



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of Education
and Youth

Looking at Music

Draft Guide for Post-Primary Schools

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Introduction

Looking at Music (2025) has been compiled by inspectors of Music to make a positive contribution to the learning, teaching and assessment of the subject in post-primary schools. It seeks to enrich existing self-review practices, to share exemplars of highly effective practices gleaned from subject inspections and to assist music departments in the interlinking processes of self-review in the subject with ongoing whole-school self-evaluation.

Materials are presented in the following order:

- A list of possible evidence sources to support self-review by the music department. In reflecting on the context of your school, the music department may identify additional in-house sources of evidence relevant to your needs.
- An overview of how the learning and teaching domains of *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* can be used as a tool to support music department development.
- A discussion of each domain in *Looking at Our School* along with an examination of how these might be utilised to support the self-evaluation of a music department, along with prompt questions to support departmental review and exemplars of how the process might take place in departments.
- A practical example of interlinking subject specific school self-evaluation (SSE) with the whole-school SSE process.
- Further reference sources to support self-evaluation of learning and teaching in Music.

Possible evidence sources to consider during subject department self-review

- Feedback from students about their learning experiences through surveys, focus groups and peer reviews.
- Review of how the subject promotes the development of students as musicians.
- Exploration of learners' experiences of how music connects to their own lives.
- Collation and review of teachers' insights on students' practical skills, listening and appraising skills, composing skills and levels of engagement in class discussions and collaborative tasks.
- Review of minutes of subject department meetings that reference key discussion points. These may include areas for improvement identified during subject learning and assessment review (SLAR) meetings.
- Discussion regarding how digital technology can enhance teaching, learning and assessment in Music.

- Ongoing development and review of units of learning or modules for various year groups.
- Examination of relevant inspection reports related to Music and associated findings of highly effective practices and guidance for improvement.
- Analysis of all formative and summative assessment records to support the addressing of students' learning needs.
- Review of the range of students' portfolios and other written materials.
- Consideration of approaches that enable learners to take ownership of and responsibility for improving their learning.

Further sources of evidence and tools can be found at www.gov.ie/DEInspektorate.

Using *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* to support subject department self-review

Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools provides a set of standards that can help teachers and school leaders evaluate the quality of their practice and identify pathways for improvement. Within this framework, learning and teaching are viewed through the following four distinct, although interrelated and sometimes overlapping, domains:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learner outcomes• Learner experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers' individual practice• Teachers' collective/collaborative practice
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Having identified and agreed on the aspects of practice they need to evaluate, schools should look more closely at the relevant domains and standards for the areas of their practice that require more investigation. The statements of practice associated with each standard will serve as a useful and more detailed benchmark in assisting schools to decide on the effectiveness of their practice. If subject departments reflect on the learning and teaching domains and standards, they will be able to quickly gauge the aspects of practice that are working well and those they might prioritise for improvement.

It is advisable to focus on one or two areas for improvement rather than taking on too many at one time. This will facilitate incremental, ongoing self-review and improvement planning that is manageable for teachers and meaningful for students.

Learner outcomes

This domain and its related standards encompass students' attitudes to learning, their understanding of themselves and others, their acquisition of curriculum knowledge and skills, and their levels of attainment.

When considering learner outcomes, the music department may use the related standards to establish whether students:

- enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn and expect to achieve as learners
- have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required 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 unit of learning in junior cycle and each topic in senior cycle.

When the learner outcomes in Music are of a high standard:

Students have opportunities to engage with a wide range of musical styles and student choice is given appropriate weighting in the selection of material. They experience Music through the integration of the three disciplines—listening, composing and performing—so that their learning is aligned to the type of engagement experienced by active musicians. This enables students to develop their critical thinking skills and deepen their knowledge, skills and understanding of Music.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review:

- To what extent is students' prior knowledge, experience and personal choices of Music used to inform planning and other decisions?
- How effectively are students' musical literacy skills being supported and developed?
- In what ways can students be supported in developing authentic research skills, such as locating and selecting music information and analysing and interpreting this information?
- Are students provided with opportunities to reflect on and demonstrate their learning?
- Do students have sufficient opportunities to engage with performing on their own instruments as part of the integrated approach to music education?

