



SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide





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Introduction

Producing an enduring, efficient, and effective statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS)—a *sustainable* SLDS—is not a start-and-finish endeavor; there will always be more work to do to ensure it remains current and relevant. Questions of sustainability may appear daunting to states:

- How can we preserve funding?
- Can we handle changes in leadership?
- Are our stakeholders continually engaged?
- Does the data system give our stakeholders what they want? If not, how can it?

Sustainability can take many forms—the most important of which may often be showing the value of the data in informing decisions.

What is the Purpose of the SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide?

The *SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide* is a supplemental resource for the [SLDS Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool](#). The Self-Assessment Tool was created to support states as they examine their ability to sustain their SLDS. The sections of the Planning Guide align with the sections of the Self-Assessment Tool, and offer practical suggestions and resources for each step in the overall process of maintaining a sustainable SLDS.



Figure 1. The four sections of this document and the Self-Assessment Tool



Where do we begin?

First, conduct a self-assessment using the *SLDS Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool*. Gather core members of your state's SLDS team or, if you are at the beginning stage, establish the leadership team that will drive the planning of this effort.

This planning guide will serve as a resource if a state determines that it needs assistance in a certain area. If further assistance is needed, states should reach out to the State Support Team (SST) by logging on to GRADS360° at <https://nces.grads360.org> and filling out a request form under the Request Support tab. To request a GRADS360° account, simply email a request to support@sst-slds.org.



Section A: Stakeholder Support

1. Can you articulate a clear vision for your SLDS?

Having a clear mission and vision statement that underscores the reason for building an SLDS is fundamental to the project's success. These statements are the pivot point for all future discussions, and serve as reminders to stakeholders of the reason the work is being done. This is particularly valuable when important project decisions need to be made. As these statements are being developed, a state should give careful consideration to the questions that agencies, programs, and parents value with regard to data collection, analysis, and use. These statements should be reiterated during meetings and events to remind everyone of the reason for the work.

2. Have you tracked stakeholder awareness of your system?

Ideally, the SLDS should be designed from the start with input from all of the intended user groups. Identify key stakeholder groups at both the state and local levels early on to inform them about the project and begin to establish interest in and support for the system. Maintain close communication with these stakeholders throughout the design, development, and deployment phases through direct engagements to collect input.

3. Have you documented your stakeholders' support for the system?

As user satisfaction will ultimately determine SLDS success, be sure to listen to stakeholder input. Always communicate openly about the system: make sure stakeholders know you have heard them by responding to and acting on what they have told you (within reason). Also be sure to communicate the revisions or changes that have been made based on stakeholders' feedback. Not only will this improve the system, but it will also strengthen engagement and buy-in, and will help to foster a collaborative environment.

Additionally, brainstorm about how to create demand for the system and its product. Think strategically about creating use for all stakeholders, as they may be important allies when budget cuts or political pressures occur.

4. Do you have a stakeholder committee/advisory group?

Task a key group (or groups) with coordination of particular efforts, utilizing existing groups whenever possible. For example, stakeholder advisory groups, comprised of members from a range of stakeholder groups, can gather feedback from and speak for their respective groups. The type of initiative being addressed should determine which particular groups are represented. For example, do you need an IT or end-user perspective (or both)? A P-20W (early childhood through workforce) group of this sort may include school board representatives, superintendents, postsecondary representatives, representatives from other state agencies (e.g., labor, corrections, public assistance), policymakers, researchers, business



leaders, teachers, parents, etc. In addition, committees and advisory groups help to create a sense of ownership and common interest within the SLDS project and its stakeholders.

5. Does state legislation support the use of your system? If not, is this something your state has considered?

Chances are that some state legislative interests align with the goals of the SLDS project. While the information gained from an SLDS can be very useful to legislators in designing and evaluating education policies, often these decisionmakers do not fully appreciate the connection between the system (and its technical infrastructure) and the information it can provide. Pay attention to policy debates and legislative mandates in the state, and identify areas where the SLDS may fit into the discussion. State legislative liaisons can help bridge the gap in understanding by conveying the link between legislative objectives and SLDS project funding needs. Maintain a relationship with your state's liaison to help win legislators' support.

