SSE UPDATE

POST-PRIMARY EDITION   ISSUE 14 – December 2019

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Welcome to issue fourteen of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-primary schools. We know that from your feedback, 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 approaching the beginning of 2020. That means that we are coming to the end of this cycle of SSE. Circular 0040/2016 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 schools have really found the process to be 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 takes a look at the area of modern foreign languages. It makes practical links between _Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026_ and how schools can use the SSE process to examine their own language provision. The second article takes a short look at the sixth step in the SSE process – Monitor actions and evaluate impact.

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. School have told us that they have found these visits beneficial and that they helped deepen their own conversations and to make their process more focused.

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

Applying the SSE process to the teaching of modern foreign languages in post primary schools

Post primary MFL education is at a crossroads in Ireland, re-energised through a succession of recent innovative updates in the diversification of language subject offerings, short courses and specification development.

Did you know that…
Recent developments include the introduction of the new junior cycle MFL specification, the diversification in the range of languages available for study to encompass short courses such as Chinese Language and Culture, Polish, and Japanese in junior cycle, while in Transition Year 'Units' in language subjects such as Korean have also been developed.

Furthermore, plans are in place for the upcoming introduction of four new curricular specifications for examination at Leaving Certificate level: Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese. These new courses will all be introduced to schools for the first time in September 2020.

Underpinning much of this development is the 2017 Department of Education and Skills **Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026**. The strategy aims to support and develop language education in Ireland. It sets out a vision that Ireland's education system will promote a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted, because of its value for individuals, society and the economy.

Within Languages Connect, four key strategic goals are set out to enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages:

1. Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment.
2. Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish.
3. Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages.
4. Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages.

In terms of the first goal, to 'improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment', we in the Inspectorate will provide positive support for a quality foreign language education for learners. We will offer advice and guidance to schools about using school self-evaluation, school planning to improve foreign language education, as well as a range of evaluation approaches to monitor and report on the quality of foreign language education.

In light of the high profile that MFLs are currently enjoying, it's worth considering how your school can progress MFL within your local context. In this article we will look at how SSE, in

conjunction with **Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026** can support achievements in MFL within your school.

Circular letter 0040/2016 outlines the current requirements for post-primary schools, in terms of their continuing engagement with school self-evaluation of teaching and learning from 2016 to 2020. Whole-school targets are derived from the six-step SSE process and it may, at first glance, appear challenging to transfer this same process to MFL teaching and learning. However, this need not be the case and you could take a number of approaches to link the SSE process to MFL.

One possibility, at whole-school level, would be to look for areas of practice that would be applicable to all subject areas. Take, for example, the provision of written formative feedback. This is relevant to junior cycle reform, as well as general teaching and learning, and it cuts across subject areas. You could then look at means of applying the whole school targets to your subject area. In instances where more than one language is offered in your school, you may wish to consider establishing an MFL department, in order to promote greater collaboration across the language subjects. This could involve, for example, the provision of bespoke written feedback to students in the target language, with strategies devised to ensure that students are familiar with the vocabulary used.

Another way you could look at this would be to implement the agreed whole-school SSE targets, but to also take a second look at the six-step process to see whether or not there are areas of current practice within your subject area/MFL department that could benefit from review. By following this optional approach, and referring to the School Self-Evaluation guidelines, we hope that you might find inspiration and clarity as to current key priority areas for development. You could, for example, also take a closer look at Languages Connect and, perhaps, goal one within the strategy, to:

> "Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment".

Of course, the actions deriving from this goal are talking about system change at a national basis, so let's look at it locally, to examine what we are doing in our school to create a more engaging learning environment. You may wish to refer the domains and standards within Looking At our School and to decide whether current practices are effective or highly effective, identifying both strengths and areas for development.

In mapping your thinking to Looking at Our School, the following extract may be useful:

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.

If the area of focus is on improving "language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment", then you could begin by raising a number of questions:

- *Do our students have opportunities in every lesson to speak in the target language with their classmates?*
- *What specific student-student target language usage opportunities do we provide to students? Are they spontaneous, focussed on oral engagement, or does it involve role play?*
- *Do the students engage with the teacher in the target language as the language of communication within the classroom?*
- *How engaging are the language opportunities we provide to our students? And when do we provide such opportunities within the lesson structure – at the beginning, middle or end?*
- *What scaffolds do we put in place to support student confidence in using the target language?*

In moving to the data gathering phase, you may wish to look at:

- *A review of recent lessons within the subject department – how regularly did student-student oral interactions feature within each lesson and for how long did each interaction last approximately?*
- *Providing a brief questionnaire to all MFL students to ascertain their views as to the frequency of oral interactions, their use of the target language and how engaging the learning environment is for them.*

