



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

*Step Up*  
**School Excellence Fund  
project report:  
process, activities,  
future relevance  
(2018 – 2021)**

March 2022

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## 1. Introduction

In 2015, the *Framework for Junior Cycle* was launched by the Department of Education and Skills, outlining a large scale reform of the Irish junior cycle curriculum that had been in preparation from 2010 onward.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, a new cycle of school self-evaluation (SSE) was launched by the Department of Education and Skills for primary and post-primary schools.<sup>2</sup> Circular 40/2016 advised post-primary schools that in this new SSE cycle, “Schools should continue to use the process to implement national initiatives and to identify and work on aspects of their own teaching and learning practices which require development and improvement. These 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 relevant aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2018, a School Excellence fund project called Step Up was launched by the Department of Education and Skills. The goals identified for the Step Up project were to achieve higher quality learning experiences and outcomes for students through more effective implementation of aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Project schools were to be supported to develop highly effective practices of teacher collaboration and reflection, guided by the SSE process and standards (as set out in the Inspectorate quality framework *Looking At Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*), while simultaneously developing student-centred innovation in relation to aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Cross-subject groups of teachers whose subjects had been the first three to undergo specification change under the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* were invited to participate in Step Up, creating the opportunity for their learning to influence the practice of other subject areas within their schools.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) had launched a public consultation proposing the idea of a “Framework for Junior Cycle” within which schools might organise junior cycle, with some elements being for all students and all schools, and others being school designed. Subsequently, *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle - Innovation and Identity* (2011) and *A Framework for Junior Cycle* (2012) were published. After 2012, further engagement took place with the education partners and with national and international research, leading to the eventual agreement of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> In 2020, the Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education, with a separate government department created called the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

<sup>3</sup> Circular 40/2016 also advised “It is expected that schools will also use the process to maintain a meaningful focus on literacy and numeracy.”

Step Up was designed to provide professional learning and in-school time supports to a small number of project schools, enabling the capture of varied case studies developing innovative approaches to more effective implementation of aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*, for public dissemination. The project schools were supported by a joint team of Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) advisors and post-primary inspectors, through out-of-school seminar days and in-school visits, with ongoing support provided by the designated Step Up project co-ordinator (a JCT advisor). While the Step Up project schools worked on an individual basis, all seminars organised by JCT emphasised the benefits of peer collaboration and peer learning across schools.

The following table summarises the themes pursued through Step Up by the nine project schools from 2018-2021:

School	Focus areas
Borrisokane Community College, Co. Tipperary	Demystifying the language of assessment to help students engage more meaningfully in their learning by embedding four key formative assessment practices among teachers and students: learning intentions, co-creating success criteria, effective formative feedback, and reflective practices
Castletroy College, Co. Limerick	Bringing together teachers of subjects where sustainability was linked to learning outcomes in their Junior Cycle specifications, to develop an interdisciplinary learning experience for students, designed using active, challenging, formative assessment methodologies.
Castleknock Community College, Dublin 15	Supporting the development of students' listening, critical thinking, and speaking skills through explicit skill instruction and creating more opportunities for students to engage in purposeful, collaborative speaking and listening activities in class.
Coláiste Muire, Ennis, Co. Clare	Further developing teachers' reflective capacities and pedagogical strategies for enabling students to take a more reflective, action-orientated role in their learning, leading to more engaging learning experiences and higher outcomes for students.
St Bricin's College, Belturbet, Co. Cavan	Year 1: Improving students' ability to ask, create and formulate questions  Year 2: Establishing consistent practice among teachers in the use of success criteria, to ensure coherence between

	teachers' success criteria and the feedback they were providing, and to achieve richer feedback for students on summative pieces of work. <sup>4</sup>
St. Columba's College, Stranorlar, Co. Donegal	Developing a broader range of everyday, interactive classroom feedback approaches from students to teachers, to give students more opportunities to be actively involved in their learning, to voice their opinions, and to take more responsibility for their learning.
St. Colmcille's Community School, Knocklyon, Dublin 16	Creating more challenging learning experiences by further developing questioning practices in the school.
St. Louis Secondary School, Dundalk, Co. Louth	Strengthening student and teacher use of digital learning technologies, as an element common to all eight junior cycle key skills.
Stratford College, Rathgar, Dublin 6	Teachers working across disciplines to develop a broader range of inquiry-based and collaborative methodologies and to agree similar practices around the teaching of key skills, to support students engaging with classroom-based assessments (CBAs).

The nine schools submitted their final Step Up reports in April 2021. Remarkable commitment was shown by the school project teams to completing their Step Up case studies, recognising that Covid 19 unavoidably impacted on their plans for Year 2 actions and for reporting on their learning. The case studies produced by the nine schools offer rich, school-specific testimony of how they improved practice in their selected area of teaching and learning, using the SSE process. Each Step Up case study is a descriptive, analytical account of what happened in one school, working within its own unique context and circumstances. The reports are not prescriptive of what should happen in all schools.

Written by a member of the Step Up team of inspectors, the purpose of this report is to offer insights to a range of readers on Step Up's aims, process, activities, and outcomes

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<sup>4</sup> This change of focus from Year 1 was a consequence of the fact that there was significant turnover of the school's Step Up team by Year 2. See section 2.10 for an explanation of how, due to the impact of Covid 19, a two-year project ended up spanning the period 2018 – 2021.

across the nine schools. The report also reflects on Step Up's future relevance to the Irish education system.

School leaders and teachers will likely find Chapter 5 of most interest: "A comparative analysis of the learning process and outcomes documented in the nine Step Up case studies." The chapter looks at common practices that were characteristic of the nine project teams' approaches to collaboration and reflection; at how a number of projects sought to strengthen elements within their students' junior cycle key skills, and at how some projects focused on the development of formative assessment practices. In addition, Chapter 5 describes a project that simultaneously engaged in curriculum and pedagogical development. School audiences may also wish to examine section 6.1 titled "Advice from Step Up schools to support the next cycle of SSE."

Professionals in the area of teacher professional development and relevant policy makers will likely find Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6 of most interest. Step Up has made a valuable contribution to areas such as identifying possible future modes of promoting professional learning within schools and supporting teachers in engaging with curriculum reform, as well as scoping possible future areas for the next cycle of SSE (2022 – 2026).

Teacher, student, and school leader participants reported that Step Up was a very enriching experience for the school teams and students who engaged in it, and for the wider teaching staffs who benefited from the sharing of insights in relation to embedding curricular change and to improving outcomes for students. Fundamentally, Step Up has led teachers to understand that school self-evaluation is a process that can be used to support curriculum change rather than a separate add-on to teaching, learning, and assessment. What emerged from the Step Up projects is perhaps most succinctly captured as follows:

"Teachers really began to see the whole point of Junior Cycle reform by collaborating across subjects. They saw JC reform as more than a change in teaching methods, a change in approach to assessment, as being about skills etc. They saw how it all tied together and saw how SSE ties with JC reform which ties with literacy and numeracy initiatives. They saw the big picture."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Respondent to a survey of JCT advisors and inspectors, February 2021. See chapter 4 for more detail on this.

## 2. What was the School Excellence Fund Step Up project?

### 2.1 The School Excellence Fund (SEF)

Arising from the 2016 – 2019 Action Plan for the Department of Education and Skills, the School Excellence Fund (SEF) was established to enable schools to participate in innovative programmes that would be context-specific and aimed at improving learning outcomes for young people.

As of 2021, there are six different SEF project strands in operation, including Step Up. The other five strands are:

SEF – Creative	SEF – Gaeltacht
SEF – DEIS	SEF – Digital
SEF – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)	

A useful source outlining the aims of the six SEF project strands can be found in the following Press Release “Schools funded to work together on Experimental Projects, . . . rewards Excellence and Innovation” (first published 2 April 2018, updated on 1 October 2019). See <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/273a4b-schools-funded-to-work-together-on-experimental-projects-as-minister/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR2018-04-02.html>

### 2.2 Specific Aims of the Step Up project

The overarching aim of the Step Up Project was to support post-primary schools who had self-assessed as being ready to move to a more effective level of implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*, in order to improve learning outcomes for young people. Schools participating in the project were required to take an SSE approach in reviewing their implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* in one or more of three specific subject areas: English, Business Studies and Science. Schools were then encouraged to identify areas for improvement and were supported in developing and implementing actions leading to improvement across their chosen areas. At its end, learning from the individual project schools and from the overall project outcomes was to be disseminated to all schools through website publication of successful case studies and other Step Up-related materials.



