



SLDS Topical Webinar Summary

Contingency Planning: How to Think About Options

Even with careful planning, statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) can be hit with unexpected issues during development. Contingency planning helps project teams anticipate potential threats to the project and take steps to keep the project from suffering detrimental delays or being derailed entirely. Contingency planning involves identifying risks to the SLDS project, mitigating the chance those risks will become real issues, and determining how the project will move forward if and when those issues emerge.

Project leaders from Washington State and Louisiana shared their contingency planning processes, including how they approached risky elements of their projects, steps they took when issues surfaced, and what they could have done differently.

Washington: A Formal Approach to Contingency Planning

Washington State takes a formal risk-management approach to contingency planning for its P-20W SLDS. Like birds visible outside an airplane windshield, some risks are small and distant while others pose a more immediate threat to the project. Contingency planning in Washington involves determining how likely each risk is to strike the project and what to do if and when a strike happens.

The project management team holds a monthly meeting to review new and previously identified risks to the SLDS project. The risks are described in a formal log and assessed based on their likelihood of occurring and their potential impact to the project (see Figure 1). Risks with higher levels of likelihood and impact receive more extensive risk-mitigation activities and contingency planning.

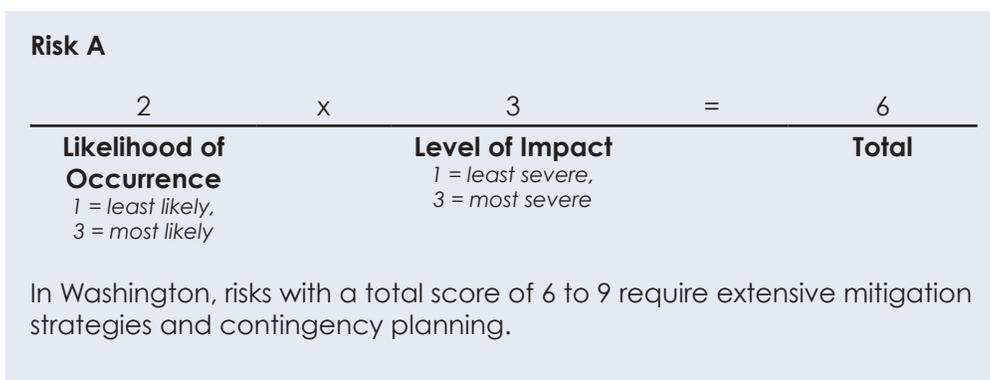


Figure 1. Sample Risk Assessment Scoring

Washington manages its priority risks by documenting the specific events that would turn each risk into an issue and trigger a contingency plan. Documenting the triggering events and communicating the contingency plan to project staff, sponsors, and other appropriate stakeholders are vital to keeping everyone on the same page and on board with the plan. These groups are kept apprised as risks loom larger to ensure they are not surprised and that other issues are not created when the contingency plan is triggered.

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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>.



Contingency Planning Challenge: Vendor Inexperience

The vendor selected to build Washington's data warehouse was a company already well known to state agencies, including SLDS project leaders. This familiarity meant that project leaders had a good idea of both the strengths and risks associated with the vendor's involvement and could plan accordingly.

Washington took immediate steps to mitigate the risk that the vendor might not be able to complete the data warehouse as needed. The project team spent a significant amount of time meeting with vendor staff and working with them to explain unfamiliar concepts. Project staff also took on some activities in place of the vendor in order to keep the project moving while the vendor got up to speed with those tasks. To the extent possible, solution-neutral software was purchased to minimize the costs of purchasing new software if the project had to switch to a different vendor and warehouse solution. Project leaders established a deliverables-based contract with the vendor that included "gates" after major deliverables where the state could determine whether or not to continue the contract. The contingency plan associated with this stage of the project identified specific milestones that, if not met by the vendor, would result in the termination of the contract. The project team's concerns about the vendor and the milestones that would trigger the contingency plan were clearly communicated to the vendor and the project sponsors.

