

Step^{Up} Project

School Excellence Fund: Step Up Project

October 2018 - October 2021

School Report:
Castletroy College
Newtown, Castletroy, Co. Limerick

Nine schools took part in the Step Up Project. Schools submitted a final report telling the story of their Step Up Project. The reports are descriptive accounts of what happened in school given their unique context and circumstances. The reports are not prescriptive of what should happen in all schools. Reports should be read in conjunction with reading the overall Step Up Project composite report.

Cross Curricular Unit Planning | Our Journey



Castletroy College

Co. Limerick



School Excellence Fund

Step^{Up}
Project

Coeducational Community
College

Suburban Limerick

90+ teachers

1200+ students

Co-educational

Science, business, CSPE,
geography, metalwork

7 teachers in Step-Up team

Identifying a focus

School Self Evaluation (SSE) forms a central role in school development planning in Castletroy College. We identify our areas of strength as well as areas for improvement during annual reviews, using student and teacher surveys and student focus groups. Feedback from both subject and whole school inspection reports are also taken into consideration and from these our SSE targets emerge. A four-year cycle of school self-evaluation commenced in September 2016, with the main aim of increasing student ownership of and responsibility for their learning (LAOS D2S1).

This was to be achieved by:

- i. agreeing learning intentions and criteria for success with students,
- ii. designing purposeful tasks which place students actively in the centre of their learning,
- iii. facilitating students to reflect on their learning.

Work had been progressing at departmental level to advance these targets since September 2016. The school Step Up fund in September 2018 gave us the opportunity, in terms of time and resources, to work on these areas of improvement *across* departments. Interested teachers from different subject departments came together to form an interdisciplinary learning and teaching team. The subject areas chosen had common topics or themes in their specifications. In our case, we selected the topic of sustainability. To facilitate the subject departments to work effectively in a structured way, it was agreed to collaboratively plan and design a four-week unit of work, which would be delivered concurrently across five subject areas to our second-year cohort (LAOS D4S2). This four-week integrated interdisciplinary programme would focus on the area of sustainability, drawing on the relevant learning outcomes in the five subject specifications.

Sustainability in our use of electronics, more specifically our use of mobile phones, formed the core theme in all lessons delivered across the relevant five subject areas over the four-week unit.

Students studied the topic from the perspective of the three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental, or social) depending on the subject they were in. The three school-wide SSE areas of improvement, as identified earlier, were embedded deliberately into the design of each of the lessons, with resources produced by the core design team. The resource pack was then shared with the wider teaching teams to support teaching and learning in the classroom.

It was acknowledged that this type of integrated interdisciplinary planning would serve to allow our students to 'make meaningful and authentic connections between learning in different subject areas of the curriculum' (LAOS D2 S4).

Our principal,
Padraig Flanagan,
on the focus of the
project.



Step^{Up}
Project

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Established Step Up team, assigned roles and established group norms. Time was spent ensuring a shared understanding of the link to current SSE practices and the rationale for participation in this step-up initiative.

Identified common statements of learning across the subject areas. Three statements of learning, namely 7, 9 and 10 were common across the subject specifications and all linked to the area of sustainability.

Reviewed current SSE targets. The agreed school-wide areas of improvement were to be deliberately embedded in all lessons designed.

Surveyed all students to establish baseline data on engagement in the areas of focus, as well as connections students identified between learning in the various subject areas.

Researched student-centred methodologies, reflective practice strategies and investigated and shared current best practice across the five subject areas.

Design of cross curricular unit of work. The core team of teachers, in consultation with their subject departments designed the four-week unit of work.

Engage, if possible, with external agencies, to ensure content knowledge is relevant and up to date. Our learning area chosen was critical raw materials with an emphasis on sustainability in consumer electronics, namely mobile phones. A UL research group on this topic offered support.

Engaged with Inspectorate and JCT to discuss and reflect on progress and to work together towards ensuring that the principles of JC were embedded in the design and delivery of the unit.

Implemented and evaluated the unit of work in all seven second year classes in the chosen subject areas. Recorded observations and results in learning logs. Gathered data from students once delivery was completed.

Key learnings shared with all staff. Teacher led CPD conducted with staff with student voice and student feedback playing a central role.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

The Step Up team, which included the principal, established group norms and were timetabled to meet regularly. Goals and targets were set, and timelines were clear.

A learning log was used by teachers to record their own reflections throughout the process. Deliberate moments of reflection were embedded into meetings during both the design and delivery phases.

Clarity of communication was prioritised. Regular team meetings, the use of a teacher Google Classroom for communication and sharing and regular feedback to subject departments were viewed as essential.

