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Small steps to success: A structured assessment model for learners with SEND at The Sea View Trust

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

This project centres on the development and implementation of a highly structured assessment model—**Small Steps to Success (SS2S)**—designed to support learners with Generic Learning Difficulties (GLD) across a specialist all-age school. The model breaks learning into incremental, measurable steps, enabling educators to track progress with precision and respond swiftly to individual needs. It offers a robust alternative to traditional assessment frameworks, aligning with national standards while remaining flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of SEND learners.

Introduction

Led by a senior SEND leader with over 20 years of experience, the initiative was developed within a large specialist school serving pupils aged 4 to 19. The school is part of a Multi Academy Trust in the North West of England and caters to learners who require highly structured and differentiated approaches to learning. The SS2S model was born out of a need to move beyond outdated tools like P Levels and teacher judgement, which lacked the nuance and developmental alignment necessary for meaningful assessment.

The leadership team recognised that existing systems did not adequately reflect pupils' holistic progress. Following the Rochford Review and the national shift to assessment without levels, they undertook a diagnostic process informed by internal data, pupil needs, and national policy. The result was a bespoke framework that could track progress across subjects and developmental stages, while also supporting preparation for adulthood.

Implementation

The SS2S model is built around the **STEP Progress Framework**, which includes 24 developmental steps across all subjects. The first seven steps are pre-subject specific and applicable to all curriculum areas, while steps 8 to 24 are mapped to subject-specific expectations from Early Years to Year 4. Each step is broken down into five sub-steps, with progress recorded using four descriptors: *Introduced*, *Completed with support*, *Completed independently*, and *Generalised*.

Key Features of the Model

- **Cross-subject consistency:** A step in English mirrors the same step in Maths or Science.
- **Termly review cycles:** At least three assessment points per year.
- **Embedded TA involvement:** Teaching assistants play a key role in continuity and insight.
- **Structured reporting:** Supports EHCP reviews and external moderation.

The model was first trialled in English, followed by Mathematics. Foundation subject tools are currently under review to improve precision. Staff received whole-school training, and subject leads refined frameworks to ensure developmental accuracy. A comparability table was developed to align SS2S with national and specialist tools, and a regional curriculum group was established for external moderation.

To support delivery, assessment weeks were introduced to protect staff time, and parents were trained to understand the STEPS data shared each term. Monitoring included internal and external moderation, lesson observations, and planning reviews.

Impact and Outcomes

The SS2S model has had a transformative impact on teaching, learning, and assessment across the school. It has enabled consistent progress tracking and supported strong academic gains through clear developmental pathways. Learners benefit from repeated practice and skill reinforcement, which leads to sustained improvement and increased engagement.

Staff confidence in assessing and supporting learners with SEND has grown significantly. Teachers now have a shared language for assessment and a clearer understanding of how to set challenging yet realistic expectations. Communication with parents and external stakeholders has improved, with families better able to understand and support their child's progress.

Recent Ofsted feedback (February 2025) highlighted the school's high aspirations and expertise in understanding and meeting pupils' additional needs. Inspectors praised the SS2S model for enabling pupils to progress through developmental milestones with success and for fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Key Strengths of the SS2S Model

- **Alignment with pre-key stage standards:** Ensures progress is measured against recognised national benchmarks.
- **Specialist-focused framework:** Reduces the risk of misjudging learners by mainstream expectations.
- **Evidence-based approach:** Proven effective in capturing small but meaningful progress.
- **Supports multiple learning styles:** Incorporates visual aids, physical representations, and technology-assisted assessments.
- **Fair and accurate assessment:** Addresses barriers faced by learners with physical, cognitive, or communicative difficulties.



More inclusive high-quality teaching



Improved parental/carer satisfaction



Increased engagement of learners with SEND

Sustainability and Scalability

To sustain impact, the school has:

- Integrated SS2S into SEND policies and daily practice.
- Migrated to a digital platform for real-time tracking and reporting.
- Appointed a Data Manager to oversee assessment analysis and reduce staff workload.
- Partnered with other specialist schools to refine tools and share best practice.

The model has also been adapted to assess Independent Living Skills, using the same sub-step framework to track progress in functional tasks such as making a cup of tea—further supporting preparation for adulthood.

SS2S is now being rolled out across other schools within the trust, including mainstream and specialist settings. Fidelity is maintained through staff training, moderation, and digital solutions. The model is flexible enough to be adapted to different contexts while retaining its core developmental structure.

Conclusion

The Small Steps to Success model offers a powerful, inclusive, and measurable approach to assessment for learners with SEND. By breaking learning into manageable steps and aligning with national standards, it ensures that every learner—regardless of starting point—can demonstrate progress. The model supports educators, empowers families, and prepares pupils for lifelong success.



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