



Alternative Sources
of Support for SLDS Work
Tips from the States

Brief 2
September 2011

best practices brief



Statewide
Longitudinal
Data Systems
Grant Program



SLDS Best Practices Brief

Alternative Sources of Support for SLDS Work: Tips from the States

Developing, sustaining, and expanding statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) require significant resource investments. Beyond the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) SLDS grants, states have leveraged many alternate sources of SLDS support. In a monthly SLDS topical webinar, representatives from three states shared experiences and offered tips on identifying alternative sources of support; initiating relationships with these sources; and maintaining meaningful, ongoing communication—all of which are critical to the longevity and success of an SLDS.

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Relationship Initiation Tips

- ✓ Be creative in your search for revenue streams and cost savings.
- ✓ View information requests as opportunities to build relationships with potential supporters.
- ✓ Pay attention to legislative activity in your state.
- ✓ Establish personal connections with potential supporters.
- ✓ Develop trusting relationships with potential supporters.
- ✓ Look for non-monetary donations and support.
- ✓ Look for resources and cost savings within your state education system or state government.
- ✓ Involve your organization's procurement and legal specialists as you identify potential funders.

Communication and Outreach Tips

- ✓ Show investors the positive impact of their support.
- ✓ Celebrate and share progress through websites, press releases, and data release events.
- ✓ Establish clear and reliable communication channels and routinely engage stakeholders.
- ✓ Utilize your organization's communications department for outreach.
- ✓ Ask for support only when you are ready to listen and act in response.
- ✓ Show supporters what they ask for, and exceed expectations whenever possible.
- ✓ Be prepared to continually make adjustments.
- ✓ Do not forget to say "thank you."

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Jim Boardman
Arkansas Department of Education

Dan Domagala
Colorado Department of Education

Brian Rawson
Texas Education Agency

Corey Chatis
SLDS Program, State Support Team

For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program, additional Best Practices Briefs, or for support with system development or use, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.

Relationship Initiation Tips

According to states, the following practices are effective ways to find and maintain alternate sources of support for an SLDS project. (Note: The following suggestions do not necessarily represent the views of the IES SLDS Grant Program.)

Be creative in your search for revenue streams and cost savings.

Be creative in the ways you look for individuals and organizations that think education is a worthy investment and may be interested in contributing to an SLDS project. 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. Also, keep in mind that efforts to promote SLDS sustainability by identifying new sources of support should be accompanied by efforts to cut down on both upfront and long-term costs.

View information requests as opportunities to build relationships with potential supporters.

When individuals or organizations ask for data, reports, or other information, consider the possibility that they may be able to help support the SLDS project. Potential partners include businesses, schools, institutes of higher education, health departments, and others interested in obtaining access to education data for approved research or analysis. Additionally, by researching your organization's history of received requests for information and data, you can focus

on the aspects of the SLDS (current or possible) that may be of interest to potential supporters. In the end, knowing what outcomes potential supporters care about will help your SLDS team to craft a more effective message.

Pay attention to legislative activity in your state.

Attentiveness to policy discussions and legislative mandates can help you identify areas where legislative interests align with the goals of the SLDS project.

The information gained from an SLDS can be very useful to legislators in designing and evaluating education policies, but all too often these decisionmakers do not fully appreciate the connection between the system (and its technical infrastructure) and the information it can provide. 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.

Establish personal connections with potential supporters.

Get to know potential supporters (personally) by going to relevant stakeholder meetings such as those held with administrators associations, college deans, etc. Many potential supporters are interested in topics that align with SLDS development, including school performance, student outcomes, educator effectiveness, and career and workforce skills. Appeal to these interests and give potential supporters the opportunity to assist the SLDS project or sub-projects targeted toward these goals. SLDS project staff should also develop personal connections with others in their own agency. Too often, for example, the SLDS team underestimates the importance of developing allies in education agency leadership. These champions can advocate for the program in their interactions with a broader array of external stakeholders beyond those to which the SLDS team has access.

Examples of Alternate Sources of Support

- Federal sources (e.g., grants such as Enhancing Education through Technology or Title I state education agency funds)
- State appropriations, capital funds, or governor's discretionary funds (e.g., stimulus dollars)
- Private grants from organizations with an interest in education data use such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, or the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation
- Local foundations, non-profit organizations, and education advocacy groups

Develop trusting relationships with potential supporters.

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. However, it is important that both parties understand the other's capabilities and interests related to the project, as well as their accountability and any limitations to the partnership. Understanding the commitments of each partner is especially important as SLDS projects begin to accumulate multiple funding sources and resource streams. Make sure that each partner is contributing to the overall vision of the SLDS project and, ultimately, that the project can meet the needs of each partner. The sooner you discuss these topics, the smoother the process will go down the road.

Look for non-monetary donations and support.

