



Circular 0039/2016

**To Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and Teaching Staff
of Primary Schools and Special Schools**

CONTINUING IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION 2016-2020

Please bring this circular to the attention of all teaching and other relevant staff and to all members of the school board of management

Introduction

This circular

- follows on from, and supersedes, Circular 0039/2012, *Implementation of School Self-Evaluation*
- provides an overview of the first cycle of school self-evaluation, 2012-2016
- sets out the requirements for schools in their continuing engagement with school self-evaluation of teaching and learning
- outlines appropriate timeframes and stages for the school self-evaluation process, 2016-2020
- indicates the support available to schools for school self-evaluation
- includes a summary at section 11, listing the actions that schools need to take

1. School self-evaluation and school development planning

The Education Act, 1998 required schools to develop a school plan which would state the school's objectives regarding access and participation, and the measures proposed by the school to achieve these objectives. The Act obliges boards of management to regularly review and update the school plan. School development planning as a formal activity resulted from these provisions. Through formal school planning, schools developed and reviewed mandatory policies and legislative requirements, creating what can be regarded as the permanent section of their school plan. School planning also enabled schools to identify and work on priority areas for development, thus creating the developmental section of their school plan.

School self-evaluation is a further development of school development planning. It is a way of working that contributes to both the permanent and developmental sections of the school plan. Through school self-evaluation, schools reflect on and review their day-to-day practices and their policies, with a particular focus on teaching and learning. It provides all schools, including DEIS schools, with an internal process for developing and progressing action planning for improvement.

School self-evaluation involves reflective enquiry leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context. The process enables schools to use this evidence to identify meaningful and specific targets and actions for improvement that focus on teaching and learning practices and outcomes. It enables them to create and implement improvement plans, to measure their progress, and to identify their achievements.

Through school self-evaluation, boards of management can further develop and review the policies and practices contained in the permanent section of the school plan. This will enable boards to support continuing developments and improvements in teaching and learning.

2. The first cycle of school self-evaluation, 2012-2016

Systematic school self-evaluation was introduced in 2012/13 as a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review, focused on school improvement. Circular 0039/2012 required all schools to engage in the process, and set out its purpose and rationale. The circular made explicit reference to the application of the process to schools' implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

In the first four-year cycle of school self-evaluation, schools were required to develop and implement improvement plans for literacy, numeracy, and another curriculum area that they selected themselves. Irish-medium schools were specifically required to focus on literacy in Irish, literacy in English, and numeracy. In this way school self-evaluation provided schools with a process for implementing a national initiative, and also for identifying and working on a curriculum area or aspect of teaching and learning that would be meaningful for them.

The process of school self-evaluation places an emphasis on reflective enquiry leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context. Many schools have gained very useful knowledge of their own strengths and areas for development and improvement through their initial engagement with school self-evaluation. They have not only reflected on and evaluated aspects of their teaching practices and pupils' learning but have also gained valuable insights into the process of evidence-based action planning for improvement.

As the first cycle of school self-evaluation concludes, schools have begun to embed the teaching and learning practices that are leading to improved outcomes in literacy, numeracy and other areas. They should continue this process of embedding successful practices as they embark on the next cycle.

3. The second cycle of school self-evaluation, 2016-2020

In the next cycle of school self-evaluation, **teaching and learning continues to be the focus**. Schools should continue to use the process to implement national initiatives and to identify and work on curriculum areas or aspects of their own teaching and learning practices which require development and improvement. These curriculum areas and aspects of teaching and learning will vary according to the needs of schools.

Typically, most schools will use the process to assist them in introducing and embedding the **Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)** on a phased basis for English and Irish, in accordance with the implementation plans for the PLC, outlined in Circular 0061/2015. This will complement and build on the work they have already undertaken in relation to literacy in the first phase of school self-evaluation. It is expected that schools will also use the process to maintain a meaningful focus on numeracy.

Schools should use the knowledge they have acquired from the first cycle to enhance their continuing engagement with school self-evaluation. Of particular relevance is the experience gained in areas such as gathering baseline data, establishing meaningful targets, and whole-school implementation of actions.

