SSE UPDATE

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A NEW CYCLE OF SSE, 2016-2020

Welcome to issue eight of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-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 so as 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/post-primary/sse-2016-2020/ .

Firstly, there's a new SSE circular, 0040/2016, 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 all our 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 raising student motivation and expectation, and self-evaluation focused on implementing the new Junior Cycle. 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 continue to be available through the website and through the Inspectorate's Twitter and Facebook Feed.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

Contents

A brief introduction to *Looking at our School 2016*

Looking at Our School 2016 - A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools is designed to give a clear picture of what good or very good practices in a post-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 *Looking at Our School 2016 - A Quality Framework for Post-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 students' learning experiences and outcomes.

OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING DIMENSION

	DOMAINS	STANDARDS
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Learner outcomes	Students: 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 post-primary curriculum attain the stated learning outcomes for each subject, course and programme
	Learner experiences	Students: 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 students' learning selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning intention and the students' 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 students 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 actions and dispositions belonging to that domain. You'll notice that all the standards are describing what students 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 develop and improve on what is already good practice in your school.

DOMAIN 2: LEARNER EXPERIENCES

Standards	Statements of effective practice	Statements of highly effective practice
Students engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities	Students demonstrate high levels of interest and participation in learning.	Students demonstrate **very high** levels of interest and participation in learning.
	They are able to work both independently and collaboratively in a purposeful manner.	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.	They understand and can explain the purpose of the learning tasks they are engaged in, **and can extend and develop the activity meaningfully.**
	They are able to report on, present, and explain the process and outcome of learning activities to a competent level.	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 asked 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 these statements?

- 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 2016* is to make SSE manageable, purposeful and more focused. Undoubtedly, 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 0040 / 2016 suggests that schools will engage in an investigative year ahead of the implementation of actions leading to improvement. The investigative phase essentially includes the steps *Identify Focus*, *Gather Evidence* and *Analyse and make judgements*. Below are scenarios outlining how two post-primary schools have used the quality framework to support the investigation phase of their SSE process.

Scenario 1 – Sunnyhill College

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Sunnyhill College is a co-educational school under ETB management with over 500 students, serving a large country town and its rural hinterland. The school has been innovative in a number of areas: for example, engaging in a project on the use of tablet devices as a learning tool with TY and LCA students; and trying out various approaches to subject sampling in first year to tackle a pattern of gender-stereotyped subject choice.

Senior management and teachers feel they have learned a lot about the SSE process in the first cycle. After trial and error, they have now embedded a whole-school approach to literacy skills, focusing on the students' use of key words, some subject-specific but mostly the 'Tier 2' vocabulary required for skilful and mature language use. The numeracy focus now embedded is on problem-solving skills. The school contacted the (Project) Maths Development Group for input and resources on the different skills and approaches required for 'learning *for* problem solving' and 'learning *through* problem solving'. The third focus on formative assessment that gives clear developmental feedback to students is already having a positive impact on the standard of students' work.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY FOCUS

Senior management and teachers want to focus on the new Junior Cycle in the second cycle of SSE, as it makes sense to apply the process to this important curriculum change. The school planning co-ordinator, whose role entails the co-ordination and overall monitoring of school improvement planning, led an SSE session as part of a whole-school Junior Cycle planning day. She made the point that all the good practices that were surfaced and then embedded in the first SSE cycle were very supportive of the approaches underpinning the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, and in particular the key skills of 'being literate', 'being numerate', and 'managing information and thinking'.

The SSE co-ordinator then gave an overview of the new *SSE Guidelines 2016-2020*, and the *Looking at our School 2016* quality framework for teaching and learning that was presented in them. She played a short clip from the SSE website on the alignment between the new junior cycle and the quality framework, and then asked the teachers to consider which domains and standards might be especially relevant to the implementation of the junior cycle "for our kids, in this school" as she put it. Interestingly, there were almost even numbers identifying 'learner experiences' and 'teachers' collective/collaborative practice' as the most relevant domains. However, they agreed that this was really a case of two sides of the same coin.