How one subject department improved the quality of learner outcomes in Music:

In one post-primary school, the music department demonstrated highly effective practice that led to very good learner outcomes. The teachers' planning was meticulous, with lessons carefully sequenced to develop students' skills in performance, composition and listening. Learning intentions were clearly articulated and consistently revisited throughout the lessons to reinforce understanding and sustain focus.

Students were highly engaged, confidently participating in ensemble work and solo performances. Their ability to listen critically and respond thoughtfully to Music was evident in rich discussions and written reflections. Teachers used differentiated strategies that enabled all students—regardless of ability—to access the learning and achieve success.

Assessment was seamlessly integrated into the learning process. Students received timely, constructive feedback that helped them refine their compositions and improve their instrumental technique. Peer and self-assessment were also embedded, fostering a reflective learning culture. The effective use of technology—including notation software and digital audio tools—enhanced creativity and supported independent learning. Students showcased their work through recordings and live performances. As a result, students demonstrated deep musical understanding, technical proficiency and a genuine enthusiasm for the subject. Their achievements in both classroom assessments and external music examinations reflected the high quality of teaching and the inclusive, supportive, learning environment fostered by the department.

Learner experiences

This domain and its related standards encompass students' learning experiences as demonstrated in levels of engagement, growth, self-reflection and development as lifelong learners.

When enquiring into learner experiences, the music department may use the related standards to establish whether 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.

When learner experiences in Music are of a high standard:

Students are actively engaged in lessons that are purposeful, inclusive and musically rich. Teachers structure lessons effectively, using a well-paced sequence of varied activities that are responsive to students' needs and interests. Success criteria are made explicit, enabling students to assess their own work and understand how to improve.

High-quality music teaching integrates the three core disciplines of listening, composing and performing. These elements are not taught in isolation but are meaningfully connected. For example, students may analyse a piece of music, identify compositional techniques, apply these in their own creative work and then perform their compositions. This integrated approach deepens understanding and reinforces theoretical knowledge through practical application. The use of the “Sound before Symbol” method, where students develop aural awareness before engaging with notation, is particularly effective in building musical fluency.

Student collaboration is a key feature of effective learning experiences. Learners are given opportunities to work in pairs or groups, often with clearly defined roles that promote accountability, teamwork and creativity. Collaborative tasks encourage exploration, discussion and problem-solving, while inquiry-based learning enables students to ask questions, test ideas and refine their musical thinking in a supportive and inclusive environment.

Music literacy is actively developed through consistent use of technical vocabulary and theoretical concepts. Students are encouraged to articulate their musical thinking using appropriate terminology in both oral and written form. Teachers embed vocabulary meaningfully in classroom discourse and use open-ended questioning to stimulate analysis, justification and reflection. This approach fosters critical thinking and deepens engagement with the subject.

Digital learning technologies (DLT) are used strategically to enhance the learning experience. Students use music software to compose, edit and evaluate their work, receiving immediate feedback that supports progression. Digital platforms are also used to share resources, monitor learning and facilitate collaboration. When students create digital portfolios or engage in research-based tasks, they develop independence and confidence in using technology as a creative and evaluative tool.

Inclusive and respectful classroom environments underpin high-quality learning. Teachers establish positive relationships that nurture participation, self-expression and mutual respect, ensuring that students experience success and enjoyment in their musical learning.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review:

- How does the study of Music facilitate the development of key skills at junior cycle?
- To what extent does the design of learning tasks support students in engaging meaningfully and enable them to create and use success criteria to evaluate their learning?
- How effectively can students critically analyse and respond to their own work and that of others using agreed criteria?
- How do we monitor the application of teacher and/or peer feedback to support progress in learning?

- Is there evidence that students are making progress?

