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Enabling Every Child to Thrive: Leading Child Agency and Participation

IPPN Principals' Conference, November 2026
Dr Alan Sheehan
Director IPPN Member Supports and Services

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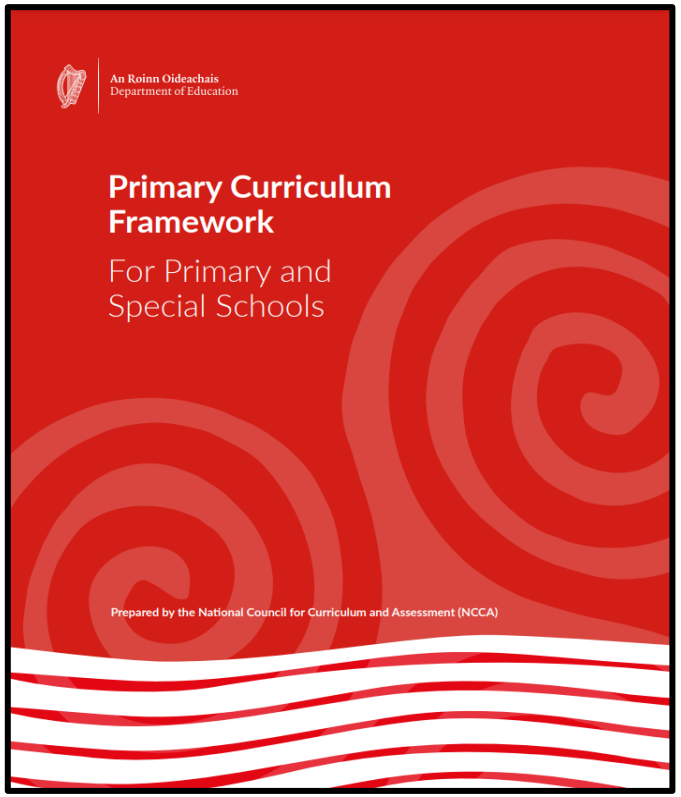
What we will discuss:

- **Our current understanding of child agency and participation**

- **Child Agency and Participation**
  - Classroom Level: Learning, Teaching and Assessment
  - School Level: Decision-Making

Child Agency and Participation



ENGAGEMENT & PARTICIPATION

Children are active and demonstrate agency as the capacity to act independently and to make choices about and in their learning. Curriculum experiences provide them with opportunities for decision-making, creativity, and collaboration.

- What do you think of when you read that principle of Learning, Teaching and Assessment?
- What aspects of this are you currently successfully leading?
- What aspects of this do you think are challenging to lead?

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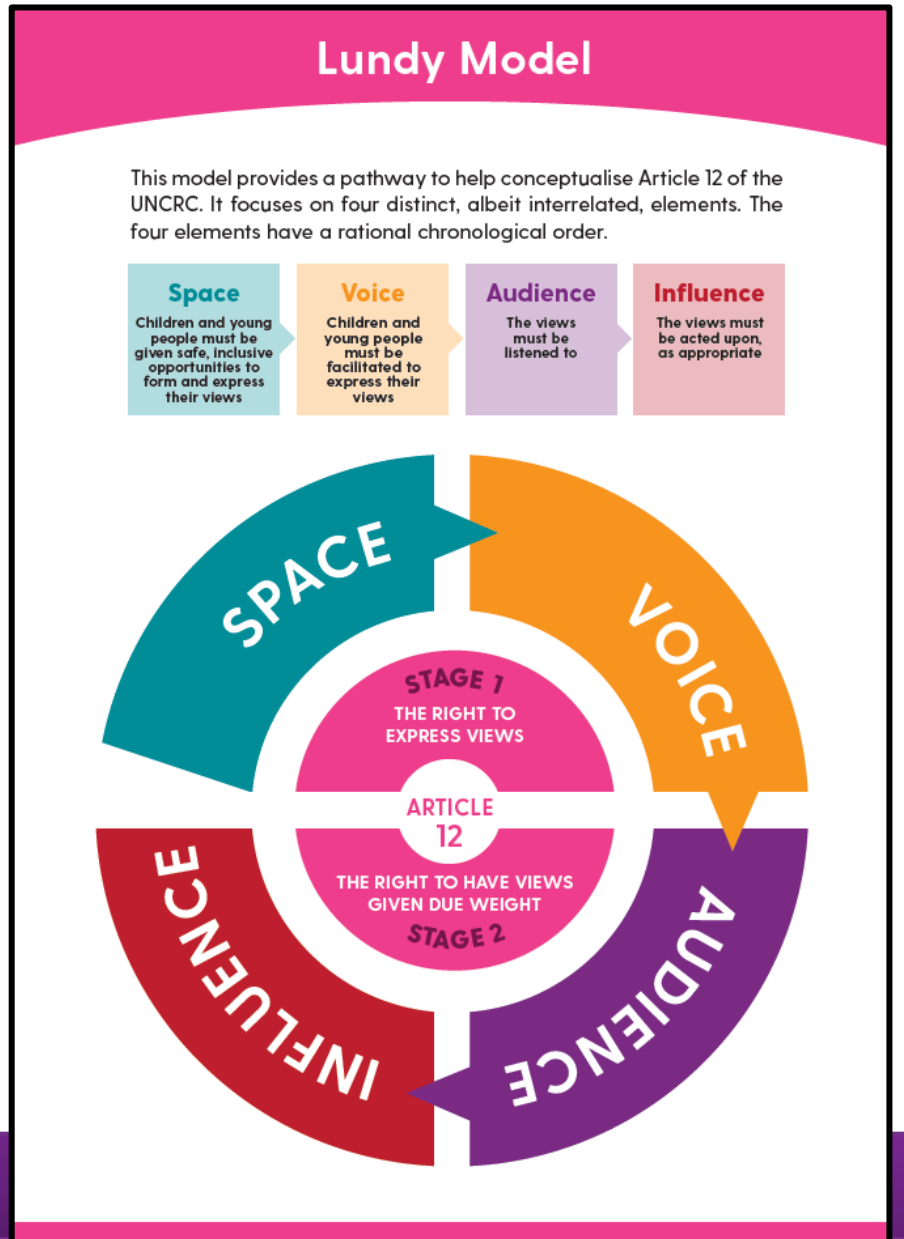
Origins