The first session of the day had focused on the phased roll-out of Junior Cycle, with three new subject specifications now underway, and Irish, Art, Modern Languages, and Wellbeing as an area of learning to be introduced in September 2017. The challenges and opportunities posed by the introduction of Wellbeing had been discussed earlier, but with a focus on practical aspects of delivery. The SSE co-ordinator now highlighted an extract from page 16 of the *SSE Guidelines* about the quality framework.

> The framework takes a holistic view of learning. It emphasises the need for students to develop a broad range of skills and competences that enable personal well-being, active citizenship and lifelong learning. Learning experiences for all students should therefore be broad, balanced, challenging and responsive to individual needs. The framework sees students' well-being as intrinsic to this holistic view of learning, both as an outcome of learning and as an enabler of learning.

The teachers felt that this view was consistent with Wellbeing as an underpinning Junior Cycle principle, and with what they aspired to for their students. They also saw clear connections with the standards linked to the domain of learner experiences in the quality framework. It was decided to continue the investigation phase of the SSE process by gathering evidence in two specific areas: what helps students to persist when learning presents challenges; and to what extent students see 'school learning' as learning for life. The sources identified included student focus groups, student questionnaires, group reflection by the student support team, and teacher individual or group reflection.

Scenario 2 – Ballymore College

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Ballymore College is an all-boys school in a long-established suburb. The school had a WSE-MLL three years ago, and the main teaching and learning recommendations were to introduce more active and enquiry-based learning, and to raise expectations for students' attainment. Inspectors had particular concerns about the number of students taking ordinary level in the Junior Certificate. The present school principal was appointed in September 2015, and 8 of the 28 teachers are also relatively new to the school. The principal would like to advance the implementation of the recommendations using the SSE process and *Looking at our School 2016*.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY FOCUS

At the first staff meeting, the principal led a session on the progress made in addressing the WSE recommendations on teaching and learning. Uptake of higher level in JC Irish and Maths had increased, but he thought there was still scope for improvement in a number of subjects. He then turned to the recommendation about active learning, and said that he'd like to see it progressed in a structured way, using the SSE process. At that point, he asked two teachers – a long-serving teacher of English, and a science teacher in his third year in the school – to recount how, in different ways, they had surfaced some interesting insights from students.

The teacher of English described how she had asked her first-year class to write about the experience of going into secondary school. While their pieces were often not well developed, they engaged well with the topic. Building on this, she asked them to prepare a short oral presentation in groups of three on 'what school should be like'. The staff wouldn't be surprised to hear that some of the ideas were pretty hilarious, but certain themes emerged: school should be a place where:
- learning was enjoyable
- it was okay to ask for help
- you didn't have to sit and listen all the time

A 'eureka moment' for her about the writing process was when a bright but disorganised lad said "I could write something good about this after doing the presentation, because the things I want to say are clear in my head."

The science teacher then explained that in a first-year class test he had given last year, the final question he had set was actually a student survey, asking students to say what they had enjoyed and why, what they had found difficult, and what had helped them to understand. They enjoyed doing experiments, and finding out things. They found the language of science difficult – not just specialised terms but the particular meanings that more familiar words have in science. The thing that helped them most was being asked about what they were doing and why, and trying to explain the experiment and what they had found out using the correct words. What he found most insightful was their awareness that it wasn't just the language itself but understanding and using it that mattered.

The principal asked the staff to do a 'think, pair, share' exercise to reflect on their colleagues' inputs and to agree on two or three key points emerging from them. The points most mentioned were the following:

- Students feel that they learn better when learning is linked to or arises from an activity
- Students need to articulate their learning; explaining their learning is a key part of the process
- Students are better motivated when they feel they can achieve something good

At this point, the principal introduced the quality framework from *Looking at Our School 2016*. He displayed the graphic on the right as a visual summary of the teaching and learning domains, then asked the staff to scan the overview of the teaching and learning dimension (see page 2 above) and to identify the domain(s) and standards they saw as most relevant to the aspects of learning they had discussed and the WSE-MLL recommendations that they needed to address.
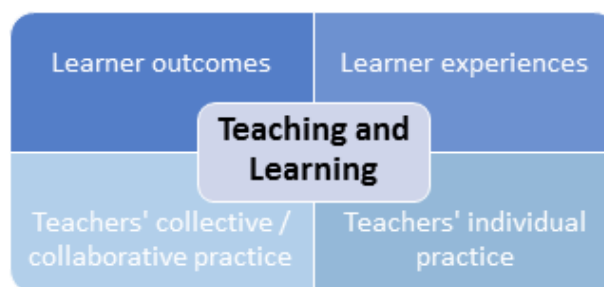
A consensus emerged quite quickly. The domain of 'learner outcomes' was the one most directly relevant to them. As one senior teacher put it, "that first standard covers everything we've been talking about":

