

# SSE UPDATE

**POST-PRIMARY EDITION**

**ISSUE 2 – OCTOBER 2013**

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## **A NEW SCHOOL YEAR**

This is the second issue of SSE Update, an e-bulletin for post-primary schools, which we hope will support your continuing engagement with the school self-evaluation process.

During the summer, we surveyed a sample of school principals to ask them about their schools' experience of the SSE process so far. We wanted to know what had been helpful to their schools in getting the process under way; what further resources we could provide on the SSE website; and what aspects of the process might, in their view, prove challenging. We also met the SSE advisory group, on which all the education partners are represented, and heard their views.

We have included in this issue of SSE Update articles that deal with some of the areas raised during these consultations.

You'll find an article looking at how Chapters 3 and 4 of the SSE Guidelines can be applied as a 'lens for learning', through which classroom practice can be evaluated and areas for improvement identified. The key idea here is that school improvement happens in every classroom and therefore involves every teacher.

Effective target-setting poses challenges. Are the targets soundly based and realistic? Do they emerge from good evidence-gathering and analysis? Are they SMART enough for you to measure how well they have been achieved? See page 3 for more on this topic.

Schools are aware of the need to have an SSE report and a school improvement plan (SIP), and the piece on page 4 aims to help you ensure that the SIP reflects a meaningful process, and doesn't become an end in itself.

You'll also find the second part of the article on numeracy development and the SSE process, and some further ideas on how to link the SSE process to your planning for the new junior cycle in your school.

There are links between the articles, so it may be helpful to read them all, then identify the most relevant ones. We hope that you will find this material useful, and we'd welcome feedback and suggestions to [info@schoolself-evaluation.ie](mailto:info@schoolself-evaluation.ie).

The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit

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## THE SSE PROCESS: A LENS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING



As you are working towards the development of your SSE report and school improvement plan in your school, here are some key points to keep in mind. The most important thing to remember is that SSE is not an end in itself. Instead, it's a process that you can apply to any aspect of learning where you want to bring about improvement. For example, literacy can be examined through the lens of SSE by applying the 6-step process to the teaching and learning of oral language, reading and writing.

The second key point to remember is that school improvement happens in the classroom, and comes down to the quality of the learning that takes place there. You can begin to evaluate the quality of learning in your school, using the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework to focus on teaching approaches and learning experiences. Using this Framework, your school can select the theme or sub-theme that is most likely to lead to an improved quality of learning.

For each theme and sub-theme, the *Guidelines* set out evaluation criteria and quality statements. The criteria are in bullet points; the quality statements are in paragraphs. Your school can use either or both to evaluate teaching and learning and place it on a quality continuum ranging from significant strengths to significant weaknesses. Treat them as benchmarks of standard that denote significant strengths in learning and teaching.

SSE should be a constructive, productive process, so the next point is crucial: *make haste slowly* when evaluating your strengths and weaknesses. Your evaluation will guide you in writing your SSE report and in devising your School Improvement Plan (SIP). Don't rush to produce a report and plan. Take time to draw conclusions about the evidence gathered and how it fits in with the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework and the evaluation criteria.

It's really important to gauge how your school's teaching and learning compares with standards of best practice. Unless you measure yourself against statements of significantly strong practice, you won't be able to ask "How are we doing?" and, more importantly, "What should we be doing in order to improve?" And it's vital to really think about the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework so that the targets you set, and the actions you plan to achieve them, focus on classroom practice.

Devising a good, useful SSE report and SIP is, in some ways, a very simple task. There are short templates to complete, indicating strengths and actions for improvement. At another level it's a more complex process involving analysis and judgement, then target-setting and action planning. So when your school is devising its SSE report, ask yourselves a few key questions:

- Have we considered SSE as a lens through which all learning can be evaluated?
- Have we gathered enough appropriate evidence about our teaching and learning practices, and have we analysed it carefully to give us reliable information?
- Have we used the Teaching and Learning Framework to look at our teaching approaches and our learner experiences?
- Have we measured our practice against the evaluation criteria in the guidelines?

