

SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY EDITION

ISSUE 14 – December 2019

Welcome to issue fourteen of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for primary schools. We know that from your feedback, that many of you are finding these e-bulletins a useful support in your continued engagement with the SSE process. All of the previous editions of the e-bulletin are available for download and print from the [SSE website](#).

It's hard to believe that we are already at the beginning of 2020. That means that we are coming to the end of this cycle of SSE. 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 developed their SSE practices and we know that many school have really made the process a great way to manage change and bring about improvements in learning and teaching. Later in 2020, a new circular will be published to guide the system from September 2020 onwards and to support schools to build further on their established SSE practices.

There are two articles in this edition of the Update. The first article continues the conversation about making SSE a way of working in schools and it explores how schools might use *Looking at Our School 2016* as part of their SSE process and also as a tool to support reflection and ongoing improvement. The second article takes another look at setting targets in step four of the SSE process.

During 2019, inspectors continued 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. Schools have told us that they have found the advisory visits beneficial and that they helped them deepen their own SSE conversations and to make the process more focused in the context of their own individual schools.

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

Contents

SSE as a way of working - Using LAOS 2016 to reflect	page 2
Setting meaningful targets	page 4

Using LAOS 2016 formally and informally to support reflection

In SSE Update 13, we included an article called *SSE as a Way of Working*. In that article we discussed how SSE has been promoted as *the* process to help schools to reflect and manage change across the whole school system. It also examined how a school might use the six-step process formally to progress the areas of focus identified at a whole school level, but also how the process could be used in an informal way to progress other items, simply because using the process was a tried and tested way for them.

We know that *Looking at Our School, the Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (LAOS) is being used more and more across the system. CPD providers use it in conversations about teaching and learning; the Centre for School Leadership uses it to support the development of school leaders; boards of management use it when appointing teachers to leadership roles; and inspectors use it to inform external evaluation.



LAOS is being used formally and informally by schools. Many are using it in a more formal way to support their engagement with the six-step SSE process. We're also hearing from lots of schools that are using the framework in a less formal way to guide reflection and to help them to think about their schools. LAOS was published in 2016 at the same time as the SSE Guidelines and Circular 0039/2016 to provide a set of standards for two dimensions of a school's work: Teaching and Learning, and Leadership and Management. For each standard there are statements of effective and highly effective practice.

Using LAOS to support SSE

Schools are finding LAOS 2016 to be a useful sounding board to help them shape their SSE process and to guide their reflection as they engage with the six-step process.

The statements of practice provide practical examples of what each individual standard looks like when practice is effective and highly effective. They can help schools and teachers to answer the fundamental questions that SSE asks. The table below shows the three fundamental questions on the left side and the associated or reframed questions when you think about them using LAOS.

What is working well?	What aspects of our practice are already effective / highly effective?
What is not working as well as we'd like?	What aspects of our practice are not yet effective / highly effective?
How can we improve things?	What do we need to do to improve our practice to ensure it is effective / highly effective?

In step one (Identify focus), many schools have found it useful to take one or two standards and their statements to help filter the possible areas of focus and to pinpoint the area(s) of greatest importance for pupils' learning. Other schools have also found LAOS useful to help them shape how they gather evidence. Step three (analyse and make judgements) is where many schools find that LAOS can really help them to be discerning about what the evidence is telling them, and to support them to reflect on their strengths and areas for development. We've also encountered schools that have used the standards as a starting point in shaping targets in their improvement plans.

A key piece of learning for schools around the use of LAOS as part of their SSE process was to not use too many standards! It was never intended that a school would use all, or even a large number of standards in an SSE

process. Schools have found it best to identify a small number of standards that are particularly relevant to the area of focus and use those standards to guide and shape their thinking.

Using LAOS less formally

As schools have become more familiar with LAOS they have been finding other uses for it. One of its objectives is to provide a common language to help teachers, school leaders and whole staffs to engage in reflection and conversations about teaching and learning, and leadership and management.

Some examples of the positive practices that we have heard about include:

- One principal prints one standard together with the statements of effective and highly effective practice ahead of each staff meeting. Teachers spend about ten minutes discussing their own practices in relation to the statement in pairs and then the whole staff talks about things that are working well for them in relation to that standard.
- The staff in another school were really keen to think more about pupils' learning. They felt that conversations were always about teaching in the school. Each teacher took one standard that related to learning and, over the course of a few staff meetings, they each led a short discussion. They presented the core points from the statements of practice and then as a whole staff had an opportunity to talk about them.
- In another school, the staff knew that assessment was something that could be improved. They had considered identifying it as their main SSE focus but they agreed that pupils' learning in oral language and science skills were more critical at that point in time. They progressed oral language and science skills through their formal SSE process. To help them to keep thinking about assessment, each teacher was given a copy of the page with the statements of practice for the standard: *The teacher selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning*. Over the course of a whole term, the teachers used it in their small planning groups to reflect on any small changes they could make in their assessment practices.
- One in-school management team that we met used the domains of leadership and management to help them think about the work that they were doing. They told us that it helped them to reflect on their priorities as school leaders and how they worked as a team.
- We also met a board of management that used LAOS on an annual basis to help the members reflect on the board's work that year. They made a list of things that worked well and collectively identified one thing that they would change for the following year.

