SSE UPDATE

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SSE 2016-2020 – what's been done and what's next?

Welcome to issue twelve of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-primary schools.

As we are half-way through the third school year of the 2016-2020 cycle of self-evaluation now is a good opportunity to reflect on what you've done and to think about what's next in your school improvement process. One of the fundamental principles of SSE is that it allows schools to focus on areas that are a priority for them. Every school is different, so will have different priorities at different points in time. A priority may be an aspect of teaching and learning, or may be informed by a national initiative or strategy. We've included two articles on areas that some schools have chosen to prioritise on that basis. The first article is about Digital Learning and examines the synergies that exist between SSE and the digital strategy. The second article looks at the School Excellence Fund – Step-Up Initiative and, how a school might move through the investigation phase when the area of focus relates to Junior Cycle.

In November and early December, we delivered five regional SSE seminars for post-primary principals. Participants were very positive about the opportunity these events gave them to consider how *Looking at Our School 2016* can be used to support the SSE process, and to share practice and learn from other school leaders. Schools had identified meaningful areas of focus, gathered and analysed evidence and had planned for improvement. Lots of schools have been telling us about the changes that they are making in learning and teaching, particularly relating to Junior Cycle, as they engage in the most important part of the process: *Putting Improvement into Action.*

We hope to be able to offer some more seminars in the spring term – keep an eye on the SSE website for details. Inspectors have also supported schools through non-evaluative SSE advisory visits. These visits involve an inspector working with the principal and other members of the leadership team to help the school to get the most from the SSE process. We'll continue to offer these visits during 2019 and to request one, simply e-mail info@schoolself-evaluation.ie.

To help us to make sure that the supports provided continue to be useful and relevant, we're conducting an online SSE survey. We're interested in hearing from principals and other school leaders, teachers, parents and members of boards of management about how things are progressing in schools. It's a short survey and it'll remain open until Friday January 18 – you can access it here or on the front page of the SSE website.

The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit

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Digital Learning and the SSE process

We have all come to recognise the important role that digital technologies can play in the learning and teaching process. Students use technology as an integrated part of their everyday lives and technologies will form part of the lives of today's learners' in ways that we probably can't even imagine. There is considerable research evidence too that digital technologies, can provide deep, richer and more stimulating experience for learners. The effective embedding of digital learning as part of everyday classroom experiences poses questions about learning and teaching and requires changes in our practice. Effective digital learning in post-primary schools involves students in actively and collaboratively using technologies as an integral part of teaching, learning and assessment processes.
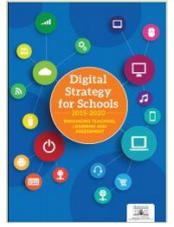
Digital Strategy and Digital Learning Plan

There has been a lot of focus on digital learning at system level in Ireland, including the development of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015 – 2020. The subsequent circulars (0001/2017 and 0011/2018) have allocated annual funding to schools up to 2020 to support investment. Schools have been asked to plan for the use of this funding in the form of a digital learning plan. A school's digital learning plan will support you in embedding digital learning and help you to provide meaningful learning experiences for your students.

Planning for digital learning has been deliberately aligned to the SSE process. SSE is the established process for schools to reflect and review and to manage change. SSE helps you to consider how well you are doing, what their strengths and areas for improvement are and how you can make the improvement happen. You can use the identical six-step process as you examine digital learning and as they prepare a digital learning plan.

One of the commitments of the Digital Strategy for Schools was to develop a framework to guide quality and progress in digital learning in the Irish System. The resulting framework, the _Digital Learning Framework for Post-Primary Schools_ (DFL) is directly aligned to the domains and standards of _Looking at Our School 2016._ The DFL is a useful tool for you when reflecting on your strengths, areas for development and the actions you can take to bring about improvement specifically in the area of digital learning. It has the added advantage of drawing on the same structure and language as _Looking at Our School 2016_.