## 2.3 Why was Step Up introduced?

English was the first new junior cycle specification introduced to first years in September 2014, followed by new specifications in Business Studies and Science in September 2016. The rollout in September 2017 of Irish, Modern Foreign Languages and Visual Art was followed in September 2018 by the introduction of new specifications in Mathematics, Home Economics, History, Music and Geography. 2019 saw the final phase introduction of new specifications for the technology subjects, Religious Education, Jewish Studies and Classics.

Step Up was launched in June 2018, seeking school applications for participation. While June 2018 was relatively early in the overall phased introduction of new subject specifications, by that time, schools had considerable experience in implementing the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* through the subject specifications for English, Business Studies and Science. The Step Up project wanted to give schools an opportunity to reflect on the quality of their implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* in relation to these three specific subjects, and to identify how that quality could be raised to a higher level. It was hoped that the three subject areas would act as leaders and influence practice in all other subject areas within the school and that the project would provide sustained support across a school's curriculum for more effective implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*.

## 2.4 Selection process

Nine schools were selected from the applications received. The schools were selected by representatives of Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and the Department of Education and Skills based on agreed selection criteria. The nine schools selected were

- Borrisokane Community College, Co. Tipperary
- Castleknock Community College, Dublin 15
- Castletroy College, Co. Limerick
- Coláiste Muire, Ennis, Co. Clare
- St Bricin's College, Belturbet, Co. Cavan
- St. Colmcille's Community School, Knocklyon, Dublin 16
- St. Columba's College, Stranorlar, Co. Donegal
- St. Louis Secondary School, Dundalk, Co. Louth
- Stratford College, Rathgar, Dublin 6

## 2.5 Who was involved?

The project was led by a team of three: an Assistant Chief Inspector, the Deputy Director of JCT (Subjects), and a Step Up co-ordinator in JCT. Three link inspectors with subject specialisms in English, Business Studies, and Science were identified to work with the project schools in collaboration with five subject specialists from JCT.

The key participants in the project were the teachers and school leaders from the project schools. The role set for JCT was to provide dedicated professional development support to the Step Up teams in the project schools. The role of the Inspectorate was to provide professional advice and assist the coordination and implementation of the project.

## 2.6 The specific goals the Step Up Project sought to achieve

The internal Step Up proposal document approved for funding by the Department stated that Step Up Project would be successful, if, at the end of a three-year period

- The participating schools were to demonstrate measurable improvements in the learning outcomes of students, using a range of suitable assessment tools
- The participating schools were to demonstrate measurable improvements in key themes such as developing innovative approaches or practices with respect to
  - learner outcomes
  - learner experiences
  - teachers' individual practice
  - teachers' collective practice
  - professional collaboration between schools
  - linkages with outside agencies
- Teacher collaboration, including peer learning and review, was to be embedded in the practice of the participating schools
- Pedagogical and professional innovations relating to the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) were identified and shared with other subject departments within the school
- Each school's learning journey was to be reported on, for public dissemination, with the proviso that those individual journeys should not be viewed as prescriptive of what should happen in all schools

## 2.7 Project requirements for schools

As part of their applications, schools were asked to commit to:

- Identifying an overall focus for the proposed project using the quality framework in *Looking At Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*
- Conducting a thorough analysis of all available data, information and evidence relating to the area of focus
- Incorporating support and assistance from external agencies, businesses or academic institutions, where available and relevant, in designing innovative approaches to improve learning experiences and outcomes
- Involving students from the outset and gathering evidence of the outcomes their participation had on their learning throughout
- Identifying strengths and areas for improvement through the analysis of baseline data
- Establishing a clear focus and a clear direction for their project
- Developing an improvement plan to address the areas of need to be focused upon
- Engaging with the JCT support service and the Inspectorate to implement the school's action plan
- Monitoring and reviewing progress at regular intervals
- Participating in any centrally-organised seminars/ conferences associated with the Step Up project
- Writing up their projects to support engagement with good practice by other schools

## 2.8 Funding

The following funding support was provided to the project schools by the School Excellence Fund:

- Substitution for attendance by teachers at any centrally-organised seminars or conferences associated with the project,
- An annual allocation of hours for supervision and substitution cover to facilitate the holding of in-school meetings to advance projects.

No additional funding was provided to the schools and no additional funding was provided to JCT or the Inspectorate. Dedicated professional development support was provided from the overall resources of the JCT. Link inspectors were allocated a small number of work days annually for Step Up activities.

## 2.9 How progress was to be evaluated

From its inception, evaluation was built into Step Up design. An evaluation of all out-of-school seminars and online webinars, was conducted to feed into the design of subsequent professional learning experiences.

Schools did not simply work to enact their initial project proposals from 2018 – 2021. In-school visits had both a supportive and an evaluative function, where JCT advisors and inspectors listened to school teams describing their progress, their achievements and challenges. In some instances, project teams were advised to reconsider their approaches, to gather more data/feedback, to help guide their next steps, where the external coach felt that a project was moving in a direction that was not consistent with the school-specific need that had been identified as the key driver for the project.

An overall review of the progress made and challenges being encountered by the individual schools was conducted at the end of Year 1, drawing on the school's resubmitted project proposals and feedback from the link inspectors and JCT advisors working with those individual schools. An end of Year 1 report, collating this feedback, was compiled by the Step Up Co-ordinator, leading to the planning of specific Year 2 inputs to address needs identified.

In the original Step Up proposal document, it was planned that an external researcher would be employed to evaluate and report on the project's outcomes. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, it was not possible to engage an external researcher to meet with participants and review their progress. Instead, a member of the Inspectorate link team prepared this project report, engaging in the following activities:

- Reviewing the original internal proposal document for Step Up, to summarise the vision, scope and model of support envisioned for Step Up (the main source of detail for this chapter)
- Reviewing all learning materials associated with seminars, webinars and the joint May 2019 JCT/NCCA "Supporting Sustainable Change in Schools" conference, so that a thematic synthesis of the two layers of support provided by Step Up could be compiled (see chapter 3)
- Analysing and reflecting on the final case studies submitted by the schools in April 2021 in relation to each other, identifying common themes and approaches (see Chapter 5)
- To bookmark the outcomes reported by the schools in their individual case studies, a qualitative survey of JCT advisors and inspectors involved in Step Up (2018 – 2021) was also prepared, circulated, and analysed. The insights that emerged from the open text box questions are compiled in Chapter 4, as another source of information on the outcomes of the project.

Draft chapters were circulated to the JCT and Inspectorate managers linked with the project, and to some JCT advisors and inspectors who had participated in the project, with feedback gathered and requested edits/ additions, and changes being made throughout the writing process.

## **2.10 How Covid 19 impacted on the project timeline**

Step Up was designed as a two-year project. Year 1 was planned for the 2018-19 academic year, and Year 2 was planned for the 2019-20 academic year, with final reports to be published in October 2020. In reality, Year 1 took place during the academic year 2018 – 19 while Year 2 spanned the period 2019 – 21, when Step Up had to be paused for significant periods due to Covid 19.

Schools were physically closed from 13 March - 31 May 2020 due to Covid 19 public health requirements. Recognising that priority needed to be given to remote teaching and learning, no virtual meetings were organised for Step Up during this period.

From September to December 2020, priority was given to the safe resumption of schooling and continuity of teaching and learning. Consequently, no physical or virtual Step Up meetings were organised. Instead, the project schools were encouraged to implement Step Up Activities they had had to postpone from the spring, where they could be conducted in accordance with public health guidelines. Also, the recording of some filmed interviews with teachers, school leaders, and students proceeded in some schools (see Chapter 3 for additional detail on this).

From early January to 1 March 2021, teaching and learning had to switch to remote provision again. From 1 March onward, year groups returned to post-primary schools on a phased basis. The Step Up project schools were asked to submit their case studies by the end of April 2021, with a view to their publication in Autumn 2021.

## 3. The Step Up model of support

### 3.1 Background

The suite of activities that the Step Up schools were led through over the course of the project was grounded in ongoing communication between the Step Up team of link inspectors and JCT advisors. The group met in June 2018 to explore the key tenets of Step Up and to plan for the initial phase of the project. A subsequent meeting was held in August 2018 to consider the nine successful applications and to agree models of support for the schools.

