





## **SECTION 4**

# **SCHOOL POLICY ON ASSESSMENT**

# Section 4

## School policy on assessment

The purpose of this section is to assist schools in constructing their policy on assessment. The Education Act (1998) places a statutory obligation on every school to draw up a school plan.

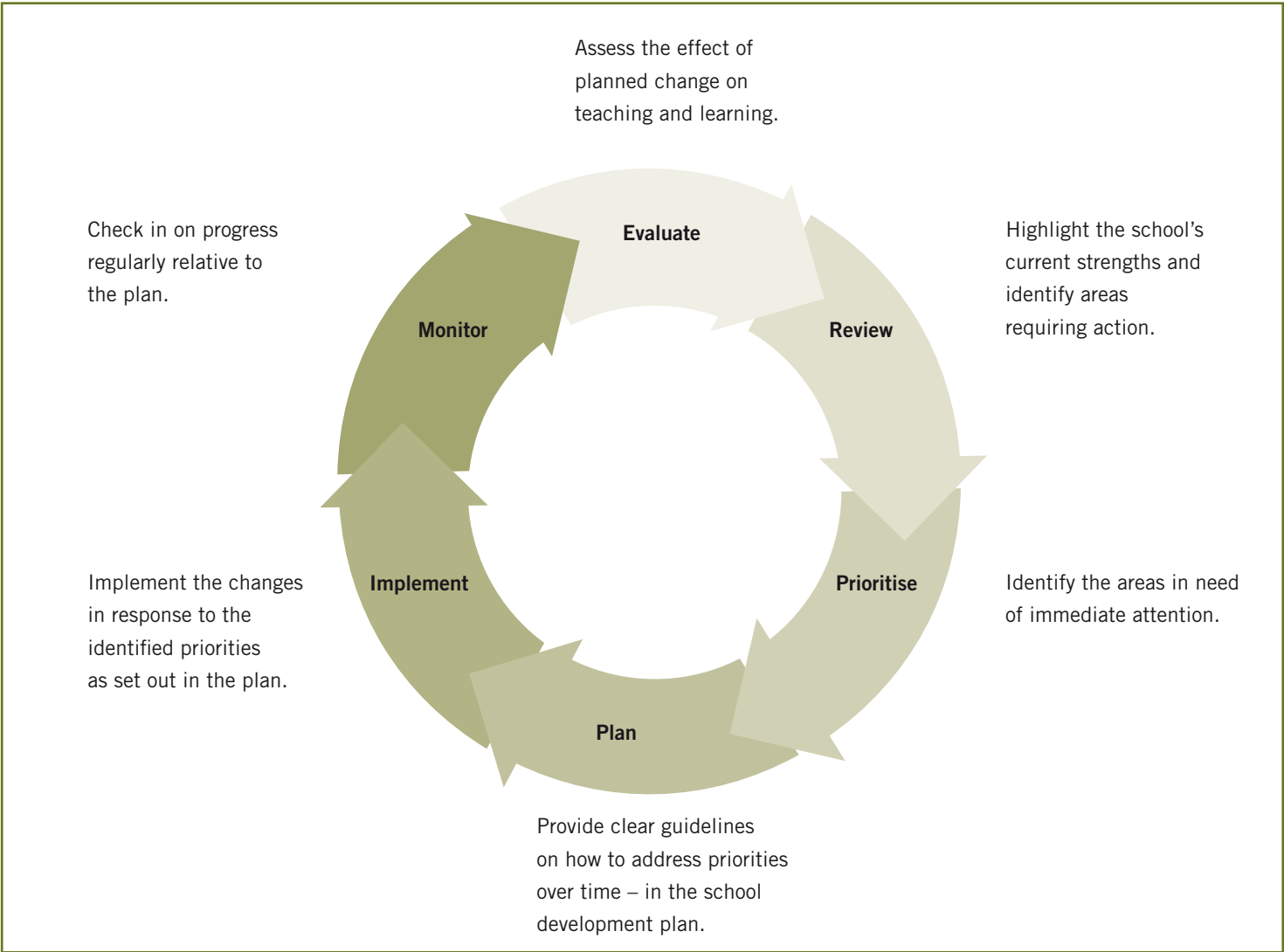
*The School Plan is a statement of the educational philosophy of the school, its aims and how it proposes to achieve them. It deals with the total curriculum and with the organisation of the school's resources ... (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 8)*