Asking these questions will ensure that the *products* of the self-evaluation process – the SSE report and SIP – truly reflect each step taken along the way. And the targets you set will be realistic, soundly-based, and focused on attainable improvement. Ní beag sin!

## EFFECTIVE TARGET-SETTING IN THE SSE PROCESS

Target setting is a crucial part of the SSE process. It's the essential link between what you have found out from the data you have analysed, and the actions you're going to take to bring about improvement. However, schools can have difficulty with this stage of the process. Perhaps your data analysis has thrown up something unexpected, so the actions you thought you'd be taking have to change. Perhaps you're anxious to get that improvement plan down on paper, and you're cutting short the time needed for clear thinking in order to set effective targets. But getting it right when it comes to target setting is probably the key to a successful SSE process, so it's worth spending time on.

How do you go about effective target setting? Firstly, you require baseline data – for example, reliable information about where your students are now with regard to attainment, attitudes to learning, expectations of themselves, and so on. Next, analysing this data will point up strengths and weaknesses in the current situation. This leads to the third SSE step: making judgements and drawing conclusions from the data. Remember that data doesn't provide the answers; its function is to lead you to the right questions. What needs to be improved? Which of the present findings would you target as a priority for development?

Once you've drawn conclusions from the data analysis, the next step is to discuss and agree where you want your school to get to. In other words, what would represent improvement? Let's think again about the data, and consider how you can best use it to set targets. The data you've got could be 'hard' data: for example, "45% of our junior cycle students sit English at higher level." The data could be 'soft': for example, "70% of our senior cycle students don't think maths is important to life outside school." Using such baseline data, you can state your school improvement targets in simple, measurable terms.

The mention of measurement can give rise to uneasy feelings in schools. There's a concern that if what is *measurable* is emphasised, what is *valuable* will be overlooked. But learning how to measure what you value is essential if you are to be confident that school improvement has happened. And, while school improvement sounds impersonal, what it actually means is that teachers can be certain their work has had a positive impact, and students can experience a sense of pride in the real, measurable progress they have made.

Now, back to the targets themselves! The acronym SMART is well-known and helpful. There are some variations in how it's explained, and the list below contains most of them. (The first word in each line is the one referred to in the *Guidelines*, but the others are worth bearing in mind also.) Each component of the acronym is significant, and it's easy to see that setting SMART targets is not a job to be rushed.

- S**pecific
- M**easurable and manageable
- A**ttainable, appropriate, agreed
- R**ealistic, relevant, recorded
- T**ime-bound

In considering what's specific and measurable, it may be useful to state your target as a percentage change in the current situation. In considering what's attainable and realistic, you need to decide: how much change? Too little, and your target remains in the comfort zone; too much, and you're setting yourselves up for failure. Your timeframe will depend on the rate of change you think is desirable and workable.

Finding the 'Goldilocks' target – the one that is just right – will involve different considerations in every school, and should make for a very constructive discussion of what improvement will actually look like in your school, and for your students.

## DEVELOPING YOUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

One of the key messages that inspectors aimed to get across in the SSE presentations to schools is that school self-evaluation should be a paper-light process. However, some written account of what you have done and what you plan to do is invaluable. It gives you a record of the **conclusions** you've been able to draw from analysing your data; the **priorities** you've identified; the **targets** you've set; and the **actions** you're going to implement to achieve those targets. These four linked areas – conclusions; priorities; targets; actions – are essential components of your SSE report and school improvement plan (SIP).

On page 62 of the *Guidelines* there's a template\* for the SSE report. Using the template will help to ensure that you have a record of the focus of the evaluation, the context factors you considered, and the findings that emerged from your analysis of the evidence. However, the SSE report isn't just a record of what you did. Its main purpose in the process is to help you as a school to home in on the question: "what do these findings tell us about what we need to do now?" For that reason, the most important aspects of the SSE report are the **conclusions** you've reached about the strengths and weaknesses in your current practice and, arising from these, the **priorities** you've selected for action towards improvement. A report of two or three pages is enough to cover these points.