The Step Up team presented learnings to all staff, while individual team members led CPD within departments on specific areas of focus (for example, reflection).

Advice and support was received from the Link Inspector & JCT Link Advisor, both during school visits and during sharing opportunities with other Step Up schools.

Step Up Team Coordinator, Lisa Kiely
talks about key SSE practices



Core design team members
discuss key implementation
practices.

Sharon, Anne Marie and Linda



IMPLEMENTATION NARRATIVE

Our SSE whole school plan, which is founded on evidence gathered from students and teachers, focuses on two domains and two standards from the LAOS framework for improvement:

Domain 2: Learner experience, Standard 1, Students reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of **and responsibility for their learning**.

Domain 4: Teachers' Collective/Collaborative Practice, Standard 2 **Teachers plan collaboratively** for learning activities that enable students to make meaningful and progressively more challenging connections between learning in different subjects.

Having engaged with our SSE areas for improvement for two years prior to commencement of this Step Up project, the SSE team had evidence that there were examples of good practice happening within departments in our school. The SSE team had delivered CPD to all staff on the sharing of learning intentions and criteria for success, the design of meaningful and purposeful student-centred activities and on various strategies and tools for reflection. Data gathered indicated that the school had reached a level of effective implementation in these areas.

To progress our targets for improvement in learning and teaching it was agreed to focus on five subject areas, science, business, CSPE, geography and metalwork and to work collaboratively to move our areas for improvement from effective to highly effective practice. These subjects were chosen because there were 2-3 statements of learning linked to the topic of sustainability common to each of these specifications. This commonality in SOL formed the foundation of our unit plan.

To truly embed our student centred strategies, e.g. i) sharing learning intentions and success criteria and ii) facilitating student to reflect on their learning, a student learning log was designed by the team, which included a weekly outline of the intended learning in each of the five specifications. Students would formally check-in with the intended learning at the beginning and end of each week and evaluate their personal progress with their learning. This provided clarity for students and allowed them to evaluate how they developed individually in knowledge, understanding and skills over the timeframe, thus enhancing ownership of their learning.

A range of tools for reflection were integrated into the learning log. These tools for reflection had previously been researched, piloted and evaluated in classrooms and shown to be effective. The tools were chosen to help students to plan for the next steps in their learning.

Students' use of this single learning log booklet in each of the five subject areas over the four-week delivery of this integrated unit of work, helped them in realising the connections between their learning in the different subject areas. Students were required on a weekly basis to reflect on connections they made between learning across the subjects and to log these in the learning log. Teachers delivering the unit were also asked to log examples where students voluntarily connected the learning in one subject area to learning that was happening in any of the four other participating subject areas. This evidence was then shared with the core design team.

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The learning log felt like extra work at the start but then I saw that it helped me to see what I didn't really understand. The teachers gave us time to identify what we did and did not know. I found this good especially when I could decide what the next steps should be.

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2nd year survey

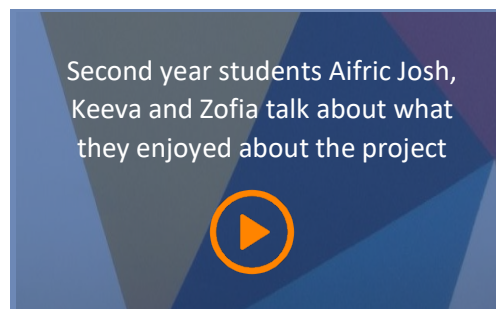
The organic way in which learning in the subject areas is connected by teachers Evelyn and Daniel



Initial feedback from students at the end of year one indicated that there were too many moments of reflection embedded in the design of the lessons, with neither teachers nor students having enough time to engage with them. With the assistance of an interested student group and feedback from teachers, key learning moments were identified within the lessons and reflection tools were chosen to facilitate focused and detailed reflection on just these key activities. Inspection of the learning logs at the end of year two identified higher quality and more detailed reflection than had been recorded in year one.

Clarity of communication among teachers in the five subject areas was also identified as a priority area. The Step Up core design team consisted of 7 teachers, but up to 21 teachers were involved in the delivery of the unit of learning to our cohort of 210 second-year students. In year one, we realised that communication between the core design team and implementation team needed improvement. Feedback indicated a lack of understanding of the rationale of both the interdisciplinary nature and the design of the lessons. Deliberate steps were taken to improve communications, such as whole staff and departmental presentation and feedback sessions. The use of a teacher Google Classroom enhanced the sharing of resources and improved communication. It also helped to structure moments for reflection and feedback before, during and after the delivery of the unit.