The fact that the three inspectors appointed to Step Up were already the nominated link inspectors for the new Junior Cycle subjects of English, Business Studies and Science meant that they were already acquainted with the relevant JCT subject specialist team leaders. For a start-up project, these pre-established relationships were a key strength. However, turnover of some JCT and Inspectorate staff occurred at the end of Year 1.

Three seminars per year, gathering the Step Up schools together, were planned and delivered by the Step Up Co-ordinator, in collaboration with the wider JCT and Inspectorate advisory team. Seminar days enabled the Step Up project teams to take time out of school, to engage with new professional learning as well as with school project forward planning, mid year review, and end-of year evaluation and follow-up planning.

One visit to each project school by the assigned inspector and JCT advisor was planned per year, with ongoing professional support by JCT. Teachers reported valuing the opportunity to share their learning to date, to clarify and seek advice on any identified challenges and to agree amongst themselves how to further progress their initiatives. Advisory visits were very useful in affirming the good practice that was happening.

### 3.2 The foundation of Step Up

The suite of Step Up activities was designed to provide two inter-connecting layers of support:

- Customised professional learning inputs for teachers in the areas of reflective practice, teacher agency, collaboration, leading change, and “telling your story”
- Supports requested by individual schools in relation to specific aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* involving teaching, learning, assessment and/or reporting as well as occasional requests for project management advice

In essence, these two layers combined proactive (pre-structured) and reactive support, offered based on needs articulated by individual project teams.

A former JCT advisor commented that “The different elements all served different purposes. I think the project would have been much weaker and possibly failed had any one piece not been in place.”<sup>6</sup>

### 3.3 Reflective practice

Year 1 focused on developing reflective practice among the Step Up project teams. Activities that required participants to engage in explicit, collaborative reflection on the challenges and progress of their projects were built into all seminar days and a series of webinars on models of reflection was provided to the Step Up schools. Not only were participants guided to reflect after action, but also to “reflect on-the-spot, in the here and now, and the products of their reflections are immediately put into practice in a continuous and spontaneous interplay between thinking and doing, in which ideas are formulated, tested and revised” (Rolfe, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

Active learning activities were built into seminar days, requiring teachers from the different schools to engage with each other’s projects, triggering reflection on the learning being achieved by peers. The Step Up co-ordinator also created “learning log” booklets to support all seminar days, incorporating key quotations from relevant theory with space for participants to record their own observations and insights, supporting ongoing reflection. Furthermore, a webinar outlining Brookfield’s four lenses to support critically reflective practice was provided to participants in Year 1 (1998).<sup>8</sup>

Year 2 supports guided teachers to reflect on specific aspects of their projects:

- the link between project focus, desired outcomes, and the specific domains and standards from *Looking at Our School* that the schools were seeking to implement more effectively
- the degree to which projects were improving student participation, learning experiences and outcomes

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<sup>6</sup> Survey of JCT advisors and inspectors, February 2021. See chapter 5 for more detail on this.

<sup>7</sup> This experimental “doing” approach to reflection is proposed by theorists following on from John Dewey’s perspective including Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire, and Donald Schön.

<sup>8</sup> The four complementary lenses are the lens of one’s own autobiography as learners of reflective practice, the lens of learners’ eyes, the lens of colleagues’ perceptions, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical and research literature.

- the extent to which evidence gathered in Year 1 indicated more effective practice

### 3.4 Teacher agency

A core element of Step Up was creating opportunities and providing support for teachers to present their progress to their Step Up peers, to their school staffs, and to a national conference, thus strengthening their individual and collective sense of professional agency.

On 17 May 2019, a joint NCCA/JCT conference was held titled “Supporting Sustainable Change in Schools.” The conference provided an opportunity for schools to share their experience of the Step Up project up to that point (end of Year 1). The attendance at the conference included members of NAPD, ETBI, ACCS, JMB, Educate Together, the Teaching Council, NCCA, JCT, Inspectorate, CSL, union representatives, other support services and a cross section of school leaders and education partners.

The programme for the day began with a Step Up “speed dating” exercise. Two representatives from each Step Up school were seated at different round tables, with attendees from other organisations assigned to sit with them. The Step Up spokespersons summarised their school project focus, rationale, activities and the key learning achieved by the end of Year 1. Attendees then had time to ask questions. The attendees were rotated to other tables within a set timeframe, to learn from the nine Step Up projects. A panel discussion was also integrated into the conference programme before lunch, with key ways of working, challenges and successes being discussed by representatives of the different schools.

The Step Up segments within the “Supporting Sustainable Change in Schools” conference had been planned to achieve two aims. First, the activities were aimed at securing public affirmation for the Year 1 progress the teams had accomplished, to strengthen momentum for Year 2. Second, it was anticipated that the project schools would take away some interesting reflection points with them, from attendee comments/questions.

A third support to developing attendees’ sense of their agency as self-directed learners was the afternoon lecture and follow-up activities led by a specialist in teacher professional learning, Dr. Kathy Smith, Senior Lecturer at Monash University Australia. One of Smith’s key propositions resonated with the design of Step Up experiences: “Encouraging teachers to openly face and articulate the challenges or issues that arise every day in their teaching is essential to mindful practice. Such learning enables teachers to see that issues and problems do not reflect inadequacy or lack of success as a teacher but rather, as (Dewey, 1933) explained, the act of recognising that teaching



is often problematic and is essentially the first step towards developing and enhancing teaching (Smith, 2017).<sup>9</sup>

### 3.5 Collaboration

The Step Up seminars deliberately integrated active, collaborative learning experiences. On those days, school leaders, teachers, inspectors, and JCT advisors were placed in cross-organisational groupings, helping to build relationships, trust, and collaboration among all involved in Step Up.

The original Step Up co-ordinator explained that a key source for her ideas when designing collaborative Year 1 activities for the Step Up schools had been literature on “teacher design teams”. A short overview of the elements of “teacher design teams” is provided below.

A teacher design team (TDT) is defined as “a group of teachers, of the same or adjacent subjects, who cooperate on a regular basis on the design of their common curriculum” (Handelzalts, 2009). Handelzalts, Nieveen, and Van den Akker (2019) contend that teacher collaboration is essential “to bridge the gap between the work of individual teachers (within their own subjects and classrooms) and school-wide aspirations. Handelzalts et al also emphasise how TDTs support teachers’ need “to take a stronger role in curriculum development, deciding upon their own curriculum preferences and options, in order to realise context-specific solutions, that involve ownership and commitment at the school level, having “a profound impact on student learning.”<sup>10</sup>

Many of the elements that were explicitly integrated into the Step Up suite of supports resonate with findings in relation to TDTs:

- For teams of teachers from different subject areas
- Planning the enquiry for an extended period of time, to give the teachers enough time to make sense of and align goals
- Ringfencing time for teachers to discuss ideas and consequences and to find ways of coming to an agreement
- Ensuring ongoing informal and formal communication (including limited documentation) of the learning process as well as preliminary and final outcomes
- Fostering selectivity in relation to aims of the school-specific innovation

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<sup>9</sup> See how this key proposition of Dr. Smith’s surfaces in Step Up, as described in Section 5.1.

<sup>10</sup> See this article on <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-20062-6?page=2#toc>.

- Recognising that teams with larger numbers of participants could experience more group process challenges
- Linking the project focus with teacher needs and wishes in relation to new curricular principles and practices
- Supporting the teacher teams through school's management's implementation of flexible arrangements to support ongoing communication and meetings of team members
- Connecting the teacher teams with external coaches operating with clearly-defined remits. The linkage of each Irish school with two coaches (an inspector and a JCT advisor), bringing different professional expertise to the teacher team), was a specific strength of the Step Up project
- Integrating project goals with everyday practices in relation to teaching, learning and assessment
- Developing reflection and working together skills among the teacher teams to strengthen effective teacher collaboration
- Planning occasions where teams are invited to present their work to their peers – these work as “catalysts for team development”
- Enriching the practice of all colleagues in the school by feeding the efforts of the teacher teams into whole-school school development

This brief review of TDTs strengthens the argument that the process Step Up schools were led through was a valid one, integrating “curriculum development, teacher development, and school organisation development” (Handelzalts, Nieveen and Van den Akker, 2019).

### 3.6 Leading and sustaining change

Specific reflection tasks were embedded in Year 2 seminar days to strengthen teachers' and school leaders' awareness of, and strategies for, leading longterm change in their schools.

