SLDS Topical Webinar Summary
Researcher Access to the SLDS

One of the greatest benefits offered by a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) is the ability to perform policy research and exploration of student outcomes using information from the system. Whether working with researchers within SLDS partner agencies or with those from external organizations, providing data for research purposes offers exciting opportunities for states—as well as challenges. Managing data requests, safeguarding privacy, and ensuring proper use are all tasks that must be approached with care and proper planning as states engage with researchers.

This publication examines the processes that Kansas, Virginia, and Kentucky have established to receive, evaluate, and respond to researcher requests for SLDS data.

Kansas

In Kansas, the process of receiving and responding to researcher requests for data is overseen by a Data Request Review Board (DRRB) within the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), which manages the K12 portion of the state's SLDS. The five-member board is composed of directors representing KSDE's three divisions and strives to ensure consistent treatment of data requests. The DRRB meets monthly to review the status of current requests and to act on any non-routine requests, such as those recommended for denial or monetary charge, and requests for personally identifiable information (PII). The DRRB can also meet virtually on an ad hoc basis for issues needing immediate attention.

KSDE maintains a web portal to collect the hundreds of data requests it receives each year. These requests, including those from researchers at KSDE and its SLDS partners as well as researchers from external organizations, are entered into an automated system for tracking and escalation. Because the agency does not have the resources to respond immediately to all requests, prioritization is one of the first goals of the request response process. Although the DRRB strives to approve all requests when possible, requests from SLDS partner agencies and requests for research that aligns strongly with the state's research agenda and education goals may be given priority.

Most requests flow through a routine sequence of interactions between the organization requesting the information and KSDE staff members involved in data management. However, the agency also has defined expedited and other special processes to handle non-routine requests. These processes are illustrated in Figure 1 (next page).

Routine Requests

Requests for non-confidential information are usually classified as routine and are almost always approved. Once the researcher submits a request in the web portal, the request manager at KSDE works with the requester to further clarify information about the research purpose and the data needed. Some of the questions addressed during this stage include:

- *Does KSDE have the data?* If the SLDS does not contain the data requested, or if the data are in a format that cannot be distributed, KSDE might not be able to fulfill the request.
- *Are the data publicly available?* If KSDE has already published the data online, requesters are directed to the public website.
- *Are the data subject to KORA?* The Kansas Open Records Act requires certain types of information to be available to the public. KSDE must determine whether it is legally obligated to provide the information requested.

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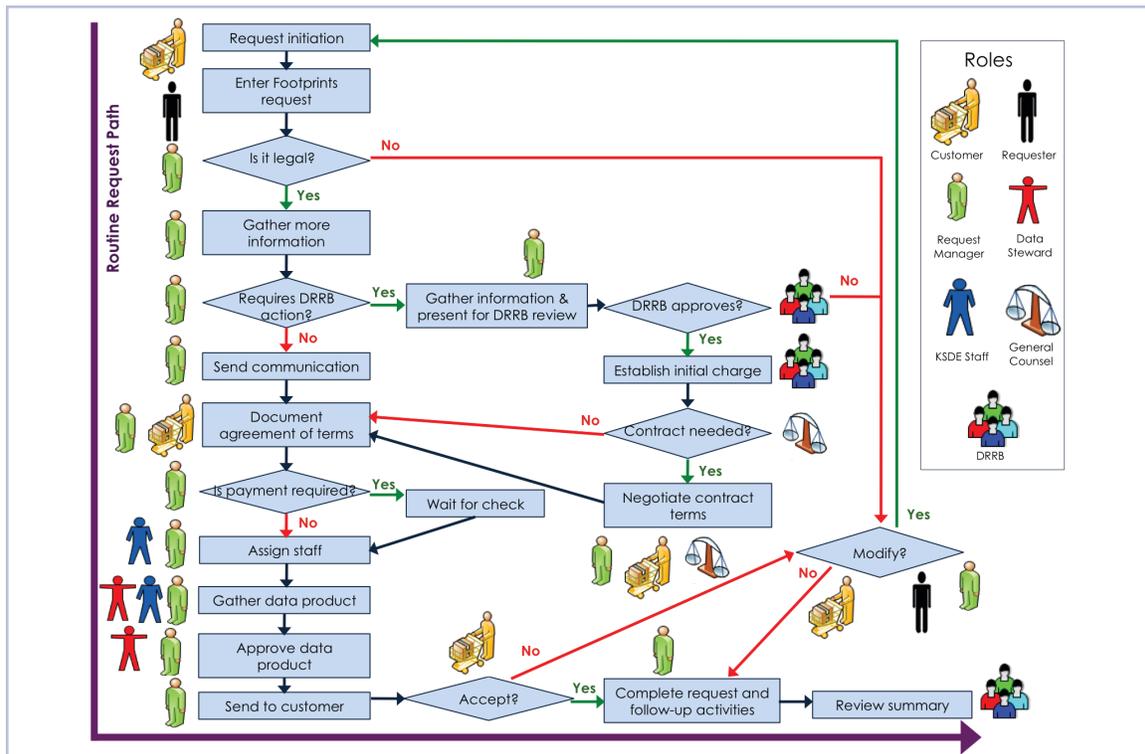Institute of Education Sciences

