SSE UPDATE

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A NEW CYCLE OF SSE, 2016-2020

Welcome to issue eight of SSE Update, the E-bulletin for primary schools.

A new four-year cycle of self-evaluation is beginning and the focus is still firmly on teaching and learning. You can now look back on the road you have travelled so far, and then look forward, to map out the road ahead – knowing what is working well in your school; knowing what has improved because of your actions in the first SSE cycle; and beginning to investigate what particular aspect of teaching and learning you should focus on next.

While the focus remains on teaching and learning, there have been some changes and developments we'd like you to know about. You'll get a complete picture, along with lots of resources, on our redesigned website: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary .

Firstly, there's a new SSE circular, 0039/2016, setting out the requirements for school self-evaluation over the next four years. The circular gives schools more flexibility and choice in how they manage and focus the SSE process in the 2016-2020 cycle.

Along with the new circular, you'll find new SSE Guidelines for 2016-2020. We've listened to what you've said during advisory visits, and we've worked with the partners to produce Guidelines that we hope you'll find useful and manageable. We'll mention here just one important development that you should know about.

The 2012 Guidelines included evaluation criteria and statements of quality for you to use as reference points when making judgements about your practice in key areas. The Department has now developed a quality framework for schools, _Looking at our School 2016_. It's a comprehensive framework with many intended uses. One of these is to support and inform school self-evaluation. You should refer to the teaching and learning dimension of this framework when you are reflecting on and evaluating your own practice. You'll find it in the new SSE Guidelines 2016-2020.

In this issue, you'll find articles on the new circular, the Guidelines, and _Looking at our School, 2016_. There are two 'scenarios' – imaginary schools but real issues! – that walk you through how you might use the quality framework to inform self-evaluation focused on the use of digital technology in teaching and learning, and self-evaluation focused on implementing the _Primary Language Curriculum_. And there's a brief guide to what's available on our redesigned website.

We intend to continue producing SSE updates in 2017. From spring 2017 it will issue as E-zine. It will still be available through the website and through the Inspectorate's Twitter and Facebook Feed.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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A Brief Introduction to Looking at Our School 2016

Looking at Our School 2016 - The Quality Framework for Primary Schools is designed to give a clear picture of what good or very good practices in a primary school look like. The framework covers two dimensions of the work of schools: teaching and learning, and leadership and management. The teaching and learning dimension is the one you're asked to focus on in your school self-evaluation process from 2016 to 2020.

You can access a copy of *Looking at Our School 2016 - The Quality Framework for Primary Schools* here. We hope you'll find an opportunity to read the Introduction (pages 6 to 11) as well as the Framework itself.

As you can see in the graphic below, which is taken from page 12 of *Looking at our School 2016*, the teaching and learning dimension has four domains, two related to learning and two related to teaching.

'Learner outcomes' and 'Learner experiences' are probably familiar to you from the first SSE Guidelines. But for these new Guidelines, we've taken a more detailed look at 'Teachers' practice' and have separated it into two domains: Teachers' individual practice; and Teachers' collective/collaborative practice. The second one of these is worth explaining a bit. Collaborative practice, where teachers work together and co-operate with each other, is a familiar concept. Collective practice focuses more on the impact that teachers working together have on their pupils' learning experiences and outcomes.

	DOMAINS	STANDARDS
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Learner outcomes	**Pupils:** enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners have the necessary knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the primary curriculum achieve the stated learning objectives for the term and year
	Learner experiences	**Pupils:** engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning experience opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning
	Teachers' individual practice	**The teacher:** has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary
	Teachers' collective / collaborative practice	**Teachers:** value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise

Each domain has four standards that cover the essential aspects of that domain. You'll notice that all the standards describe what pupils and teachers do, and how and why they do it. Most of them combine a number of elements, and that's not surprising. As we all know, teaching and learning are complex and multi-faceted processes.