You may decide to raise other questions, and once you have done so, the next step is to analyse and make judgements. This particular phase should assist in narrowing down the focus on a limited, manageable and measurable number of areas for development. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge and build on areas that are current strengths within your subject area/MFL subject department.
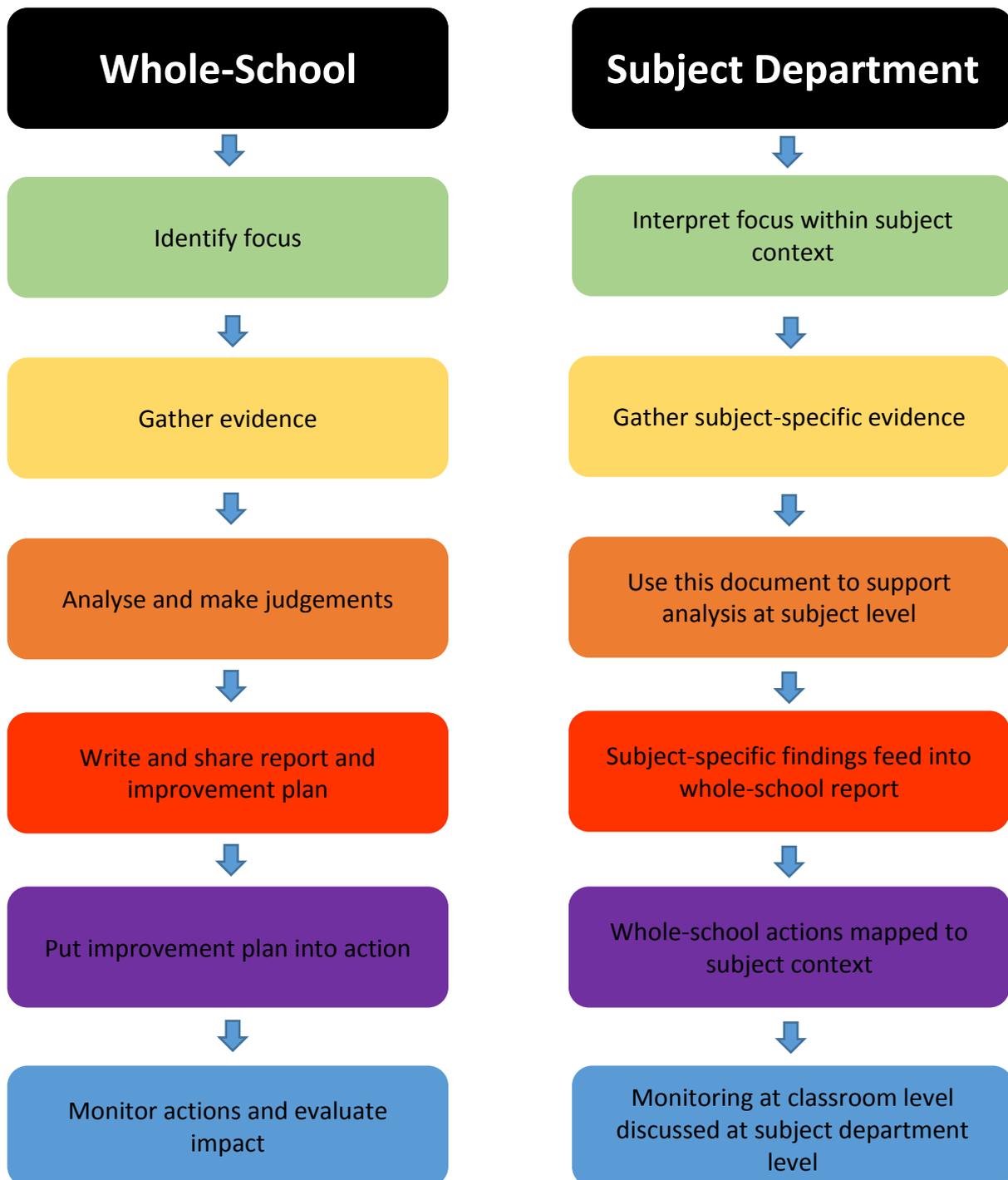
From this point, a number of SMART targets, that is targets that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound, can be devised. These may include targets as to increasing the frequency and duration of student-student interactions, as well as ensuring that such interactions focus specifically on oral skills development.

As the term and school-year progresses, it will be important to monitor the effectiveness of the agreed teaching and learning strategies, to ensure that they are having the desired effect on the learner experience. There are various ways to gather this data, you may wish to include a student survey, for example, or meet with a focus group of students. These would be ways of ascertaining that practice has changed and that learners are improving their proficiency through a learning environment that has become more engaging.