Therefore, the development of school policy on assessment is set in the wider context of school development and planning, and follows the School Development Planning model as shown in Figure 4. Further information on this model is available on the website of the School Development Planning Support (Primary) (SDPS) at <http://www.sdps.ie>.

The planning process is cyclical, enabling schools to enter the process at the stage relevant to their own unique situation. Some schools will have already developed an assessment policy and may be at the stage of reviewing their policy in light of these guidelines. Others may be at the design stage.

It is important that all members of the teaching staff are involved in developing, implementing and reviewing the assessment policy. It is also important that the policy formulated by schools is evaluated and reviewed regularly so that it can continually meet the changing needs of schools and their children. Parents should also be involved in the assessment policy. This creates a sense of ownership around the policy and allows for more effective implementation. Like all policies, a school policy on assessment reflects the core values and ethos of the school.

**Figure 4: School Development Planning model**



## Content of the assessment policy

The Education Act (1998) requires schools to *regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents*. In fulfilling this requirement, schools develop assessment procedures, which provide an accurate account of children's progress and achievement. The how, when and where of these procedures are outlined in the school's assessment policy.

Broadly speaking, the school's assessment policy contains a written statement of aims, and outlines how the school will use assessment to meet the needs of children, teachers, parents, and other relevant parties. It may include an outline of

- **how the policy was developed**
- **the policy's relationship to the school's mission statement and ethos**
- **the purpose of the policy**
- **staff roles and responsibilities for the policy**
- **the policy content—the assessment process in the school**
  - the purposes of assessment
  - assessment methods (gathering assessment information)
  - interpreting, recording, using, and reporting assessment information
- **implications for staff training and resources**
- **review and evaluation procedures.**

This is adapted from *Prompt questions towards drafting an assessment policy* on the website of SDPS (Primary) at [www.sdps.ie/policies/Assessment.doc](http://www.sdps.ie/policies/Assessment.doc).

The assessment policy also needs to clarify when and how the school will use ICT in assessing children's learning, in recording and storing assessment information, and the rationale that governs this process.

Prompt questions that can facilitate the drafting of an assessment policy are available on the website of SDPS (Primary) at <http://www.sdps.ie>. It is important that the policy refers explicitly to all of the aspects highlighted above. The detail of the assessment process in the school should be a key element of the policy. (See the fifth bullet above.) In this regard, the policy needs to answer the following questions about the school's practices in assessing children's learning:

- **Why should children's learning be assessed?**
- **What should be assessed?**
- **When should assessment happen?**
- **How should children's learning be assessed?**
- **Where should assessment information be recorded?**
- **How should assessment information be recorded?**
- **With whom should assessment information be shared?**
- **How should assessment information be shared with others?**
- **For how long should assessment information be stored?**

The remainder of this section of the guidelines responds to these questions. The implications of legislation for policy and practice are highlighted throughout. (See Appendix C, pp. 95-96 for a detailed summary of the implications of the different Acts for schools.)

## Why should children's learning be assessed?

As outlined in Section 1, assessment is part of good teaching and learning. It provides the teacher with information to make decisions about what and how the child is learning. This information in turn enables the teacher to identify the next steps in progressing the child's learning and adapt his/her teaching strategies and/or the learning activities, as appropriate. Using assessment information to inform teaching and learning in this way can make learning a more enjoyable and challenging experience for the child, and can contribute to a more enriching and rewarding professional experience for the teacher.