Let's turn now to the SIP. This is where you will record your school improvement **targets** and the **actions** linked to them. The previous article gives some advice on setting SMART targets. But what will really make a difference and bring about improvement is how you *use* the targets you've set. You're using targets well where you:

- identify the best strategies and resources to reach the targets
- monitor your progress towards the targets
- amend the targets or strategies in the light of experience

Your SIP should take account of these three elements of effective target-using.

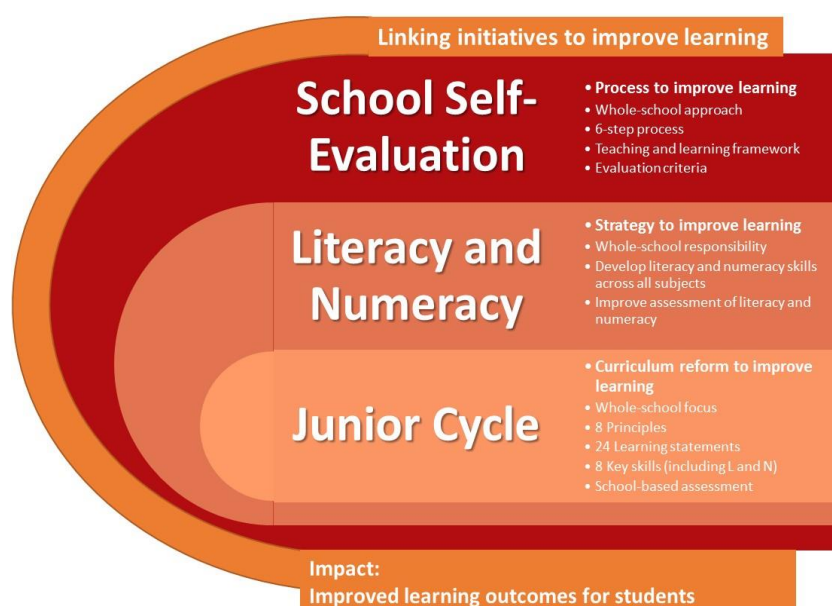
First of all, the SIP should be specific about the actions and strategies your school has selected; who will implement them; and what resources will be used. You need to identify actions and strategies that are likely to be successful, so consider what you've found out about your strengths and weaknesses. What is working already and needs to be used more widely? What ideas can you take from the evaluation criteria and quality statements that might address the weaknesses in practice you have identified?

Your SIP should reflect the fact that it's a record of work in progress, so it also needs to take account of the other two elements mentioned above: monitoring of progress, and amending targets or actions where changes are required. To support these elements effectively, your SIP needs to state how you will know when you've achieved the target. What are your success criteria? And what timeframe have you set out for reviewing progress and targets?

For the SSE process in your school to be meaningful and successful, you need to ensure that it follows a logical progression from one step to the next. Sometimes, the temptation to run ahead of your evidence is strong. It's possible that the actions you've identified haven't been articulated clearly enough to show how they are linked to your conclusions and priorities, or how exactly they will achieve your improvement targets. Writing your SSE report and developing your SIP provides you with an opportunity to check that each step of the process is part of a clear and logical continuum.

It's worth bearing in mind that the more your SSE report and your SIP show the links between each stage of the process, the more useful they will be to your school as you chart your school improvement journey. It will also make providing a summary SSE report and SIP for your school community a much more straightforward task. \*You'll find templates for reports and plans at [www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/).

## JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM AND THE SSE PROCESS



The overarching aims of SSE, Junior Cycle Reform and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are linked in that they all seek to improve students' overall outcomes. Two of the eight key skills that Junior Cycle Reform aims to improve are literacy and numeracy. Thus there is a clear link between Junior Cycle Reform and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. SSE is a way of working, an evidence-based process that facilitates schools to examine any aspect of their work in a coherent and logical way, and to identify strengths and areas for development.

In issue 1 of the *SSE Update* we outlined how a school might use the SSE process to evaluate current junior cycle provision and to plan for the implementation of the revised Junior Cycle Framework. In this issue we will explore how the SSE process might be used to identify strengths and areas for improvement and actions that when implemented will improve student outcomes in other areas of the Junior Cycle Framework.

As you implement the new junior cycle programme you will want to improve students' skills that, in addition to supporting learning in subjects and short courses, are also needed to support your learners in their personal, social and work lives. The Framework for Junior Cycle outlines eight key skills: Literacy, Numeracy, Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking.

In addition to literacy and numeracy, you may decide as part of your self-evaluation work to examine learner outcomes in relation to other key skills, and produce a three-year improvement plan for one or more of these skills if necessary.

As you start the SSE process, you will reflect on the three evaluation themes, focusing initially on learner outcomes, using your professional knowledge and evidence already available in your school. The main questions you will ask yourselves are:

- How well are we doing in relation to student achievement of the key skills?
- How do we know?
- What teaching practices and learning experiences are contributing to this achievement?

This reflective process will enable you to highlight the aspects of your practice that are working well and to identify aspects which require more detailed investigation.

During a whole-staff discussion you may decide for example, that students will gain knowledge of the two key skills: 'Communicating' and 'Managing Information and Thinking', when the improvement plans for literacy and numeracy are implemented. But as you discuss teaching and learning you may realise that you're not sure how well your students have developed the skill of 'Working with others'. You decide that you have to investigate this key skill in more detail in relation to learner outcomes, learning experiences and teachers' practice, as you suspect you need to do a great deal of work in this area.\*

When **gathering evidence** (step 1) you will have to decide what evidence is required and how you might gather it if it is not already available in the school. For example, under the sub-theme *Attainment of subject and programme objectives*, subject departments may ascertain that students are not attaining well in aspects of their subjects that require skills such as active listening, communicating and working with others during practical activities, when using ICT, and when developing joint portfolios. This may lead you to gather evidence on the range of active teaching methodologies used during lessons, such as guided discussion and independent, collaborative and co-operative learning.

Teachers might also identify the opportunities for developing the skill within their subject and the activities that students would need to experience to develop and practise the skill of working together. This information may be garnered from both students and teachers using methods such as focus groups, questionnaires and other tools suggested in Chapter 5 of *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools*. These are also available on [www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/) and other tools can be obtained on [www.pdst.ie](http://www.pdst.ie). This balance of data will ensure that your **analysis**, the second step, will be as well informed and comprehensive as possible.

You can then **draw conclusions** (step 3) and judge the quality using the relevant evaluation criteria and quality statements in the sub-themes *Attainment of subject and programme objectives* and *Teaching approaches* in chapter 4 of the *Guidelines*. This will enable you to determine and celebrate the strengths you find in relation to the key skill 'working with others' and to identify the areas for development.

Having outlined your findings, your strengths and areas for development in your SSE report, (step 4), you will devise a **school improvement plan** (step 5) outlining the targets set in relation to improving learning and the actions to be implemented over a three-year period. It's important to ensure that the targets you've set are related explicitly to your evidence and the conclusions you've drawn from it. Each teacher will have a role in **implementing** the school improvement plan for working with others. And, as a school, you'll need to consider how best to **monitor** the implementation of agreed actions in classrooms.