Figure 1. KSDE Data Request Process

If the data can be provided legally and without special action from DRRB, the request manager and the researcher clarify the data needed and KSDE staff members begin compiling the data. The KSDE data steward responsible for the relevant data must approve all reports and data files before they are shared with the researcher.

Non-Routine Requests
Certain types of requests, including those for PII or other restricted data, require approval from DRRB. In these cases, a primary investigator advocate is assigned to work with the researcher. The primary investigator advocate is a KSDE employee with a strong data background who can act as a liaison between the agency and the researcher in discussions about research purposes and the desired data. The interaction between the researcher and the primary investigator advocate streamlines the data request process and helps ensure the researcher receives the correct dataset based on research needs and available data. Often the researcher will also attend a DRRB meeting to explain the research more fully and answer questions directly from the board. If DRRB approves the request, KSDE's legal counsel helps implement the contracts and data use agreements required for the specific data being shared.

If a request requires significant staff time—usually defined as four hours or more—or if the requester asks for publicly available information in an alternate format, KSDE may decide to charge for the request. Standard rates are 25 cents per printed page of information produced, 12.5 cents per electronic page, and $37.37 per hour of staff time. All

charges must be approved by the DRRB. DRRB must also sign off on any request that is denied in order to ensure that consistent standards are applied in reviewing data requests.

Requests for P-20 Data
KSDE's data request portal receives research requests for P-20 data as well as for K12 data. If a research project will involve higher education information, a representative of the Kansas Board of Regents is invited to join DRRB meetings to consider the request. The Board of Regents representative must approve the request before P-20 data can be released. He or she can veto a request but cannot compel the DRRB to fulfill a request it would otherwise deny. When the Board of Regents receives a data request with a K12 component, it will similarly invite a designated KSDE representative to help review the request.

Additional Resources for Researchers
To help researchers navigate the data request process more efficiently, KSDE offers two online training programs for those seeking to use SLDS data. The first training module introduces the SLDS and public data sources, explains KSDE's data request process, and offers an overview of ethical data use. The second module is intended for researchers requesting restricted-use data and covers KSDE's data access and use policy for personally identifiable student information. This module also contains best practices for data storage and destruction based on KSDE's data use agreements.
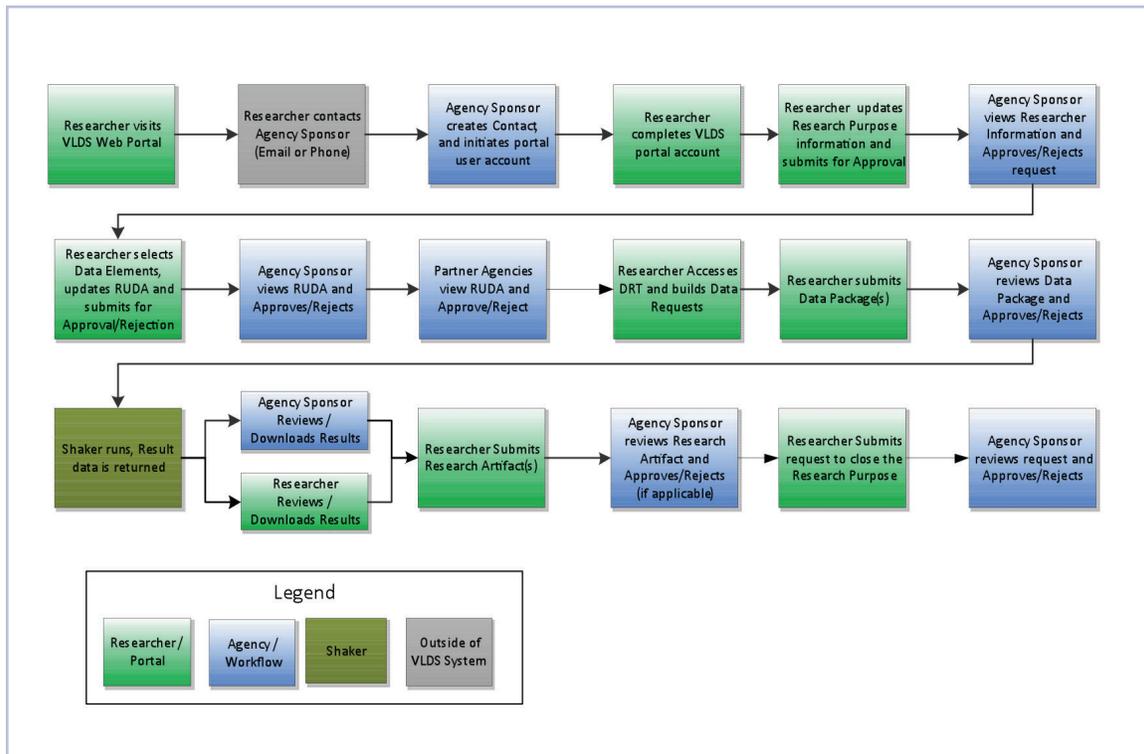
Figure 2. Data Request Process for the Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS)