6. Have you provided appropriate methods of reports or dashboards for your stakeholders?

Provide legislators, educators, and other stakeholders with not only data, but answers to their questions. Show return on investment (e.g., short- and long-term student earnings after graduation, total number of students leaving the state after graduation, time it takes students to find jobs after graduation, high school feedback reports on college success, etc.). Identify the deliverables that can be most easily completed and tackle them for some quick wins. Delivering this valuable information will show stakeholders the true value of the SLDS.

7. Do you brand all reports/presentations based on SLDS data with the state SLDS logo so people see that the SLDS is providing useful information?

Belief in SLDS data use can be encouraged through effective branding. Help stakeholders to become aware of SLDS resources that they already use by applying the state's SLDS name and graphic to every product. This lets stakeholders know that they are already consumers of SLDS products and creates a positive association with the brand.

8. Do you have a communications and stakeholder engagement plan?

Every SLDS team should create and follow a clearly defined, carefully conceived outreach plan, as well as identify an owner for the plan. A communications plan should clearly define key information about the planned outreach (e.g., audiences that should be kept informed of SLDS development news, authors or leaders of each communication activity, methods and formats of communication to be used, key messages of each communication, desired outcome of the communication, and the dates and frequency of communications.) A



communications plan should also delineate in what instances communication should be one-directional (a simple communication of information) and in what instances communication should be two-directional (communication of information with the goal of soliciting feedback).

For more information:

- [Stakeholder Communication: SLDS Best Practices Brief](#)
- [State Approaches to Engaging Local K12 Stakeholders](#)
- [Engaging Postsecondary Stakeholders](#)
- [Engaging P-20W Stakeholders](#) (PPT Presentation)
- [Engaging Legislators to Secure Support for the SLDS](#) (PPT Presentation)



Section B: Ensuring Widespread Use of the SLDS

If an SLDS isn't being used—or isn't being used properly—then the benefits are not being realized. Fully engaged stakeholders will

1. **Know** the system and how to use it;
2. **Believe** that SLDS data use will help achieve project/program goals; and
3. **Use** SLDS data to drive decisionmaking.

By determining a data use strategy, states can ensure that they are making the SLDS system an essential resource for users.

1. Does your state clearly articulate whom the system was intended to be used by?

The P-20W system should be constructed around the needs of the data's *primary* users—the individuals who analyze and interpret data queried from the system, and may or may not be involved in decisionmaking. Drawing the line between primary and secondary users is a difficult decision, but attempting to design a system for all users is likely to result in an ineffective product that fails to meet the needs of any user.

2. Does your state document the stakeholders and how often they use the system?

Simply put, the ability to demonstrate who is using the system, and how often, can demonstrate where stakeholder engagement is strong, and where it is not. Reach out to stakeholder groups who are not using the system as frequently to determine where the issue lies. For example, is more training needed? Ensure that stakeholders have regular opportunities to provide feedback on the system's needs for improvement and strengths, including how they are using it. Feedback opportunities include help desk requests, stakeholder surveys, training sessions, and conferences.

3. Does your state know how stakeholders are using the system?

Review of stakeholder use of the system should be an early, and ongoing, endeavor. By documenting and communicating how the data are providing value from the beginning, states show a need for the system. User interviews should include questions about how stakeholders currently use data, the type of data they use, how they access the data, and their available resources. During interviews, request specific examples of use and make firsthand observations of the users in action. Users may be unable to articulate their data use, but the examples and observations help to discern between what users say and do.



4. Does your state provide training?

States have taken different approaches to training. Many states utilize partnerships with Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs), Institutions of Higher Education, teacher preparation programs, or not-for-profit organizations to provide training.

