



SLDS Issue Brief

Vendor Management Dos and Don'ts

Most state education agencies use vendors in support of their education data projects. While what works in one state may not work in another, there are some key 'dos and don'ts' for developing requests for proposals (RFPs), engaging with vendors, and managing vendor work that can increase the likelihood of producing a cost-effective, high-quality statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS).

Do

Engage stakeholders early and continuously in the project.

Make key partners such as the information technology (IT) department aware that an RFP is in progress so that department leaders can review requirements and assign staff. Talk to end users such as teachers and district administrators prior to drafting the RFP in order to fully understand their needs, and build user acceptance training into the proposal. Establish communications plans for each stakeholder group, and look for “early wins” in the project in order to keep stakeholders engaged.

Build a knowledge transfer process and exit strategy into the contract.

With most vendor-developed projects, vendors will eventually turn the project back over to the state. Occasionally a vendor will need to be replaced mid-way through a project. Both scenarios require that the state have a well-documented process for taking over or reassigning the project. The state should have copies of any code or other documentation necessary to complete the project.

Have a stated remediation strategy for contractual failures.

The consequences to the vendor of failing to meet contractual obligations should be stated upfront, as should the procedures to be followed when applying the consequences.

Pay attention to the vendors' actions during the RFP process.

If a vendor is late submitting information or unresponsive to emails, chances are this behavior will continue if that vendor is awarded the contract.

Speak to references other than those provided by the vendor.

States should do due diligence and find references who can speak intelligently about the vendor's performance, but who have no interest in the vendor's success. The discussion board in the SLDS Planning and Management Community of Practice (<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/planning-and-management>) can be a good place to ask for references from states that have already worked with the vendor. Several states have also submitted resources such as sample reference check questions and criteria to the “Workspace” section of this Community.

Stakeholders are individuals or groups directly or indirectly affected by 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.



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

Hire a project manager to manage the vendor.

An internal project manager will ensure executive engagement from the state, and can guide project implementation from the perspective of the stakeholders and their business goals. Involve the project manager in the RFP process, and be sure that the project manager is knowledgeable about the process and can evaluate the vendor's work effectively.

Vet the vendor's project manager.

The vendor's project manager will be the state's primary contact throughout the life of the project, so don't discount his or her fit within the project team. Make clear in the RFP that the state has the right to replace the vendor's project manager, and identify the project manager as "key personnel" so that the vendor cannot switch out the project manager without the state's knowledge and approval.

Include the vendor's proposal in the contractual documents.

Hold the vendor to any commitments made in the proposal, especially proposed functionality that addresses core application requirements. If proposed staff are not available at the start of the project, require replacements with equal or better qualifications and experience.

Hold status update meetings at least biweekly.

Communication with the vendor should be open and frequent. Review the list of deliverables and the risk and mitigation strategy regularly, document all meetings, and increase the frequency of meetings if things are not going as planned.

Don't

Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take to complete the project.

When presented with unrealistic timelines, vendors will often overpromise what they can deliver. To keep the project on track, state staff should be held accountable for meeting deadlines and reviewing vendor deliverables for quality and completeness.

Don't forget to manage expectations.

Again, overly ambitious promises can lead to vendors who overpromise and ultimately cannot deliver. Also beware of uncontrolled expansion of a project's scope (also known as "scope creep"). Keep the project focused and on track through documentation and frequent status updates.

Don't create a situation where you are working against the vendor.

A combative situation helps no one. Avoid power struggles by documenting responsibilities and staff assignments in a specific manner. Don't blame the vendor if the state has produced poor or confusing requirements, and don't waste the vendor's time by being late to meetings or cancelling on short notice.

Don't give the vendor full control of the project.

The project should be led at the state level. Have internal processes for controlling contracts. Officially assign staff, and document state responsibilities and a clear process for submitting change orders in the contract.

Additional Resources

Early Wins: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5906>

Effective Project Management and Managing Change: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5245>

Managing Vendors: SLDS Webinar

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6506>

SLDS Planning and Management Community of Practice

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/planning-and-management>

Stakeholder Communication: SLDS Best Practices Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2729>

Technical and Business Documentation for an SLDS: SLDS Best Practice Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/7097>

Vendor Engagement: SLDS Best Practices Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2726>

Working with a State Central IT Agency to Develop an SLDS: SLDS Best Practice Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/7330>