What is an early win? An early win is the implementation of a small outcome or objective that can be realized quickly and early in a project's timeframe. In the context of an SLDS project, all early wins should align and be consistent with the larger project, although it may not be in its final format.

It is critical to be strategic when planning the project's early win(s). Consider questions such as, "What will get you the biggest bang for your buck?" or, "What will cause leadership, stakeholders, and policymakers to sit up and take notice of the project?" Early wins are about making the SLDS project become "real"—something of use and value to its stakeholders—so that the SLDS team can increase buy-in. Early wins may include the release of a useful data product or service for stakeholders as the SLDS program begins, helping cast the larger vision of the role and purpose of the SLDS.

> An **early win** is the implementation of a small outcome or objective that can be realized quickly and early in a project's timeframe.

A strategically planned early win can have several benefits:

- *Builds credibility and trust.* As the project is in its early stages, confidence in the project, development staff, and project leadership is critical. Early wins will help bring credibility to the team and project, as well as build confidence among the SLDS project team.
- *Showcases the benefits to come once the system is built.* Early wins help others see the advantages the SLDS will bring and the value of the project.
- *Encourages participation in the SLDS.* Stakeholders are given a better understanding of the vital role that they play and the potential of the SLDS project. This builds excitement for the SLDS and encourages stakeholders to depend on the SLDS for data.
- *Builds momentum for a larger win later.* As important as it is to have an early win, this technique only works once or twice and in the short term. After the project team has established the momentum that an early win provides, the team needs to capitalize on that momentum, using the newfound credibility and confidence to develop the next, larger piece.

Engage Stakeholders

Early wins should involve stakeholders. After all, the objective of the early win is to provide something tangible for stakeholders to "see or touch." Engaging stakeholders will add value to the SLDS project. Specifically, engaging stakeholders will

- help identify stakeholder needs and pain-points for the design of a useful product/service, since wins cannot be 'created in a vacuum';
- build a sense of collaboration around the SLDS;
- provide a resource that answers stated stakeholder needs; and
- demonstrate that the SLDS team is listening and responding to input and feedback.

Plan and Create

As stated above, strategic planning is key to the successful rollout of an early win. As the SLDS team plans for and creates an early win, the following should be considered:

- *Reflect on stakeholder needs or feedback.* As stakeholders are engaged in the project, they provide comments and requirements. Commonalities or similarities they have provided in their comments and requirements should be carefully considered. Think about a product or service that could alleviate fears and start to bring the SLDS to life.
- I*dentify potential early wins that can be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time and will make a tangible, real difference for stakeholders.* Any early win must be an obvious win—a real result that can be put on paper or made real in ways that everyone can observe. Using data is important in any SLDS project, but in the context of an early win, the project team must define specifically what the result will be: a new product or a measurable change for the better.
- *Select a solution that is achievable, quick, and easy to compile.* Above all, the project team must be absolutely certain it can accomplish the win. Failure to do so will do great damage to the project, with the SLDS's credibility often being the first victim. Not accomplishing the win sends signals that the project may not be feasible or that the outcomes cannot be produced as anticipated or on time.
- *Use a small number of readily available datasets.* Using data or datasets that are already available substantially decreases the risks related to achievability and allows for a quicker turnaround of the early win deliverable.
- *Create a report that does not necessarily need to be made publicly available.* Often, the report or information is shared with a select group of stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, or policymakers as a proof of concept, and is password protected. The early win is only of use if it is perceived as important to some or all of the stakeholders. It must be symbolic of the larger SLDS project, and the benefits of the early win must be consistent with those of the larger project.
- *Ensure that the product or service is in an area that is non-threatening to most of the stakeholders.* Datasets such as student assessment data can be viewed as high-risk, and are therefore not appropriate when seeking an early, easy win. The key is to start with non-threatening datasets such as enrollment. While many of the stakeholders may already be on board, this is an opportunity to win over some of the naysayers by quelling some of their fears.

Early Wins that Increase Data Sharing - State Examples

District of Columbia
One of the largest community-based organizations (CBOs) in DC's SLDS network was reluctant to share its service participation data, so the SLDS project team decided to publish an extensive report without this CBO's historical data. The CBO realized that if its data were not published, the whole story would not be told. The CBO eventually submitted over 10 years of historical student data that allowed the SLDS team to publish a report that highlighted what services students were receiving, showed if there were complementary services other CBOs were providing, and identified gaps in services. This report was the impetus for getting all college access providers to understand that they have to collaborate in order to increase college graduation rates.

New Hampshire
New Hampshire developed an early warning system (EWS) available to all high school and district educators in the state. The EWS was initially developed for grades 9–12 using data that are currently collected, with an additional update to the attendance data for the first 20 days of school. Principals and guidance counselors are now using the EWS. With a clear picture and understanding of the value of the EWS, stakeholders are now anxious to help enhance the system to include grades 3–8 and assist with additional data collections to report on other critical EWS indicators.

Release and Follow-Up

When releasing an early win, the product/service should be publicized and celebrated as a win, at least with stakeholders, leaders, and/or policymakers. How the early win should be used should also be communicated. A misunderstood or misused product or dataset will be a win for no one. When an early win is publicized, released, and explained effectively, it can then be an effective tool to create or support a "culture of data use" among stakeholders, leaders, or policymakers, which helps with the sustainability of any SLDS.

Once the early win is released, however, the SLDS team's work is not finished. To ensure that stakeholders continue to return to the system, the product/service and its content should be kept up-to-date. Use the new release as an opportunity to learn how to better meet stakeholder needs by asking for feedback, and respond in kind. The quick win may be an effective means of opening lines of communication to foster understanding of the SLDS project, support sustainability, and expand stakeholder engagement.

Early Wins that Reduce LEA Burden - State Examples

North Dakota
Through stakeholder engagement, the state identified reporting requirements that were a huge district burden. In response, North Dakota began collecting enrollment data directly from the statewide student information system (SIS) instead of requiring the local education agencies (LEAs) to send the same data to the department. The LEAs are only required to validate the information before official submission. The state also worked directly with assessment vendors so assessment data never had to be collected from the LEAs for inclusion in the SLDS. This action significantly reduced the reporting burden for stakeholders, and it also brought in assessment data for teacher-level reports through a simple early warning indicator.

Kentucky
The state released early childhood profiles that included county-level data about children and poverty; daycare and preschool services; information about economic and disability services for children in publicly funded preschool programs; and preliminary findings from the state's kindergarten readiness screener. For the SLDS project, this did not involve a large amount of staff time because the data were already available from other publications or sources and aggregated at the county level. It was primarily a matter of rearranging data and providing it together in a single report.

Additional Resources

Spiro, Jody. (2012, April). Winning Strategy: Set Benchmarks of Early Success to Build Momentum for the Long Term. *JSD*, pp. 10-16.

Stakeholder Communication: SLDS Best Practices Brief
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best_practices.pdf

Stakeholder Engagement & Sustainability: Helping Stakeholders Get the Most from an SLDS
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Stakeholderengagement_Sustainability.pdf

Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit: Traversing 'Stakeholder Land'
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/target_team_stakeholderland.pdf