



SLDS Topical Webinar Summary

Managing Leadership Change: Keeping the Work Going

When working with state agencies, leadership change is inevitable. Even when legislators, governors, and the public officials they select to lead state departments are committed to long-term projects such as statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs), that support can ebb overnight when new leaders are elected or appointed to take their places. To ensure continuity of resources and cooperation for SLDS work, states need to develop strategies for dealing with change at the highest levels of leadership, whether it happens predictably with election cycles or suddenly due to unforeseen circumstances.

SLDS representatives from Vermont and Rhode Island discuss the political changes that have affected the state agencies involved in their SLDS work and the different approaches they have taken to make sure that work is not derailed by changes in state leadership.

Vermont: Communicating and Planning for Continuity

During the last two years, Vermont's state education agency has undergone significant changes in both its organizational structure and its leadership. In early 2013, the state's governor and legislature transformed the Vermont Department of Education into the Vermont Agency of Education in order to streamline oversight and decisionmaking processes related to education. While the Vermont Department of Education was led by a commissioner appointed by the State Board of Education, the new Vermont Agency of Education is led by a secretary appointed directly by the governor. The incumbent education commissioner was chosen as Vermont's first secretary of education, easing the transition before the governor appointed a new secretary one year later. These changes—along with an unexpectedly close statewide election in 2014—reinforced the importance of planning for political change, and Vermont's SLDS team developed several strategies to ensure the continuity of its work.

Communicate early and often about the SLDS

Shortly after the Vermont governor named a new secretary to take the helm of the Vermont Agency of Education in 2014, the information technology (IT) director leading the SLDS met with the incoming secretary to discuss the system. They covered the SLDS's objectives, the deliverables and timelines associated with the SLDS grant, the strengths and limitations of the IT department, and the incoming secretary's goals and interests. The secretary's strong background in research and data use allowed her to grasp the possibilities for the system, and she offered ideas about how to approach developing it. For the SLDS team, the discussion was an opportunity to review how the SLDS could support the incoming secretary's goals and to communicate realistic expectations for its capabilities.

To keep the SLDS visible within the Vermont Agency of Education, the SLDS team uses the agency's regular leadership meetings to update senior leaders on project timelines, upcoming deliverables, and resources and staff time that will be needed from each department.

To keep the SLDS visible within the Vermont Agency of Education, the SLDS team uses the agency's regular leadership meetings to update senior leaders on project timelines, upcoming deliverables, and resources and staff time that will be needed from each department. The meetings allow the SLDS team to manage expectations for the

This product of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) was developed with the help of knowledgeable staff from state education agencies and partner organizations. The content of this publication was derived from a Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program monthly topical webinar that took place on January 29, 2015. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the IES SLDS Grant Program. We thank the following people for their valuable contributions:

Webinar Presenters:

Brian Townsend

Vermont Agency of Education

Peg Votta

Rhode Island Department of Education

Moderator:

Jeff Sellers

SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team

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

data system as well as to keep apprised of agency needs that the SLDS can help address.

The Vermont Agency of Education also frequently features the SLDS in its updates to the state legislature. The agency submits an annual report as part of a state act related to partnerships among prekindergarten programs, K12 schools, and institutions of higher education. That report details the progress made on the agency's K12 SLDS as well as how data work will be expanded to include early childhood datasets and postsecondary outcomes data. Additionally, SLDS leaders meet with education committee members in both houses of the state legislature to further promote the SLDS and clarify expectations for the work as those bodies experience turnover in their membership.

To ensure ongoing communications and outreach related to the SLDS, the Vermont Agency of Education uses its public website and a weekly field memo to keep school communities, parents, and the public informed about recent SLDS work and how the data system will affect them. It maintains a list of frequently asked questions about the SLDS to serve as a centralized, consistent source of information both for the public and for agency staff encountering questions about the system.

Write the SLDS into agency strategic plans

To help minimize the impact of staff turnover, agency leadership changes, or executive changes at the state level, Vermont's SLDS team pushed to include language related to the SLDS in strategic plans for multiple state agencies and offices. The Vermont Agency of Education, the former State Board of Education, the governor's office, and the state chief information officer's office all include reference to a "comprehensive Statewide Longitudinal Data System across the learning spectrum" in their multi-year strategic plans. When the SLDS is identified as a key goal across several state offices, it is easier to sustain momentum and support for data system work even when new leaders reprioritize other projects.

Remember federal obligations

When leadership within a state changes, the federal SLDS program office and grant obligations can provide structure and continuity for SLDS work. Vermont has found it helpful to remind incoming agency leaders of the state's obligations under its SLDS grant in order to affirm the importance of the work.

Be prepared for future changes

Vermont's 2014 gubernatorial election was closer than anticipated, and an unexpected result might have left some unprepared state agencies scrambling to navigate new political priorities. For Vermont's SLDS team, the close election reinforced the importance of keeping elevator speeches and informational one-pagers about the system up to date in case they are needed on short notice.

