



SLDS Topical Webinar Summary

Planning for a Sustainable ECIDS

From the earliest stages of designing and developing an early childhood integrated data system (ECIDS), a significant part of the project planning process can and should be devoted to ensuring the system will continue to operate after the grant to build it has ended. Sustainability planning not only involves securing funds to meet the system's ongoing operational needs, it also includes considering the personnel, equipment, and other resources needed for the ECIDS to grow and adapt to new needs over time.

This publication covers sustainability planning for an ECIDS using the Sustainability Framework, a tool outlining essential components for ensuring sustainability. It draws on examples from South Carolina's integrated data system to illustrate successful sustainability planning and data use to support early childhood issues.

The Sustainability Framework

For ECIDS project managers, the ultimate goal is to create a system that is reliable and essential to the point that if it were discontinued, users would rally to bring it back. High levels of dependence on and support for the system are as important for its long-term success as a secure funding stream. The Sustainability Framework (figure 1, below) describes four primary factors that contribute to sustainability: stakeholder support, ensuring widespread use, financial support, and return on investment.



Figure 1. The Sustainability Framework

Stakeholder Support

Sustainability depends on the breadth and depth of stakeholder support for the data system. ECIDS leaders should examine how widespread stakeholder engagement is in the various aspects of the system as well as how deeply stakeholders are involved in each aspect. Although not all stakeholders will be involved to the same degree in all stages of the system's design, governance, and use, there will be opportunities for stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to every step along the way. Leaders can help stakeholders develop the capacity to make meaningful contributions and take on a sense of ownership in the system.

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 brief was derived from a Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program monthly topical webinar that took place on December 18, 2013. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the IES SLDS Grant Program. We thank the following people for their valuable contributions:

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



Ensuring Widespread Use

Broad stakeholder engagement in the development of an ECIDS increases the likelihood that stakeholders will become active users of the system. It also helps ensure the system will be developed to serve their needs. When stakeholders view the ECIDS as an essential tool and depend on it to make their work easier and better, they become powerful advocates for its continuance.

Financial Support

After the grant establishing the ECIDS has ended, leaders need to ensure they have enough financial support in place to continue current operations as well as expand or alter the system to meet future needs. The system's financial needs include not only the costs of hardware, software, and infrastructure, but also the staff to maintain and operate the system. Additional costs such as training materials for ECIDS users and data products also need to be considered. State appropriations, contracts with partner agencies, and grants from nonprofit or private foundations are all possible sources of funds to sustain the ECIDS. When approaching potential funders, ECIDS leaders need to be able to clearly articulate how the system is used and the value it brings to early childhood stakeholders.

Return on Investment

Another powerful way to secure support for an ECIDS is to demonstrate the value it brings to stakeholders in relation to its costs. Value can be calculated monetarily in terms of cost savings from storing data in a centralized data warehouse and consolidating resources, but value is not solely financial. The enhanced capabilities that stakeholders have to access information, monitor children's progress, and evaluate program outcomes are also strong examples of value gained from the ECIDS. Again, for ECIDS leaders, being able to demonstrate this value clearly for both stakeholders and potential funders is vital to ensuring the system's sustainability.

Planning for Sustainability

When planning for an ECIDS, being able to explain how the system will serve users in the long term is a powerful selling point and a key to securing early stakeholder support. In addition to showing stakeholders the intended outcomes of the system—including what the system will do, what processes it will change, and how it will help users perform their work better—ECIDS leaders need to inspire confidence that the system will become a permanent resource. This confidence is especially important for early childhood stakeholders, who often already have data systems to meet their needs at the program level and might hesitate to give time and data to another data system that might not outlive the initial grant period. By making sustainability part of the project plan and talking points early in the development process, ECIDS leaders can begin building stakeholder support and even soliciting funds from alternate sources from the start.

Putting in place the following materials can help inspire confidence among stakeholders and enable effective planning for the ECIDS's future:

- *Documentation of the costs to support and maintain the integration of data into the ECIDS.* Knowing the costs of maintaining the system is vital to keeping the system operational as well as justifying those costs to potential supporters.
- *Identification of potential funding sources beyond federal grants.* Many ECIDS projects rely heavily on federal funding to get off the ground. Once the project development phase winds down, systems will need steady and dependable sources of funds to continue operations.
- *Documentation of training opportunities and other assurance that end users are properly prepared to use the ECIDS.* Training programs and other user resources help ensure that current users are taking full advantage of the system. These resources also prepare users for enhancements or modifications to the system and enable new users to use it.
- *Sustainability plan encompassing the total cost of ownership of the ECIDS.* The sustainability plan incorporates the previous three components and other materials to 1) demonstrate total cost of ownership (an estimate of the total direct and indirect costs of the ECIDS) and 2) give ECIDS leaders the tools needed to pursue support and funding for the system. It also shows stakeholders and funders that project leaders are committed to making the system work long-term.