Within months of starting the project, Washington had to implement its contingency plan when the vendor failed to meet one of the agreed-upon milestones. Because the SLDS project partners, sponsors, and vendor knew the plan and were kept informed as the milestones approached, none were caught off guard when the contingency plan was triggered. Following the plan, Washington quickly took steps to sever ties with the vendor. Careful documentation of deliverables helped project leaders determine the work that was already complete or still in progress and deliver final payment to the vendor within two months. As the state issued a new request for proposals (RFP) to identify a new vendor, project staff turned their attention to tasks that needed to be completed regardless of the final data warehouse solution. These tasks included documenting data and files to be collected from the SLDS partner agencies and becoming familiar with data elements and collection practices. Incorporating these tasks into the contingency plan helped minimize lost time on the project while a new vendor was selected.

Contingency Planning Challenge: Project Management Turnover

Washington faced another challenge when the project team lost its project manager six weeks after hiring him due to a conflict of interest. The manager was selected through an RFP, but he failed to disclose during that process that he sold software that competed with what the state had chosen

for the SLDS. After ignoring repeated directions to stop pushing his own software, the manager was let go.

Washington's contingency plan for project leadership turnover identified three other team members with the skills and experience to serve as interim project managers. One of those individuals was asked to take on the role of project manager and ran the project for more than a year.

Washington prepares for personnel transitions, both expected and unexpected, by keeping an inventory of staff members' skills and maintaining flexibility in roles and job descriptions. Determining which team members can take over for others is an important step in developing contingency plans for staff turnover. Washington also uses broad job descriptions for both state employees and contract positions to develop team members with a range of skills. Existing vendors and partner agencies can also provide needed skills and experience on short notice.

Louisiana: Hands-On Project Management and Lessons Learned

The Louisiana Department of Education began its SLDS project without a formal contingency planning process, but project leaders nonetheless took steps to minimize the risk of detrimental changes and challenges as the project progressed. For example, when working with a contractor, the SLDS project manager keeps detailed records of tasks that have been completed as well as itemized cost schedules for each piece of the project. These tools help the SLDS stay on track and on budget, and they allow the project manager to review the work the contractor claims is finished and identify any discrepancies. No payments to the contractor are approved unless the project manager agrees the associated work is complete. The agency also retains a percentage of the total payment until the project is finished to the team's satisfaction. These steps protect the project team and motivate the contractor to complete work in a timely manner. In addition, contract staff work on site at the Department of Education during the SLDS development to ease communications and collaboration between the two groups.

Contingency Planning Challenge: Change in Agency Administration

The Louisiana Department of Education experienced a change in leadership during the build-out phase of its SLDS. At that time, the project team was focused on technical work that involved mostly IT personnel, rather than a broad cross-section of agency staff. The new administration was not as familiar with the project and did not prioritize it, resulting in a decrease in money and support for the SLDS. Cuts to the SLDS budget also resulted in the loss of some project staff, including team members responsible for ongoing maintenance of the system.

Leaders recognized that promoting the SLDS project and securing buy-in earlier from all levels of the education department—from state administrators to district superintendents—might have helped position the SLDS as a higher priority for the department even before the change in administration. The project team might have prevented a loss of resources by building a firm base of support throughout the agency and conducting focused outreach to new leaders to demonstrate the importance of the project. Louisiana recommends creating a contingency plan for political and leadership changes that identifies a team member who will manage communications and promote the project to all stakeholders.

Contingency Planning Challenge: Balancing Costs and Benefits in Building the SLDS

Project leaders in Louisiana initially underestimated the amount of time needed to import information such as historical assessment data and accountability records into the SLDS. Building a feature within the system to generate

complex reports also took longer than expected. When these tasks began to overrun the time allotted for them, the project team found itself balancing mounting costs with the benefits of having those data and features in the SLDS. Leaders recognized that more careful planning up front to map the data going into the system and schedule related tasks earlier could have helped them accomplish the work more efficiently. Contingency plans could also include parallel work streams to prevent delays in one part of the project from affecting other parts, as well as guidance for decisionmaking when costs begin to outweigh benefits.

Louisiana also recognized that placing a greater focus on delivering tools to the system's primary users early in the SLDS development process could have increased use and support for the SLDS and laid the groundwork for sustainability even earlier. In addition to helping maximize data use for the resources invested in the system, involving primary data users early on can reveal technical glitches or security issues that can be rectified sooner.

Additional Resources

Louisiana Department of Education
<http://www.louisianabelieves.com/>

SLDS Issue Brief: Effective Project Planning and Managing Change
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/managing_change.pdf

State of Washington Education Research and Data Center
<http://www.ercd.wa.gov/>