Virginia

Virginia's SLDS follows a federated model in which each contributing agency keeps control of its own data rather than storing it in a central database. When requests come in to merge data from multiple agencies, those data must be de-identified before leaving the source agency, matched and merged by a third party, then de-identified again before being shared. Currently the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), the State Council on Higher Education, the Virginia Community College System, and the Virginia Employment Commission contribute data to the SLDS. The state's Department of Social Services, Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Labor and Industry, and early childhood programs are expected to join the SLDS effort in the future.

Requests for VDOE Data
VDOE makes numerous non-sensitive datasets available to the public online using cell suppression to mask identifiable information. It also maintains a Data for Researchers and Developers webpage with disaggregated datasets available for download. Requests for data not available online or for sensitive data are entered into a service request tracking system, which also receives any Freedom of Information Act requests and internal requests for system modifications received by VDOE. A director or higher-ranking VDOE official must approve all requests before they can be fulfilled.

In nearly all cases, releasing PII requires the requester to establish a contract and a restricted use data agreement

with VDOE. The agreement specifies the data elements to be provided, the type of research being performed, and how the data will be protected and destroyed once the research is finished. Three VDOE reviewers must sign off on the agreement, and everyone at the requesting organization who will have access to the data must sign a non-disclosure agreement.

Requests for SLDS Data
Requests involving data from multiple SLDS partner agencies go through an approval process created by the state's Data Governance Council, which includes representation from each agency. The council also established a statewide research agenda. All research requests must support that agenda and be approved by the agencies whose data are being requested.

Researchers requesting SLDS data use an online portal to contact a sponsor at an appropriate partner agency. If the request aligns with the state research agenda, the sponsor will create an account through the web portal where the requester can further describe the research. The portal facilitates all subsequent steps in the data request process, with each step appearing in the requester's account interface as previous steps are completed. If the sponsor approves the research as described, the requester can then use the web portal to select the data elements desired and generate a restricted use data agreement (RUDA). Once the agreement is reviewed and approved by the appropriate SLDS partner agencies, the requester builds a data request and submits the data package he or she

wishes to obtain. After another review and approval by the agency sponsor, the data package is generated automatically and the researcher can download the data. Researchers are required to submit any artifacts created from the data, including charts and graphs, for review by the sponsor. Once the research is completed, the researcher submits a call to close the request, which is also reviewed and approved by the sponsor.

This request process must be completed both by researchers within SLDS partner agencies and by external researchers. There is currently no charge for researchers to use the portal, although a charge may be assessed for fulfilling data requests requiring more than four hours of staff time.

Current Research
The research agenda created by the Data Governance Council encourages SLDS data use to address the following questions:

- How can Virginia improve high school graduation rates while increasing students' preparation for college and careers?
- How can Virginia improve the preparation, recruitment, and retention of Virginia's educational personnel, including their meaningful and ongoing professional development, especially in teacher shortage areas and hard-to-staff schools?
- How can Virginia improve performance of the public workforce system?
- By what means can Virginia's public workforce development system meet the needs of job seekers/workers and employers?

Current research projects are focused on college and career readiness, School Improvement Grants evaluation, and career and technical education outcomes. VDOE is collaborating with computer science classes at James Madison University to develop apps based on data available through the public research webpage. Virginia is also examining how other states successfully partner with researchers and meeting with in-state researchers to brainstorm new approaches to collaboration. One of these efforts is the Bridging the Digital Divide initiative facilitated by Virginia Commonwealth University, which seeks to improve cooperation among state agencies and university researchers by examining areas such as organizational culture, data governance and access processes, existing state-university partnerships, and experiences from other states.