Delving further into the framework, you'll find a number of statements linked to each standard. These offer a more detailed picture of specific practices related to each standard, and what these practices look like at an effective level and at a highly effective level. When using this framework as a benchmark to help you evaluate practice in your school, you should begin by looking at the statements of effective practice. That will help you to identify what you

are already doing well. It will also help to identify areas that need development to bring them up to the level of good and effective practice.

You'll notice that the statements of highly effective practice contain words and phrases in bold type. These are the points that distinguish between effective and highly effective practice. You may find them useful when considering how to further develop the existing good practice in your school.

Domain 2: Learner Experiences

STANDARDS	STATEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	STATEMENTS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
Pupils engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities	Pupils demonstrate high levels of interest and participation in learning. They are able to work both independently and collaboratively in a purposeful manner. They understand and can explain the purpose of the learning tasks they are engaged in. They are able to report on, present, and explain the process and outcome of learning activities to a competent level.	Pupils demonstrate **very high** levels of interest and participation in learning. They are able to work both independently and collaboratively in a **very purposeful and productive** manner. They understand and can explain the purpose of the learning tasks they are engaged in, **and can extend and develop the activity meaningfull**y. They are able to report on, present, and explain the process and outcome of learning activities to a **highly competent** level.

You'll probably recall some of the central and critical questions that you were encouraged to ask yourselves as a school when you embarked on the SSE process. These are the questions that prompted you to consider your existing practices, to identify what was working and what needed improvement, and to use the evidence you gathered to decide the best plan of action to achieve that improvement. Here are some of those questions, rephrased in a way that shows how you can use *Looking at our School 2016* to evaluate and develop practices in your school.

Critical SSE Questions	Rephrased using *Looking at our School 2016*
• How well are we doing?	How close is our practice to the statements of effective practice?
• What are our strengths?	What areas of our practice are highly effective?
• What are our areas for improvement?	Where are we not yet reaching effective practice?
• How can we improve?	How can we work towards (highly) effective practice?

USING THE QUALITY FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT THE SSE PROCESS

One of the key purposes of *Looking at Our School – A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* is to make SSE manageable, purposeful and more focused. We hope that schools will develop a variety of ways to use the framework.

Most schools will choose to follow the six-step process when engaging with SSE, (see the diagram on the right) that is laid out in chapter 2 of the guidelines. Circular 0039 / 2016 gives schools the flexibility to engage in an investigative period ahead of the implementation of actions leading to improvement. The investigative phase allows schools the time for the steps *Identify Focus*, *Gather Evidence* and *Analyse and make judgements*. Below are scenarios outlining how two primary schools have used the quality framework to support the investigative phase of their SSE processes.

SCENARIO 1

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Oakleaf Primary School is an urban mixed school with sixteen mainstream teachers, four learning support teachers and an administrative principal. The school caters for all classes from junior infants to sixth. In their previous SSE in literacy they focused on pupils' writing skills. They successfully introduced a genre-based approach to the writing process and recorded improvements in pupils' writing achievements. In this school, each SSE process is led by a committee that is made up of the principal, and six teachers.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY FOCUS

The whole staff considered several areas as possibilities for SSE. They decided that, because the oral language component of the *Primary Language Curriculum* is being rolled out in all schools this year, it made sense to use the SSE process to implement it. They have been concerned about pupils' learning in oral English and Gaeilge for some time. As the curriculum is initially being implemented with pupils from junior infants to second classes, some teachers wondered if it was a good whole-school focus. However, they agreed that it was important for all staff to understand the curriculum, and that engaging with it now would prepare everyone for full implementation of the *Primary Language Curriculum* in future years.
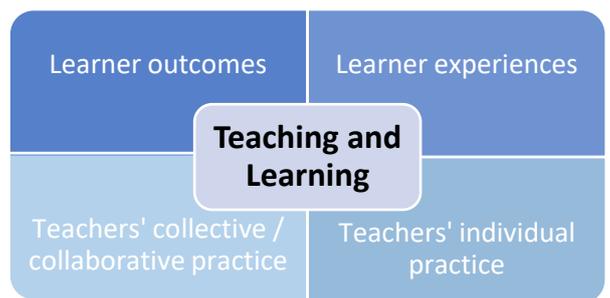
Once the staff had made their decision, the SSE committee used the domains and standards of the quality framework to help them make the process manageable, useful and focused. They considered the four domains of the framework and used the standards to think about oral language. They decided to use the standards to pose some initial questions about teaching and learning in oral English and Gaeilge in their school.