How one subject department improved the quality of learner experiences in Music:

A music department enhanced learner experiences through a combination of strategic planning and inclusive practices. Recognising the need to deepen students' engagement with composing, the department implemented strategies that enabled every learner, regardless of ability, to experience success. Students collaborated effectively with minimal teacher intervention, exploring musical ideas both theoretically and through performance. This process led to dynamic and creative compositions and fostered strong critical thinking skills and genuine ownership of learning.

The learning environment was inclusive and supportive. Students reported feeling valued and affirmed, and they appreciated the teacher's willingness to provide additional help. High-quality assessment practices were evident, with detailed written feedback and real-time adjustments that promoted continuous improvement and achievement for all.

Teachers' individual practice

This domain and its related standards encompass teachers' knowledge and skills, their use of practices that progress students' learning, their use of appropriate teaching approaches and their responsiveness to individual learning needs.

When enquiring into teacher individual practice, music teachers may use the related standards to establish whether the teacher:

- has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills
- uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress students' learning
- selects and adopts teaching approaches appropriate to the learning intentions and to students' learning needs
- responds to individual learning needs and differentiates learning and teaching activities as necessary.

Where a teacher's individual practice in Music is of a high standard:

Teachers make effective use of a wide range of resources, including technologies, to design engaging, diverse, active and purposeful learning opportunities for all students. Learning activities and assessment approaches are thoughtfully adapted to reflect the varied learning needs, abilities and interests of

students. Teachers monitor students' progress continuously during lessons and adjust their teaching strategies responsively to support learning. Digital tools are used productively for both composing and assessment purposes, enabling students to engage creatively and develop strong self-assessment skills.

Teachers actively participate in professional learning, including opportunities provided by Oide, the professional development service for school leaders and teachers. They also avail of other relevant initiatives that enhance their practice in music education.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review:

- How can learning tasks and resources be differentiated to address the diverse needs of students and promote an inclusive classroom environment?
- How can teaching and learning approaches be designed to reinforce students' understanding of musical concepts and nurture their growth as musicians?
- How can digital technology be used to support and enhance teaching, learning and assessment?
- Do we plan and use a range of questioning strategies and assessment approaches that effectively gauge students' understanding, promote higher-order thinking, and enhance their engagement in learning?
- How does planning inform and guide teaching, learning and assessment in the music classroom?

How one teacher reviewed teaching approaches to respond to the learning needs of students:

The teacher adapted their teaching approaches in response to student feedback and observed learning needs. They identified that some composing activities were overly exam-focused and not fully engaging students. In recognising this, the teacher diversified their strategies by integrating more practical music-making and listening activities into composition lessons. This approach enabled students form more meaningful connections between composing and authentic musical experiences, thereby enhancing their creativity and engagement.

Teachers' collective/collaborative practice

This domain and its related standards encompass teachers' professional development and collaboration, their co-operation to extend students' learning opportunities, their collective use of dependable assessment practices and their sharing of expertise to build capacity.

When enquiring into teachers' collective/ collaborative practice, the music department may use the related standards to establish whether 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.

When teachers' collaborative practice in Music is of a high standard:

The music department has established highly effective collaborative practices through a combination of formal and informal planning structures. Teachers meet regularly to plan lessons, share resources and reflect on teaching and learning strategies. This strong collaboration is evident in the consistent quality of learning and teaching across different classes and year groups.

Teachers design common assessments to ensure that all students, regardless of class group, work toward the same intended learning outcomes. A shared digital platform is used to store plans, resources and assessment records, making collaborative work efficient and transparent. Teachers also exchange samples of students' work and undertake cross-marking across class groups. This practice promotes consistency in assessment and provides valuable professional learning opportunities for all members of the music department.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review:

- How effectively does the music department plan for and support students' transition into post-primary school and progression into senior cycle?
- How frequently does the music department engage in discussion of teaching, learning and assessment during meetings?
- Are there opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning and to share the learning gained from these experiences with colleagues?
- Does the music department incorporate whole-school SSE priorities into its planning for learning and teaching?

- Are there opportunities for the music department to collaborate with or draw on the support of external agencies to enhance students' learning experiences?

