

SLSS Discussion Document

February 2001

Introduction

The remit of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) is to offer co-ordinated support to second level schools involved in the Transition Year Programme (TYP), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). The remit also extends to the support of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in schools. This will include support in areas such as teaching and learning methodologies, the curriculum aspect of school development planning, enterprise education, work experience, school-industry-community links citizenship education and a range of other generic areas. It is also intended that the SLSS will support future change in other areas as agreed.

This move towards coherence provides an opportunity to promote a strategic approach to the provision of support for second level schools and to construct a rationale to counter the ad hoc approach which is currently the norm. It also provides an opportunity to approach support from the point of view of the learner by asking “What are the learning experiences we want students to have?”, “What competences do teachers need in order to provide these experiences?” and “How can we help to provide teachers with these competences?”

This document takes as its focus the short term development of the SLSS. The time scale is to the end of the 2002-2003 school year. The task of co-ordinating and cohering the existing programme support services and expanding their remit in that time scale is the immediate challenge and this document attempts to deal with the issues that arise from that. The SLSS must also use this time to develop capacities to engage with the longer term task of supporting teaching and learning in an era of review and revision at Junior and Senior Cycle which we will be facing into in the coming years.

1. Issues to Consider:

1.1. Immediate Concerns

1.1.1. Co-ordination and coherence in provision will mean greater collaboration between the existing support teams. This will bring change and implies the need for a shared sense of purpose and a renegotiated understanding of the sense of team identity.

1.1.2. It is recognised that there are still areas of vulnerability in all three programmes and that in the short term a degree continuing programme specific support will be necessary. An immediate priority for each programme support team will be to establish where each programme currently is in terms of implementation and what the projected support needs will be to the end of the 2001-2002 school year. An objective and rigorous audit will be a factor in establishing the capacity of the SLSS to meet broader system needs.

1.1.3. A crucial task for the SLSS team as a whole over the coming months will be to reflect on the expanded remit, on the nature of the broader system needs to be met and to construct a vision for how the team should proceed and where its contribution will lie in the future

1.2. Growing Capacity

1.2.1. If the existing support teams remain focused on programme specific support then their capacity in terms of meeting broader system needs will be limited and as a consequence their utility in the longer term will be open to question.

1.2.2. It will be necessary to establish what the broader generic needs of schools are and to grow the capacity of the SLSS to meet these needs. It will be important initially to exercise prudence in what we promise to schools. We should only offer what we have the capacity to deliver reliably.

1.2.3 Strategies to increase capacity will need to be put in place. Central to this will be increasing the coherence of the SLSS, making provision for the development of the SLSS team and the creation of a database of expert individuals on whom the SLSS team can draw in order to meet the diverse needs of schools.

1.2.4. Such a growth in capacity will be necessary to allow the SLSS to meet the needs of schools as identified through the School Development Planning (SDP) process. The SLSS should become a natural point of contact for schools seeking assistance in meeting needs identified through the SDP process.

1.2.5. Over the coming years we are likely to see considerable change in the area of assessment for learning in schools particularly in the Junior Cycle. Changes in techniques and modes of assessment will have implications for the professional development of teachers. As a longer term strategy the SLSS team should develop its capacity to meet the professional development needs of teachers in this area as they emerge.

2. Coherence:

2.1. Present Position

2.1.1. The support teams currently in place are focused on programme specific provision and until recently engaged in little or no co-ordinated inter team planning. The notion of greater coherence in the work of the support teams is central to the success of the SLSS. Coherence, if properly achieved, will enable greater efficiency in the provision of support and an improved capacity to meet the diversity of need in schools. It is possible to propose a number of models for improving coherence.

2.2. Generic Topics Model

2.2.1. Coherence could be pursued by focusing on generic topics across the existing teams. There are two broad categories of topic on which attention might focus:

1. Programme (and subject) related generic topics such as, for example, project work, enterprise education, work experience, programme co-ordination, programme review.
2. Broader whole school issues such as, for example, curriculum planning, mixed ability teaching, teaching and learning strategies, assessment for learning.

2.3. Shared Tasks Model

2.3.1. Progress could also be achieved by cohering around a range of tasks which address shared needs across the programmes. Examples might be:

- An editorial task group to co-ordinate the development, writing and production of an SLSS Journal, resource materials and web sites. Such co-ordination would ensure the greatest possible utility of the materials and counter the risk of duplication.
- A task group to open conversations with Third Level Education Departments on issues such as accreditation for ICD courses and the design of accessible post graduate diploma courses to meet identified needs.
- A task group to undertake a research project to quantify the extent of the difficulties facing schools in releasing teachers for ICD events and to propose a range of workable solutions.
- A task group to examine issues related to the domain of work experience such as transfer of learning, models of work experience, personal reflection, value of part time work, progression across programmes.

