

Step^{Up} Project

School Excellence Fund: Step Up Project

October 2018 - October 2021

School Report:

St. Colmcilles Community School
Scholarstown Road, Knocklyon, Dublin 16

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.

CHALLENGING STUDENTS THROUGH EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING; Our Journey



Scholarstown Road
Knocklyon
Dublin 16

School Excellence Fund



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- COMMUNITY SCHOOL
- URBAN AREA
- 60+ TEACHERS
- 720 STUDENTS
- CO-EDUCATIONAL
- ENGLISH, BUSINESS STUDIES, SCIENCE
- 5 TEACHERS IN STEP UP TEAM

Identifying a focus

During the review process of our School Improvement Plan in 2016 and following consultation with our staff, students and parents, we recognised that we had many strengths and effective practices within our school. We also identified areas that we would like to improve and in which we might move from effective practice to highly effective practice. Engaging and challenging our more able students was one of these areas and became a priority of focus on moving into the second cycle of SSE. We have many effective practices and support structures in place to help our students reach their full potential. From tracking students' academic progress, we can identify students who need such supports and those who are not reaching their full potential. As a staff we wanted to analyse different strategies that could be used within our classrooms to challenge and engage the more capable students. One of our targets in our SSE 2016-2020 was to further develop the key skill of higher order thinking and problem solving among students.

When the Step Up project came to our attention we felt that it would be a very good opportunity for the school. Through the project, we decided to focus on questioning techniques so that as a whole school we could move our practice from effective questioning to highly effective questioning. Our aim was to develop strategies for effective questioning in our classrooms to challenge our students. We hoped that this would enhance student engagement and support us in devising appropriate learning experiences for students of all abilities thereby improving the outcomes for our students.

“ We put a greater emphasis on higher order questions in the classroom. This practice has enabled us to challenge each student at their specific academic level.

Sarah Burke, Science teacher ”

Principal, John McKennedy speaks about the importance of SSE initiatives in St. Colmcille's.



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KEY IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

The Step Up team communicated through google classroom. Ideas, resources and analysis of surveys were shared and reviewed on this forum.

A reflective journal was used by the step up team to evaluate their own lessons, reflect on techniques used in class and track their own progress throughout the project.

Advice was sought from the Link Inspector and JCT Link Advisor.

Video Observations the Step Up team gained great insight from recording their own lessons. This allowed the team to evaluate their own classroom practices prior to the project beginning.

Step Up team presented learnings to all staff, at each staff meeting throughout the year. This allowed the staff as a whole to learn from the findings of the Step Up team.

Step Up Team Co-ordinator,
Jennifer Ní Mhuirí talks about the
focus of the project at whole
school level.



IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Established Step Up team, selected the second year group as our focus. Discussed the timeline for implementation. Started using reflective journals.

Show & Tell presentation to the staff. The Step Up team along with NQTs researched different methods of questioning studied in college and presented these to the staff at our staff development day. This was the launch of the project on a whole school level.

Surveyed all staff in order to establish the level of planning and exactly how teachers were questioning in the classroom.

Researched different methods of questioning and investigated current best practice including various strategies and methodologies.

Engaged with Inspectorate and JCT to help teachers implement best practices in selected English, Business Studies and Science classes.

Surveyed the students in order to gain insight into their perception of learning in the classroom.

Focus groups with students provided us with invaluable information which allowed us to progress the project further.

Whole school approach to SSE, each department compiled a list of their own subject specific higher order questions.



Subject specific higher order questions are now visible in each classroom in the school, which are an invaluable resource to all teachers.

Jennifer Ní Mhuirí, Step Up Co-ordinator



IMPLEMENTATION NARRATIVE

Our school has always been both innovative and creative in its approach to teaching and learning. St Colmcille's has been involved in many different initiatives over the years, most notably, a Junior Cycle framework network school, School Self- Evaluation; Collaboration and Leading Learning and as a school selected to work closely with Mike Hughes on the publication of the Irish Magenta Principles book, to name but a few.

We pride ourselves in being a progressive and modern school where the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of teaching and learning is continuously being developed by a highly motivated, talented and professional staff. The Step Up project brought a focus of developing strategies to engage the more capable student into subject departments and individual teacher lessons. The project promoted professional dialogue within the departments and at a whole school level.

In the first year we focused on gathering evidence from students and staff in relation to the use of effective questioning in our classrooms, using both staff and student questionnaires, video observation and student focus groups. We analysed student engagement in response to new strategies using reflective journals and reflective sheets. In the second year we aimed to further develop and engage with the student focus groups. These proved beneficial and extremely insightful. Feedback from students was positive. Students were open about their learning experience in the classroom. Feedback included how students were not 'afraid to get a question wrong' and that they 'enjoyed being challenged'. Students also noted that allowing sufficient wait time enabled them to get the correct answer and improved their 'confidence' in the classroom. We also discovered that a "no hands up" approach worked best for the learner. This ensured that students remained focussed throughout the entire lesson. It also allowed the teacher to engage all students and direct questions appropriately. This proved beneficial with students noting that they enjoyed being challenged in the classroom setting.

