An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of
Education and Youth

Circular Number: 0084/2026

To: The Managerial Authorities of Recognised Primary, Post-Primary, Special, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards

School Self-Evaluation (SSE): The Next Phase

1. Introduction

This circular sets out the next phase in the development of School Self-Evaluation (SSE), which begins in November 2026. It supersedes Circular 0056/2022.

This circular reflects the experience gained by schools over more than a decade of self-evaluation. It recognises the capacity that now exists within schools to lead and sustain improvement.

Since its introduction in 2012, SSE has become an established feature of school life and an integral part of continuous school improvement. Many schools have developed significant expertise in using self-evaluation to improve learning and teaching, strengthen leadership and respond to the needs of their own school communities.

Building on these strong foundations, this circular introduces revised arrangements that provide schools with greater flexibility in organising SSE while maintaining the principles that have underpinned the process since its introduction. The revised approach is intended to strengthen the quality and impact of self-evaluation, support schools in responding confidently to their own contexts and reinforce the complementary relationship between internal and

external evaluation. For schools in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, the SSE process is integrated within the DEIS action-planning process. The DEIS action plan for improvement is the school's plan for self-evaluation and improvement.

DEIS action plans for improvement should contain targets and actions under each of the main DEIS themes: literacy outcomes, numeracy outcomes, attendance, retention, transitions, parental and community engagement, and examination attainment. These themes are key aspects of provision that are critical for successful outcomes in education. For this reason, schools should plan across these themes to ensure that learners in need of extra support in any given theme are identified and supported.

Irish-medium schools should ensure that their SSE processes take appropriate account of their linguistic and educational contexts, including the quality of immersion education and learners' development of proficiency in Irish. Schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (GSRS) should also have regard to the objectives and language-based criteria of the scheme.

Key points for schools

- SSE is integral to schools' existing planning and improvement processes.
- From November 2026, schools will have flexibility in how they organise SSE, including the option of using an annual improvement cycle to support their improvement priorities.
- Schools may continue to address their improvement priorities across multiple years where appropriate.
- For schools in the DEIS programme, the three-year DEIS Action Plan for Improvement is reviewed annually.

- Documentation should remain proportionate.
- Schools may have regard to broader education system trends and recommendations for improvement as set out in the annual *Inspectorate Report and Thematic Review*.
- Schools retain flexibility to determine priorities based on their context.

2. Building on established practice

Over successive cycles of SSE, many schools have strengthened their capacity to identify priorities for improvement, implement change and evaluate its impact on learner experiences and outcomes.

SSE is now an established process. The priority is to strengthen its quality and impact by further embedding self-evaluation within the everyday work of schools. As schools continue to engage with significant developments across the education system, including curriculum redevelopment, SSE provides a flexible framework through which they can identify, implement and review improvements that are most relevant to their own contexts.

SSE is most effective when it is collaborative and informed by the perspectives of the school community to create a shared vision for continuous improvement. Meaningful engagement with learners and parents enriches the process and recognises the valuable contribution they can make to identifying priorities, shaping actions and evaluating their impact.

This next phase does not introduce a new approach to SSE or alter the purpose of the process. Rather, it provides a more flexible approach through which schools can embed self-evaluation as a collaborative and evidence-informed process for continuous improvement.

3. Identifying priorities and planning for improvement

The purpose of SSE is to support schools in continuously improving the quality of education they provide for all learners.

It enables schools to:

- use evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of their practice;
- identify priorities for improvement;
- implement appropriate actions; and
- evaluate their impact over time.

SSE is a continuous and structured process of inquiry through which schools identify strengths, determine priorities for improvement, implement actions and review their impact on learner experiences and outcomes.

SSE should be embedded within the school's ongoing professional practice. It supports evidence-informed professional judgement across learning, teaching, assessment, inclusion, wellbeing, leadership and other aspects of school life that influence learner experiences and outcomes.

Schools should identify priorities having regard to their own context, the needs of their learners and relevant national priorities. *Looking at Our School 2022* provides a quality framework that schools can use to make judgements about their practice during this process. While many schools may identify aspects of curriculum enactment as priorities during the coming years, they should retain the flexibility to determine the areas most likely to improve learner experiences and outcomes in their own settings.

The well-established six-step SSE process continues to provide a valuable framework for planning, implementing and reviewing improvement. Schools can apply this process or other approaches flexibly within an ongoing cycle of evidence gathering, reflection, planning, action, monitoring and review. The



emphasis remains on the quality of professional dialogue, the effectiveness of improvement actions and their impact on learner experiences and outcomes rather than on adherence to a prescribed sequence of activities or limiting schools to only one approach.

From November 2026, schools may choose to organise SSE using an annual improvement cycle. This approach enables schools to review progress regularly and to determine, through evidence-informed professional judgement, whether identified priorities and actions should continue, be refined or conclude.

An annual cycle should not be interpreted as limiting improvement work to a single school year. Many priorities, particularly those relating to curriculum enactment, inclusion and wellbeing, will require sustained attention over time. An annual cycle provides a structured opportunity to review progress and determine appropriate next steps, recognising that meaningful improvement is often incremental and sustained.

The revised arrangements will promote greater flexibility, proportionality, evidence-informed practice, collaboration, learner-centred improvement and coherence. Integrating SSE with existing planning, professional learning and improvement activities reduces unnecessary duplication and supports a more coherent approach to school improvement.