At the 17 October 2019 Step Up seminar, groups were given quotations to reflect on regarding effective professional learning communities from educational research.<sup>11</sup> They were asked to consider the degree to which some/all of the eight characteristics of effective professional learning communities were evident in their Step Up projects. A key question for discussion was “How might your Step Up team ensure the pedagogical changes you are engaging in will persist in your school after your Step Up project

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<sup>11</sup> See diagram 6.1 “Provisional Model of a School Operating as an Effective Professional Learning Community” in *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5622/1/RR637.pdf>.

ends?” Similarly, during the February 2020 Step Up seminar, groups were asked to discuss how they would share the learning and successes of their project, and put in place or seek supports to ensure sustained and long-term impact of their learning in their schools.

The varied structures that the school teams developed for communicating with each other and their evolving use of digital learning technologies to support resource sharing, reflection, and reporting of progress to the wider school community will hopefully be key supports to leading and sustaining change in their schools into the future.

### **3.7 Telling your Step Up Story**

As signalled in the original Step Up application form, the nine schools were expected to produce case studies of their stories, for public dissemination through web publication. The case studies were to describe each individual school’s learning journey, rather than to prescribe what should happen in all schools.

To help the schools plan their final reports, an “Our Story” mind map was created by the Step Up co-ordinator. Also, a suggested template incorporating headings for the case studies was provided to the schools. Schools were encouraged to integrate the voices of teachers and students into their case studies. To ensure the capture of interviews for embedding in case studies, JCT provided schools with the option of one day’s professional filming for each school. Due to contextual circumstances, this option was taken up by some schools but not all.

### **3.8 In-school visits by inspectors and JCT advisors**

In Years 1 and 2 of the project, Step Up schools received one visit from the link inspector and typically one visit from the JCT advisor, with ongoing email and telephone support from the JCT advisor and Step Up co-ordinator. The purpose of the visits was to keep the schools focused on improving junior cycle learning experiences and outcomes, utilising the six step SSE process and associated quality standards. All in-school visits had been completed before Covid 19 caused the closure of schools on 13 March 2020.

In almost all cases, the Step Up group of teachers in a school had not worked together on a project previously, so norms of working together collaboratively had to be explicitly discussed to negotiate a common work process.

The preparation for these visits by school teams and by the link inspector or JCT advisor served to provide a mini deadline for reflecting on what had been achieved to date, for identifying challenges encountered, and for focussing the discussion on how to proceed.

Specific strategies used by inspectors and JCT advisors during school visits to strengthen teacher collaborative practice included:

- Using an SSE type questioning approach, asking school teams to assess and communicate their work by asking themselves the questions: What's working well? How do we know? What are we going to do to make it even better?
- Using active listening, directed questioning, and note taking of the different teachers' responses. "By acting as facilitator for the meeting, it meant that the school team co-ordinator was not under pressure to answer all questions and could listen and reflect. I typed up notes from the session and sent them back to the chair, to help the project move forward. I was thanked for my outsider's summary of comments, which supported decision-making by the team after my visit."<sup>12</sup>

Where a Step Up school team involved a large number of teachers, more energy and attention had to be invested by the link advisor, inspector, and teachers in building productive collaboration. A key message conveyed to these teams was that building up effective communication systems would take time and that this was normal. Accepting that this was part of the learning process and working toward such collaboration was a longterm benefit for those project teams, for their school leaders, and for their whole school cultures.

After in-school visits, inspectors and JCT advisors liaised with each other and with the overall JCT Step Up Co-ordinator on project progress and on areas for review. In some cases, future planning for seminar days or for webinars was influenced by feedback from those "critical friend" visits.

### **3.9 What Step Up contributes to Irish SSE practice and to teachers' ongoing engagement with curricular reform**

Section 2.4 of the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines: 2016-2020 (Post-Primary)* stated that "In the period 2016-2020 significant curriculum change will be underway in post-primary schools through the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. The school self-evaluation process will enable schools to engage with the Framework in a variety of

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<sup>12</sup> Survey of JCT advisors and inspectors, February 2021. See chapter 5 for more detail on this.

ways. Most importantly, it will help schools to focus on classroom practice and to reflect on and introduce the changes in teaching, learning and assessment at subject or whole-school level that are necessary to meet the requirements of the Framework.”

Along with the *SSE Guidelines 2016–2020* and *Looking At Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*, the Inspectorate also provided a series of SSE Update newsletters to schools. The newsletters often included illustrative examples detailing ways in which an aspect of teaching, learning or assessment related to the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* could be improved through the six-step SSE process.<sup>13</sup>

The Step Up case studies provide a third support to schools engaging with junior cycle curricular reform, capturing the voices of participants as well as nuanced descriptions of authentic, experimental learning journeys undertaken collaboratively by teachers, students, and school leaders. Gathering SSE case studies produced as a result of ongoing and future SEF projects in a central, publically-accessible e-repository would be a positive, professional SSE support to all teachers and school leaders.

Ireland has been experiencing a very significant amount of curriculum reform in recent years, spanning the continuum from early years, through primary and post-primary education. In the post-primary sector, a review of senior cycle reform has been conducted, involving multi-stage work with a group of collaborating schools and multi-stage public consultation work, as detailed on <https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/>

Chapter 4 of *Education in Ireland: An OECD Assessment of the Senior Cycle Review*, speaks to the issue of the conducive conditions that need to be put in place for the successful implementation of future senior cycle reform (2020).<sup>14</sup> Two of the six key conducive conditions identified by the OECD to support senior cycle reform are learning from the experience of junior cycle and strengthening teacher collaboration through further professional development and school networks.

Step Up offers a model for instigating meaningful and effective collaboration within and among schools, enabling teacher ownership of sustainable change, further developing conducive conditions for future curricular reform.

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/436d9-school-self-evaluation-post-primary-2016-2021/#sse-2016-2021>

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-in-ireland\\_636bc6c1-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-in-ireland_636bc6c1-en)



## 4. The views of JCT advisors and inspectors on Step Up outcomes

A qualitative survey of JCT advisors and inspectors involved in Step Up was prepared and circulated in February 2021, before the final case studies were submitted. Nine responses were received to the open text box questions posed. The commentary below is organised to mirror the question headings of the survey and records the key observations made by respondents. Text that appears in quotation marks below is copied directly from the responses provided to the survey.

### 4.1 The ongoing necessity to review and refine the focus of projects

While reviewing Step Up applications in July 2018, a core steering group comprising the assigned Assistant Chief Inspector, Deputy Director of JCT (Subjects) and the Step Up Co-ordinator noted that detail on proposed project focus was sometimes limited. The group decided that a key element of the seminars to be organised for the schools would be supporting them to fully identify the focus of their projects.

Schools were encouraged to gather data from as many different relevant sources as possible, including surveys, focus groups and SSE material already gathered by the school. This was to ensure that a school's ultimate focus was based on an authentic contextualised issue for that school, which would support a sustainable, whole staff approach. "The importance of a focus being identified based on evidence and input from all stakeholders is evident throughout the project. The gathering of evidence and using existing evidence to inform the focus has led to more meaningful projects in my opinion."

On reflecting on their Year 1 experiences at an October 2019 seminar, a number of project schools commented that they still needed to refine their project focus. Continually refining the focus of projects, in response to emerging evidence and reflection, was key learning for the schools.

In supporting schools to clarify the focus of their project, sometimes advisors or inspectors worked with schools to generalise their learning beyond the specifics of the project. "When you asked initially what had they done the response was we built a bank of resources, we developed lesson plans but really what they had learned was about what were the structures needed for collaboration, how to gather evidence of outcomes from students, how to promote buy in to an ideal with colleagues etc."

Inspectors or JCT advisors also guided Step Up teams to focus more closely on how the project was enhancing the learning of students. In a few instances, advisors guided the schools to refine the focus of their project to be more manageable and more

quantifiable. This sharpening of the focus helped ensure that all teachers involved knew exactly what they were doing, why and how it would be measured and reported. The fact that this process took quite some time for some schools was still a key achievement for those school teams.

