# SLDS Issue Brief

## Strategies for Situation-Based Communications

*In addition to establishing a communications plan to keep partner agencies and stakeholders informed about regular progress on the statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS), SLDS leaders need to be prepared to communicate information about the project in difficult or unforeseen circumstances. Situation-based communications strategies help address changing circumstances, establish priority messages about the SLDS, and clarify roles and responsibilities for disseminating those messages.*

*Following are four fictional situations based on challenges commonly faced by states with SLDS projects. Sample communications strategies for each situation were developed from discussions with state participants at meetings held in May and July 2014.*

### State A: An Advocacy Group Discouraging Parents from Allowing Student Data in the SLDS

The state has worked hard to communicate with stakeholders about the design, development, and implementation of its SLDS. The first project phase—linking K12 data to postsecondary data—is available to authorized users, including state education agency (SEA) program staff, local education agency (LEA) and school-level staff, public postsecondary staff, and some legislators. Data are provided at an aggregate level.

Recently, a parent advocacy group has begun publicly asking all parents to "exercise a parent's right" to opt out of having their child's information be collected and sent to the SEA for inclusion in the SLDS. Many parents are calling their state legislators and the governor's office and stating they will not allow the state to collect their children's information, which includes demographics, program- and service-related information, and assessment scores. More than half of the LEAs in the state have called the SEA for guidance.

**Key Considerations**

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needs to clarify for its LEAs and parents what type of student data must be collected and reported to the state and what type of data parents can opt out of having collected. Because parents are contacting legislators and state officials with their concerns, it is essential to clarify data collection practices at the state government level as well. The situation also provides an opportunity for the SEA to reiterate its privacy policies and demonstrate the value of including student data in the SLDS to help study and improve educational outcomes for students.

**ies** NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS
Institute of Education Sciences

**Possible Communications Strategy**

The SEA's communications strategy has two parts:

1. Public communications to help the agency get in front of the issue of data collection for the SLDS with outreach that is targeted at specific concerns and is coordinated across all SLDS partners

2. SEA-LEA communications to offer clear guidance and support to LEAs in managing concerns from parents

*Public Communications*

The goal for messages to parents and others concerned about data collection is to clarify how the state uses the data it collects. The student data gathered by schools and incorporated into the state's SLDS affect a variety of state services related to public education. The state uses these data to make decisions about education programs and to determine funding for programs and schools.

This message will be conveyed to parents and other interested groups online through "toolkits" of informational materials tailored for each audience group. These materials can include

- one-pagers addressing the services and support the SEA provides for the state's schools, what it means to "opt out" of contributing student data to the SLDS, and how schools benefit when students "opt in";
- a list of frequently asked questions covering which student data are collected, why they are collected, how they are used, and who sees the data, as well as security considerations such as de-identifying and storing data, vendor selection processes, and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations;
- technical documentation related to privacy, access, and security procedures to help provide transparency;
- social media outreach including public service announcements, videos, and other messages to address concerns in a manner that is engaging and easy to understand; and
- a mechanism for members of the public to submit questions and concerns to the SEA and for appropriate officials to respond to them.

Although the messages and materials may be developed in collaboration or consultation with other SLDS partners, the SEA will be the authoritative source for consistent information about SLDS data collection policies and procedures. The final materials will be shared with all SLDS partners so that they are familiar with the key messages and can point their own stakeholders to additional resources, if needed.

The content of informational materials about the SLDS can be strengthened through feedback from the advocacy groups and individuals concerned about the data collection. In addition to conducting outreach to individual groups to gauge their understanding and questions about the SLDS work, the SEA will host a town hall-style public forum to engage with parents and respond to their concerns directly. If further conversations are needed, the SEA will consider working with LEAs to hold regional meetings in different parts of the state.

Outreach to legislators and state officials will clearly explain what the SLDS is, how it is used, and how it helps support the state's education goals. All SLDS partners are encouraged to advocate for the SLDS and will have consistent talking points to use when communicating with policymakers.

*SEA-LEA Communications*

It is essential for the SEA and each LEA to be on same page regarding the messages being shared externally with parents and stakeholders. LEAs and schools may develop fact sheets and one-pagers to distribute to parents based on the SEA resources. The SEA and LEAs must both understand their individual and collective roles in communicating with parents about the SLDS and where concerned individuals can be referred for additional information.

