



SLDS Webinar Summary

Planning for Early Childhood Data Use

Currently, states are examining early childhood for its potential benefits to K12 and postsecondary education. However, these benefits are difficult to assess because of incomplete early childhood data in statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs).

The need for data can pressure state education agencies (SEAs) to quickly increase the collection of—and access to—early childhood data. However, in order to successfully facilitate the use of these data, SLDS staff must proceed thoughtfully. Careful planning of data use will anchor the P-20W system with concrete and tangible needs that are actionable. In effect, the agency will ensure that appropriate, relevant data are made available to their primary users, who will then be better able to inform key early childhood decisions.

This document examines the planning phase of the Early Childhood Data Use Framework through the experiences of Arkansas’s and Washington State’s SLDS P-20W agencies.

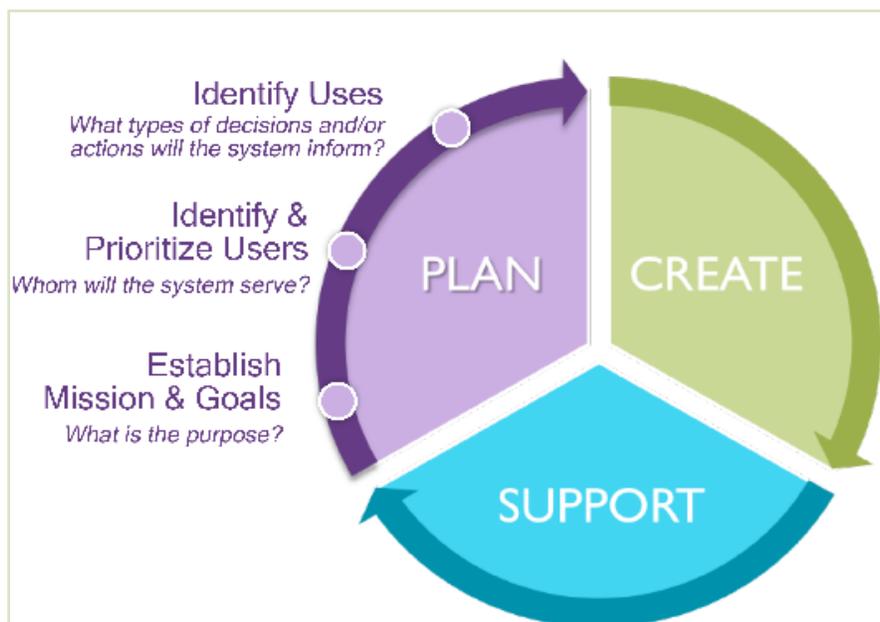


Figure 1. SST Early Childhood Data Use Framework

1. Establish Mission and Goals

The first step in planning for early childhood data use is to establish a clear mission that is understood and supported by all stakeholders. The mission will help to focus the work and guide future decisions.

In establishing its mission, Arkansas’s early childhood data use project adopted the mission of its larger P-20W agency, thus acknowledging the project’s role in providing data to support the larger system. Alternatively, a project may choose to develop a unique mission; for example, the mission of Washington’s early childhood data use project is to “Create a data governance structure to support data sharing related to early learning research questions and program effectiveness.”

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Webinar Presenters:

Sarah Argue
Arkansas Research Center

Melissa Beard
State of Washington Education
Research & Data Center

Moderator:

Missy Cochenour
State Support Team

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Data Users versus Information Users

Data users analyze and interpret data into information that can be used for decisionmaking. For P-20W systems, this includes researchers, data analysts, and anyone who interprets data queried from the system.

Information users apply knowledge gained from information to make decisions. For P-20W systems, this usually includes legislators and practitioners, and anyone who uses information created by P-20W data users.

Some roles, such as program administrators and policymakers, may fit under both categories because they use information created by other P-20W data users and also analyze and interpret P-20W data themselves.

Once the mission is determined, the stakeholders should identify critical questions that the early childhood data will help to answer. The list of questions—whose answers are goals of the project—are useful for gaining initial buy-in from early childhood education providers. The questions and their importance are usually agreed upon across stakeholders, thus helping to emphasize shared goals while also clarifying the type of system the agency aims to build and which data each provider will be asked to supply.

As short-term goals (e.g., stakeholder buy-in, data collection) and long-term goals (e.g., answers to critical questions, implementation of findings) are reached, the mission should be revisited to ensure that the use of data and the systems supporting the data are appropriate and effective.

Clearly defined primary users make the process of building relationships more manageable as they only need to be built with a few users instead of all.

2. Identify and Prioritize Users

Early childhood data in the P-20W system should be constructed around the needs of the data's primary users—the individuals who analyze and interpret early childhood data queried from the system, inform key decisions, and may or may not make the decisions. 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.

In order to identify primary users, a list of all early childhood data users should be compiled and then prioritized based on each user's role in supporting initial project goals. In other words, priority should be given to the roles that will use the data to answer the previously identified critical questions, and in effect, create information that will inform early childhood decisionmaking.

In Washington, for example, early childhood data users include policymakers, researchers, administrators, and many others; however, the primary users are limited to specific university research partners. These researchers are included in the state's P-20W data governance work to ensure that the data they need are collected and accessible within the system.

3. Identify Uses

Once the primary users have been identified, staff must understand how these individuals might use early childhood data to answer critical questions. Relationships are fundamental to this understanding, and agencies must account for the time it takes for the users to become familiar and comfortable with the agency's interest in their everyday work.

In order to identify early childhood data uses, the agency should spend time interviewing the data's primary users. User interviews should include the following questions:

- What tools do you have?
- What data do you currently use?
- What data would you like to use?
- What data will excite you?

If a primary user is also an early childhood decisionmaker (e.g., policymakers, program administrators), the following additional questions may be asked:

- What decisions are currently being made in early childhood education (e.g., resource allocation, program improvements)?
- Which of these decisions are not informed by data?
- Of these decisions not informed by data, which could be better informed if appropriate data were provided?
- What data does the P-20W system have that can support these decisions?

An understanding of the primary users' day-to-day work and the key decisions they inform will help the agency to build the tools and resources to help the primary users in their tasks. The agency will then be able to prioritize which uses of early childhood data to inform and influence through the supplying of data.

State Examples of the Early Childhood Data Use Planning Phase

	Arkansas	Washington
Mission & Goals	Provide educators, parents, policy makers, and researchers with relevant data to improve educational outcomes for students in Arkansas.	Create a data governance structure to support data sharing related to early learning research questions and program effectiveness.
Identification & Prioritization of Users	Use internal research capacity to work with ECE stakeholders to identify priorities for effective policy development.	Engage external researchers with experience in EC data analysis from the beginning
Identification of Uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program expansion • Program alterations • Focus areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program improvements • Funding decisions

Additional Resources

Arkansas Research Center (ARC): <http://arc.arkansas.gov>

State of Washington Education Resource Data Center (ERDC): <http://www.erdcddata.wa.gov>

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA): <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

Prioritizing Early Childhood Data: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Prioritizing_webinar.pdf

Innovative & Effective Utilization of Early Childhood Data: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/utilization.pdf>