We're sure that over the coming years LAOS will continue to be used more and more by schools both formally and informally in their work and reflective practices. We look forward to hearing about these innovative uses. If your school is using LAOS in ways that you'd like to share – don't hesitate to e-mail us on info@schoolself-evaluation.ie.

Setting meaningful targets – another look

Step 4 in the SSE process (Write and share a report and improvement plan) is an exciting point in the process because it's where you really start to look to the future and identify the changes and improvements that you want to make in pupils' learning. The combined report and improvement plan only need to be a short document. Its purposes are to celebrate the strengths, to name the things to be improved, and to create a 'map' to guide the journey ahead.

Setting meaningful targets is important as they give you something to aim towards and they help in keeping focused on the ultimate prize – improvements in pupils' learning. The most important question to ask when considering targets is: *Will we know that we have achieved this target when we review it?*

During the course of evaluations and SSE advisory visits, we've heard about the kind of challenges that target setting can present. It's well recognised that in any action planning for improvement, target setting can be tricky and this is particularly true in the field of education where there are so many factors to consider. In this article, we've assembled some of the common questions that come up and provide some short answers to help you navigate your way through setting meaningful targets.

How many targets should there be in an improvement plan? There's no hard and fast answer to this question – it really does depend on your context. But, we know that when there are too many targets – they become unwieldy and unmanageable. One or two well-framed targets, with definite actions aligned to each one can often be all that is required.

Should targets be linked to a baseline?

The simple answer to this question is yes. SSE is about improving experiences and outcomes for pupils – based on evidence. Through evidence gathering, you establish baseline information, or the starting point, and this is really important in order to know whether or not progress has been made. So, for example, a target in mathematics, might be: *To increase the proportion of children achieving above the 50th percentile in problem solving from 53% to 55%.* Or, in digital learning: *To increase the number of weekly engagements that pupils have with digital technologies as part of their learning, from the current average of three.*

By referencing the baseline, it will help you to more easily recognise that the target has been achieved and celebrate the progress made.

Do targets always have to be numerical? The answer is, not always. It does make sense for schools to create targets that they know are SMART. Some areas of focus and the evidence that has been gathered, lend themselves more readily to framing numerical or percentage based targets. For example, if a school has identified an aspect of reading, it will be easier to create a numerical target based on the analysis of test scores.

Other times, however, you may approach the question of targets in a different way. You may decide that targets that are not based on percentage increases are more suitable. So for example, in the area of oral language a target might well look like this: *Pupils will demonstrate measurable improvement in their ability to tell and retell imaginative stories and narratives in the school environment (individuals, groups, own class) by June 2021.*

Can targets be based on pupils' attitudes and dispositions?

They certainly can. Pupils' attitudes and dispositions are important aspects of learner outcomes. Capturing what pupils' attitudes and dispositions are like at the start is key to setting targets in this area. You might capture this information through a survey, or using some short focus groups. Here's an example of this kind of target for a school focused on improving learning in music: *There will be an increase in the number of pupils that agree (in a survey) that they enjoy music lessons and that like listening to different kinds of music.*

Can we set targets about learners' experiences?

You certainly can. Improving learners' experiences is one of the key purposes of SSE, so setting targets around learners' experiences might be really important, depending on your area of focus. An example of this kind of target for a school focusing on improving the learning of skills in Science might be: *To develop pupils exploring, planning, making and evaluating skills, all pupils will engage in three design and make projects over the course of 2019/20 school year.*

Can we set targets about teachers' practice?

The ultimate goal of SSE is to improve learning for pupils. Teachers' practice both individually and collectively is a key factor that impacts on pupils' learning. So, sometimes, it could be useful to have a target focused on teachers' practice, especially when there are significant changes that need to happen. For example, a school using the SSE process to implement the Primary Language Curriculum might have the following target in its first year: *All teachers will plan for the teaching of vocabulary and sentence structure and grammar using the learning outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum.*

Should targets and actions be linked?

Absolutely. The actions identified should be directly aligned to achieving the targets that have been set. So, for example, if your target is about improving pupils' historical investigation skills, then the actions might include things teachers will do during history lessons, the kinds of experiences pupils will have, the ways in which skills will be assessed, the resources that need to be acquired, and the CPD that teachers will engage in.

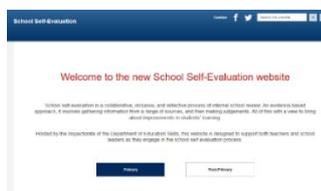
What happens if we realise we set the wrong targets?

This is going to happen from time to time. Target setting is not an exact science and sometimes we can be over ambitious or indeed under ambitious at the start of an improvement process. SSE is designed to be flexible and responsive to your school's needs. As you review the progress of targets, you will also be reviewing their suitability. So, if you discover that one of our targets is not as suitable as you initially thought, or that it is no longer relevant, simply review it, change it, and continue with the process.

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.



Preparing for the next SSE Cycle

As you know, Circular 0039/2016 and the 2016 SSE Guidelines were designed to support and guide schools in their use of the SSE process up to September 2020.

The Inspectorate has already sought feedback and suggestions from schools, school leaders, teachers and members of boards of management through an online survey, and in conversations with teachers and school leaders in the course of visits to schools.

During the early months of 2020, we will be working with the education partners to prepare guidance for schools for the next SSE cycle from 2020. We look forward to hearing the ideas and suggestions for the further development of SSE from schools and school leaders as part of those engagements.