Kentucky

In contrast to Virginia's federated SLDS model, Kentucky operates a centralized P-20W data system through the Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics (KCEWS). KCEWS is an independent office established by state legislation to provide education and workforce information to decisionmakers, conduct research and evaluation on behalf of the state, and respond to requests from other sources for data. The SLDS currently receives data from early childhood programs, public K12 schools, private high schools, public and independent two- and four-year colleges and universities, private training colleges, some out-of-state colleges, adult education and GED programs, workforce training programs, the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, and the state's financial aid and educator licensure authorities. A board composed of the heads of the data-contributing agencies oversees KCEWS, and a data access and use policy governs how the center responds to data requests.

Requests from Partner Agencies
Although data in the SLDS remain the property of the source agency, only KCEWS employees can access the integrated data system directly. In February 2014 the center launched a De-Identified Reporting System (DRS) to give partner agencies access to person-level data in its de-identified data warehouse. State law prohibits the center from releasing PII, even back to the agency that originally supplied it. The DRS allows SLDS partners to view data and generate reports without submitting a request to KCEWS.

Requests from External Researchers
Data requests coming from outside an SLDS partner agency are collected through an online portal where requesters describe their project, their research questions, and the type of data they want. Data requests generally fall into two types: requests for statistical information or reports, which follow redaction rules to prevent the release of data that would be statistically identifiable, and requests for person-level files for statistical analysis.

Although many researchers initially request person-level files, KCEWS is often able to determine from the research questions and from conversations with the requesters that their needs would be met by aggregated statistical information rather than more sensitive person-level data. All data requests submitted online are uploaded to KCEWS's internal project management tool, which also tracks internal KCEWS projects, publications, and data integration activities.

In Kentucky, requests for statistical information or reports must be met unless they contain confidential information, defined as any information that could identify a person at the individual level. This includes not only names and

Figure 3. A Data Request Entry in KCEWS's Project Management Tool

Social Security numbers, but also datasets involving small population sizes or combinations of data fields that, taken together, could be used to identify an individual.

Requests for person-level datasets and confidential information are reviewed by KCEWS to ensure alignment with the proposed research questions and with the center's mission to support education and workforce systems in Kentucky. If KCEWS approves the request, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is created with the relevant partner agencies authorizing KCEWS to provide the specified information on their behalf. The MOU includes a general data sharing agreement generated from information provided in the data request as well as any agreements specific to the agency that provided the data. Some data elements, such as free and reduced lunch information, also have specific usage rules and require an additional form in the MOU. Once the researcher has signed onto the agreements, the data files are provided through a secure FTP site. KCEWS is currently developing a statistical analysis tool that will allow researchers to analyze data using a range of statistical software packages without the data ever leaving KCEWS's control.

KCEWS monitors the following areas of concern throughout the data request process:

- *Does the request involve confidential information?* Any information that could statistically identify an individual person, employer, or other entity within the SLDS is exempt from open records requests.
- *Does the researcher have the appropriate background and resources to ensure a secure environment for the data?* In its data use agreements, KCEWS reserves the right to inspect researcher facilities to assess data security. However, because no legal penalties exist for researchers who store or use data incorrectly, KCEWS considers researchers' capabilities carefully when reviewing requests.
- *Are the data being used for the approved purpose?* Researchers sometimes request data for one purpose and later decide they want to use the same information for another project. Each new research purpose needs to be approved by KCEWS to ensure appropriate use.
- *Who is using the data?* Researchers might decide they want to share data received from KCEWS with colleagues or students. Additional users raise new questions about how the data are being secured and accessed.
- *Will there be a charge for the data?* If the request involves statistical reports that can be generated in an hour or less, KCEWS generally does not charge for providing the information. But for reports that take more than an hour to compile, or for any dataset not requested by a partner agency, the center does try to recover its costs. Those costs include administrative time and IT support in addition to the cost of the data files. KCEWS will work with researchers, particularly those writing grants for activities involving KCEWS data, to estimate costs in advance of fulfilling the request.

Any reports or products developed from the data must be reviewed by KCEWS to ensure compliance with the center's acceptable use guidelines. Copies of data files and any documents provided by the researcher are stored in KCEWS's project management tool alongside the original request.

Additional Resources

Data Use Issue Brief 2: Forming Research Partnerships with State and Local Education Agencies
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Data-Use-Issue-Brief-2_Research-Partnerships.pdf

Forum Guide to Supporting Data Access for Researchers
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2014801.asp

Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE)
http://www.ksde.org/

Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics (KCEWS)
http://kcews.ky.gov/

KCEWS Data Request form
http://kcews.ky.gov/DataRequest.aspx

SLDS Webinar: Using SLDS Data – Working with Researchers
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/webinars.asp

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/

VDOE Data for Researchers and Developers
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/research_data/index.shtml