This is also an opportunity to make sure that the LEAs fully understand why they collect and share student data with the state. In addition to informing programming and funding decisions, the SLDS can help LEAs by providing data to inform classroom instruction and streamlining federal reporting requirements.



**State B:
A Change in Governor**

The SEA is in the third year of a three-year SLDS grant to build a P-20W data system incorporating data from early childhood programs, the K12 system, and postsecondary institutions, as well as employment data from the state's Department of Labor. It has taken considerable work to convince some partners of the value of linking their data, but all have recognized the need to share data for policy and program evaluations and have signed on to the project.

The current governor has just lost a re-election bid. The incoming governor was heavily supported by advocacy groups concerned about how the state uses personal information across all policy areas, but particularly in education. As a result, all state agencies are under increased scrutiny related to their data collections. Some SLDS partners are now reconsidering whether to participate in the project. Despite waning support from partner agencies and the incoming governor, the SLDS grant requirements regarding the establishment of a P-20W system have not changed.

**Key Considerations**

One of the greatest challenges for the SEA and its SLDS partners will be to maintain support for the SLDS through the transition to the new governor's administration and into the future. This support will be critical not only to completing the SLDS grant requirements, but also to sustaining the system after federal grant funds are no longer available. To generate solid and lasting support, the SEA will need to engage the new governor's administration, public audiences including parents and the press, and existing SLDS partners that are increasingly hesitant about being involved in the project.

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**Possible Communications Strategy**

The SEA's communications strategy has two parts:
1. Communications about the leadership transition directed both to SLDS partner agencies and to the incoming governor's office
2. Ongoing public communications to inform the public, press, and parents about the use and benefits of the P-20W data system

*Transition Communications*

Even before the election, the SEA can begin shoring up the support base for the SLDS and anticipating questions that might be asked by new state officeholders and their supporters. Strategies for preparing for a smooth transition include the following:

- Solidify relationships with SLDS partner agencies and other project advocates. All executive-level agency leaders need to be in contact and on the same page about the goals and benefits of the project, as well as their agencies' roles. If memoranda of understanding or data-sharing agreements among data contributors have not yet been completed, focus on developing these agreements to formalize each agency's role in the project.
- Complete as much work on the project as possible before the transition to strengthen the project from the bottom up. Program and information technology (IT) staff will work across agencies on technical tasks, while agency executives will set high-level policy and guidelines for collaboration.
- Keep all partners, including districts and schools, informed about progress on the SLDS. The project team will demonstrate the system's benefits to educators and encourage them to become advocates for the system with their state representatives.

When the new administration is in place, SLDS partners will reach out early on to the new governor's office to explain the P-20W project and answer questions. This outreach will include a high-level overview of the system, including the agencies involved, the data being shared, and how the data will be used to answer policy questions for the partner agencies and the state. The partner agencies will develop a set of talking points to address the following:

- What data are collected and linked in the SLDS—as well as the data that are not collected—and why. Reviewing this information in detail will help increase transparency around the data system and address concerns about student privacy. It will also clarify that the system is not a new data collection, but rather a new tool for examining data the state already collects.
- How the SLDS can support the governor's policy goals by providing important insight into topics such as high school dropout prevention, closing student achievement gaps, postsecondary return on investment, workforce readiness, and the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs. This information should be tied to specific policies and goals from the new governor's platform.
- Privacy policies governing the storage and use of personally identifiable information as well as the use of aggregated data for reporting purposes. Discussion of the policies will include who can access SLDS data and for what purposes.
- Expected return on investment for the SLDS, both in terms of cost savings and in terms of benefits to the state from having access to longitudinal data.
- Examples of similar efforts under way in other state agencies as well as in other states, if appropriate.
- Details of the federal SLDS Grant Program and the state's obligations under the grant.

The partner agencies will also provide updates to their executive-level leaders on the project's progress to date, including privacy and security measures, procedures for storing and destroying data, and data governance policies. The governor or a member of his or her office will be invited to attend an SLDS data governance meeting.

Stakeholders from each SLDS sector—including early childhood, K12, postsecondary education, and workforce—will be encouraged to advocate for the SLDS with elected officials by asserting the SLDS's value to their work and their commitment to the project. It is essential that the messages created from the talking points above are used consistently among all advocates and are tailored to specific audiences.