2.4. Coherent Regions Model

2.4.1. Coherence of the SLSS could also be achieved by ensuring that Regional Development Officers (RDOs) held responsibility for common geographical regions. Currently there is little coincidence between the regions for which RDOs have responsibility across the programmes. Co-operation, coherence and innovation might flow from:

- Establishing a coherent regional presence for the SLSS which would offer schools a local 'one stop shop' to which they might turn for support in meeting a wide range of needs.
- Regional SLSS teams where each team member embraced as a second agenda the task of helping schools to meet their broader staff development needs within the region.
- Establishing working relationships between RDOs and Education Centres at local level around the agenda of meeting local needs.
- Establishing local networks of schools along the lines of those currently operating in the LCVP. Establishing partnerships with subject associations as in current TYP practice.
- Strategies developed locally to approach generic topics across the programmes in a coherent way.
- Strategies developed locally for meeting the needs of Irish language schools.

This regional model has the attraction of providing a local point of contact for schools, flexible local response and the potential for the building of long term relationships between the SLSS and schools locally. Regional teams might be encouraged to develop a strong sense of autonomy with responsibility and control of resources devolved to them within the national framework. This model can readily co-exist with the two models described at 2.2 and 2.3.

2.4.2. In moving towards a coherent regional model some difficulties arise, for example:

- Geographical location of RDOs.
- Matching regions across programme teams
- Reluctance of RDOs to lose contact with schools with which they have developed excellent relationships over time.
- Number of RDOs in different teams, eight in LCA support, five each in LCVP and TYP support.

2.4.3. Two possible routes by which progress could be made suggest themselves:

1. Five regions could be designated on the basis of ensuring an equal number of schools in each one. This might not mean an equal number of schools participating in each programme. One RDO from the TYP team, one RDO from the LCVP team and one or two RDOs from the LCA team would be assigned to each region. This approach might mean the transfer of some RDOs between programmes to permit more reasonable geographical assignments.

2. The regional structure adopted by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) could be used as the basis for providing a regional presence for the SLSS. This structure provides for nine regions nationally and each region contains approximately the same number of schools. There are currently eighteen RDOs. In this scenario two RDOs would be assigned to each region. This would mean that no regional team had all of the programme specific skills at its disposal and each team would draw on the wider resources of the SLSS as necessary.

3. Education Centres:

3.1. Links with SLSS

3.1.1. A strategic approach is needed to stitching second level support into the fabric of the Education Centre network in the way that primary level support already is. Where regional SLSS teams existed it would be possible to 'link' a team member to one or more Education Centres locally. The role of the regional team would be to assist the Education Centre in providing suitable ICD opportunities for second level teachers and schools. The key contribution of SLSS team members in this scenario would not necessarily be their programme or subject specific skills but rather the wealth of expertise and experience in identifying needs and designing, planning and organising ICD events which characterises the SLSS personnel.

3.2. Accredited Courses

3.2.1 In the event that appropriate and accessible post graduate diploma courses (such as the Citizenship Education Diploma in Curriculum Studies from the University of Dublin, Trinity College) can be designed and put on offer in outreach centres, the regional SLSS team could play a role in publicising these courses locally, in recruiting teachers to participate, in identifying suitable presenters and generally assisting the Education Centres in offering these courses.

3.3. Local Networks

3.3.1 If we view teachers as professionals then we must also consider them capable of creating their own agendas for professional development. The notion of providing teachers with opportunities to meet locally in order to identify and devise strategies for meeting their own professional development needs has been tested in local networks of schools by the LCVF support team. Granville (1999)¹ recommended that " A network of local school clusters should be developed from the current LCVF network ... in conjunction with Education Centres and supported by the national Support Service". He further commented that the maintenance of the local networks "requires a sustained programme of work between events, of a kind that realistically can only be maintained by a dedicated professional support service".

3.3.2. Regional SLSS teams would be ideally placed to establish, energise and sustain networks of schools based around Education Centres. Such network meetings involve little participant travel and when held in the afternoon minimise disruption. The potential for addressing generic issues and topics across the programmes at such meetings is enormous.

4. Continuing Support:

4.1. Programme Support

4.1.1. Every year in schools staff members with no previous experience of particular programmes engage with them for the first time. While this process is helpful in exposing greater numbers of teachers to opportunities for personal and professional development, difficulties arise for teachers because the transfer rate of new skills between staff members within schools is low.

4.1.2. The consequence is that transformation in school cultures of teaching and learning is slow and that the methodologies promoted by the new programmes have not yet become deeply embedded. It is increasingly clear that transformation of this nature will require considerable time.