How one music department improved teachers' collaborative practice:

One music department actively engaged with the school's SSE process, particularly in the areas of assessment of learning and reporting to parents. This whole-school focus was clearly evident in the department's practices. Teachers implemented the agreed SSE targets by enhancing the quality and consistency of feedback provided to students, both orally and in writing. Reports issued to parents reflected strong alignment with the school's SSE goals.

To support this work, the music department strengthened its collaborative planning practices. Teachers shared assessment records and planning documents through the school's digital platform, promoting transparency and consistency across class groups. Formal meeting times were used to reflect on learning and teaching to align departmental strategies with whole-school priorities. This collaborative approach not only supported the effective implementation of SSE targets but also fostered a culture of shared responsibility and continuous improvement within the department.

Using this document to support your whole-school SSE strategy – a practical example

	Whole-School	Music Department
Identify focus	<p>Example:</p> <p>To support students to reflect on their progress as learners and to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning by focusing on strategies that enable students to make improvements to their written work.</p>	<p>We ask questions of ourselves as teachers, and consider the focus in relation to the specification, and classroom practice such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we encourage student ownership of learning? • How can we support students to form judgements and make decisions regarding their learning and progress?
Gather evidence	<p>There are a variety of approaches that may be used to gather evidence for this area of focus. For example,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group of students • Questionnaire for all/sample of students • Review of subject planning • Teacher peer observation to identify current practices 	<p>With a focus on strategies to support student ownership of their learning, we might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with students about what helps them learn • Identify strategies that empower students to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning, such as using success criteria or rubrics to assess the quality of their written work • Ensure lesson plans allocate time for students to reflect on and act upon feedback to improve their work • Share practices on providing ongoing, effective and targeted feedback to help students edit and enhance their work • Review how we report on students' progress, both in class and at key intervals, in their learning journey

<p>Analyse and make judgements</p>	<p>Evidence gathered identifies effective practices used by teachers, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-creation of success criteria • Productive classroom interactions, such as robust discussion and collaborative learning opportunities • Students purposefully using feedback to improve their work 	<p>Evidence might indicate that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While we are using success criteria, there is a need to work on co-creating them with students • Students need more opportunities to discuss with each other in class • Feedback needs to be clearer and more instructive to effectively support students in editing and improving their work
<p>Write and share report and improvement plan</p>	<p>Improvement plan commits us to developing and implementing these positive practices widely and effectively at whole-school and subject department level</p>	<p>The subject department will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and share effective teaching and co-teaching practices • Share examples of effective differentiated teaching approaches for an inclusive classroom • Co-create targeted and focused areas for development; including appropriate timeframes for how improvements will be reviewed and measured
<p>Put improvement plan into action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amend assessment policy to support plan • Implement at subject department level • Set up cross-department structures to enable consistent implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-create differentiated success criteria with students so they can work more purposefully • Plan classroom interactions that enable students to learn with and from each other • Implement agreed assessment practices that help students
<p>Monitor actions and evaluate impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there consistent implementation? • Are adjustments needed? • Was the process manageable? • Was the process meaningful? • How did the plan support students to be agents in their own learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the feedback from students? • Do we need to make changes? Why? • Was the process manageable and meaningful in Music? • How can we continue to support and develop the process?

Further reference sources to support subject departments in self-evaluating the learning and teaching of Music

- A survey of inspection reports on the learning and teaching of Music collated from the Department of Education and Youth website ([click here](#) for copies of subject inspection reports and follow-through inspection reports on subject inspections of Music)
- [Focus on Learning Toolkit, NCCA](#)
- Online resources from the [Oide](#) music advisory team
- [State Examinations Commission \(SEC\)](#) examination instruments such as past examination papers, marking schemes and Chief Examiner's reports
- Circulars outlining prescribed materials for the subject
- [The Junior Cycle subject specification and associated Assessment Guidelines](#)
- The [Digital Learning Framework](#)
- The [School Self-Evaluation Process](#)
- [School Self-evaluation: Next Steps 2022-2026](#)