A number of factors were noted as impacting on the readiness of a project team to revise its project focus over time:

- whether decision-making in the Step Up school team was collaborative or remained directed by the co-ordinator,
- the degree to which the Step Up project was viewed as a way of solving a “problematic” aspect of Junior Cycle pedagogy or assessment arrangements for teachers or as a way of developing a deeper understanding of how to support learning, with student choice and voice at the heart of pedagogy,
- the degree to which, as the project progressed, the focus was kept on student learning rather than primarily on teacher actions/activities
- whether the team remained constant or was impacted by personnel turnover (either involving a teaching member, team co-ordinator or assigned link member of senior management),
- the team’s openness to reflecting on questions and considering suggestions offered by link JCT advisors and inspectors,
- the capacity of the Step Up team to reflect on its evidence gathering, to determine whether agreed actions were achieving the hoped-for outcomes or whether the project focus and associated actions needed to be reviewed.

The teachers who took part in the project are to be commended for their professional willingness to be vulnerable and to negotiate risk, challenge, and achievement. Through their collaboration, these teachers further strengthened their professional agency, “making sense” of aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* and of the SSE process through the lens of their own school context.

## **4.2 The development of teachers’ individual and collective/collaborative practices**

Teachers had the scope to reflect on the learning needs of their students, to identify areas where they would like to improve outcomes, and to identify ways to achieve those goals. Their agreed actions were grounded in shared reflections and in their classroom observations - from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Teachers reported being more willing to invest time and energy in this self-directed learning. “I think it was a great opportunity for teachers and subject departments, for their first time, to really consider students’ learning experiences and outcomes and to do so in a structured and



quantitative manner. I think teachers recognised the 'cause and effect' of their strategies and this fuelled their motivation." [Step Up JCT link advisor/inspector comment]

Teachers welcomed and reported significant benefits from the opportunity to work with colleagues outside their usual subject department groups, learning about alternative ways to approach planning, teaching, learning and assessment. The project provided a structure for such meetings and for establishing ways of working together. The development of a collaborative culture of open sharing, review and reflection supported teacher learning in the project schools, with teachers reported a confidence to try new methodologies in their classrooms and a recognition and realisation of their own expertise as they shared their own knowledge and offered feedback to colleagues.

Teacher collective/ collaborative practice is very much dependent on school systems and culture. Step Up supported the need for space and time for the project schools to develop a collaborative culture. A bank of hours for supervision and substitution was provided to all project schools, to support the emergence of a team approach. One of the key challenges that teams grappled with was how to make best use of those hours. Teams with larger numbers found this trickier. The project schools reflected on this and created new ways of keeping connected, using school-based digital meeting and content-sharing facilities.

The support of senior school management was an important factor for the success of Step Up initiatives. Project teams reported that some school culture changes had been made by senior management teams to support their Step Up work, which had sustainable, beneficial impacts for all staff. It is hoped that those new approaches to facilitating meetings and communicating key insights and approaches to all staff will remain in operation after Step Up has concluded.

### 4.3 Students' learning experiences and outcomes

"The greatest benefit for students resulted from teachers spending time together to collaborate professionally. Whether it be across or within a subject department, teachers were given the time to dig into their specifications, examine learning outcomes in a deeper way and think about the best approaches for students to experience those outcomes. The isolated teacher practice that can sometimes occur in our schools, was replaced with an open door policy in a safe environment that was established by senior management. This time and dialogue between teachers brought the specifications to life and helped teachers to realise the connections between their subjects – which of course is built in through the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Specific projects have specific things that they focused on and some of the interviews show these specific benefits for students. But overall I think it is the teacher professional relationship

and dialogue that will lead to lasting change which will have a longterm positive effect on all students that enter those classrooms.” [Step Up JCT link advisor comment]

Specific effects on students’ learning experiences and outcomes identified by survey respondents included the following:

- Student survey data and oral testimony highlighted how lessons planned as part of Step Up actions were more enjoyable, thus enriching the learning experience and motivation of participant students
- In particular, students’ key skills were explicitly developed by all of the projects
- Students (as well as teachers) referred to the benefits of collaboration across subject areas to their learning: “It was a hallmark of the project that students appreciated having a greater sense of joined up thinking and approach across the subjects that were involved“
- The use of student focus groups by project teams, to capture students’ perspectives on Step Up’s effects, led teachers to reflect on nuanced points made by students that had not been previously captured by in-school surveys
- Student confidence was also strengthened. In some cases, students spoke of feeling more able to activate and connect prior learning of content or skills in one subject to support learning in another. Some students also reported feeling more willing to articulate their knowledge, understandings, personal responses and questions in class
- “Students buy into initiatives when they make sense to them. Students embraced a new culture of questioning and effective questioning in their classes and brought this learning to other classes too”
- Audio and film footage of students who participated in the project in different schools is a powerful reflection of how students’ learning experiences and outcomes were progressed by Step Up projects. Such clips are embedded in the individual Step Up school reports. Unfortunately, footage gathering was not possible in the case of every school, due to the impact of Covid 19.

#### **4.4 Implications for school leaders**

Survey respondents commented that Step Up would not have proceeded as well without early seminar inputs to the nine project school leaders, communicating the rationale of the project, its shape, and goals for the individual schools. Given that the project support offered to schools was a bank of hours allowed for supervision and substitution, it was vital that school leaders were convinced of the merits of using that bank of hours to support the project teams at particular times of the school year and in flexible ways.

Where designated senior management link persons attended and participated in Step Up seminars, and where they participated in in-school project team meetings with JCT advisors or inspectors, those school leaders accessed the following benefits:

- reflected on their understanding of the teaching, learning, and assessment changes linked with the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*
- gained a real understanding of what was happening in their own school, by participating in the project team reflections on how to move projects forward
- learned about the challenges and successes that other schools were experiencing
- gained insights into the benefits of teacher collaborative practice across subject disciplines
- developed new approaches to timetabling/ communication systems to enable project teams to work together
- successfully translated project team learning into whole-staff learning and whole-school approaches

#### **4.5 Future ways of working for inspectors and teacher support service advisors**

The Step Up project provided a valuable opportunity for JCT advisors to mentor a number of schools over an extended period of time, enabling them to form relationships with the school staff involved in the project, to develop a understanding of the individual school context and of the aspects of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* that its teachers and students wanted to examine at a deeper level. The project also provided an opportunity for the JCT team to see how schools were using the SSE process to further develop teaching and learning at Junior Cycle: “Prompting schools to reflect on their practice through SSE questions will help me to support teachers in implementing the Framework for Junior Cycle in their own school contexts”.

One survey respondent who had returned to the classroom from a JCT advisory role commented that *“As a teacher in future I will be trying to keep linked in with the SSE aims of the school in my daily practice, rather than that being something in addition to what goes on in the classroom. It has also encouraged me to ensure that my classroom practice is not isolated.”*

Step Up presented an opportunity for all those involved to work across organisational boundaries in a manner very different from their usual work programmes. One former JCT advisor commented that, working as part of a support service on the Step Up project, he felt “really supported by colleagues in the Department of Education. There was such openness and genuine collaboration on how we might best progress the project. It felt authentic.”

Inspector respondents commented that they would be citing Step Up examples in future evaluations and advisory visits, when promoting increased inter-departmental collaboration and shared approaches to curricular change: “The Step Up schools exemplify how the SSE process can and will work to benefit both the teacher and the student.”

On a systems level, different respondents commented that the Step Up model of supporting schools should be carefully looked at in terms of designing future models of professional learning and challenge for schools. One respondent commented that “more explicit connections of this type would help achieve an alignment of practice with policy.”

In Step Up schools, teacher agency was strengthened, student learning experiences and outcomes were further improved, and meaningful pedagogical and assessment change was achieved “from the bottom up.” As the project schools succeeded, they became less dependent on external supports and even more empowered.

## 5. A comparative analysis of the learning process and outcomes documented in the nine Step Up case studies

This chapter does not seek to replicate the views of JCT advisors and inspectors on the outcomes of the Step Up process, as presented in the preceding chapter. Rather it seeks to triangulate those findings, engaging in a comparative close reading of the case studies (including the multimedia evidence embedded in them).

Each Step Up case study is a descriptive, analytical account of what happened in one school, working within its own unique context and circumstances. The reports are not prescriptive of what should happen in all schools. You are advised to read the individual reports in advance of this chapter.

### 5.1 How the Step Up teams worked together

For all nine schools, authentic teacher collaboration was nurtured. A number of teachers commented in interviews embedded in case studies that, in working with colleagues teaching different subject areas, their professional conversations had not concentrated on subject content only. Rather they had broadened to focus on student needs and on transferable teaching and learning strategies, leading to increased sharing of ideas and resources.