*Public Communications*

The SEA will release information about the SLDS project online and to news media to help ensure that the goals and terms of the project are correctly understood beyond its immediate stakeholders. By providing accurate information about the SLDS and its benefits, the SEA can address

concerns and any misinformation put out by groups opposed to the project and lessen the pressure on the governor and legislature not to support the project. Communications and outreach to the public will include

- a fact sheet explaining the SLDS, the data it contains, and how those data are used;
- a summary of data historically collected by the state agencies and how those data have been used, emphasizing the agencies' record of data stewardship and security;
- a strategy for releasing project updates to parents, the media, and stakeholder groups;
- parallel efforts by P-20W partners advocating for the system;
- detailed information for parent organizations and school communities on data collection practices, identification procedures, and access to data; and
- a collection of success stories from other state agencies or other states engaged in similar efforts to use data to improve education policies and outcomes.

## State C: Advocacy Groups Raising Legal and Ethical Challenges to the SLDS

The SEA is in the final stages of building its SLDS and has developed a set of priority policy questions it hopes to begin answering by the end of the year. One of these questions is, "What is the employment level of students, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and high school, after completing K12 education?" The final stage of building the SLDS includes linking to workforce records, but the state has a state policy limiting the ability to link individual workforce records to other SLDS data.

Following a recent state board of education meeting at which the need to link to workforce data was discussed, a privacy advocacy group posted an item on its website stating that the linkage could violate state privacy laws. The web post was shared with a minority advocacy group that was previously unfamiliar with the SLDS but soon expressed outrage at the "potential unfair measurement" of minority students during testimony before the state legislature's workforce committee. A legislative inquiry was brought to the state board of education regarding the data being collected, the data-sharing agreements currently in place, and the involvement of legislative and advocacy groups in discussions around the data system. All work on the SLDS was ordered to stop, pending a legislative and legal review.

### Key Considerations
The SEA needs to look back on its project planning, data sharing, and policy question development processes to identify steps and miscommunications that led to the current situation. It is probable that state laws, stakeholder interests and concerns, and privacy and civil rights issues were not adequately reviewed while developing the state's grant proposal or the research agenda. The SEA also should determine how the project will move forward following the legislative inquiry. Going forward, transparent privacy policies, appropriate stakeholder involvement, strong executive support, and the swift resolution of the current situation will be essential.

### Possible Communications Strategy
The SEA's communications strategy has two parts:

1. Project team communications to help clear the lines of communication among SLDS staff, mitigate current problems, and avoid similar situations in the future
2. Public communications to provide updates and respond to questions about the SLDS project and legislative inquiry

*Project Team Communications*
A strategy of internal communications will keep project partners informed about the situation, establish roles and responsibilities during the legislative inquiry, and clarify SLDS project goals. It is vital that executive leaders at each SLDS partner agency are fully aware of the project status and meet regularly to reach consensus on project decisions moving forward. Executives and legal counsel from all SLDS partner agencies will be briefed on the project's current status and the inquiry, including

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- the SLDS project goals, grant terms, and data sharing agreements already in place;
- the process for developing the research agenda and the specific data elements needed for the policy question under discussion;
- the types of personally identifiable information and data on small populations that are included in the SLDS, as well as how these data will or will not be treated in policy questions or data requests;
- data management practices, including access and data matching procedures;
- precedent for similar policy questions and legal requirements in other states; and
- a coordinated strategy for releasing public statements and responding to questions about the SLDS and the legislative inquiry.

In addition, the project parameters will be reiterated to the entire project team—including the data governance group and those responsible for setting the research agenda—to clear up any misunderstandings about what the data system is and is

not designed to do. Project leaders will revisit the process for developing policy questions to guide SLDS work to address shortcomings and determine whether additional stakeholders need to be involved in the future. They will work with the data governance group to anticipate other potentially controversial policy questions on the current research agenda and identify the stakeholders who need to be involved in answering those questions. They will also explore whether policy questions can be answered using proxy data from another source if the requested workforce data are not available, and whether existing statements about the purpose, scope, and use of the SLDS will need to change if workforce data cannot be integrated.

Project staff will receive regular updates on the status of the legislative inquiry, as well as the work that can and cannot be done while the inquiry is in progress. Project leaders will develop contingency plans to make up for lost time and keep the project moving once the inquiry has ended.

The project team will also communicate with federal SLDS program officers and grant administrators to keep them informed of the project and inquiry status and to discuss any necessary changes to the grant related to the incorporation of workforce data.