- **Article 12:** States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.



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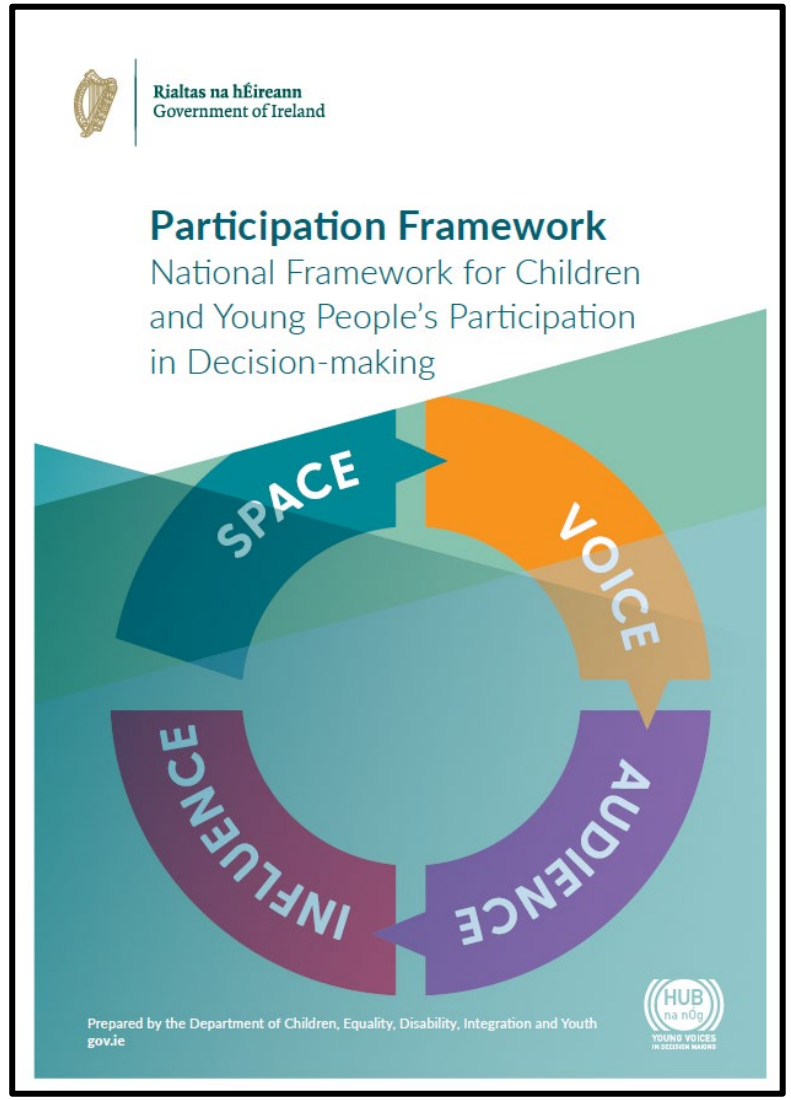
Classroom Level

- **Schools**
  - At classroom level – every child and young person should have a voice in decision-making on approaches to learning and other activities in the classroom.



Classroom Level

Learning, Teaching and Assessment

What are some ways that children can participate and demonstrate agency in their learning and assessment?

What they learn

How they learn

How they demonstrate what they have learnt

Classroom Level Considerations

How do we lead this in our schools?