4.1.3. A continuing support system is therefore necessary in which teacher professional development is seen, not as an event with finite boundaries, but as an ongoing process.

4.1.4. Local networks of schools based around Education Centres and supported by regional SLSS teams would be an ideal vehicle for offering support for continuing professional development.

4.2. Subject Support

4.2.1. The SLSS has the experience and expertise to assist in the training of newly constituted subject support teams in generic areas of inservice delivery. The SLSS team would also be in a position to provide a mentor in close regional proximity to members of new subject support teams.

4.2.2. Intensive support for new syllabi being introduced at Senior Cycle is offered for a limited period of time. There is no provision for continuing support other than the provision made, with limited capacity, by subject associations for their members. There is a need for a strategic approach to continuing support in order:

1. To supplement and protect the investment in the intensive phase of support for new syllabi in the areas of both content and methodology and to meet emerging needs over time.

2. To address generic issues and topics relevant to Senior Cycle subjects, for example Enterprise as a topic in the Business group of subjects.

3. To provide support for entirely neglected Junior Cycle subjects where the potential for a focus on methodology is great.

4.2.3. Key partners in the provision of continuing support for subjects across the curriculum will be the subject associations and the Education Centre network. Relationships could be established between the SLSS and individual subject associations under the auspices of the Subject Association Representative Group (SARG), assistance could be offered in conducting needs analyses across the curriculum. The regional SLSS team could in short become enablers and capacity multipliers for the subject associations in offering quality ICD programmes to their members regionally. The subject specific expertise required to offer such programmes resides within the associations and could be identified and recruited locally.

4.2.4. It is likely however that subject support will become a longer term aspiration of the SLSS due to the other concurrent demands on the existing team. It is possible to suggest some ways in which the capacity of the SLSS might be increased in order to engage with the subject support agenda more quickly.

1. Additional National Co-ordinators might be appointed to take overall responsibility for broad subject groupings. For example:

- Languages Group (*English, Gaeilge*)
- Modern Languages Group (*French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Japanese*)
- Science Group (*Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Physics and Chemistry*)
- Mathematics Group (*Mathematics, Applied Mathematics*)
- Business Studies Group (*Accounting, Business, Economics, Economic History*)

- Applied Science Group (*Agricultural Science, Agricultural Economics, Home Economics*)
- Technologies Group (*Engineering, Technical Drawing, Construction Studies, Technology*)
- Humanities Group (*History, Art, Music, Classical Studies, Latin, Hebrew Studies, Ancient Greek*)
- Social Group (*CSPE, Geography, SPHE*)

2. At local network level teachers might be appointed from the same subject groupings to work with the SLSS team. These would be short term appointments and might involve release for an agreed number of days per year.

5. Immediate Starting Points:

5.1. Draft a communication for all schools and concerned bodies introducing the SLSS formally and setting out its broad intent.

5.2. Make the SLSS available to assist in the design and delivery of a training / induction programme for new subject support teams. Provide a mentoring service to new subject support team members.

5.3. Coordinate planning of ICD events for 2001-2002 across the three senior cycle programmes in a way which minimises disruption to schools and takes advantage of opportunities to minimise duplication in generic topic areas. Communicate this schedule to all schools in early September 2001.

5.4. Each support service should conduct an audit of where their programme currently stands in terms of implementation and projected support needs to the end of the 2001-2002 school year.

5.5. Establish an SLSS editorial team founded around the informal cross-programme team currently working on projects with the Enterprise Boards and the Irish Fair Trade Network.

5.6. Establish an SLSS team to undertake / commission research into the difficulties faced by schools in releasing teachers to engage in incareer development opportunities and propose a range of workable solutions.

5.7. Establish a working group representative of the SLSS and other interest groups to examine the domain of work experience at second level. A wide range of issues such as models for work experience, effectiveness, learning outcomes, transfer of learning, value of part time work, coordination and teacher expertise could usefully be explored with a view to offering insights into how learning from work experience might be improved.

5.8. Establish a team to open dialogue with third level Education Department/s to examine the potential for developing a Diploma in Curriculum Studies which could be outreached to Education Centres. Such a diploma course would be focused on the

professional development needs of coordinators and teachers of the new senior cycle programmes.

5.9. Put in place a professional development programme for the SLSS team to ensure that each member is more fully familiarised with each of the programmes and to develop the capacity of the team to meet the broader needs of schools.

5.10. Move towards regionally coherent SLSS teams by September 2001. These teams will begin the process of building strong links with principals and ensuring that schools are aware of what the SLSS can offer in terms of programme specific and broader system support.

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