEM practices
A focus group with pupils about learning in Science / Maths	Analysed standardised test data (Mathematics)
A focus group with parents	Pupils' projects and portfolios
Professional collaborative review of teaching and learning	

Step 3: Analyse and make judgements

This step will involve looking at the evidence and asking what it is saying. Using the statements of practice from LAOS, you'll be able to identify the aspects of current practice that are effective or highly effective in the school. These strengths will be a good basis to build on and might include things like the pupils' motivation, initiatives in Science and Maths or particular approaches and methodologies that are already working well. The statements will also help to pinpoint areas for development. They might point to particular skills that need to be developed, learning experiences that would deepen pupils' learning or teaching approaches that could be

adopted. By standing back from the strengths and areas for development, you'll be able to begin to identify some practical things to help make improvements.

Step 4: Write and share improvement plan

The combined SSE report and improvement plan will flow very much from the thinking that emerges in step 3. There will be an overall target or two that are about improving STEM learning, relative to the baseline evidence that has been gathered. Your plan will also identify some specific teaching and learning actions aimed at attaining your targets. Examples of some possible actions include:

- Providing more open-ended and inquiry-based activities as part of *Aistear*
- Creating a common framework for Science, Maths and Visual Arts lessons that emphasises higher-order skills
- Including an open-ended problem in all Maths lessons
- Introducing activities that involve computational thinking across the curriculum
- Commencing a coding project with pupils in senior classes
- Providing pupils in all classes with at least three design and make experiences that integrate Science and Visual Arts each term
- Assessing pupils STEM skill development on a regular basis
- Sharing good STEM practice with each other
- Establishing a STEM week during the school year
- Organising a whole-school celebration of STEM learning during the school year

Step 5: Put improvement plan into action and Step 6: Monitor actions and evaluate impact

This will be the most important part of the process. It's where the identified actions happen in classrooms across the school. Steps 5 and 6 are very closely linked. As the improvement plan is being put into action, the school monitors the actions as they are rolled out. It will be important to consider the experiences of teachers and pupils as well as the impact of the changes on learning.

We look forward to hearing more from schools about how they progress STEM Learning and we hope to be able to continue to develop resources to support schools with self-evaluation work in this area in the future.

Monitoring actions and evaluating impact

Without doubt, the most important step in the SSE process is Step 5 – *Put improvement plan into action*. It's where the changes that we want in learning and teaching actually happen. It is really closely aligned to Step 6 – Monitor actions and evaluate impact. This short article explores some of the good practice we've encountered in schools with the final step in the process.

The SSE process is cyclical and iterative and by monitoring and evaluating impact you're checking to see if the actions that you've identified are working and improving teaching and learning as hoped - and if you're on course to achieve the targets that have been set. As actions are being implemented, don't forget to build in times and ways to reflect on them, consider if they are working and support each other to get them right. It's important to stand back regularly – and collectively tweak or change approaches based on what you've learned. Sometimes, you may even have to go back to the drawing board and alter an action or reframe the target altogether!

The word 'monitoring' can sometimes conjure up negative images of authoritarian checks and balances! One school leader that we encountered said that they thought about monitoring in Step 6 as 'monitoring with a small m.' Monitoring actions can be a way of building in reminders and opportunities for teachers to talk and



reflect in both formal and informal ways about the school's improvement actions. It's also a way of considering how much progress is being made.

We've encountered lots of really good 'small m monitoring' in schools. They include the following:

- Discussion at every staff meeting about SSE and how actions are progressing
- Gently keeping the conversation going on a regular and often informal basis, so the agreed changes remain live
- A small SSE notice board in a staff room or other prominent area that highlights the agreed actions
- Reminders on the school's planning and monthly progress report templates of the agreed SSE actions
- Teacher pairings - where two teachers arrange to have a short informal conversation on a regular basis – to help keep each other motivated and to problem solve when they were having difficulties
- Cluster planning – in larger schools where teachers plan together – spending a few minutes each time talking about the SSE priority actions
- Co-teaching to introduce new practices – where a teacher who has experience of a new practice works in-class with another colleague in a supportive way to develop the practice together
- Members of the ISM team regularly touching base with groups of teachers in a supportive capacity

Of course there is also a place for capital M monitoring. It will often involve members of the ISM team formally checking in with teachers about the agreed actions, taking an overview look at monthly progress reports or perhaps taking a look at pupils' work samples across the school.

The second part of this step is to evaluate impact. It's important when you're putting your improvement plan together to think about when you will stand back and see if you've achieved the improvement you set out to make. You'll be checking the progress made against the targets that you have set, based on the baseline information gathered in Step 2. Evaluating the impact will involve comparing where things were at the start against where they are now. It's really important to do this so that you can celebrate the progress made.

Reminders of Supports for SSE

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 or to sign up to our social media feeds.