What they learn

- Curriculum learning outcomes
- School context
- Whole school plan
- Existing practices

How they learn

- Profile of pupils and their learning needs (One Page Profile)
- Teachers' skillsets and interests
- School context
- Resources
- Time
- Layout of classrooms
- Use of building and environment

How they demonstrate what they have learnt

- Whole school approach to assessment
- Teachers' assessment literacy
- Resources
- Time

Appendix 2

One-Page Profile (OPP) Template

Child's Name:

Class/Year:

Date Completed:

About Me

- My interests and hobbies:
- Things I enjoy:
- What makes me happy:
- What is important to me:

I am good at

I learn best when

- ❑ Instructions are broken into small steps
- ❑ I have visual supports
- ❑ I have extra processing time
- ❑ I can move around
- ❑ I have hands-on activities
- ❑ I work with a partner
- ❑ I work in a quiet space
- ❑ I use technology
- ❑ Other:

I may need support with

How you can help me

Things to avoid

When I need help, I usually

Things that overwhelm me

Things that help me stay calm

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Classroom Level

How do we lead this in our schools?

- We hold staff meetings
- We discuss our understanding of children's participation and agency in relation to learning, teaching and assessment
- We watch a video (NCCA) and discuss/reflect on our practice
- A teacher leader shares an element of their practice
- A teacher leader models a lesson for the rest of our staff
- A teacher leader is observed modelling a lesson in their class
- A teacher plans with a teacher leader and is observed by them in trying out this practice
- A group of teachers try out a practice and reflect on it afterwards

Reflection:

- Where do you think your school is?
- Would you like to move to a different level?
- What could you do?

Culture

People

Time

Resources

Vulnerability

Trust

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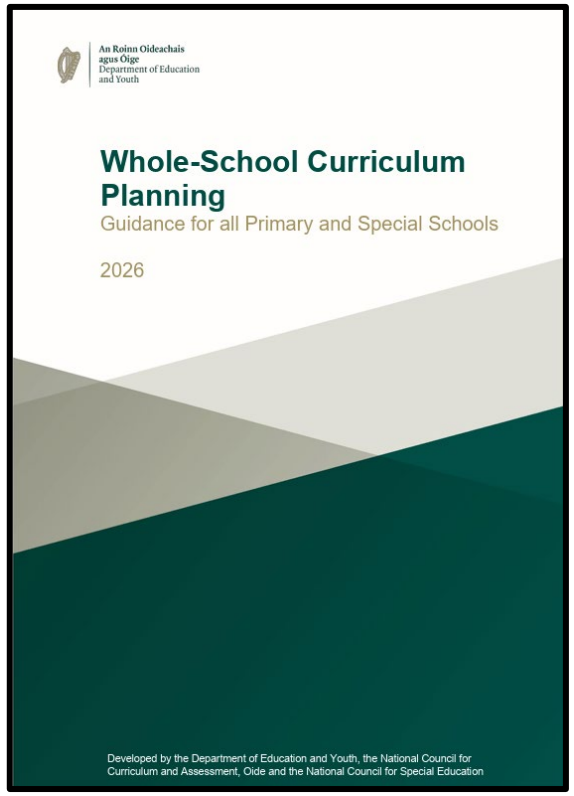
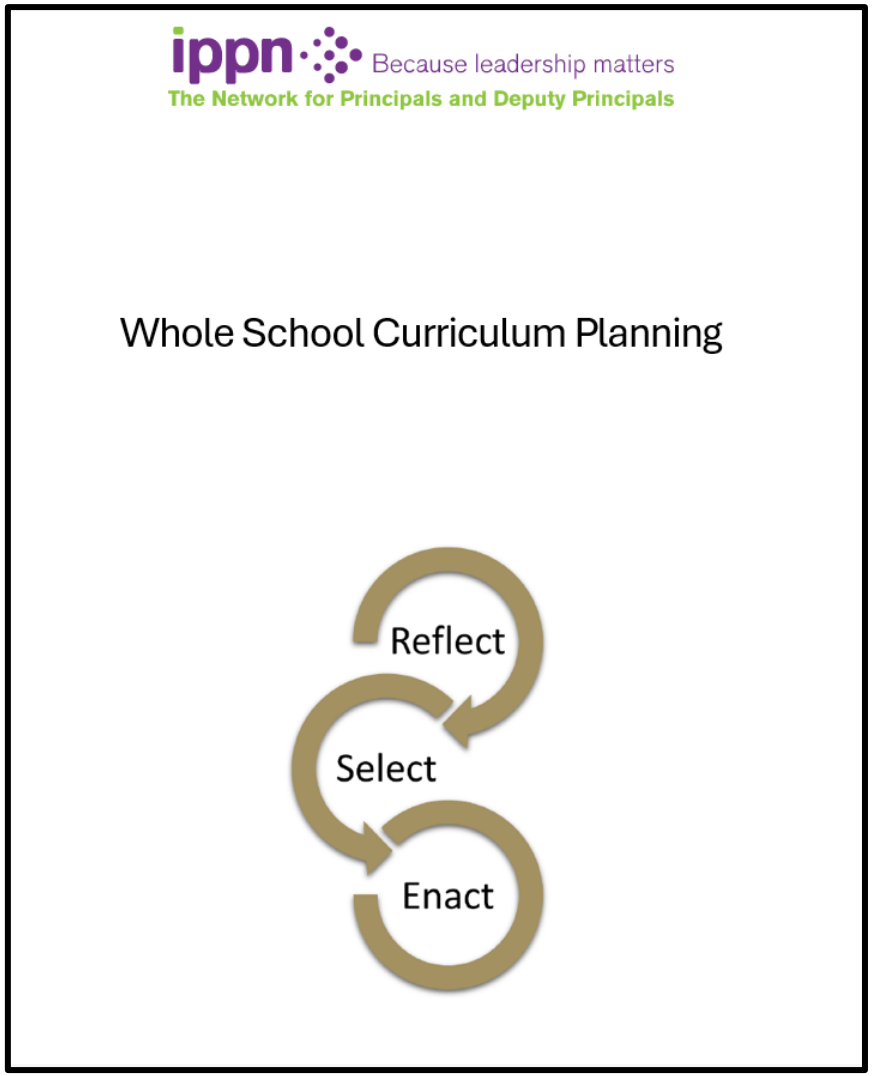
Classroom Level