Monetary donations are only one way in which organizations can support an SLDS project. Foundations, advocacy organizations, and other supporters may be able to assist in other ways, such as "lending" personnel (data analysts, subject matter experts, grant writers, etc.) to help advance project goals, especially when the state's in-house capacity is limited or insufficient in particular areas. Supporters may also be able to dedicate time to the project by assisting with quality assurance or providing feedback on the system as it is being developed. One state's foundation partners have even made their meeting spaces available to the state education agency for conferences, stakeholder meetings, etc.

Look for resources and cost savings within your state education system or state government.

Within a state, collaboration with districts, regional service centers, other divisions within the state education agency (SEA), or other state agencies or departments (e.g., State IT Department) can also provide opportunities for cost savings or additional resources (e.g., multi-agency volume purchases, district collaboration around e-transcripts).

Within your education system, cost shifting by reallocating existing resources can be another effective way to generate funding for an SLDS project. For example, posting report cards online rather than mailing them allowed one state to realize significant savings that were redirected to hire full-time equivalent staff to sustain and improve online data efforts. Also, be sure to involve local education agencies (LEAs) in SLDS outreach efforts. LEAs may be able to work directly with local funders, which can further reduce the costs of state outreach efforts.

Involve your organization's procurement and legal specialists as you identify potential funders.

Each state has laws regarding how education agencies can obtain and use funding. When pursuing alternative funding sources, it is important to involve procurement and legal specialists to ensure that the partnerships developed with funders are able to meet all legal requirements.

Communication and Outreach Tips

Potential and active supporters should be kept informed about SLDS progress. The states offered the following effective practices. (Note: The following suggestions do not necessarily represent the views of the IES SLDS Grant Program.)

Show investors the positive impact of their support.

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.

Celebrate and share progress through websites, press releases, and data release events.

Be excited to share your success! Use websites, press releases, and data release events to make the public (and project

supporters) aware of the work you are doing. Whatever form of communication you use, make sure it is easy to follow and tailored to the audience. Acknowledge the support of funders, especially when their help has contributed to major data release events, new functionality, expanded access to information, cost savings, or other notable achievements that demonstrate a return on investment.

Establish clear and reliable communication channels and routinely engage stakeholders.

Once an organization has agreed to support the SLDS project, it is essential to maintain regular communication and keep them current on project developments. Ensure that any required progress or financial reports are timely and accurate. Regular progress reports, even when they are not required, are a useful way to keep supporters informed. To ensure appropriate and effective communication, it is good practice to make a specific group or individual responsible for reaching out to project supporters. This person or group should recognize that the frequency and type of communication should depend on the supporter. For example, while local foundations may want to hear about (or be involved in) day-to-day project management and issue meetings, others, such as the state legislature, may be more interested only in periodic formal reporting and briefings. When discussing the project with supporters, ensure that both sides agree on project goals and timelines.

Utilize your organization's communications department for outreach.

Take advantage of your organization's communications department or public information officer (if it has one) to help develop an outreach plan for your SLDS project. Supporters will vary widely in terms of technical expertise, and the communications department can help to tailor information about the project to different audiences. A proactive, well-planned outreach initiative will help to address issues and share results in ways that are meaningful to funders and that address their particular interests.

Ask for support only when you are ready to listen and act in response.

It is important to ask your supporters and other stakeholders what they would like the SLDS to be—but

once you have asked, be sure you listen to what they have to say and be responsive. It is important that the SLDS project team and the system's stakeholders are on the same page about why data are collected and how they will be used. Once you have reached an agreement, work should focus on achieving those shared goals. Keep in mind, though, that as the number of supporters increases, so too may the number of competing demands tied to the various contributions. In such an environment, it is important that all of these expectations lead the project toward a common vision for the system. If a potential supporter's vision and goals for the SLDS are not aligned with the agency's, it is probably better not to pursue their support rather than attempt to satisfy two different (or conflicting) agendas.

Show supporters what they ask for, and exceed expectations whenever possible.

When showing investors a product, it is important to show them what they have asked for. It is also a nice touch to demonstrate other benefits of an SLDS by showing off a capability they were not expecting. Showing stakeholders a surprising feature (e.g., a report) will help them appreciate the project's full potential.

Be prepared to continually make adjustments.

Know that hardly any project ever goes exactly according to plan. There are many variables when working on the SLDS project—technology, funding, policy, needs of stakeholders, expectations of supporters—all of which can influence how and when the project is completed. Keep an open mind and realize that what may seem like the perfect plan at one time may not be the best plan for the future.

Do not forget to say "thank you."

Don't underestimate the power of a simple thank you note, which shows your appreciation for what project supporters have helped to accomplish. In addition to demonstrating professional courtesy, showing gratitude may also increase your chances of receiving future support.