This allowed the committee to discuss oral language and to consider the various possibilities. When they examined the standards in the learner outcome domain, they realised that they were unsure about the quality of pupils' outcomes in oral language as the school had never really considered how pupils were doing in this area of their learning. This pointed them to their collective approach to assessing pupils' oral language achievements. They agreed

that because it was a new curriculum, teachers' individual practice was a key priority for the school. The committee took it back to the whole-staff and together they agreed to focus the scope of their SSE process on the three standards in the table below.

Domains	Standard
Learner outcomes	Pupils demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the primary curriculum.
Teachers' individual practice	The teacher has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills.
Teachers' collective/collaborative practice	Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices.

In a further effort to make sure that the process was manageable, they looked at the *Primary Language Curriculum* and decided that they would focus initially on just two of the learning outcomes. They chose learning outcomes four (sentence structure and grammar) and eleven (retelling and elaborating) as these aligned well to their work on writing in their previous SSE on literacy.

To read more on how Oakleaf NS managed their evidence collection and progressed their SSE process open the *Stories from Schools* section of the SSE website or click on this link:
http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/scenario-1-oakleaf-primary-school/

SCENARIO 2

INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2016 the principal and teachers of Ballymartin NS were embarking on their second four-year cycle of school self-evaluation (SSE). As well as implementing and monitoring the improved literacy and numeracy practices that had resulted from the first SSE cycle, the principal and staff would this year investigate three other aspects of teaching and learning. Two of these aspects related to the *Primary Language Curriculum*. The principal and staff were of the view that the third aspect for investigation should be something cross-curricular.

This case study describes how the principal and staff of Ballymartin NS identified this cross-curricular focus and how they gathered the evidence on which their self-evaluation would be based. The article also documents how the school used the quality framework from *Looking at Our School 2016* to structure and inform their progress.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Ballymartin NS is a rural primary school, with four mainstream class teachers, one full-time support teacher and a visiting support teacher for 15 hours per week. The principal is the most experienced member of the teaching staff. She has been teaching for twenty years, eight of which have been spent as principal. During the first SSE cycle, the staff of Ballymartin NS focused on oral-language development in both English and Irish and on introducing more hands-on approaches in the teaching of Mathematics. With every passing year, the principal has become more discerning about which initiatives she gives time to in school. She only allows the school to commit to projects that can be demonstrated to lead to improved learner outcomes for the pupils. On this basis, she was happy with the school's engagement with the first cycle of SSE and positively disposed towards the second cycle.

In advance of the first staff meeting of the school year the principal invited her colleagues to give some thought to what might form a useful cross-curricular focus for this cycle of SSE. At the meeting five aspects of teaching and learning were suggested and considered:

- development of pupils' collaborative and co-operative skills across the curriculum
- use of the local environment as a resource for teaching and learning
- provision for the skills sections of the three SESE subjects
- provision for the development of each pupil's personal creativity in the three Arts Education subjects
- use of digital technology in teaching and learning

After much discussion, the staff agreed that the use of digital technology in teaching and learning should form the cross-curricular focus for the current SSE cycle. There was a consensus that, at this point in the school's development, this was the focus that was most likely to lead to significant improvements in learner outcomes.