Regular opportunities to feed into the design of the unit of work by the implementation team served to increase their sense of ownership of the product and also increase their knowledge and understanding of the connected nature of the learning across the five subjects. Teachers sense of confidence in delivery, as well as in the facilitation of the more innovative student-centred lesson were greatly enhanced with this improved communication.



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I found the professional development to be extremely rewarding, the collaborate approach of working as part of this team was invigorating.“

CSPE Teacher

IMPACT

On an Individual Teacher Level

Stronger teacher engagement with learning outcomes both in own subject specifications, but also in identifying overlaps in other subject areas.

Greater understanding of school self-evaluation and our school-wide targets.

Personal invigoration in own teaching by being part of a committed and exuberant team and with increased exposure to a range of effective classroom practices from other departments.

Extremely rewarding to see the students respond so positively during the implementation of the unit of work.

Development of teacher leadership skills with opportunity to offer CPD to wider staff.

On Students

18% increase in teachers who 'always' allow time for students to reflect on what they have learned in a lesson.

35% increase in enjoyment of lessons and a 29% increase in those who said they found their lessons interesting.

42% increase in teachers who 'always' shared the intended learning in the lesson.

Students indicated a deeper understanding of the topic having studied it from different perspectives in the different subject areas.

Interestingly, data collected before and after delivery indicated that this integrated approach to teaching the topic of sustainability was able to influence students' environmental orientation in a desirable direction.

At Subject-Department Level

Collaboration across departments has led to a shared understanding regarding all aspects of teaching and learning, but particularly in relation to learning intentions, the design of purposeful tasks and activities, reflection on learning as well as with assessment task design.

Expertise in effective unit planning increased across departments.

The connections and links students made between learning in the various subject areas served to enrich the learning experience for both teachers and students.

Whole School

Interdisciplinary unit planning process now refined and can be applied to any mix of subject areas or themes within the school.

Our culture of teacher collaboration is now stronger in the school with the benefits clear for all to see.

The learning and expertise gained was shared regularly at staff led whole school CPD sessions.

An exemplar of an effective unit plan now available for others to refer to.

KEY REFLECTION PRACTICES

Student learning logs: This allowed progress to be tracked. The reflections in the learning log helped students and teachers to see the connections between learning in the different subject areas. It also helped in identifying gaps in learning and teaching.

Prioritising communication: Regular two-way communication between the core design team and implementation team in year two increased the sense of ownership of the work by all involved in its delivery. Improved communication also promoted greater school wide understanding.

Effective tools and practices: Reflective tools and strategies which had been previously trialled and proven to be effective were included in the lesson designs. A bank of effective tools for reflection are now in circulation to scaffold this process across our school.

ENABLING CONDITIONS

Genuine support, input and affirmation from senior management encouraged staff to take ownership and pride in their work.

Feedback and input sought from both subject departments and students at various points in the design phase aided whole-school understanding of the project.

Time was allocated to facilitate the Step-Up team to meet. In year two this time was embedded in the timetable which proved very effective.

Openness and honesty among team member to reflect together on successes and failures in a respectful and supportive environment.

Parents were informed and were very supportive of the work being done to improve student experience.

Collaboration with the Inspectorate and JCT supported and affirmed the work being done by the Step-Up team.



FUTURE PLANNING

Much learning has occurred on many levels over the duration of this project, from project coordination to whole school communication. Exemplars of good classroom practice have been developed and refined. Capacity in leading learning has been built among the core design team, while the implementation team trialed and evaluated a range of innovative student-centred practices in their classrooms and have felt invigorated by the process.

There is school-wide commitment to ensure that we capitalize on this learning and build on it. School management place huge value on the process of SSE and a dedicated time is allocated at all staff meetings for discussion and sharing of ideas and learning in our areas of focus. The step-up team have used this time effectively to ensure the professional learning as well as the benefits as identified by students were shared with all staff.

Core SSE teams are allocated time to meet collectively on a weekly basis to research, pilot and evaluate good practices before sharing them at departmental or whole school level. The impact of our actions on the experience and outcomes of our students are core to our decision-making process and student voice is given central stage at all our whole-staff CPD sessions.

Other departments have been encouraged to and have already identified topics and themes that could be planned for in a similar integrated way in the future. The 21 teachers involved in the delivery are already applying the strategies and practices learned to their other year groups with noted benefits. All staff through a six-week action planning cycle within departments are encouraged to do the same.

A nice tradition in our school is to dedicate our final day of each academic year to the celebration of learning and teaching. Here members of staff both new and more experienced have equal opportunities to present and share in a structured, internally organised, whole school CPD event. We believe that this commitment to SSE will ensure continued and sustained improvements in teaching and learning in the months and years ahead.