4. Planning and implementing the second cycle of school self-evaluation

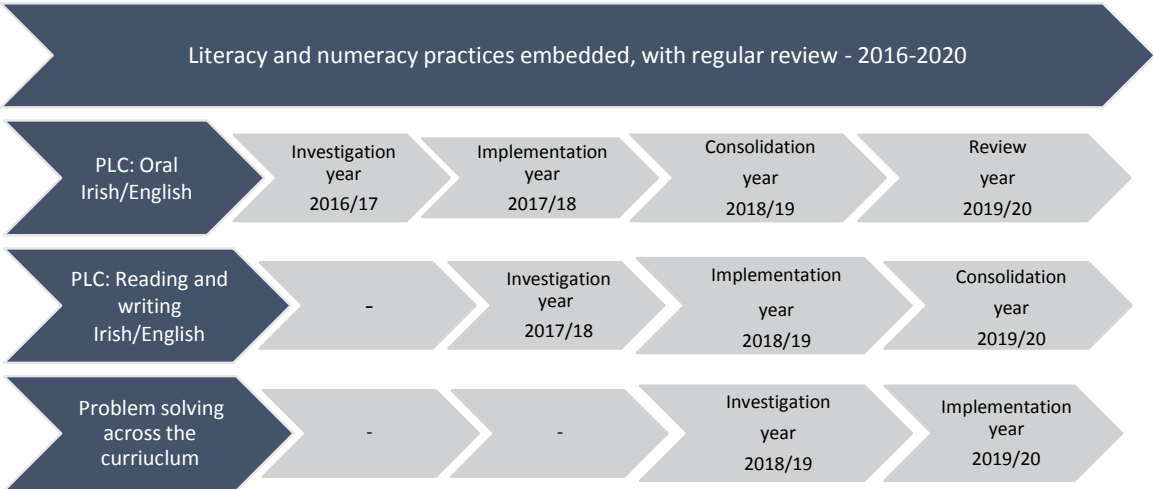
Schools should select a minimum of two and a maximum of four curriculum areas or aspects of teaching and learning as the focus for their self-evaluation process from 2016 to 2020.

Within this four-year period, schools should maintain self-evaluation as a continuous process and should develop and implement school improvement plans in curriculum areas or aspects of teaching and learning that are of relevance to them. They should use the teaching and learning section of *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* in the revised *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* as a benchmark when reflecting on and evaluating their current practice.

Schools now know the importance of the initial steps in the process – evidence-gathering and analysis – to ensure that judgements based on them are sound and that plans for improvement have the required focus and clarity. The four-year period allows for an investigation year for scoping out and developing the improvement plan, and preparing for its implementation. A sequence of implementation, consolidation, and review then follows over the next three years until practice becomes embedded.

The graphic below sets out how the process would work over a four-year period in which a school selects three aspects of teaching and learning. **For illustrative purposes only**, it provides examples of how aspects of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) can be implemented through the self-evaluation process. Schools should refer to circular 0061/2015 for specific requirements. To avoid duplication when implementing the primary language curriculum, schools should review their current school self-evaluation report and school improvement plan for literacy. They should build on the progress already made in implementing improvements in the teaching and learning of literacy.

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Within the four-year timeframe indicated above, schools have a degree of flexibility in the number of curriculum areas or aspects of teaching and learning that they focus on. Some schools may feel confident that they can implement an improvement plan without a preliminary investigation year, for example where baseline data is already available and the actions required are clear. In other cases, schools may select an aspect of teaching and learning or curriculum area which necessitates considerable changes in practice to

bring about improved outcomes for pupils. In such cases, schools may begin implementing these changes and defer the investigation of a new area or aspect until the following year, where they consider it wise to do so.

5. Recording and reporting on the school's self-evaluation process

School self-evaluation is about reflecting on and improving how teachers teach and how pupils learn. Documentation should not be the focus. Only the documents detailed below are required.

Each year, the school should produce a short ***self-evaluation report and school improvement plan***. This single document will record:

- the progress made in the last year in previously-identified areas for improvement and, where relevant, how actions for improvement will continue in the current year
- where relevant, the new curriculum area or aspect of teaching and learning the school has selected for the current year and the basis for the selection
- targets and actions for improvement the school has set; the specific actions to be undertaken in classrooms and learning settings; the timeframes and methods agreed for monitoring and assessing progress; and the personnel responsible at each stage of implementation.

Schools may wish to write a separate ***self-evaluation report and school improvement plan*** for each area identified for improvement, but this is not required.

Each year, boards of management should complete the **policy and legislative checklist as an internal record** of their ongoing process of policy development and review, and their compliance with requirements.

Schools should ensure that parents and other relevant partners in their community are informed of the school self-evaluation process. They should create a **summary** of the ***self-evaluation report and school improvement plan*** and communicate it in a way that makes it accessible and meaningful to parents and the community. Schools should also ensure that parents are aware of the school's policies and of the school's compliance with requirements that support good teaching and learning. Resources to assist schools in recording and reporting on their self-evaluation process are listed in section 10 below.

6. School self-evaluation in DEIS schools

Schools in the DEIS programme are required to develop and implement three-year improvement plans as a condition of their participation in DEIS. **These plans are the school's improvement plan for the purposes of school self-evaluation, and no additional or separate improvement plan is required.**

DEIS schools should, however, within their own particular contexts take note of the emphasis that the school self-evaluation process places on the core activity of any school: teaching and learning. They should ensure a focus on teaching and learning wherever relevant when planning for improvement in literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, progression, and partnership with parents and others.