If this approach at subject department level has encouraged you to develop your practice, you may also wish to look at other goals within Languages Connect, possibly at whole-school level, in co-operation with the Guidance services and the senior management team in your school. The following two goals may be particularly relevant in that regard:
- Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish.
- Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages.

Using this article to support reflection within your MFL subject department

Whole-School	Subject Department
Identify focus	Interpret focus within subject context
Gather evidence	Gather subject-specific evidence
Analyse and make judgements	Use this document to support analysis at subject level
Write and share report and improvement plan	Subject-specific findings feed into whole-school report
Put improvement plan into action	Whole-school actions mapped to subject context
Monitor actions and evaluate impact	Monitoring at classroom level discussed at subject department level

Using this article to support teaching and learning – a practical example

	Whole-School	Languages Department
Identify focus	Example: Improve the learner experience with a view to enhancing student wellbeing and supporting higher outcomes	Ask questions of ourselves as teachers, e.g. • Are students presented with rich and appropriately challenging tasks that develop solution curiosity?
Gather evidence	• Focus group of students • Questionnaire for all/sample of students	• Talk to the students in your language classes • Examine students' work for evidence of disengagement
Analyse and make judgements	How good is the learner experience in our school?	How good is the MFL learner experience?
Write and share report and improvement plan	The school-wide learner experience is in need of improvement	Students regularly engage in challenging activities; however more activities could stem from their own interests and questions
Put improvement plan into action	Cross-departmental collaboration on how to improve the learner experience	Collaboration within the subject area/MFL department on the development of richer tasks
Monitor actions and evaluate impact	• Was the process manageable? • Was the process meaningful? • How did the plan support improvement in wellbeing and outcomes?	• Was the process manageable/meaningful in the subject area/MFL department? • How can we continue to support the process?

Monitoring actions and evaluating impact

Without doubt, the most important step in the SSE process is Step 5 – *Put improvement plan into action*. It's where the changes that we want in learning and teaching actually happen. It is really closely aligned to Step 6 – Monitor actions and evaluate impact. This short article explores some of the good practice we've encountered in schools with the final step in the process.

The SSE process is cyclical and iterative and by monitoring and evaluating impact you're checking to see if the actions that you've identified are working and improving teaching and learning as hoped - and if you're on course to achieve the targets that have been set. As actions are being implemented, don't forget to build in times and ways to reflect on them, consider if they are working and support each other to get them right. It's important to stand back regularly – and collectively tweak or change approaches based on what you've learned. Sometimes, you may even have to go back to the drawing board and alter an action or reframe the target altogether!

The word 'monitoring' can sometimes conjure up negative images of authoritarian checks and balances! One school leader that we encountered said that they thought about monitoring in Step 6 as 'monitoring with a small m.' Monitoring actions can be a way of building in reminders and opportunities for teachers to talk and reflect in both formal and informal ways about the school's improvement actions. It's also a way of considering how much progress is being made.

We've encountered lots of really good 'small m monitoring' in schools. They include the following:

- Discussion at every staff meeting about SSE and how actions are progressing
- Gently keeping the conversation going on a regular and often informal basis, so the agreed changes remain live
- A small SSE notice board in a staff room or other prominent area that highlights the agreed actions
- Reminders on the school's planning and monthly progress report templates of the agreed SSE actions
- Teacher pairings - where two teachers arrange to have a short informal conversation on a regular basis – to help keep each other motivated and to problem solve when they were having difficulties
- Discussion at subject department level – ongoing dialogue about how the school's identified SSE priorities are being reflected in practice and planning in subject departments
- Co-teaching to introduce new practices – where a teacher who has experience of a new practice works in-class with another colleague in a supportive way to develop the practice together
- Members of the ISM team regularly touching base with groups of teachers in a supportive capacity

Of course there is also a place for capital M monitoring. It will often involve members of the ISM team formally checking in with teachers about the agreed actions, taking an overview look at monthly progress reports or perhaps taking a look at pupils' work samples across the school.

The second part of this step is to evaluate impact. It's important when you're putting your improvement plan together to think about when you will stand back and see if you've achieved the improvement you set out to make. You'll be checking the progress made against the targets that you have set, based on the baseline information gathered in Step 2. Evaluating the impact will involve comparing where things were at the start against where they are now. It's really important to do this so that you can celebrate the progress made.

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.
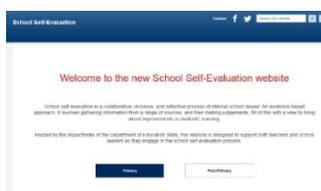
Preparing for the next SSE Cycle

As you know circular 0040/2016 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.