Rhode Island: Insulating Against Change from the Top Down and from the Bottom Up

In Rhode Island, very few state agency leaders who were in office when SLDS work began in 2009 are still in office. Additionally, a statewide data governance board created by a previous governor has been inactive under the current administration. To ensure the continuity of the project in the face of changing agency directors and the absence of a formal data governance structure, SLDS leaders are focusing on different methods of keeping the work moving. The Rhode Island Data Sharing Project—a system of research, resources, and marketing and communications support for the Rhode Island Data Hub—has two key stakeholder groups that form a two-pronged approach to sustainability. One prong is a bottom-up approach to maintaining interest and support in data work by building relationships with agency personnel directly involved in contributing and using SLDS data. The other takes a top-down approach by involving education, workforce, and policy leaders outside state agencies in setting research priorities and advocating for the SLDS.

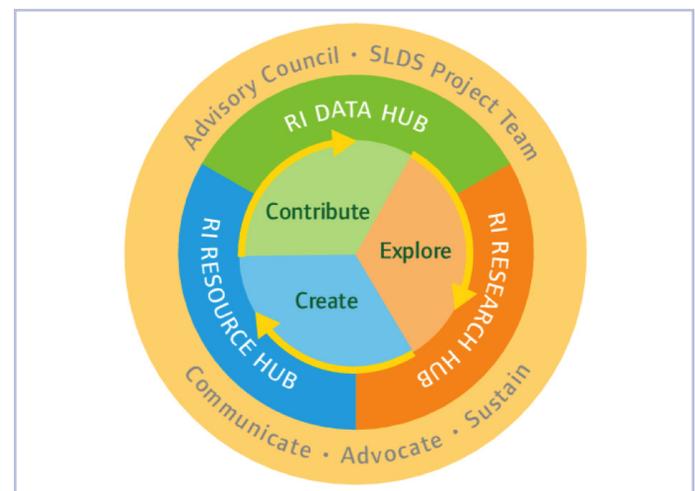


Figure 1. The Rhode Island Data Sharing Project

Bottom-up support: SLDS Project Team

Rhode Island's SLDS includes a range of education, health, and workforce data. The SLDS Project Team is composed of representatives from each of the state's primary data-contributing partners:

- Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training
- Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
- Rhode Island Adult Education Professional Development Center
- Providence Plan, a state and local government collaboration for public-sector data collection and analysis that built the Rhode Island Data Hub