> *Students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners.*

Teachers also commented on the links between domains, and between standards in different domains; they could see that focusing on one domain or standard naturally drew them to consider others as well. They decided their focus for self-evaluation would be active and reflective learning approaches to raise students' levels of motivation and attainment.

STEP 2: GATHER EVIDENCE

One of the lessons the school had learned from the first SSE cycle was the importance of only gathering a manageable amount of relevant evidence. Teachers saw that they had already tapped into a number of sources of evidence in identifying a worthwhile focus: the Inspectorate evaluation report; some state examination data; and views gathered from two junior cycle class groups. They felt that each of these sources could be further used to yield both 'hard' statistical information and 'softer' information about students' dispositions and needs, and the approaches that would lead to improved outcomes for them.

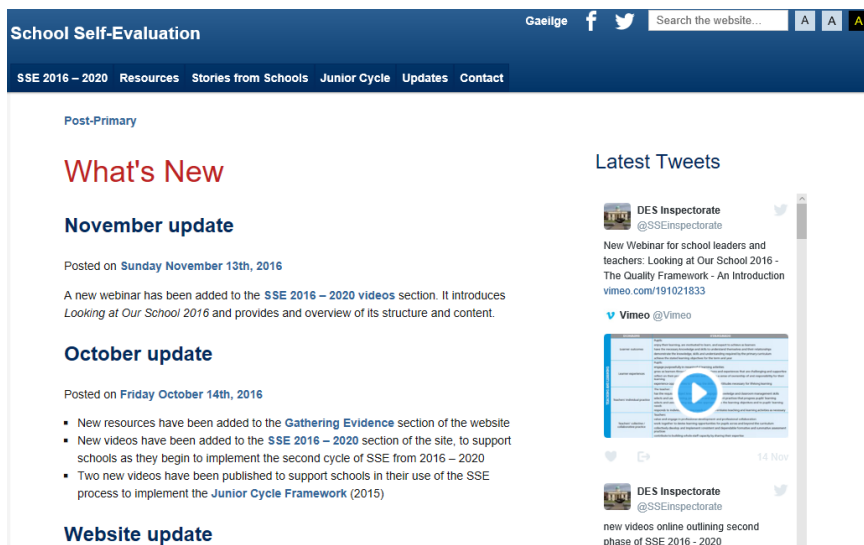They agreed on the following actions to build their evidence base:

- revisit the WSE-MLL report and focus on the positive aspects of teaching and learning practice identified, so that the good practice could be shared and developed (the deputy principal would lead this work)
- conduct a more detailed analysis of Junior Certificate outcomes for the last three years, and focus on establishing trends in uptake and attainment, looking also at results for a sample of students (the principal would work with a junior cycle year head on this analysis)
- survey the current first-year students to gather more information on 'what's good, what's difficult, and what helps', using the Science teacher's approach during class tests

We'll continue the story of these schools in the Stories from Schools section of the SSE website.

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 0040/2016 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 post-primary 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, Junior Cycle, Updates and Contact.

Amongst the newly added resources you may find useful are:

- The *SSE Guidelines*, *Looking at Our School 2016*, and Circular 0040/2016 [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 in which Deirdre Mathews, Assistant Chief Inspector, highlights what's new and what remains the same in the new SSE requirements [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- A webinar presented by Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig introducing the structure of *Looking at Our School 2016* [Available in SSE 2016 – 2020]
- Two videos in which Kate O'Carroll outlines the alignment between *Looking at Our School 2016* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* and looks at using the SSE Process when implementing the new Junior Cycle [Available in Junior Cycle]
- 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]

We'll continue adding other resources to the website over the coming months, and we really welcome your feedback and suggestions. 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/.