*Public Communications*
All SLDS partner agency executives and project leaders who may be called upon to give information as part of the legislative inquiry will be thoroughly briefed on the project as outlined above. In addition, all partner agencies will be part of a coordinated external communications effort. Project leaders will develop an initial press statement relating to the legislative inquiry for release by the state board of education. They will also establish a policy for responding to public inquires that identifies appropriate spokespeople across partner agencies and outlines talking points so that information about the project and legislative action are communicated consistently. The talking points will cover the facts of the legislative review and include positive statements about the strengths of the SLDS and the information it can provide to the state's educators and policymakers.

Partner agencies will also reach out to advocacy groups opposing the project to explain the goals of the SLDS, the policy questions it is designed to answer, and how those answers can lead to beneficial policy changes for their constituents. This outreach will provide context for controversial policy questions within the state's broader policy priorities. It will also focus on demonstrating that the benefits of the SLDS outweigh the risks and that the advocacy groups can contribute to making the research agenda successful with their support and resources. Outreach will take the form of meetings with advocacy group leaders, public forums to address concerns, and inviting group leaders to key discussions or data governance meetings as appropriate.

## State D: SLDS Project Running Behind Schedule

The SLDS project team is approaching the end of its grant period. The SLDS was branded early in its development and promoted often among the state's education community and legislators. Although the system has linked K12 data to postsecondary records and accounts have been created for 10,250 authorized users on the online data warehouse portal, the data system has not yet gone live. The IT director is determined to ensure that the data are 100 percent accurate and that all planned reports have been developed before officially launching the system.

With its grant money winding down, the SEA has approached the legislature for state funds to sustain the SLDS. Legislators are asking for more information about the system, including a specific launch date. News media have also begun asking questions about the system's status.

### Key Considerations
A gap has emerged between the expectations created by the project team's promotion of the SLDS and the actual availability of the system. With federal grant funds about to run out, the SEA needs to demonstrate the value of the system quickly and integrate it into its users' regular workflow in order to secure support to sustain the system in the future.

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### Possible Communications Strategy
The SEA's communications strategy has two parts:
1. Project team communications to establish realistic plans and timelines for the completion and release of SLDS tools and reports
2. Public communications to provide users, stakeholders, legislators, and the public with reliable information about the system's features and availability, including several reports as short-term wins

*Project Team Communications*
The first step for the SLDS project team is to determine the current status of the SLDS and develop a revised plan for rolling out system features. The project director will work with program and technical staff, including the IT director, to determine what data are in the system already, what data still need to be incorporated, and what resources can be leveraged to complete the work. Based on input from program and technical staff, the project director will develop

a new timeline for providing users with access to the SLDS and releasing reports and other data products, including specific dates for deliverables. The IT director's goal of 100 percent data accuracy and completion is not realistic; the team needs to focus on early wins to prove the value of the SLDS by releasing some products and features while others are still being developed. As necessary, the project director and agency executives will hold the IT director accountable for ensuring that his team meets new project deadlines.

*Public Communications*
Based on the revised project timeline, a new schedule for launching SLDS tools and granting access to users will be released. Dates for gaining access will be staggered for different user groups to allow for user training and for the project team to address any technical issues that arise. All user groups, including legislators and the public, will receive detailed communications about launch dates and the SLDS features they will be able to access.

Project leaders will work with the public information officer and program staff at the SEA to identify topics for reports and data releases that will create the biggest impact in demonstrating the value of the SLDS and that can be quickly released. Topics might be drawn from the state's policy priorities, such as economic and workforce development and college preparation. A publication schedule will be developed to release new products at regular intervals to maintain interest in the system.

In addition to new product releases, the project team will implement a schedule of updates on SLDS development and new features to data users, press, legislators, and other stakeholders. These updates may be monthly or quarterly, depending on need. The project team itself will hold regular meetings with partner agency executives to report on progress, update project timelines, and schedule user access and training.

## Additional Resources

Early Wins
*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/early_wins.pdf*

Effective Project Planning and Managing Change
*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/managing_change.pdf*

Everyone on Board: How to Engage Reluctant Stakeholders and Stakeholders Experiencing Leadership Transitions
*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/everyone_on_board_Jan2014.pdf*

Quick Guide to Branding and Promoting an SLDS
*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Quick_Guide_to_Branding_and_Promoting_an_SLDS.pdf*

Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States
*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best_practices.pdf*

Stakeholder Engagement and 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*