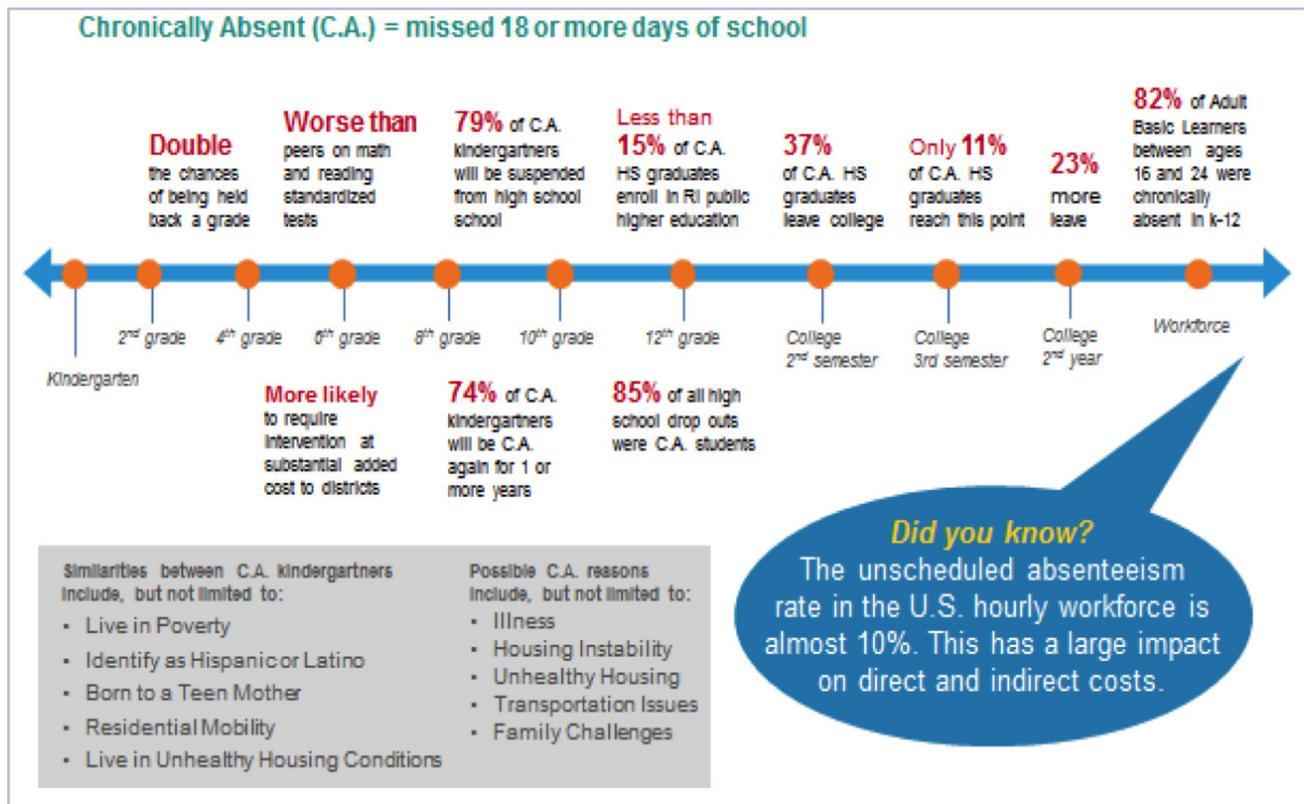


Figure 2. Rhode Island's Chronic Absenteeism Timeline

Although directors of each of these agencies are necessarily involved in implementing data sharing agreements and other efforts requiring leadership approval, Rhode Island focuses much of its outreach and engagement effort on communications teams, legal teams, and staff members directly involved in collecting and using data. This grassroots approach covers individuals at each of the agencies involved in the SLDS Project Team as well as a number of policy organizations and nonprofits interested in the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project's research and resources. It helps ensure that many key staff members in each agency are familiar with the SLDS, even when the agencies' leaders change.

Rhode Island has successfully used its bottom-up outreach strategy to build networks of data partners and advocates around policy questions that cross several organizations' domains. For example, a recent examination of chronic absenteeism in K12 schools and higher education brought together more than 20 state agencies and organizations to generate multiple data stories and reports. Using data and resources from across these partners, Rhode Island constructed a timeline illustrating the impact of chronic absenteeism on students from kindergarten through postsecondary and into the workforce (see figure 2). Local school districts have begun using this information to address chronic absenteeism, and the state legislature has proposed a related bill. Additionally, Housing Rhode Island intends to use some of the findings from this analysis in

its upcoming strategic plan, and the Latino Policy Institute has discussed a series of public service announcements on the topic.

Top-down support: Advisory Council

In addition to shoring up grassroots support for the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project, Rhode Island developed the Advisory Council to engage high-profile advocates from multiple policy sectors in its data work. The eight members of the Advisory Council were nominated by the SLDS Project Team based on their active involvement with education, workforce, and public service issues, their statewide recognition, and their connections to state leaders. They include state legislators, heads of professional organizations and nonprofits, and senior policy researchers who are prominent in the state as well as actively involved in civic activities and issues outside their primary areas of focus. The individuals invited to join the council were chosen for their ability to see across the full spectrum of policy issues covered by the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project, and they could not send another representative from their organizations to the council in their place.

The Advocacy Council meets every other month to hear updates on the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project and to hone the state's policy research agenda. The SLDS team prepares recent data stories and reports to share at each council meeting, rotating the policy focus and

presenting agency at each meeting to ensure that council members across all sectors are engaged. Advisory Council members contribute feedback on products as well as ideas and resources for future analysis. Outside the scheduled meetings, the SLDS team sends council members regular email updates.

In the year since it was established, the Advisory Council has become a valuable resource for the SLDS team, both through its members' guidance on policy research issues and through their willingness to advocate for SLDS work with the governor's office, state agency directors, and other connections. In the event that Rhode Island's now-dormant data governance board is re-established in the future, the state hopes to keep the Advisory Council in place to continue guiding and supporting it work.

Conclusion

Both Vermont and Rhode Island have successfully kept their SLDS work moving forward in the face of potentially disruptive leadership changes. Although their approaches are different, both states have established formal documentation and structure to support the continuity of their data systems even when governors, agency directors, and political priorities change. Central to both states' strategies is demonstrating the value of the SLDS to state agencies, policy organizations, and researchers who rely on high-quality information to reach their goals. By responding to the needs and interests of a variety of stakeholders and engaging those stakeholders as advocates for the SLDS, the states aim to shield their data systems from the potentially negative consequences of leadership turnover.

Additional Resources

Everyone on Board: How to Engage Reluctant Stakeholders and Stakeholder Experiencing Leadership Transitions: SLDS Issue Brief
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5196>

Rhode Island Data Hub
<http://ridatahub.org/>

Rhode Island Department of Education
<http://www.ride.ri.gov/>

Sustainability – Project Ownership/Leadership: 2014 SLDS Best Practice Conference Workshop
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6186>

Vermont Agency of Education
<http://education.vermont.gov/>