Applying the Framework: South Carolina's Integrated Data System

In South Carolina, early childhood agencies as well as a variety of other state service providers contribute data to a statewide integrated data system managed by the state's Office of Research and Statistics (ORS). This section outlines South Carolina's data integration process and how its system fits the four components of the Sustainability Framework.

About the System

South Carolina's integrated data system receives data from a wide variety of state agencies covering education, healthcare, legal issues, and other social services. This collaborative effort enables information exchanges among diverse agencies based on the belief that the problems faced by students, patients, and social services clients in South Carolina are whole-person problems rather than being confined to a single sector. ORS acts as a neutral steward of the data system, leaving each contributing agency with ownership of its own data as well as the authority to allow or deny its use by other agencies. Figure 2 (next page) illustrates the various agencies that contribute data to the integrated system.

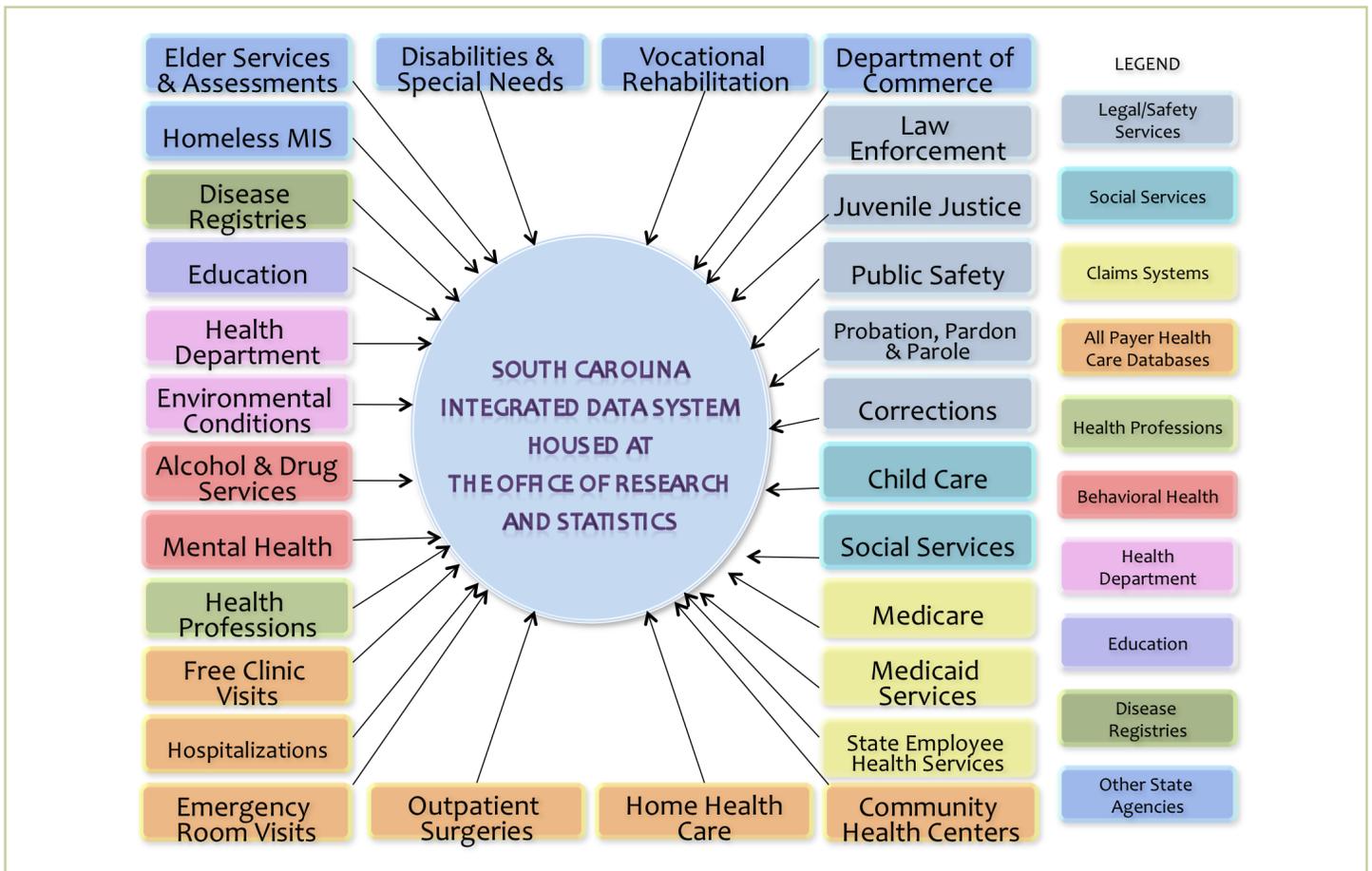


Figure 2. Agencies contributing to South Carolina's integrated data system

Stakeholder Support

More than 30 South Carolina agencies have memoranda of understanding or other agreements with ORS to contribute data to the integrated data system. Although state statutes give ORS the authority to store data from state agencies, the agreements allow each agency to specify the rules governing the collection and use of its information. Some agencies have joined together to form governance committees to further regulate the use of similar and shared data. ORS's neutral stewardship role and the well-established legal framework surrounding the data system have helped generate stakeholder trust in the system. For example, the Department of Social Services (DSS) Division of Early Care and Education, which oversees many of South Carolina's early childhood activities, realized that contributing its data to the state data warehouse would allow it to take advantage of ORS data and IT experts for data projects its own staff did not have time to undertake. Many other stakeholders have been actively involved in software deployment as well as the design and creation of datasets for specific projects. Regular internal and external reviews of data privacy and security help preserve stakeholder confidence that the data system is operating correctly.

Ensuring Widespread Use

ORS's contracts and data use agreements with contributing agencies provide frequent opportunities for the creation of new datasets and tools as needs arise. DSS has a contract with ORS to develop and house its quality rating and improvement system information, known as the ABC Quality database. ORS's neutrality was a key factor in DSS's decision to store the cross-agency database in the integrated data system, as it was originally designed to be used by more than one agency. ORS hosts a website for DSS to display quality rating information, based on environmental rating scale scores and other information collected through the ABC Quality database. ORS also worked with DSS to develop web-based data cubes—tools that associate specified datasets on several related dimensions and allow users to explore a variety of relationships among the data. The data cubes allow DSS to identify and follow up on deficiencies with specific providers in areas such as health and safety or infant and toddler care. The cubes also contain a geo-mapping component that DSS uses to determine the best locations for family child care home provider training activities based on provider locations. Additionally, ORS helped develop web-based software to support the collection and sharing of Ages & Stages Questionnaire results between