How do we record this in our schools?



Five sections:

- Our School Context
- Curriculum Enactment (Strategic Plan)
- Curriculum Plans (evolving over time)
- School Self-Evaluation and Action Planning
- Appendices



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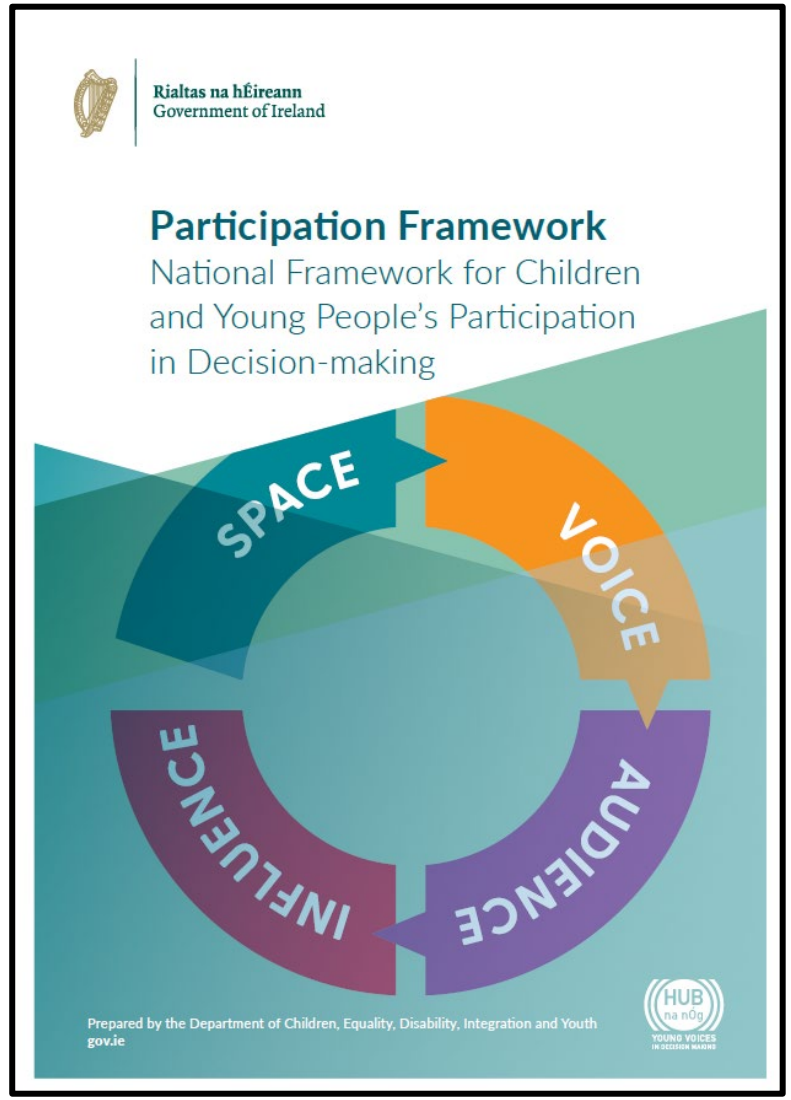
School Level

- **Schools**
  - At school level – children and young people should have a voice in decision-making in the running of the school, school policies and school governance. Student councils are one way to encourage that voice.