Schools should continue to identify those priorities most likely to improve learner experiences and outcomes, having regard to their own context, stage of development and relevant national priorities such as the DEIS programme that focuses on tackling concentrated educational disadvantage. The purpose of this next phase is not to introduce additional processes, but to strengthen evidence-informed improvement within a more flexible framework.

As schools continue to engage with curriculum redevelopment, many may identify aspects of curriculum enactment as priorities for SSE. This may include

learners' experiences across the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices and planning for progression. SSE provides an important mechanism through which schools can plan for and evaluate the impact of curriculum enactment on learner experiences and outcomes.

Curriculum enactment should not be regarded as the sole or prescribed focus of SSE. Schools will retain the flexibility to identify those priorities most likely to improve learner experiences and outcomes in their own settings.

4. Evidence gathering

Schools should draw on an appropriate range of evidence, including learners' experiences and outcomes, teaching and learning, assessment information, learner and parent participation, attendance, wellbeing, inclusion and school planning. Ideally, professional dialogue and collaborative reflection on this evidence should inform decisions about priorities for improvement.

5. An annual improvement cycle

From November 2026, schools will have flexibility in how they organise SSE, including the option of using an annual improvement cycle.

An annual cycle provides a framework through which schools can plan, implement, monitor and review improvement. It enables schools to consider the impact of improvement actions, respond to emerging evidence and determine appropriate next steps.

At the conclusion of each cycle, schools should review progress and determine whether priorities have been achieved, require further development or should be replaced by new priorities. Each cycle should support professional reflection and evidence-informed decision-making, enabling schools to determine whether improvement activity should continue, be refined or conclude.

Effective SSE is reflected in the quality of professional dialogue, evidence-informed decision-making and improvement in learner experiences and outcomes.

6. Recording school self-evaluation

The purpose of recording is to support professional reflection and evaluation.

Schools should maintain a brief and proportionate record of their SSE that supports collaborative decision-making, continuity of improvement work, monitoring and review. Recording should document key decisions, agreed actions and their impact over time.

Schools should avoid creating unnecessary documentation or duplicating information already available through existing planning and review processes. Where appropriate, SSE may be incorporated within existing school documentation.

As a minimum, schools should record:

- the priority or priorities identified for improvement;
- the evidence informing those priorities;
- the targets and actions agreed;
- arrangements for monitoring progress;
- the outcomes of review; and
- decisions regarding subsequent actions.

7. Internal and external evaluation

Internal and external evaluation are complementary processes that support continuous improvement in the quality of education provided for learners.

SSE enables schools to evaluate their own practice, identify priorities for improvement, implement and monitor actions for change and review the impact of those actions. External evaluation provides an independent assessment of educational provision, recognises effective practice, identifies areas for development and contributes to public confidence in the education system. It does so at both individual school level and at system level through the collated evaluation findings in the annual *Inspectorate Report and Thematic Review*.

Internal and external evaluation inform and strengthen one another. The *Inspectorate Strategy Statement 2026–2029* commits to strengthening alignment between internal and external evaluation processes to support schools and settings to build capacity for continuous improvement. Through SSE, schools develop a deeper understanding of their context, strengths, challenges and priorities for improvement. External evaluation brings an independent perspective informed by professional expertise, national priorities, quality frameworks and evidence gathered during inspection.

SSE forms an important part of the context within which external evaluation is conducted. Inspectors may consider the school's self-evaluation processes and the evidence arising from them, including, where relevant, how the school's identified priorities are reflected in practice and the extent to which they are contributing to improvement. Both internal and external evaluation contribute to a richer understanding of the school's context, capacity for reflection, improvement and sustained development.

At the same time, inspection is not limited to the priorities identified through SSE. Inspection evaluates the quality of educational provision against relevant frameworks, standards and policy expectations. It may identify additional strengths, areas for development, or aspects of practice requiring further consideration, taking account of the school's particular educational context.

Schools should use the findings of external evaluation as part of their ongoing self-evaluation and improvement processes. Together, internal and external evaluation can promote reflective practice, support evidence-informed improvement and contribute to enhanced experiences and outcomes for learners.

8. Professional learning and supports

Effective SSE is strengthened through ongoing professional learning, collaboration and reflection. Schools should continue to engage with the professional learning opportunities, guidance and resources provided by the Department of Education and Youth and its support services to strengthen teaching, learning, assessment, leadership, inclusion, wellbeing and curriculum enactment.

Oide and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will continue to support schools in their engagement with the SSE process. The annual *Inspectorate Report and Thematic Review* will provide collated evaluation findings and insights to prompt reflection.

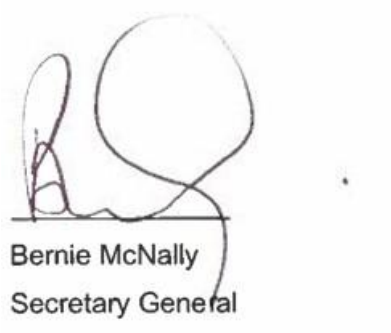
9. Commencement

The arrangements outlined in this circular apply from November 2026. They replace the previous arrangements relating to SSE cycles while maintaining the established principles and purpose of SSE.

Schools should use the revised arrangements when planning, implementing and reviewing SSE from that date.

The Department will continue to keep SSE under review to ensure that it remains a meaningful, collaborative and evidence-informed process that supports continuous improvement in learner experiences and outcomes.

This circular is available on the Department of Education and Youth website at www.gov.ie/education



4 November 2026