## What should be assessed?

The school's assessment policy should address each curriculum area/subject of the *Primary School Curriculum*, and encompass the knowledge the child acquires, the skills the child learns, the attitudes and values the child develops and the dispositions the child shows. It is important that all curriculum areas/subjects are assessed by appropriate methods. Certain methods are more suited to certain assessment purposes and to certain subjects as is noted in Section 2 of these guidelines.

Deciding what to assess is based on the curriculum objectives in each curriculum area/subject and on what the teacher intends to help the children to learn. The teacher uses appropriate assessment methods to measure the extent to which children have achieved these objectives. (See examples of assessment methods in Section 2.)

## When should children's learning be assessed?

Assessment is an ongoing process throughout the child's primary school experience. This process is shaped by the child's age and stage of learning and development. The child's perspective on the world and on his/her experience of learning is more holistic in the early years of primary school. At this stage, the separation of learning into different subjects is largely irrelevant to the child. The curriculum highlights the importance of connected learning experiences for the young child and recognises that, as children get older, subject based learning becomes more meaningful for them. A school policy on assessment should reflect this growth and change in how children approach and experience learning, and the assessment methods the school uses should vary at different stages of children's development. The policy should also ensure that judgements of children's learning and development are made over a period of time rather than sporadically, and that assessment information is used to provide intervention and support appropriate to the child's stage of learning.

Arising from the Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004), the school needs to ensure that the educational needs of all children, including those with a disability or other special educational needs are identified and provided for. The school's assessment policy should therefore also refer to the role of diagnostic assessment, and specify the diagnostic instruments to be used as well as the timescale of interventions. Similarly, the school's procedures in identifying and responding to the needs of exceptionally able children should be specified. Under the terms of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) each child assessed with a special educational need should have a personal Education Plan. The school's assessment policy should indicate the procedures for drawing up and using this plan to support the child's learning. The child's parents, the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) with responsibility for the school concerned and *such other persons as the principal considers appropriate* (EPSEN Act, 2004, Section 9 (a)) must be consulted in the preparation of the Education Plan.

### Assessment in the early years

Assessment in the early years is an informal and natural part of the teacher's interactions with children. Much assessment takes place through observations of the child, discussions with the child, and active listening to the child in a variety of learning situations.

Because the early years provide the foundation for subsequent learning it is important to identify children who experience learning difficulties as soon as possible. To facilitate this, the school should implement a screening policy in the second school year, preferably by February of the second term. Screening involves teacher observation of children and the administration of group and individual tests of early literacy, numeracy and developmental skills. The information acquired through screening tests, together with day-to-day observation by the infant class teacher, facilitates a more accurate assessment of the child's learning strengths and needs. This is particularly important in the case of younger children when learning does not necessarily follow a sequential pattern.

Screening facilitates the early identification of learning difficulties and allows for effective communication with the child's parents. Early identification enables the teacher to organise appropriate supports based on the *Staged Model of Intervention* (National Educational Psychological Service) (see p. 97). This model involves the teacher working with the child's parents, consulting with the NEPS psychologist, and, where necessary, organising learning support or resource teaching and/or access to various therapies for the child. *The Learning Support Guidelines* (2000) provide information on the development of a whole-school plan for learning support, and emphasise the importance of implementing early intervention programmes.

More detailed guidelines on assessment in the early years will be published as part of the *Framework for Early Learning* in 2008.

### Assessment in middle and senior classes

As with younger children, assessment methods used with children in the middle and senior classes should be set out in the school policy. In addition, the school's standardised testing arrangements should be documented. **Schools must meet the minimum requirement of administering standardised tests in literacy and numeracy at the end of first class/beginning of second class and at the end of fourth class/beginning of fifth class.** The assessment policy should state what tests will be used, when these tests will be administered, and how the results will be used.

The timing of the tests, whether at the end or at the beginning of the relevant class, will be dictated by the purpose of the tests. In general, the earlier an assessment is conducted for diagnostic purposes the more likely it is to lead to intervention that will benefit the child. Testing at the beginning of the year enables schools to develop appropriate interventions for certain children, while testing at the end of the year allows schools to make placement and progress decisions based on assessment results. Although the variation in the timing and sequencing that teachers choose when covering different elements of the curriculum with different classes can pose challenges in deciding when tests should be administered during the school year, the purpose of the assessment will be the overriding consideration.