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School Level

What are some ways that children can participate and demonstrate agency with regards to decision making?

Consultative

Collaborative

Child-led

School Level Considerations

How do we lead this in our schools?

Consultative

- Pupil survey
- Focus Groups

Collaborative

- Children are involved in decision-making about their education, and their views are valued
- Children with special educational needs are involved with developing Support Plans
- Student Council
- Committees

Child-Led

- Buddy Systems
- Designated roles:
  - Movees
  - Librarians
  - Eco Agents

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School Level

Reflection:

- What are we currently doing well?
- What would we like to develop?

How do we lead this in our schools?

Consultative | Collaborative | Child-Led



Planning Checklist

This checklist guides you on how to listen to children and young people and involve them in decision-making when you are developing policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation at national, local and organisational level.

You should inform children and young people that they have the right to a voice in decision-making and that you will take their views seriously.

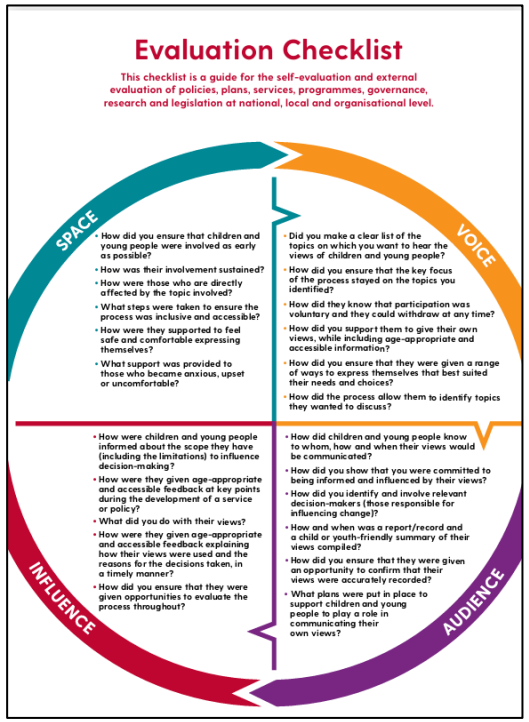
SPACE
- How will you ensure that children and young people are involved as early as possible?
- How will their involvement be sustained?
- How will those who have been, or may be, directly affected by the topic be involved?
- What steps will be taken to ensure the process is inclusive and accessible?
- How will they be supported to feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves?
- What support will be provided to those who become anxious, upset or uncomfortable?

VOICE
- Have you made a clear list of the topics on which you want to hear the views of children and young people?
- How will you ensure that the key focus of the process stays on the topics you identified?
- How will they know that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time?
- How will you support them in giving their own views, while including age-appropriate and accessible information?
- How will you ensure that they are given a range of ways to express themselves that best suits their needs and choices?
- How will the process allow them to identify topics they want to discuss?

INFLUENCE
- How will children and young people be informed about the scope they have (including the limitations) to influence decision-making?
- How will they be given age-appropriate and accessible feedback at key points during the development of a service or policy?
- What are your plans to make sure that children and young people's views impact on decisions?
- How will they be given age-appropriate and accessible feedback explaining how their views were used and the reasons for the decisions taken, in a timely manner?
- How will you ensure that they are given opportunities to evaluate the process throughout?

AUDIENCE
- How will children and young people know to whom, how and when their views will be communicated?
- How will you show your commitment to being informed and influenced by their views?
- How will you identify and involve relevant decision-makers (those responsible for influencing change)?
- How and when will a report/record and a child or youth friendly summary of their views be compiled?
- How will you ensure that they are given an opportunity to confirm that their views are accurately recorded?
- What plans are in place to support them to play a role in communicating their own views?

Before you start involving children and young people in decision-making, please review the enabling factors on page 24.



Evaluation Checklist

This checklist is a guide for the self-evaluation and external evaluation of policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation at national, local and organisational level.

SPACE
- How did you ensure that children and young people were involved as early as possible?
- How was their involvement sustained?
- How were those who are directly affected by the topic involved?
- What steps were taken to ensure the process was inclusive and accessible?
- How were they supported to feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves?
- What support was provided to those who became anxious, upset or uncomfortable?

VOICE
- Did you make a clear list of the topics on which you want to hear the views of children and young people?
- How did you ensure that the key focus of the process stayed on the topics you identified?
- How did they know that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time?
- How did you support them to give their own views, while including age-appropriate and accessible information?
- How did you ensure that they were given a range of ways to express themselves that best suited their needs and choices?
- How did the process allow them to identify topics they wanted to discuss?

INFLUENCE
- How were children and young people informed about the scope they have (including the limitations) to influence decision-making?
- How were they given age-appropriate and accessible feedback at key points during the development of a service or policy?
- What did you do with their views?
- How were they given age-appropriate and accessible feedback explaining how their views were used and the reasons for the decisions taken, in a timely manner?
- How did you ensure that they were given opportunities to evaluate the process throughout?