A comment that recurred in a number of interviews was that teachers needed to engage in professional discussion and research with their Step Up team to arrive at a shared understanding of a particular area of pedagogy/ key skills/ learning outcomes or other aspect of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Only then could the teacher teams further develop their own skills in the selected area of focus, before identifying how they would lead developments with their students.<sup>15</sup> Step Up guided teacher teams to create space and time where “honest talk” was encouraged about what was or was not working well, what was worth maintaining, and what the next steps might be.<sup>16</sup>

The support that the teachers gave each other was highlighted as an essential element of the progress that was achieved. Making such a collaborative peer review culture a

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<sup>15</sup> A representative example of this thinking can be found in the Castleknock Community College report.

<sup>16</sup> For example, an individual interviewed with colleagues from Castletroy College spoke of feeling comfortable admitting to them if she was unsure of how to proceed or if she needed help with an aspect of the work, knowing that she would be supported by her colleagues.

permanent feature of school life was an outcome that a number of schools wanted to maintain, as stated in embedded interviews or in the prose case studies.

Reflective practice among teachers is evident across the nine projects, most commonly in the use of reflective journals and of a shared drive/dedicated channel on the school's online platform. Additional practices were also developed in some schools. For example, Step Up teachers in **St. Colmcille's Knocklyon** video-recorded a sample of their own lessons, to allow them to evaluate their own questioning practices prior to the project beginning. Moreover, a 'Padlet' learning log was utilised in the **St. Columba's** project, where the project teachers recorded their personal reflections and observations throughout the process but were also able to share those ideas with the team.

The trust developed among Step Up teachers as collaborators in professional learning is also demonstrated by the number of projects where peer observation was incorporated as a key learning tool. Some schools used it to gather baseline data on an aspect of student learning in classrooms, with the visiting colleague noting observations using an agreed rubric. Others used it to share established, pre-intervention practices in the relevant focus area or to share practices developed through Step Up with colleagues outside the project team. Teachers reported feeling more comfortable in inviting peer observers into their lessons when the colleague was coming from a different subject background.

## 5.2 Projects that focused on strengthening students' Junior Cycle key skills or elements of those skills

Data gathered by the Step Up schools indicated that in many cases, students needed explicit supports in elements of the Junior Cycle key skills to support their learning.

### COMMUNICATING, CRITICAL THINKING, AND WORKING WITH OTHERS

- During initial data gathering, first-year students in **Castleknock Community College** described themselves as being nervous speaking in front of their peers. They also commented that before the Step Up initiative, they had been passively involved in their learning, generally listening to the teacher and taking down notes.
- To support the students' listening, critical thinking, and speaking skills, teachers
  - introduced students to a variety of methodologies to explicitly develop the skills
  - changed their daily practices to incorporate more opportunities for students to engage in purposeful, collaborative speaking and listening activities in class
  - pre-taught vocabulary to support oral and written use of correct subject terminology by students.
- Students' feedback on this intervention was that a "safe and fun environment" had been created, where they had learned to let go of nervousness, to listen, to

engage in critical thinking and to speak in front of their peers with confidence. They also commented that their development of these skills helped them in working collaboratively, in all their subjects, and in their classroom-based assessments (CBAs).

- The Step Up team in **St. Colmcille's Knocklyon** wanted to create more challenging learning experiences by further developing questioning practices in the school. The team put a focus on higher order questioning to trigger critical thinking and problem solving opportunities for students. While the original focus of the project was on challenging more able students, data gathered on impact led the team to realise that discussions arising as a result of higher-order questioning involved all students and allowed all to add to a topic or answer, supporting understanding and deep thought, and improving the engagement and enjoyment of all.
- The Year 1 focus of the **St. Bricin's** project was also on higher-order questioning, seeking to improve students' ability to ask, create and formulate questions. The rationale for the project was that students would need to have a strong ability to ask questions confidently and be willing to risk incorrect responses and to understand the value of making mistakes, to clarify their learning.
- During the initial data gathering phase, students' concerns were uncovered. These concerns included the fears of getting a question wrong and of being judged by one's peers.<sup>17</sup>
- The project team focused on creating a safe, secure learning environment for students, where norms for respectful, thoughtful listening and constructive speaking were agreed – a “thinking classroom.” In addition, the team decided to trial an approach of pre-planning differentiated, higher-order questions for their classes. Moreover, they devised positive reinforcement measures for students who asked questions in class. Furthermore, they also created question stem posters and bookmarks for teachers and students, based on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, to scaffold students' answers. Evidence gathered after the four week questioning intervention indicated that the students' questions had moved to higher-order levels, from “remembering” to “creating” on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

REFLECTION to inform action (an element within MANAGING MYSELF and MANAGING INFORMATION and THINKING)

- In **Coláiste Muire Ennis**, the Step Up project sought to further develop teachers' reflective capacities and pedagogical strategies for enabling students to take a

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<sup>17</sup> The same issues were identified by students in the Castleknock Community College project.

more reflective, action-oriented role in their learning, leading to more engaging learning experiences and higher outcomes for students.

- The school Step Up team gathered very detailed data at the outset of its work, through surveys and student focus groups, to establish a baseline of teacher and students' views and needs in relation to reflection. A gap in awareness and understanding emerged during this research. Teachers reported that they were regularly engaged in reflection around their practice; frequently endeavouring to include elements of reflection in their lessons, and seeking guidance around the variety and ways of using reflective tools in the classroom. Data from students suggested that they were not familiar with reflective tools and that they had a very narrow understanding of what constituted reflection, associating it with error correction.
- In Year 1, the Step Up team embedded reflective practice and tools within their daily classroom activities, developing and sharing a bank of reflective resources for students to trial. A key decision made by the team was to minimise reflection fatigue by using different terminology to activate students' reflections (skills log, reflective diary, journal etc). Teachers noted how well students, as individuals and as group members, engaged with various reflective tools and how they were becoming more active and autonomous within their learning.
- A staff survey at the end of Year 1 found that the majority of teachers were now actively engaging in reflection around their own practice on a daily basis, that staff had benefitted from the cross-subject collaboration to share reflective tools and practices, and that they felt that their engagement in reflective practice in relation to their own pedagogy was keeping students engaged and motivated. Teachers' reflective capacities and their professional learning from each other had been strengthened by the intervention. Achieving teacher collaboration, buy in, and embedding of reflective opportunities across lessons were key achievements of the project.
- Student feedback on the Year 1 activities was that students had experienced many positive opportunities to sample and compare different methods of reflecting. Some students had gone on to identify the reflection methods that suited them best, allowing them to take more ownership over their learning. Other students were still confused around what was included within the remit of reflection. They also reported that teachers' use of various terms for reflection had proved very confusing for them and that they were finding it difficult to see connections between the reflective activities that were done in different subject areas. (An agreed template for promoting consistency in reflection was later devised across the three departments represented on the Step Up team, in response to this finding).
- The Step Up team's Year 2 plan had envisaged further developing students' reflective capacities into the realms of action through individual and group goal setting, linking to wellbeing work. Those plans were interrupted by Covid 19.



- This project offers key learning for other schools about the value of gathering quality data to identify alignments and misalignments between teacher and student reflection on pedagogical developments.

#### TRANSFERABLE SKILLS SUPPORTING CBAs

- The **Stratford College** project arose from second-year students' feedback after engaging with CBAs in three subjects for the first time (2017/18). The students identified challenges in relation to making connections between CBA tasks across subjects and time management difficulties. The Step Up team then surveyed the students to gather more information on their learning experiences.
- Seeing the potential for deeper learning opportunities, the team decided to collaborate by utilising a broader range of inquiry-based and collaborative methodologies and by agreeing similar approaches to the teaching of key skills.
- The Step Up team identified elements of Junior Cycle key skills that were common across the three CBAs: planning, researching, evaluating sources, using digital learning technologies, communicating, working with others, and reflecting. The team decided to adopt consistent language, methodologies template supports, and instructions to support students in utilising key skills to complete their CBAs. They then compiled the supports that had been agreed in a booklet for students and reinforced them with visual classroom displays created by the students.
- Student feedback indicated that this consistency of approach successfully strengthened the skills targeted, enabling students to apply skills from one context to another, and to approach CBAs in a "more ordered, calm manner."<sup>18</sup>
- This project offers key learning for other schools about the need to take risks and experiment to learn.

#### STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' DIGITAL LEARNING SKILLS

- Resulting from a whole-school audit of the Junior Cycle Statements of Learning, **St. Louis Dundalk** chose to strengthen its student and teacher use of digital learning technologies through Step Up. Recognising that effective use of digital learning technologies is an element common to all eight Junior Cycle key skills, the Step Up team could see how such a focus would benefit students and teachers.

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<sup>18</sup> The Stratford Step Up Team also decided to trial an approach of agreeing a single theme to unify all students' CBA work for a year of study, to see if that would further support students. While the thematic approach was valuable for the project and the small number of CBAs involved, it is not advisable or sustainable in the context of full implementation of Junior Cycle and the need to spread the timing of CBAs to alleviate the stress on students.

- Through student surveys, the Step Up team identified that students were lacking basic digital learning skills to support their learning. In Year 1, project teachers taught first year students specific skills such as how to turn on a school-owned device, to use a Word document, to enter data in a spreadsheet, to research, to create presentations, to edit, and to use documents in the classroom. In parallel, in-class student Digital Champions were activated to provide peer support. Students' skills of working with others were also strengthened through assignments set by their teachers, requiring them to work collaboratively using digital learning technologies.
- Year 2 saw the expansion of the Digital Champions scheme as well as curriculum and organisational developments to further strengthen student's use of digital technologies to support their learning. The school moved to one-hour classes to facilitate deeper learning, more devices were purchased by the school and a Digital Media Literacy short course for students was introduced.
- Step Up teachers gathered evidence of the broad range of benefits their participant students had acquired. Outcomes included heightened confidence and competence in managing information, communication and thinking skills; strengthened capacities to utilise prior learning across subjects; and heightened levels of engagement in working autonomously and collaboratively. Students also demonstrated greater awareness of their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens, and experienced more positive levels of wellbeing, due to having the tools and knowledge to manage their online communication and information.

### 5.3 Projects that sought to develop particular formative assessment practices among teachers and students

Data gathered by the Step Up schools indicated that in many cases, students needed explicit supports in elements of the Junior Cycle key skills to support their learning

- In the **St Columba's** project, a broader range of everyday, interactive classroom feedback approaches from students to teachers was developed. Key learning from this project was that students enjoyed engaging with a variety of written and digital interactive feedback methods in their lessons. Students reported that such learning experiences gave them an opportunity to be actively involved in their learning, to voice their opinions, and to take more responsibility for their learning. The interactive classroom feedback strategies trialled provided teachers with clear insights into what the students had mastered and what they still needed support with.
- Year 2 of the **St. Bricin's** project focused on establishing consistent practice among teachers in relation to using success criteria to show students what teachers were looking for in the assessment of work, to guide teachers to ensure

coherence between their success criteria and the feedback they were providing, and to achieve richer feedback for students on summative pieces of work.<sup>19</sup>

- The **Borrisokane Community College** project sought to improve teaching and learning by embedding four key formative assessment practices among teachers and students: learning intentions, co-creating success criteria, effective formative feedback, and reflective practices.
- Through the project, students were guided to co-create success criteria in a language they could understand, helping them eventually unpack the Features of Quality associated with CBAs. This explicit focus on demystifying the language of assessment helped the students engage more meaningfully in their learning.
- An interview with a group of students embedded in this case study is very striking, as the students discuss actual pieces of work they had completed as part of the project the previous year. They explain how they had learned the meaning and function of success criteria, self reflection, peer and teacher feedback, and reviewing exemplars of standard. Most importantly, they had learned to gather and apply the insights provided by these assessment practices to improving their learning and their performance in assignments.
- Overall, it was reported that participant students had become more engaged and invested in class and were taking more responsibility for their learning by project end. Moreover, common understandings of key aspects of formative assessment had been development among teachers, senior management, students, and with some parents.<sup>20</sup>

## 5.4 A project that simultaneously engaged in curriculum and pedagogical development

### PRE STEP UP SSE WORK THAT ENABLED A DUAL-FOCUS PROJECT

- The **Castletroy College** project built on two aspects of preparatory SSE work that the school had been engaged in prior to project launch.
- From 2016-2018, the school had been working to give students' more ownership of and clarity around their learning, based on needs identified by students through SSE data gathering. The school's plan to achieve this had been to embed the following formative assessment pedagogical practices within subject departments: agreeing

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<sup>19</sup> This change of focus from Year 1 was a consequence of the fact that there was significant turnover of the school's Step Up team by Year 2.

<sup>20</sup> See a description of the CBA Information Evening for parents established by Borrisokane Community College in section 5.5.

learning intentions and criteria for success with students, designing purposeful tasks placing students actively at the centre of their learning, and facilitating students to reflect on their learning.

- A team of teachers had also identified overlaps in the Junior Cycle Statements of Learning in relation to sustainability, and wanted to enable students “to make meaningful and authentic connections between learning in different subject areas of the curriculum” in relation to the concept.<sup>21</sup>
- The Step Up project proposed by the school merged these two established strands of work: bringing together teachers of subjects where sustainability was linked to learning outcomes in their Junior Cycle specifications, to develop an interdisciplinary learning experience for students, designed using active, challenging, formative assessment methodologies.

#### THE ACTION PLAN DEVELOPED BY THE STEP UP TEAM

- Given that a good deal of research had been conducted within the school before the launch of Step Up, the team were able to develop an action plan more quickly than other project schools.
- The resultant four-week unit of work focused on sustainability in the use of electronics, specifically mobile phones, to be delivered concurrently across five subject areas to second-years.
- In Year 1, the three school-wide formative assessment areas for improvement were embedded deliberately into the design of lessons, with resources produced by the core team shared with the wider teaching teams to support teaching and learning in the classroom.
- A student learning log was designed by the team which included a weekly outline of the intended learning across the five subjects. Students would formally check-in with the intended learning at the beginning and end of each week and evaluate their personal progress, enhancing ownership of their learning. A range of tools for reflection, that had been previously researched, piloted, and evaluated in classrooms and shown to be effective, were included to help students plan for the next steps in their learning.
- Every week, students were required to reflect on connections they had made between learning across the subjects and to note these in their learning logs. Teachers delivering the unit were also asked to note examples where students voluntarily connected the learning in one subject area to learning that was happening in any of the other four participating subject areas. Such evidence was then shared with the core design team.

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<sup>21</sup> See *Looking At Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*, page 16.

## YEAR 1 REVIEW

- In response to feedback from teachers and students, and in conjunction with a volunteer student group, the Step Up team worked to refine the learning log and unit of learning, to identify a smaller number of key learning moments where focused reflection was needed. Teacher examination of the students' annotated learning logs at the end of year two identified higher quality and more detailed reflection than had been recorded at Year 1 review.
- The other focus for improvement was communication within the wider Step Up team: the core team consisted of 7 teachers but up to 21 subject colleagues were piloting the unit of learning. Feedback indicated, among some teachers, a lack of understanding of the rationale of both the interdisciplinary nature and the design of the lessons. To improve communication, departmental and whole-staff presentations and feedback sessions were provided. The creation of a dedicated channel on the school's online platform enhanced resource sharing, improved communication, and helped to structure moments for teacher reflection and feedback.

## OUTCOMES

- The case study reports on a variety of outcomes for students and teachers as individuals, for subject departments and for the whole school, arising from the project.
- The concept of a teacher team refining a unit of learning in conjunction with an interested student group was a striking element of curriculum design.
- In Year 2, communication within the wider Step Up team operated at a much more effective level, with the broader teacher team actively reflecting, taking ownership and contributing to the evolution of the curriculum design process.
- The filmed interview of a group of students embedded in the case study also offers an additional window into the project's effects on student learning. One student describes her enjoyment of purposeful tasks such as being required to research topics independently. Another student speaks of the value of the sharing of learning intentions with class groups through the learning log, clarifying for him what he would need to learn from the week's work. A more relaxed classroom atmosphere was reported and attitudes were also strongly shaped by the project.
- The Castletroy College project is perhaps the closest embodiment of a "teacher design team" in action, achieving simultaneous "curriculum development, teacher development and school organisation development" in a student-centred way, as described in section 3.5.

