



Elevator Speeches

Brief 6
September 2013

best practices brief



Statewide
Longitudinal
Data Systems
Grant Program



SLDS Best Practices Brief

Elevator Speeches

Regardless of whether states are in the planning stages, in the throes of dashboard design, or wrapping up their Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grant, it is important to keep in mind the objectives behind the work. Implementers, when given an opportunity to highlight their projects, too often fall into the comfort of providing technical specifications or sharing the latest report release. SLDS directors and key staff should understand that technology is a *tool* to work through some of education's toughest challenges—but technology is not the *solution*.

At a recent meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, all FY12 SLDS grantees gathered to focus on sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and data use. To kick off the meeting, state representatives were asked to come up with a 30-second “Elevator Speech” to explain their SLDS to a high-level, non-technical decisionmaker or policymaker. This document will describe the best practices that emerged as a result of this exercise, as well as share state examples of elevator speeches.

Do:

- ✓ Do identify the intended audience.
- ✓ Do understand who your audience is.
- ✓ Do answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” or “Where do I fit in?”
- ✓ Do update your message regularly.
- ✓ Do remember that delivery is important.

Do Not:

- ✗ Do not use overly technical jargon.
- ✗ Do not go into too much detail.
- ✗ Do not assume anything.
- ✗ Do not speak the way you write.

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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>.

Do:

Do identify the intended audience.

Remember with whom you are speaking. Describing your SLDS to the Governor versus the State Superintendent of Instruction will require two entirely different approaches. More specificity in the realm of educational outcomes would likely be required with the Superintendent, while generalization to the broader state education agenda would likely be more effective with the Governor.

Do understand who your audience is.

In the prior scenario, the *why* is far more important than the *how*. Think about why the SLDS is important to a particular stakeholder group (examples to consider are Governor, Superintendent, Parents, Teachers, Principals, etc.), and explain this importance to that stakeholder group. Save the details of exactly how the SLDS will provide a particular function or service for a future discussion.

Do answer the question, "What's in it for me?" or "Where do I fit in?"

It is important to provide a reason why your audience should care. This should be done as simply as possible so that the audience sees the value or understands why this makes sense to do or continue to do. When people care about an idea, they are often motivated to learn more.

For example, if you know that the Governor's key education agenda is focused on Early Childhood well-being, you should frame the work of the SLDS around that effort: *"Governor Smith, the State Longitudinal Data System will be able to answer that nagging question you have regarding the effectiveness of our state's Early Childhood program in preparing children for entry into kindergarten. We will be able to measure the progress of those enrolled in the program versus those who aren't so you are able to make informed decisions about future funding allocations for that program."*

Do update your message regularly.

It is vital to understand where your SLDS program is in its most current state. In the off chance you get a second opportunity with a high-level stakeholder, you should be showing progress toward the outcomes you mentioned in an earlier conversation. Secondly, being aware of current risks and challenges to the SLDS is critical. For instance, if your local or state newspaper recently published an article about parental concerns around the privacy of student data, that issue should be addressed in your elevator speech.

Do remember that delivery is important.

Finally, it is imperative that the delivery of the message comes in a confident, well-informed package. Practice your speech and salient points so that when the opportunity affords itself, you are ready to deliver.

"A great idea, poorly explained, ceases to appear great, and the cost is tremendous."

Lee LeFever, *The Art of Explanation: Making your Ideas, Products, and Services Easier to Understand*

State Example: Nevada

Audience: Legislators/
Higher Education Partners



Nevada faces some unique economic and geographic challenges. We suffered tremendously from the recent economic downturn and lost a lot of educated workforce in our state, as well as professional positions to states that are recovering faster. We're trying to connect the information from K12, higher education, and workforce in order to be able to research, affect, and align our educational practices with our workforce needs in the state to provide a higher quality workforce, retain our higher education graduates, and employ them in meaningful and productive jobs that help improve our economy.

Do Not:

Do not use overly technical jargon.

All too often, those executing the SLDS lose their audience in the weeds of “techno-speak.” The word “data” is often seen as “Big Brother.” Your elevator speech should articulate your audience’s outcomes without using words such as “database” or “technology.”

Do not go into too much detail.

Remember that your audience likely has very little time. Make concise, relevant points that highlight the linkage between their objectives and the SLDS work. Generally, you should plan on between 30 to 60 seconds. You will want to get their attention and then highlight the relevance of the SLDS to their goals. Once your audience is “hooked,” you can set up future meetings to discuss the details.

Do not assume anything.

Do not assume that your audience has any background knowledge about the SLDS, and remember that simpler is better. Yes, the trade-off may be thoroughness—however, it is better to focus on the bigger ideas and give the listener a basic understanding than to be overly precise about the SLDS.

State Example: West Virginia

*Audience: Local Education Agencies (LEAs),
Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs)*

ZoomWV is West Virginia’s single source for high-quality educational information. In order to improve the education and overall performance of PK-12 students in West Virginia, educators will be able to interpret information about their own students’ performance to make quicker, more informed decisions about the necessary resources and materials needed for their educators to best prepare, instruct, and evaluate their work, their students, and next steps.



Do not speak the way you write.

It is important for your speech to be genuine. While you do need to memorize the important points of your speech, you should know your SLDS project well enough to speak casually and confidently based on your well-informed understanding of the work you are doing.

State Example: Maryland

Audience: The Public

One of the most critical needs facing our state is the need to ensure that students who come out of high school to college are ready to succeed in college and the workplace, especially in high-skill fields where we have shortages. We have great information on how to help people succeed, but it’s in five different places. The SLDS brings that information together so that everybody—teachers and professors, students and parents, and employers—can see that information at every point along the way. That will make it easier for people to make transitions and to have success, and make Maryland a better place to work and live.