STEP 2: GATHER EVIDENCE

The staff now had to gather evidence to enable them to evaluate the use of digital technology in teaching and learning in their school. The plan for evidence gathering was the subject of a second meeting.
The aims of that meeting were
- to identify a small number of key research questions
  (*what* do we want to find out?)
- to identify the evidence-gathering tools that would enable staff to answer the key questions
  (*how* are we going to find out?)

During the meeting, the principal used the whiteboard to display the names of the four domains of teaching and learning as set out in *Looking at Our School 2016*. The principal had found the previous version of the teaching and learning framework, which had been in the guidelines for the first SSE cycle, very useful and she had the graphic on the staff room notice board. She was of the view that the teaching and learning framework supported the staff in having professional conversations that were extremely productive and learner-centred.
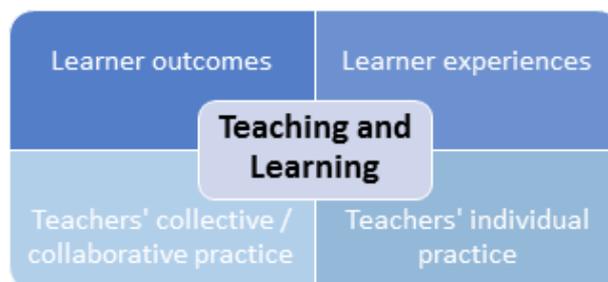
The principal would be the first to admit that in the past she and her colleagues had sometimes implemented new practices or teaching approaches simply because they had been recommended by Department agencies or support services. She and her staff had often lost sight of the fact that the changes in practice were intended to improve learner outcomes. The teaching and learning framework provided a useful reminder that the whole reason for teachers' practice (individual and collective) was that it should enable pupils to achieve relevant learner outcomes by providing suitable learner experiences. The principal was of the view that the slightly amended framework for teaching and learning presented in *Looking at Our School 2016* was an improvement on the previous version because of a useful distinction between teachers' individual practice and teachers' collective practice. She had a large version of this on display during the meeting.

To read more on how Ballymartin NS structured and managed their evidence collection and progressed their SSE process open the *Stories from Schools* section of the SSE website or click on this link:

http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/scenario-2-ballymartin-national-school/

WHAT'S NEW AT WWW.SCHOOLSELF-EVALUATION.IE?

Over the summer and early autumn months we've been working to update and develop the School Self-Evaluation Website. The site has been completely redesigned and the content has been updated to reflect the changes in Circular 0039/2016 and the new SSE Guidelines.

When you arrive on the landing page, you select whether you want to enter the primary or the post-primary site. The home page for the primary site shows the recent updates as well as the Inspectorate's Twitter Feed. The updates allow site users to link directly to the most recently added content. As the image below shows, there are now six subsections on the site: SSE 2016 – 2020, Resources, Stories from Schools, Language Curriculum, Updates and Contact.

Amongst the newly added resources that you may find useful are:

- Downloadable copies of The *SSE Guidelines*, *Looking at Our School 2016* and Circular 0039/2016 [All available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- A video of the Chief Inspector, Harold Hislop, providing an overview of the second cycle of SSE [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- A video by Deirdre Mathews, Assistant Chief Inspector, highlighting the similarities and the key differences in the new SSE requirements [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- A webinar presented by Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig, Inspector, introducing the structure of *Looking at Our School 2016* [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- A webinar presented by Noreen Fiorentini, Inspector, on using the SSE Process to introduce the *Primary Language Curriculum* [Available in Language Curriculum Section]
- Guidance on the Six-Step Process [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- Updated sample Evidence Gathering templates and resources [Available in Resources]
- A new section for Boards of Management [Available in Resources]

Other resources will continue to be added to the website over the coming months. A good way to keep updated is to register with either our Twitter or Facebook feed. The Twitter handle is @SSEinspectorate and the Facebook page is available at https://www.facebook.com/DESInspectorate/.