## 5.5 Innovative whole-school impacts from Step Up

- New ways of supporting in-house professional learning were developed by some Step Up teams. For example, the **St. Columba's** team was invited to present its work to the whole staff during an in-school JCT workshop, explaining the various interactive classroom feedback approaches from students to teachers that they had researched and trialled. The team's sharing of videoed classroom practice was a particularly effective way of showing rather than telling colleagues about the approaches that the team had trialled.
- While reviewing in-house professional expertise in relation to higher-order questioning, the **St. Colmcille's** Step Up team identified that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) on staff had already studied this area as part of their preparation for teaching. The NQTs were then asked to present their learning to the whole staff and this research was used to ground the Step Up project. This identification and utilisation of NQTs' learning as a resource for all staff was very positive affirmation of the professional resources being brought to the school community by new members.
- The **Borrisokane Community College** project introduced another new dimension to whole-school practice through a CBA Information Evening for parents of first years. At this session, students were asked to present the various types of CBA projects they had worked on, their process and the supports they were provided with. For parents, the ability of these students to explain what they had achieved and how they had achieved it was a powerful evidence of their heightened confidence, subject competence, and key skills.
- During the project, the Step Up schools had been provided with a suggested template for writing up their case studies. They had also been strongly encouraged and supported to embed audio/visual clips into their case studies. What is notable is how individual schools incorporated multimedia items to tell their stories. For example, **Stratford College** embedded a very effective Powtoon animation into its case study, communicating the focus and achievements of the project in a manner accessible to students, parents and teachers alike. Similarly, **St Bricin's** embedded visual images of exemplars of student feedback and of progress in their learning into their case study, giving readers a flavour of the resources and evidence gathering tools they had used.

## **6. Learning from Step Up for the system**

### **6.1 Advice from Step Up schools to support the next cycle of SSE**

#### **6.1.1 Place a strong emphasis on moving expectations around collaboration from plans and paper to people and practices**

Project teams need to take time to engage in professional discussion and research, to develop a shared understanding of their particular focus area (be it pedagogy/key skills/ learning outcomes/ formative assessment). Only when teachers further develop their own skills in a particular area can they identify how to lead developments with their students.

#### **6.1.2 Keep reviewing and refining your focus throughout the life cycle of the project**

Both the project schools themselves and the JCT and Inspectorate link advisors commented on the need for project teams to rigorously review their proposed project focus as a group at the outset. Refining the focus clarified for the teachers involved what they are doing, why, and how it would be measured.

Reflection on the learning needs of students, using evidence from as many different sources as possible, was key. By grounding the project focus in school-specific student needs, this strengthened the sustainability of the project, where approaches developed to address contextual needs would be adopted at a whole-staff level.

During the course of Year 1, toward the end of Year 1, and occasionally in Year 2, Step Up schools continued to review and refine their focus, as feedback and evidence was gathered highlighting unexpected needs and successes. Flexibility and courage to adjust project focus occurred where shared reflection practices were highly effective.

#### **6.1.3 Teacher collaboration has to be explicitly nurtured**

Teacher collaboration is necessary to drive improved learning experiences and outcomes across a school – the latter cannot happen across a school without the former.

Given the newness of working with colleagues in other subject areas, norms for constructively planning and holding meetings had to be teased out and agreed by the project teams. Sometimes such norms took longer than project co-ordinators had anticipated but this agreement needed to be achieved, so that the teachers' face to face and online discussions would feature "honest talk" about what was or was not working

well, what was worth maintaining, and what the next steps might be. In those “honest talk” environments, teachers could be professionally vulnerable and receive practical support from colleagues in a positive manner. Teachers who experienced such a professionally safe environment were more likely to experiment and develop their professional agency in relation to pedagogical and curriculum change.

For some schools, the establishment of authentic collaboration was one of their key takeaways from Step Up, where previously task teams had agreed and implemented actions but had not moved into the “honest talk” space.

#### **6.1.4 Record your observations throughout the project**

The ongoing recording of reflective observations by teacher and student participants during SSE projects should be promoted more strongly. Teachers on Step Up teams used a variety of approaches to share their reflections with each other including digital reflective journals and apps, a shared drive or a dedicated channel on the school’s online platform. The observations were recorded by individuals and shared in real-time, supporting professional dialogue on an ongoing basis – not just at formal team meetings.

#### **6.1.5 Make student needs and voice key drivers of projects**

Step Up schools paid very careful attention to student voice in identifying the focus and reviewing the progress of their projects. Student voice was fostered, listened to, captured, and acted on to improve learning. While some project schools had previously used student surveys only, they moved to a position that “. . .the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good educational practice is happening is the extent to which educators deliberately and systematically try to get inside learners’ heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view” (Brookfield, 1998).

By incorporating more intensive work with student focus groups into their practice, the Step Up schools gathered richer data. The longterm benefit of this practice is summarised by John Hattie: “When teachers see, or at least are open to feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged – then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful. Feedback to teachers helps make learning visible” (2009).

#### **6.1.6 Direct involvement of school leaders in projects is vital**

During seminar days, all participants (including school leaders) experienced activities requiring them to engage in reflection, collaborative working, and peer learning. Similarly, when school leaders participated in in-school visits by inspectors and JCT



advisors, they were present at discussions about school-specific actions to engage with Junior Cycle pedagogical and curriculum change.

Where school leaders participated in out-of-school and in-school Step Up activities, they came to understand the aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment that were being targeted for improvement. Understanding the potential benefits of a Step Up project to one's school predisposed school leaders to support project teams by creating time and space for their collaboration. School leaders with direct, ongoing involvement in Step Up were also more likely to seek to make project actions sustainable, by ensuring they were communicated to all teachers and embedded as whole-school practices.

A respondent to the February 2021 survey discussed in Chapter 4 summarised the need for school leaders to be directly involved in projects: "Very often, school leaders can become 'bogged down' in the heavy administrative function and daily demands of their role and I believe that the Step Up project and their participation gave them an opportunity to refocus on teaching and learning. In many cases, it also gave an opportunity to have a window into the benefits of collaborative practice."

### **6.1.7 Tell your SSE story "warts and all"**

The Step Up schools didn't experience success as a linear journey throughout the three years of their involvement. A key message delivered through activities during seminar days, through the suggested template for schools to capture their Step Up learning case studies, and through feedback provided on in-school visits was that project teams should confidently tell their stories "warts and all." The schools were encouraged to identify where they gathered unexpected findings on their learning journeys and needed to change direction in response to evidence gathered. Genuinely narrating their implementation experiences was encouraged, rather than editing out those details to construct stories of constant success, so that other schools could connect their own experiences of school improvement work with the case studies of these peer schools.

### **6.1.8 Move beyond telling your SSE story in prose alone**

To date, SSE guidance in Ireland has asked schools to communicate their progress in prose only. Step Up offers exemplars of the embedding of audio/video testimony from teachers, school leaders and students in SSE reports and of the creative use of digital learning technologies like animation to give voice to the rationale and benefits of SSE projects. Looking toward the future, multimodal communication of school improvement progress would be more accessible to students, parents, and the wider public audience than prose only case studies.

## 6.2 Joined up working by the Inspectorate and teacher support services would achieve even greater SSE outcomes in schools

Inspectors have conducted SSE advisory meetings with school teams for a number of years, where there has been professional dialogue about the specific circumstances of the school and the needs of its students. Other SSE supports provided by the Inspectorate include publications (*SSE Guidelines*, *Looking at Our School 2016*, Circulars, SSE Newsletters, an SSE website now hosted on gov.ie) and a limited number of seminars with school leaders.<sup>22</sup> Support service advisors of the PDST also provide some professional learning inputs on SSE to schools (usually focused on DEIS school planning).

Step Up was grounded in professional learning best practice, developing teachers' reflective and collaborative capacities and curriculum expertise, to support improved learner experiences and outcomes. The project provided deliberately-constructed collaborative engagement by the JCT support service and the Inspectorate with specific schools over a specified period of time. The Step Up model and process of supporting schools should be carefully looked at in terms of designing future models of professional learning and challenge for schools for specific purposes at particular times of change. The goal of such projects should always be to make external advisors redundant by supporting the emergence of collaborative, evidence-based, reflective teacher action.

## 6.3 The need for Step Up 2

It is suggested that a second phase of Step Up be activated through new cross-subject school teams. Such a second phase would have four benefits. First, it would enhance teacher collaboration and professional development through professional dialogue about pedagogy. Second, it would improve the learning experiences and outcomes of students when engaging with the full implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Third, it would capture exemplars of good practice for dissemination to all schools. Fourth, by supporting self-evaluation, innovation and collaborative practices, another phase of Step Up would further develop conducive conditions for future curriculum reform.

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<sup>22</sup> See the Inspectorate's materials to support SSE on <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/3f07cf-school-self-evaluation/>

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