AUDIENCE
- How did children and young people know to whom, how and when their views would be communicated?
- How did you show that you were committed to being informed and influenced by their views?
- How did you identify and involve relevant decision-makers (those responsible for influencing change)?
- How and when was a report/record and a child or youth-friendly summary of their views compiled?
- How did you ensure that they were given an opportunity to confirm that their views were accurately recorded?
- What plans were put in place to support children and young people to play a role in communicating their own views?



Everyday Spaces Checklist

This checklist is designed as a guide to help you ensure that children and young people have a voice in decision-making. It can be applied in many everyday situations including in classrooms, hospitals, childcare settings, child and youth services, youth and sports clubs, youth projects, arts and creative initiatives and other spaces.

Please do not use this checklist for developing policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation – use the Planning Checklist on page 18.

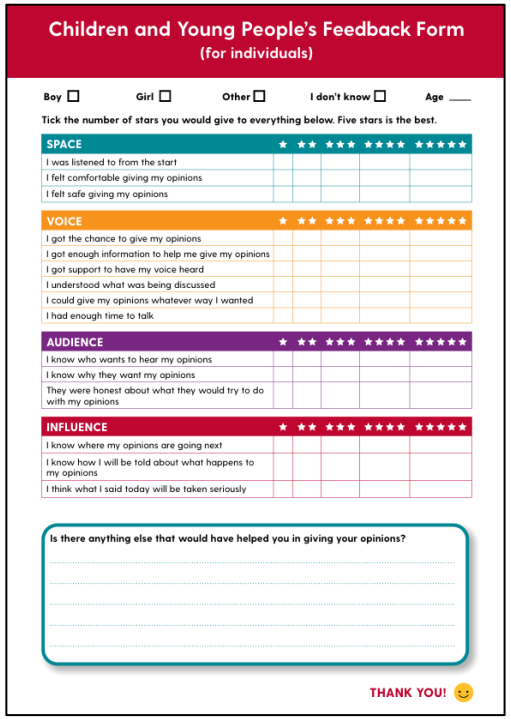
Please make sure that the ways you involve children and young people in decision-making are age-appropriate and accessible for all, whether in person or online.

SPACE
- How can children and young people feel safe to express their views?
- Have you allowed enough time to listen to and hear their views?
- How do you make sure that all children and young people are heard?

VOICE
- How are children and young people provided with the support they need to give their views and be heard?
- How can they raise the things that matter to them?
- How are they offered different ways of giving their views?

INFLUENCE
- How will children and young people know how much influence they can have on decisions?
- How will you give them feedback?
- How will you share with them the impact of their views on decisions?
- How will you explain the reasons for the decisions taken?

AUDIENCE
- How do you show that you are ready and willing to listen to children and young people's views?
- How do you make sure they understand what you can do with their views?



Children and Young People's Feedback Form
(for individuals)

Boy ☐ Girl ☐ Other ☐ I don't know ☐ Age ____

Tick the number of stars you would give to everything below. Five stars is the best.

	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
SPACE					
I was listened to from the start					
I felt comfortable giving my opinions					
I felt safe giving my opinions					
VOICE					
I got the chance to give my opinions					
I got enough information to help me give my opinions					
I got support to have my voice heard					
I understood what was being discussed					
I could give my opinions whatever way I wanted					
I had enough time to talk					
AUDIENCE					
I know who wants to hear my opinions					
I know why they want my opinions					
They were honest about what they would try to do with my opinions					
INFLUENCE					
I know where my opinions are going next					
I know how I will be told about what happens to my opinions					
I think what I said today will be taken seriously					

Is there anything else that would have helped you in giving your opinions?

THANK YOU!

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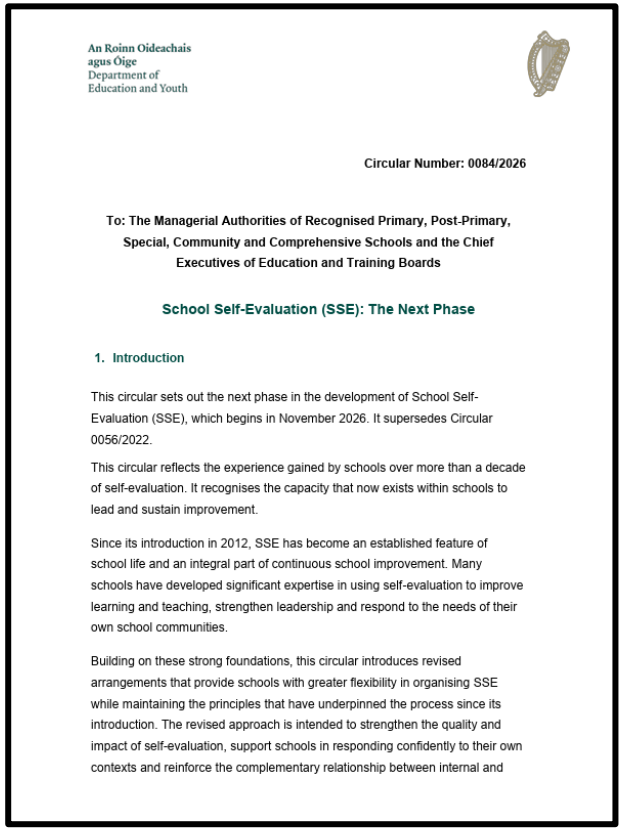
School Level