We analysed the benefits of effective questioning through collaborative peer review. This helped us identify areas of our questioning techniques that were working well, and also some areas that needed to be developed. We devised accurate methods to record improvements in student engagement, which included the use of teacher reflective journals, student feedback and results analyses. From student feedback, we have identified that a positive learning environment enhances student learning and involvement in class. We strive to create this environment for all our students at a whole school level.

We shared our findings with all members of staff at staff meetings. The project itself gave us a focus and proved very beneficial in developing a collective approach at whole school level to engage and challenge all students. From our findings we aim to embed a practice of questioning into our assessment policy.



English teacher, Hannah Dooley, speaks about Show & Tell at a staff meeting.



Business teacher, Leah Bourke, talks about the importance of the reflective journal.



Students engaged very well with this project. They were enthusiastic and enjoyed having a voice in their learning.

Leah Bourke, Business Teacher



KEY PRACTICES

Teacher reflective journals. This allowed us to evaluate our lessons, reflect on techniques used and track our progress throughout the project. Higher order question examples were recorded in this journal along with feedback on student responses to the questions (Did it work well? What reaction did you get from the student?). These could then be shared at a department or whole school level.

Focus groups. To identify how students perceived questioning in their learning we conducted a series of focus groups. These proved beneficial and extremely insightful.

Peer observations. This facilitated the sharing of questioning techniques and methodologies. It also enabled professional conversations.

Focus groups. To identify how students perceived questioning in their learning we conducted a series of focus groups. These proved beneficial and extremely insightful.

Show & Tell staff meetings, gave the team the opportunity to share their findings with the staff. This enabled the higher order questions to become a focus at a whole school level.



ENABLING CONDITIONS

Senior management were available for advice and support from the beginning of this project.

Time was allocated to facilitate meetings of the Step Up team. Google classroom was also an invaluable resource for sharing within the team.

Collaboration with the Inspectorate and JCT supported and encouraged the Step Up team.

The whole staff were involved and engaged with the project through subject department meetings.

Parents were kept informed and were supportive of the progress being made to challenge and engage all students.

Conferences and webinars added to the professional development of every teacher involved in the Step Up team.



Students noted that allowing sufficient 'wait time' enabled them to get the correct answer and improved their 'confidence' in the classroom.

Katie Dooley, English teacher



English teacher, Katie Dooley, talks about the peer observations and focus groups.

IMPACT

Student Level

- Students at all levels are engaged and challenged in class
- All students now anticipate being asked to answer a question, rather than just a select few.
- Higher order questioning allows for deeper thought and improves student understanding.
- Student collaboration and collaborative learning. Discussions which arise through higher order questioning involve all students and allow all levels to add to a topic or answer.
- Student confidence improved.

Teacher Level

- Better engagement with school self-evaluation and school wide targets.
- Teachers have been exposed to effective and accessible classroom practices which can now be implemented into daily lessons.
- Teachers are rewarded through improvements in student engagement and confidence in the classroom.
- Teachers can effectively evaluate their own teaching practice and questioning techniques.
- Exposure to the benefits of peer observations and sharing of resources and ideas.
- The team gained valuable insight on student' perceptions before and after implementation of questioning strategies. This insight was shared at a whole school level.
- Collaboration across departments and a shared understanding of goals and targets.

Whole School Level

- Developed a collective approach to engaging our more capable students.
- Findings were shared at Show & Tell staff meetings.
- Professional dialogue encouraged amongst all staff on how to challenge all students.

FUTURE PLANNING

Our main focus when getting involved in the Step up project was to investigate questioning techniques to challenge our more able students. However, the benefits of the project proved to be much broader than that. Working with small groups of students in a focus group proved to be very insightful and beneficial to the future lesson planning for the teachers involved. A partnership approach to student engagement within a lesson began to form. Tapping into the student voice about methodologies that are used in their classrooms that provide them with an enriched learning experience is an area that we would like to further develop in the next cycle of SSE.

The use of the reflective journal and reflective sheets provided the teachers with an opportunity to evaluate each lesson and make appropriate changes moving forward. The teachers found this hugely beneficial in helping to identify the level of engagement from students in their lesson. They were then able to adapt their teaching practices to promote and encourage all students to get involved and interact during the lesson.

Providing an opportunity for teachers to observe one another's lessons in a non-judgemental way gave colleagues the opportunity to share their expertise and engage in professional dialogue. It also promoted a collective approach to developing a strategy around engaging our more capable students. It promoted a culture of improvement and collaboration at all whole school level. Collaborative peer review has become a common practice within our Teaching and Learning Committee and we hope to further develop this at whole school level.

One of the most important aspects of being involved in an initiative like Step Up is to ensure that the good practice and learning from the project is shared with the whole staff. The Step Up team have presented the findings of this project to the staff and shared its successes and challenges along the way. Show and Tells on effective questioning continue to be common practice at our staff meetings

The Step Up project has helped us identify three key areas we would like to further develop in the next cycle of SSE;

1. Reflective practices among staff,
2. To further develop and engage the student voice in their learning
- 3) To further develop a structure that allows colleagues to engage with one another, observe and share their expertise.



By developing and planning our questions carefully, we have engaged, encouraged and challenged all students within our lessons which has been a very positive part of the Step Up project.

Karen Philbin, Deputy Principal



Deputy principal, Karen Philbin talks about the impact of the project.



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