Making the links between SSE and digital learning

Many schools have identified an area of focus other than digital learning for SSE. You may have identified for example student reflection to support your implementation of the _Junior Cycle Framework_ or you may have decided to focus on an aspect of teaching and learning such as effective questioning. While it is true to say that in these cases, schools are required to have a digital learning plan as well as an SSE action, schools can ensure that there is much overlap between the two processes.

For example, if you are focusing on student reflection for SSE, you could consider how digital learning could help identify specific actions that involve the use of digital technologies by learners to check on and reflect on their learning. Similarly, if you have identified effective questioning as an area of focus, you might focus on how digital technologies can be used by teachers to share examples of effective questions or, to assess the impact of questions on students learning. Essentially you can 'box cleverly' with regard to your SSE area of focus and the requirement to have a digital learning plan, by stitching in specific actions that serve both your SSE priorities and their digital learning priorities.

Digital Learning as an SSE area of focus

Perhaps your school has identified digital learning as an aspect of teaching that you want to prioritise across the curriculum and you may have decided that it is one of the areas of focus for the SSE process. There will be obvious overlap between the digital learning plan and the SSE improvement plan in your school, and

essentially both plans can become one to guide implementation and review at steps 5 and 6 in the process (*Put Improvement Plan into Action* and *Monitor Actions and Evaluate Impact*).

When planning for improvement in the use of digital learning in this case, it will be important to plan for actions that are linked to particular curriculum areas and specific kinds of learning. You will be basing actions on aspects of learning and the curriculum that need to be improved and that will be enhanced by providing focused digital learning experiences to engage and challenge learners, and help them to achieve better outcomes.

School Excellence Fund: Step-Up Project

The School Excellence Fund (SEF) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Skills which enables schools to participate in innovative projects which are context-specific and aimed at improving learning outcomes for young people. Earlier this year the Department invited schools to apply to participate in the SEF Step-Up Project. This project is specifically aimed at looking at how schools can use the self-evaluation approach to review their current implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* in one or more of three specific subject areas: English, Business Studies and Science. Nine schools from across the country are participating in the project which is aimed at supporting schools already at an effective level of implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* to move to a highly effective level. They have been encouraged to identify areas for improvement and to use innovative approaches to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting to enhance learning. Schools are being supported throughout the project by inspectors and advisors from Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) in developing and implementing actions leading to improvement in their chosen area/s. Let's look at what's been happening so far:

Beginning the journey - Investigation

In September the nine schools met to review their initial proposals and share their thoughts and expectations. Using peer coaching they consolidated their initial Step-Up proposals through asking questions including:

- Why is this focus more important than others for your school?
- What evidence/ data has led you to this focus?
- How ready do you feel for this project?
- What domain and statement(s) from *Looking at Our School 2016* are you using as your benchmark?
- What do you think the greatest challenges will be for you in this project?
- Do you have any internal resources/ expertise that could support the project?
- What form of data collection/ story telling do you think would be most effective? Why?
- How will you share the learning in your school?
- What data are you planning to capture?
- How will you capture student voice?
- What one or two early outcomes would you like?
- What action(s) could take you furthest towards these outcomes?

Moving on

Back in their schools the project leaders worked with their teams of teachers to refine their proposals. They reviewed relevant research to support the focus of their projects. They gathered evidence and reflected on the relevant statements of effective and highly effective practice for the standards from *Looking at Our School 2016*. Schools have also been evaluating innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment to use with their learners to enhance learning. During this time, inspectors and JCT advisors have been working collaboratively with the schools towards progressing the projects and facilitating sharing of practice.

We will keep you up-to-date with further developments in the Step-Up Project as the participating schools continue their SSE Step-Up journey.

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.
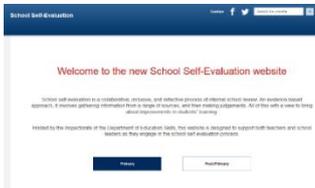
Survey on SSE

We are currently conducting an online survey to learn more about how the school self-evaluation process is progressing in schools. We're interested in hearing from principals and other school leaders, teachers, parents and members of boards of management. It's a short survey and your response will assist in ensuring that further supports provided for SSE are relevant and useful. It's available on the front page of the SSE website or click on the link below.

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