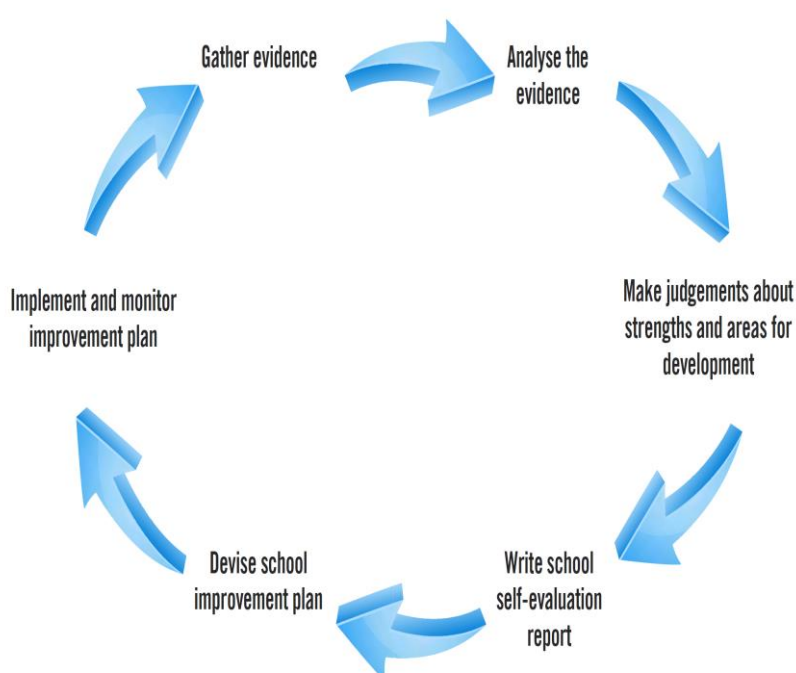
\*See [www.juniorcycle.ie](http://www.juniorcycle.ie) for resources relating to the key skills, which have been developed by the NCCA.



## NUMERACY DEVELOPMENT AND THE SSE PROCESS

In the first issue of the *SSE Update* we looked at how you might approach the evaluation of numeracy in your school with a view to devising an improvement plan that when implemented would improve learning outcomes for your students.

Using the six-step process we gave examples of the types of **evidence** you might **gather** (step 1). We outlined how the teaching and learning framework, the evaluation criteria and quality statements in the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* can be used to assist in **analysing** (step 2) the evidence gathered and in **drawing conclusions** (step 3) about the quality of learner outcomes and the quality of teaching and learning practices so that you can identify areas for improvement. In this issue we'll look at numeracy and the final three steps of the SSE process.



By step 3 of the process, you'll know your findings in relation to learner outcomes, students' learning experiences and teachers' practice with regard to numeracy. You'll have identified strengths and areas requiring improvement. Below, we've described a possible set of findings and evidence-based judgements, to give a clearer picture of the next steps of the process.

Let's say that, in relation to learner outcomes, you've found that the majority of students have a good understanding of basic computation, and carry out mathematical operations correctly. But you've also found that some students experience difficulty in solving problems; a significant minority of students have difficulty in understanding the language of numeracy; and only some students have a positive disposition to mathematics. In making judgements in these three areas, you've ascertained how students' learning experiences and teachers' practice in the classroom have contributed to the findings.

The next step is to record and report on these findings and evidence-based judgements in your **school self-evaluation report** (step 4). It should be short but detailed enough to reflect all the steps

you have taken in the process so far and, in particular, to record your conclusions and the priorities you have identified. A report of two or three pages will cover these areas.

The SSE report will in turn serve as the basis for your **school improvement plan** (step 5)\*, with specific school improvement targets. These SMART targets\*\* will be based on the areas that you have identified for improving numeracy, and the teaching and learning practices needed to achieve them.

For the possible set of conclusions and priorities described above, your three improvement targets would relate to

- enhancing students' problem-solving skills
- increasing their understanding of the language of numeracy and
- improving their disposition to mathematics

You would identify the teaching and learning experiences most likely to achieve these targets, agree them at whole-school and subject-department level as appropriate, and outline them in the school improvement plan (SIP).