How do we record this in our schools?



An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Circular Number: 0084/2026

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

School Self-Evaluation (SSE): The Next Phase

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

Schools should record:

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

Sample SSE Recording Template

The priority or priorities identified for improvement			
The evidence informing those priorities			
	The targets and actions agreed	Arrangements for monitoring progress	Decisions regarding subsequent actions
Learner Outcomes			
Learner Experiences			
Teachers' Individual Practice			
Teachers' Collective Practice			

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Sample SSE Recording Template

The priority or priorities identified for improvement			
The evidence informing those priorities			
	The targets and actions agreed	Arrangements for monitoring progress	Decisions regarding subsequent actions
Learner Outcomes			
Learner Experiences			
Teachers' Individual Practice			
Teachers' Collective Practice			
Leading Learning and Teaching			
Managing the Organisation			
Leading School Development			
Developing Leadership Capacity			

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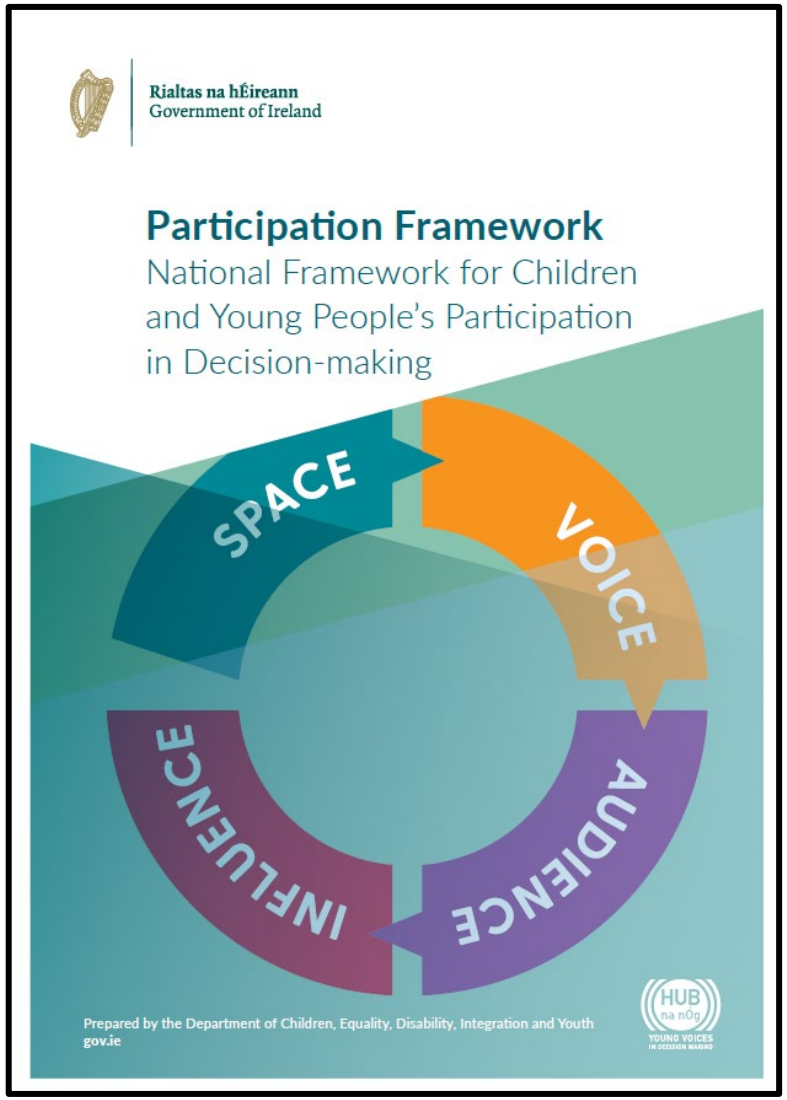
Providing Feedback

- **Full:**
  - Provide comprehensive feedback to children and young people outlining which of their views were accepted, which were not accepted and the reasons for these decisions. This feedback should also note who is implementing their views and what is happening next.
- **Friendly:**
  - Feedback or responses given by decision-makers to children or young people need to be in a format and language they understand. They need to be informed about the findings of a consultation or survey and about how their views were given due weight.
- **Fast:**
  - Children and young people quickly grow up and move on from things they are involved with, so decision-makers need to give them feedback acknowledging their contribution, outlining initial progress and giving information on next steps as soon as possible. This applies to all key stages and developments.
- **Followed-up:**
  - Decision-makers need to provide ongoing feedback and information to children and young people throughout the policy- or decision-making process.