Training stakeholders to use both SLDS tools and the data itself is essential. Some states have created modules to help users navigate the SLDS tools, while others put on a “road show”: going out and working hands-on with the stakeholders to use the data. This keeps stakeholders in the loop and has them using the data from nascent phases of development. If end users are properly trained to collect and enter data at the onset, then the result will be quality data. Training stakeholders to understand and use the data in the system effectively will drive the system’s continued relevance.

For more information:

- Communicating Data Use to External Stakeholders: Issues and Advice from States (draft)
- Developing a Data Use Strategy (draft)
- [State Actions to Ensure Effective Data Use](#) (PPT Presentation)



Section C: Financial Support

The acquisition of funding or other resources from multiple sources of support—beyond federal grants—is critical to the longevity and ultimate success of an SLDS.

1. Do you have additional financial supports for the SLDS beyond federal funding?

Be aware of other funding options outside the federal arena. For example, some state agencies have asked their states to match federal funding. Others have kept the design and maintenance of the system separate, so the state could maintain the system even if a freeze was put upon the design work. Keep in mind that regular communication about the benefits of the SLDS with the legislature, Governor's Office, and the public is critical to gaining future funding.

2. Does the state know how much it will cost to support and maintain the system?

States/agencies are often asked to justify budget figures, and it is helpful to understand how much the system costs. An intensive account review/cost analysis—both before beginning work and throughout the life of the SLDS—can help mitigate any unforeseen issues that may arise. If the need to make difficult decisions arises, it is necessary to have this information at hand in order to prioritize costs. An in-depth cost analysis, done internally or by an external organization for added credibility, enables states to communicate the need for future state funding, as well as support from partner agencies.

3. Do you have a plan for securing long-term sources of funding?

Networking, reviewing both federal and private grant award notices, and coordinating with groups interested in SLDS outcomes are all methods of identifying alternative sources of funding and support. Be sure to cast a wide net, and consider state sources, local foundations, non-profits, and education advocacy groups in your outreach. In addition to being potential sources of funding, these groups may be able to advocate to the legislature for SLDS funding, and work to ensure that the SLDS is written into legislation with a secure funding stream.

Talk to potential supporters and find out what kind of return they would like to get on their investment. If the goals of both organizations align, an SLDS project has the potential to benefit both the education agency and the funding organization.



For more information:

- [Traveling through Time: The Forum Guide to Longitudinal Data Systems- Planning and Developing an LDS](#)
- [Alternative Sources of Support for SLDS Work: SLDS Best Practices Brief](#)





Section D: Return on Investment

To maintain and increase support for the SLDS, it is necessary to show that the end results were worth the significant investment of time, money, and resources.

1. Does your state understand the value of Return on Investment (ROI)?

ROI can be both quantitative (e.g., cost savings) and qualitative (e.g., equity across sectors). The SLDS can provide better understanding of the success of SEA and partner agency programs, enabling states to more effectively channel funding and seek outside support for exemplary programs. Additionally, because many benefits of the SLDS are not financial, many states are beginning to take the approach of documenting the value SLDS adds to *education* in their states. Be sure your state is aware just how many different facets the SLDS touches.

2. Is your state tracking your state's ROI?

A concrete example is a simple way to demonstrate the benefits of the SLDS. Whether it's lower software licensing costs, more accurate dropout tracking, a report on students entering the workforce, or more efficient operations, remember that ROI can take many forms. Have duplicate tasks been eliminated? Unnecessary training eliminated? Data quality improved? Take note—when defending the SLDS, even small qualitative improvements can add to a state's arsenal. Capture as many examples of ROI as possible. Investing time up front in measuring ROI will enable more effective marketing of the SLDS to the legislature, as well as other potential funding sources, in the future.

3. Does your state communicate ROI with stakeholders?

SLDS project supporters want to know that they have made a worthy investment. Tell them where their money has gone and how it has made a tangible difference. Show them the system's new capabilities. Providing reports, screen shots, or a live demonstration will help the stakeholders understand the SLDS team's accomplishments and how this work has advanced shared educational goals.

For more information:

- [Documenting & Quantifying Return on Investment](#) (PPT Presentation)