### How should children's learning be assessed?

Using information gathered from a variety of assessment methods, over a period of time, can help the teacher to create a detailed picture of a child's progress and achievement. As already noted, this is particularly relevant in the case of younger children as their learning can be highly contextualised, resulting in less reliable assessment information (including from test scores) than is the case with older children. Knowledge of the context in which the assessment takes place enriches the teacher's interpretation of the information gathered. This makes it easier for him/her to understand the learning process from the child's perspective.

Section 2 of these guidelines provides schools with information on a broad range of assessment methods. It is important that the methods selected are appropriate to the purpose of the assessment and to the children's ages and developmental stages. The Equal Status Act (2000) also has implications for schools in making this selection. This Act promotes equality and prohibits certain kinds of discrimination, for example discrimination on the grounds of religion, age, disability, or membership of an ethnic community. Therefore, the methods of assessment used to gather information on children must not in any way discriminate against them. Schools need to be aware of the effects of context, culture and language on assessment and seek to ensure that assessments are carried out in circumstances that are appropriate for children. For example, staffs need to identify and address aspects of assessment that are particularly relevant to children with special educational needs, and provide appropriate alternatives as required. In the case of some children, the teacher may have to explore ways of recognising

progress and achievement that are sufficiently sensitive to each child's level of ability. This might involve placing a greater value on how the child experiences and responds to an activity, or providing the child with additional time to complete an activity. Alternatively, it might involve the child requiring less support to complete an activity. More information on assessment for students with general learning disabilities is available in *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities – Introduction* (NCCA, 2007), and on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Publications/SEN\\_introduction.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Publications/SEN_introduction.pdf).

## Where should assessment information be recorded?

In fulfilling the requirements of the Education Act (1998) schools create and maintain individual records of children's learning while they are attending school. They provide parents with assessment reports which contain accurate and clearly accessible information about their children's progress and achievement. Three kinds of records are maintained by the school:

- the teacher's day-to-day records
- the Pupil File
- the Report Card.

### Teacher's Records

The teacher normally keeps his/her own day-to-day record of observations, remarks, incidents, etc. as they occur in the classroom and playground. This kind of record provides the teacher with additional information about the child, which helps him/her to meet the needs of individual children more effectively. It also informs the teacher's classroom organisation.

### Pupil File

The Pupil File is used by teachers to record information on all aspects of the child's learning and development. The File provides a concise educational history of the child's progress and achievement during the course of each school year. One file per child should be maintained. It should be used to store documents filled in by the class teacher, the learning support teacher, and the resource teacher (where applicable). The main functions of the Pupil File are to

- support both teachers and children in monitoring and structuring learning
- provide information for teachers when preparing reports for parents
- provide information for teachers who will have subsequent responsibility for the child's education.

The Pupil File takes account of the child's strengths and needs, the progress he/she has made, and any areas of learning and development that need particular attention. Other useful and pertinent information may also be stored in the Pupil File, such as home contact details, enrolment data, school attendance record,

medical history (where appropriate), information concerning experiences at pre-school (if made available to the school on transfer), and the products of assessment (for example, completed standardised test booklets). The school may choose to create the Pupil File in written form (hard-copy) or in electronic form. If it is stored electronically the file should be backed up with a hard copy.

### Report Card

The Report Card is an important element of the Pupil File in which salient information about the child's educational progress and achievement (including interests, strengths and needs) is recorded. The key purpose of the Report Card is to share assessment information with parents in an accessible format so that they can use the information to help their children to learn, and thus strengthen the link between school and home.

The Report Card allows for the recording of assessment information twice a year. The cards are completed by all who teach the child during the course of his/her primary school education. The results of children's assessments are recorded to facilitate the sharing of the most relevant and useful information about a child's progress and achievement with parents, teachers, and other professionals concerned with the child's education. The NCCA is currently working with schools to develop national report card templates.