When examining teaching and learning experiences in relation to the numeracy targets their school has identified, here are some questions for teachers to consider within their subject departments:

- Where are there meaningful opportunities to develop numeracy in my subject?
- Where in my subject can mathematical reasoning be applied to solve problems?
- Are the approaches I use in carrying out calculations in line with those the students encounter during mathematics lessons?
- How can improving students' numeracy skills help them perform better in my subject?

Having identified the opportunities and teaching and learning practices most likely to achieve the targets, teachers should agree on how to use them to enhance students' numeracy skills. Subject departments should agree common approaches to teaching and assessing mathematical concepts so that students experience consistency and lots of opportunities for reinforcement. Difficulties caused by unfamiliar language or by language taking on a different meaning within numeracy can impede students' progress. Therefore, a consistent approach to the use of numeracy-related language across subject departments is necessary.

Developing students' awareness of numeracy in contexts other than mathematics lessons and developing a more positive attitude to numeracy amongst students is the responsibility of all teachers, parents, management and others. Actions that would enhance students' disposition to mathematics include whole-school activities such as '*celebration of mathematics week*' and entry into maths competitions.

Teachers can and should have high-quality discussions about opportunities and initiatives to enhance students' numeracy development. However, **implementation** of the SIP, step 6 of the SSE process, is vital to bringing about improvement. The types of actions outlined above, which result in enhanced teaching and learning practices and experiences at classroom level, are essential to improving learner outcomes. And all teachers have a role in implementing the SIP for numeracy over a three-year period, collectively as a teaching staff, and at the level of individual practice.

\*You'll find templates for reports and plans, including the summary report and SIP for the school community, at [www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/resources/).

\*\*For more on SMART target-setting, see the article on page 3 above.



## THE SSE PROCESS IN 2013/14 – A FEW PROMPTS

The SSE process was introduced to schools in 2012/13. In beginning their SSE journey, schools were advised to start small and build on what they know. Useful prompts at this stage of the process are:

- *How are we doing in this specific area?*
- *How do we know?*
- *What else do we need to find out?*
- *Do we need to find out more from our students?*

Once you've gathered the evidence, the next step is to turn data into information:

- *Have we turned our exam results data into information for ourselves?*
- *As well as relating our students' state exam outcomes to national figures, have we looked at them closely enough within our own school context? Year-on-year? Outcomes across subjects? Uptake of levels within and across subjects?*
- *What have student/parent questionnaires told us about how we are doing, and what we might need to look at again?*
- *Have we used external evaluations to the full?*

When making judgements about your current practice, use the quality continuum. Remember that identifying your strengths is a very useful step towards addressing the areas that need improvement.

Draw conclusions: the quality statement will help the school to judge the quality of this aspect of practice and place its own practice on a quality continuum

Significant Strengths

Strengths outweigh weaknesses

Weaknesses outweigh strengths

Significant weakness

- *What can we learn from what we are doing well?*

Your SSE report needs to be clear about the conclusions you've arrived at, and the priorities you've identified. It's also a brief record of the steps you've taken so far. Part of this step of the process is ensuring that your school is operating in line with Department regulations and all relevant legislation. Your school also needs to prepare a summary SSE report for the school community, so that parents are aware of the SSE process in the school.

- *Have we used the SSE report template in the Guidelines (pages 62-3) or on the SSE website to help us prepare our own report?*
- *Have we used the most up-to-date checklist on the website to ensure we are compliant and have all the necessary policies in place?*
- *Are we ready to write a summary report for our wider school community? N.B. The summary report has to be available to the whole school community by June 2014.*

Your school improvement plan (SIP) is the companion document to your SSE report. Look again at page 4 of this bulletin for guidance in writing a useful and comprehensive SIP.

- *Is the SIP we are developing clear on targets; actions; people responsible; success criteria; timeframes?*
- *Are we ready to write a summary SIP for our wider school community? N.B. The summary SIP has to be available to the whole school community by June 2014.*