Stakeholder Engagement & Sustainability

Helping Stakeholders Get the Most from an SLDS

States have been diligently and deliberately building statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) to provide useful and relevant information so that better data-driven decisions can be made. Much of the funding for such systems has been provided by the federal initiative through the Institute of Educations Sciences (IES) Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program. This State Support Team- (SST-) authored product discusses stakeholder engagement and sustainability, and how both work together towards creating a balanced and efficient SLDS. Best practices, state examples, and SST tips on how to effectively use stakeholder engagement towards creating a sustainable SLDS have been included in this document.

Overview of Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement should begin with the end in mind: a sustainable LDS. SLDS staff should consider what support is necessary from whom, and what challenges may be encountered along the way.

Stakeholders, individuals, or groups—directly or indirectly affected by the SLDS—should be engaged throughout the entire process of designing, planning, building, implementing, and sustaining such a system. It is essential for states and local education agencies (LEAs) to develop a strategic approach towards stakeholder engagement. The SST has developed a six-step plan that builds towards effective stakeholder engagement.

For more information regarding stakeholder engagement, please see, "*Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit: Traversing 'Stakeholder Land.*'"

Six-Step Plan to Develop Effective Stakeholder Engagement

1. State Desired Outcomes
2. Determine Purpose
3. Build a Plan
4. Implement the Plan
5. Monitor and Adjust the Plan
6. Reach Desired Outcomes

It is important to note that seeking leadership buy-in throughout the plan is essential to successful stakeholder engagement.

Figure 1. The four aspects that drive sustainability

Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Stakeholder Relationships

- Help stakeholders understand the LDS and know how to use it
    - o Explain what the LDS is and is not
    - o Define a clear and manageable scope for stakeholder engagement
- Develop a communications plan
    - o Manage expectations
    - o Set realistic boundaries
    - o Provide a systematic way to receive feedback
    - o Create short-term wins that show feedback was heard
- Use branding to help stakeholders identify SLDS applications
- Don't start with the "banana split version" of an LDS (i.e., a complex data system). Start with vanilla, add small toppings first, and build from there. For example, if state assessment data is available in electronic format before schools receive the hardcopy individual student reports, create an electronic version that provides quicker and easier access to the information.
- Create one-page documents or brochures targeted to specific audiences
- Develop an "elevator speech" that can be used to clearly articulate the focus of your system

Overview of Sustainability

A sustainable SLDS has four major components that facilitate and establish ongoing sustainability. The first is broad and deep stakeholder support, which informs and encourages accuracy and relevance of the SLDS. By getting clear direction/vision from stakeholders, this helps ensure that the project is meeting stakeholder needs and promoting long-term sustainability. The second is widespread use, which is facilitated by the degree of stakeholder engagement. As users come to rely on the data and reporting functionality of the system, the system becomes a necessary part of their work and processes. Once the system is necessary, stakeholders see the need to sustain the project. Next, long-term commitments of funds and staff for the ongoing support and maintenance of the SLDS, along with accommodating the needed enhancements when changes in state and federal policies and programs require it. Finally, showing a return on investment, both qualitatively and quantitatively, depicting not only potential savings in time and resources, but the value of the added capabilities the SLDS enables the state to accomplish.

For more information on sustainability, please see the *SLDS Sustainability Toolkit* and *SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide.* For more on return on investment, please see *Measuring and Documenting Return on Investment.*

The Relationship between Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability

As noted above, stakeholder engagement is a key component that drives sustainability within a state's LDS. This relationship is a "true two-way street"——each drives the other and creates strong support in a state. Sustainability helps state systems and legislation evolve over time and creates metrics that can be used as a descriptive analytics piece. Staff should communicate clearly and often about the LDS, the use of the LDS, and the efforts to sustain the LDS.

Some questions that states should consider when using stakeholder engagement to drive sustainability include:

- How is your state working to bolster and sustain stakeholder support?
- Have you tracked stakeholder awareness of your system?
- Do you have a stakeholder committee/advisory group?
- Have you provided appropriate methods of reports or dashboards for your stakeholders? The more information collected to demonstrate the value and use of the LDS, the better. All are important to build a groundswell of support to sustain the LDS.

One of the most important groups of stakeholders to engage when trying to build sustainability is legislators. The extent to which legislators are involved and when to involve them varies across states and is dependent on the political environment or culture within the state. In some states, it is important to seek legislation to sustain the LDS. In others, it is enough to calculate the total cost of ownership and provide metrics that demonstrate the demand for the LDS within the user base. One way to ensure support and continued use of the LDS is to have key legislative representation on the stakeholder advisory committee. This helps keep them informed of the SLDS project along with soliciting their input during development. Another is to show legislators and legislative staff how to access and use the information from the LDS. The emphasis of this, though, is on both access and use—until legislators and legislative staff understand how to use the system to answer a particular question that is of importance to them, they will not fully comprehend the value of the system.

Below are some examples from states, as described by the states themselves, which focus on the use of stakeholder engagement to support sustainability.

Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability: State Examples

Arizona
With its first SLDS grant, Arizona designed an SLDS for a technology or IT audience. This was a lesson learned. Through grassroots stakeholder engagement efforts, however, the state has been able to create a sustainable system. Working intimately with a local district superintendent, Arizona was able to gain 80 associate districts and LEAs in support of the LDS. Arizona is now using its second grant to deliver a data system that is designed for and by teachers. Through focus groups, Arizona is working to find out what teachers need in a data system.

Suggestions for states from Arizona:

- Gain support of key leadership, which will in turn lead to more support from other stakeholders.
- Get stakeholders addicted to data, which will make it sustainable.
- Use focus groups to identify needs of local stakeholders.

New Mexico
New Mexico has never had an SLDS grant, but they have developed a data dashboard toolkit using state funds. The SEA program offices and legislature helped the state IT group to identify ways to access specific data. Ultimately, the goal is to make state data available to both policymakers and the public, and identify broader areas of use for their data.

North Dakota
North Dakota's sustainability efforts have been different than many states. In 2007, there were equity law suits from the LEAs, which mandated many aspects of education, including state scholarships and interim assessments. In 2009 and 2011, legislation was passed authorizing the SLDS. Committees and subcommittees are made up of state agency and legislative members, which meet quarterly. In North Dakota, the SLDS became a natural catalyst for data sharing and federal reporting. With a history of collaborating among key stakeholders, the state works to continue its sustainability efforts.

Next Steps: Engaging with Key Stakeholders

For additional information on how to begin stakeholder engagement, please see the stakeholder engagement planning toolkit, available at the Public Domain Clearinghouse via GRADS at *slds.grads360.org*.

Additional Resources

Stakeholder Engagement
Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit: Traversing 'Stakeholder Land'
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/target_team_stakeholderland.pdf

State Desired Outcomes and Determine Purpose Statement: An In-Depth Look
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/sustainability_guide.pdf

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

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

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