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Parents



School Staff

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Pupils

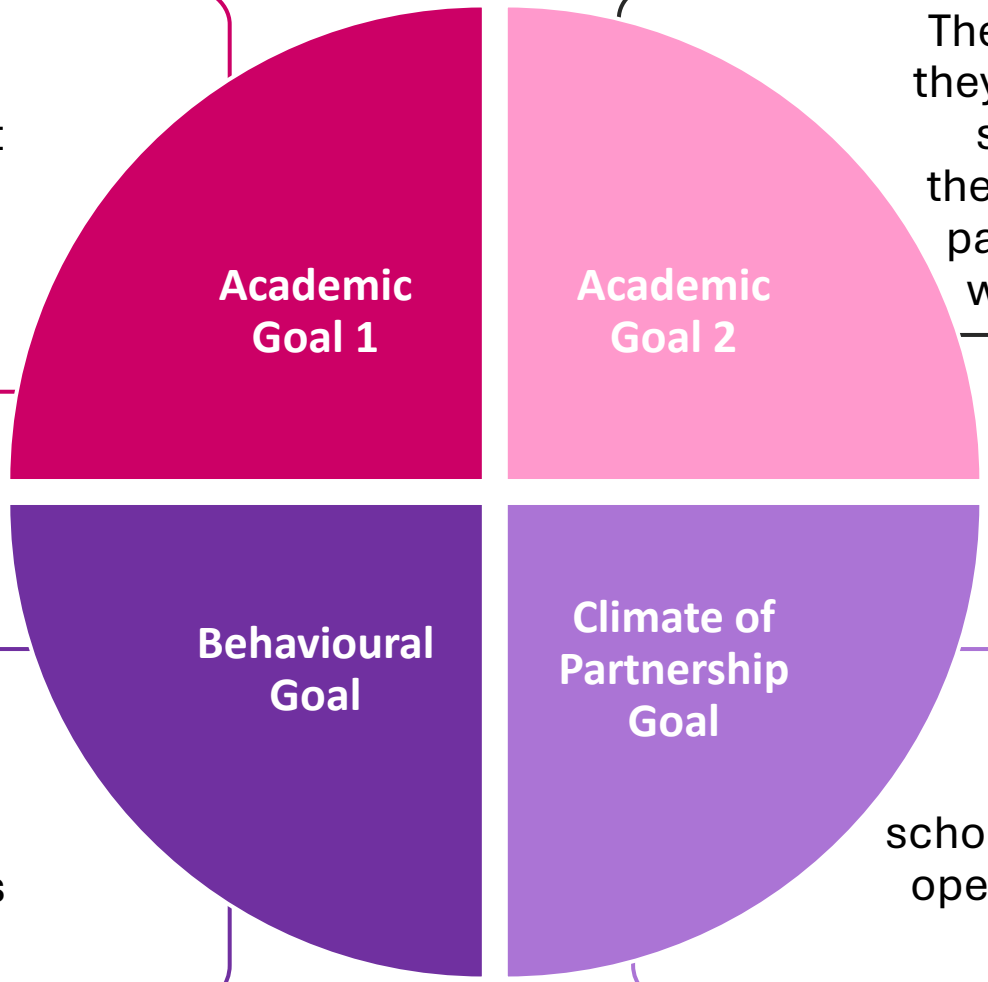
Action Team for Partnerships (ATP)



Community members



The academic goals are in the same curriculum areas that have already been identified in your SSE process and in your SIP



The ATP decide how they can support the school to achieve these goals with the participation of the whole community

Relates to student behaviours

Ensuring that the school environment is open and welcoming to partnerships

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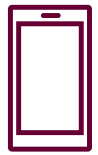
What next?



Contact PSI Co-Ordinator

Organise and Attend 2 Training Sessions





Gather your Action Team for Partnerships

Your ATP will have their plan written by the end of the 2nd training session



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Interested?

Phone	Email	Website
01-8874034	psi@npc.ie	PSI | NPC

NPC SUPPORTING PARENTS SUPPORTING CHILDREN

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Department of Education

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What we discussed:

- **Our current understanding of child agency and participation**
- **Child Agency and Participation**
  - Classroom Level: Learning, Teaching and Assessment
  - School Level: Decision-Making
- Useful Links:
  - Whole School Curriculum Guidance
  - Child Participation Framework
  - SSE Circular