early childhood teachers and parents. These and similar projects with other state agencies have become valuable tools for agency staff and the public alike.

Financial Support

Currently, 14 percent of the operating budget for South Carolina's integrated data system comes from state appropriations. The remainder is covered by contract agreements with the agencies contributing to the data system—some of which might draw on funds from federal programs such as the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program—and from nonprofit or private foundation grants for specific data projects. This diversified funding system is made possible by the trust stakeholders have developed in the system since it was established 16 years ago as well as the system's demonstrated value as a cost-effective, cross-agency resource.

Return on Investment

ORS maintains a team of statisticians, data management experts, and IT professionals who serve the integrated data system. This team reduces the need for its partner agencies to devote their own limited staff time and resources to data storage efforts individually. With the basic infrastructure already in place, the marginal cost of adding additional data to the system declines as new agencies join the effort.

Agreements Governing Collection and Use of Agency Data into South Carolina's Integrated Data System

- **Memoranda of Understanding:** Detailed legal agreements authorizing the collection or sharing of data among two or more agencies for specified purposes.
- **Business Associate Agreements:** Agreements in which an agency covered by the U.S. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), such as a hospital, may release personal health information to an associate agency in accordance with HIPAA guidelines.
- **Data Use Agreements:** Agreements in which a data owner authorizes the use of specific data by another agency for a specific purpose.

In addition to the financial savings that come with having a centralized data system and support team, ORS offers products and services to help state agencies monitor their programs and serve their audiences more effectively. The value demonstrated by the integrated data system encourages its stakeholders to continue giving time, money, and data to sustain it.

Additional Resources

Alternative Sources of Support for SLDS Work: Tips from the States
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/best_practices2b.pdf

Measuring and Documenting Return on Investment
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/ROI_Webinar_April2013.pdf

SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/sustainability_guide.pdf

SLDS Sustainability Self-Assessment
Available to states upon request: support@slids-sst.org

SLDS Sustainability Toolkit
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/sustainability_toolkit.pdf

South Carolina Budget and Control Board, Office of Research and Statistics
<http://ors.sc.gov/>

South Carolina Department of Social Services, Division of Early Care and Education
<http://www.scchildcare.org/>

Stakeholder Communications: Tips from the States
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/best_practices.pdf

Strategies for Engaging Early Learning Stakeholders
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/Engaging_EL_stakeholders_webinar_October2013.pdf

Traveling Through Time: Forum Guide to Longitudinal Data Systems,
Book II: Planning and Developing an LDS
http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2011804.asp