DEIS schools should use the self-evaluation process to ensure that their action plans for improvement have a robust evidence base, and are clearly targeted at pupils requiring specific interventions and supports.

DEIS schools should follow the recording and reporting requirements given in section 5 above, always bearing in mind that the DEIS action plans are the school's improvement plan. When communicating a summarised

report and improvement plan to parents and the community, DEIS schools may choose to highlight specific actions for improvement where they consider parental awareness and involvement are particularly relevant.

7. School self-evaluation in special schools

Special schools are required to engage in school self-evaluation of teaching and learning. They should adhere to the requirements outlined in section 4 above in their self-evaluation processes in the period 2016 to 2020.

They should use the self-evaluation process to develop and implement school improvement plans that are relevant to the needs of their pupils and to their particular school contexts. The self-evaluation process should assist special schools to ensure that their improvement plans have a robust evidence base, and are clearly directed to meeting the identified learning needs of pupils. While the modes of learning and the nature of pupil progress may differ depending on school context, special schools should follow the recording and reporting requirements given in section 5 above.

8. Time for school self-evaluation

Principals should ensure that sufficient time for school planning is made available and that school self-evaluation is a core part of this. Planning time should facilitate the involvement of all teaching staff in the school self-evaluation process.

9. School self-evaluation and inspection

School self-evaluation and external evaluation are complementary processes, both focused on improvement. External evaluations, in particular whole-school evaluations, take note of schools' identified priorities and assess their teaching and learning practices. The school self-evaluation process gives schools a means of identifying and addressing priorities, and of ensuring a whole-school focus on improving specific aspects of teaching and learning. Given this common focus on improvement, the Inspectorate will take account of schools' engagement with and outcomes of self-evaluation, as set out in this circular, in the course of its evaluations.

10. Supports for school self-evaluation

A number of supports are in place to assist schools to engage in the school self-evaluation process.

Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools

The Department has developed *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* consisting of domains and standards for teaching and learning and leadership and management. This quality framework is intended to inform both school self-evaluation and external evaluation.

The quality framework for teaching and learning, which was published in the School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (2012) has been updated as part of *Looking at Our School 2016*. It has been simplified following feedback from schools and the education partners. The evaluation criteria and quality statements in the 2012 Guidelines have been replaced by domains, standards, and statements of practice for teaching and learning.

Looking at Our School 2016 also contains domains and standards for leadership and management that will help to guide school leaders and others in their work. Schools are not required to engage in self-evaluation of leadership and management in the second phase of school self-evaluation (2016 to 2020).

School Self-Evaluation Guidelines

The Inspectorate has revised the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools* published in 2012 to support the school self-evaluation process. For convenience, the *Guidelines* include the relevant section from *Looking at Our School 2016* that contains the domains, standards and statements of practice for teaching and learning. Sample tools to help schools to gather evidence and make judgements are also included.

School support

The Inspectorate, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in the case of special schools, will continue to provide school self-evaluation support to schools. This support is provided to assist schools in embedding school self-evaluation for sustainable school improvement and as a means of implementing national initiatives.

Online support

The dedicated school self-evaluation website at www.schoolself-evaluation.ie provides up-to-date materials to support school self-evaluation. Schools are encouraged to use the website to access the latest information about school self-evaluation. Supports include:

- Electronic versions of the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines*
- Presentations explaining the purpose and process of school self-evaluation, which may be useful to school leaders at staff or group meetings
- Short video clips illustrating schools' engagement with particular aspects of school self-evaluation
- Sample school self-evaluation materials provided by schools from a variety of contexts
- SSE Update, an e-bulletin that is published twice yearly
- A range of templates for schools to use and adapt
- Checklists of policy and legislative requirements for the use of boards of management

11. Summary

- School self-evaluation is a way of working that provides one coherent internal improvement process for schools. It incorporates school development planning and DEIS action planning for improvement
- In the next cycle of school self-evaluation (2016-2020), schools should continue to focus on teaching and learning
- Schools have flexibility to focus their school self-evaluation on curriculum areas and aspects of teaching and learning according to the needs of the school
- Schools should select a minimum of two and a maximum of four curriculum areas or aspects of teaching and learning as the focus for their self-evaluation process from 2016 to 2020
- Typically, most schools will use the process to assist them in introducing and embedding the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC), as outlined in circular 0061/2015
- Schools should maintain a brief annual record of their self-evaluation in the form of a single short self-evaluation report and school improvement plan
- Once annually, boards of management should complete a policy and legislative checklist of their ongoing process of policy development and review, and their compliance with requirements, as an internal record
- Each year, schools should create a very brief summary of the self-evaluation report and school improvement plan and communicate it in a way that makes it accessible and meaningful to parents and the school community

12. QUERIES REGARDING THIS CIRCULAR

Queries in relation to this circular should be emailed to the Department's Inspectorate at

info@schoolself-evaluation.ie

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