## How should assessment information be recorded?

Assessment information can be recorded in different forms, including marks, grades, checklists, profiles, and narrative comments. (See Section 2.) Teachers need to bear in mind that comments should be objective and instructive. It is recommended that comments entered in the Pupil File and in the Report Card should be phrased in a positive manner in order to support further learning and development. Schools should keep the possible readership of these documents in mind when completing them.

The assessment information contained in the Pupil File and on the Report Card should be readily accessible and comprehensible to all relevant interests. This will entail clarity and consistency in recording and reporting assessment information from teacher to teacher within the school and in reporting to parents at the different stages of their children's primary school education. Similar consistency and clarity is needed in sharing assessment information between schools, especially so given the increasing mobility of the school population.

## With whom should assessment information be shared?

The Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003) establishes parents' rights to regular information on the progress and achievement of their children under the Education Act. The Act entitles the parents of students under the age of eighteen (and students themselves when aged eighteen or older) to access all personal data relating to these students, whether stored in any electronic form or in hard and/or manual copy in a structured filing system in the school. (Any assessment information or personal data recorded by the school, including both formal school records and less formal records, whether in automated or manual form, comes under the terms of this Act.)

Legislation also requires the school to report assessment information when requested to other teachers, other schools and the children themselves, where appropriate. The school is also obliged to share assessment information with other individuals who are involved in the child's education. These include DES inspectors, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists, Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), and Education Welfare Officers, as well as other professionals such as speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. This sharing of information between professionals enriches the child's educational experiences. In developing their policy on assessment schools need to outline how they will ensure that a full and accurate summary of the progress and development of each child is available to the relevant people referred to above.

Appendix D (p. 97) outlines the roles of various organisations in working with the school to support children's learning.

## How should assessment information be shared with others?

Assessment information presented should be accessible to all relevant parties. When formulating the school's assessment policy, the school needs to bear the following in mind:

- **To whom will the school report assessment information?**
- **How will assessment information be reported?**
- **How frequently will assessment information be reported?**
- **What terminology will be used to report assessment information (that is, what terminology is familiar to members of staff and also to parents)?**

Assessment results should be reported to parents **twice during each school year. One of these events should include a written report**, preferably at the **end of the school year**. The other can include a meeting or a meeting and a written report. The school can decide the most appropriate times for these reports and meeting, and include this timetable in the assessment policy. Outside these formal meetings, teachers may also meet parents informally. The assessment policy should outline clearly the decisions the school takes concerning the frequency and mode of reporting.

Schools may find it useful to agree a format for parent/teacher meetings. A *Meeting guide* could be developed to support teachers in conducting the meetings. This could address issues such as making best use of the time available, presenting the child's report in as positive and constructive a light as possible, using language that all parents understand and avoiding the use of technical or specialist terms, and providing guidelines to parents on ways they can support their children's learning. In supplementing the DVD for parents, *The What, Why and How of children's learning in the primary school* (NCCA, 2006), the NCCA will develop a resource for schools to help parents understand and use assessment information to support their children's learning. This resource will include information on understanding standardised test scores.

The principal should approve access to assessment information by persons other than the child's parents (as referred to in the previous subsection). Such access may need to be accompanied by commentary or interpretation by a teacher or by the principal.

Finally, procedures for transferring relevant information between primary schools (if the child changes primary schools), as well as transferring relevant information between primary and post-primary schools, should also be incorporated into the policy.

## For how long should assessment information be stored?

The school's assessment policy should outline how and where assessment information on individual children is stored. Children can request assessment information for a number of years (not yet specified in legislation) after they leave schools. It is important, therefore, that schools store this information safely to facilitate access to it by former pupils at any stage until their twenty-first birthday. The assessment information could be requested of schools under the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003). Information stored on computers must be protected so that there is restricted access to it. Back-ups of the information need to be created, clearly labelled, and, likewise, stored safely.