



SLDS Spotlight

State Approaches to SLDS Branding

Branding is a familiar concept in the business world. Widely used slogans and logos such as the Nike “swoosh” and the McDonald’s golden arches are immediately recognizable and create an instant association with an organization and its products. But behind those elements are long records of interactions between the company and its customers that imbue the brand with meaning beyond the symbols and words. At its core, a brand is a promise to customers that they can expect a certain experience or benefit when they encounter it.

For statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs), branding can help raise awareness and recognition of the system and its role in informing the state’s education system. When associated with helpful products and positive interactions, branding can foster trust, dependence, and support among SLDS stakeholders. This brief highlights the approaches several states have taken to branding their SLDSs and the benefits and challenges they have seen come out of the branding process.

Why Brand an SLDS?

Branding can help SLDS partner agencies raise the visibility of the system, increase understanding of its role, differentiate it from other data efforts, and enhance transparency around its use.

Visibility

When an SLDS report, dashboard, or other product is branded, it is clear where the information came from and how the state is using the SLDS. Legislators, stakeholders, and system users are more likely to recognize the value of the SLDS and support it if they are aware of how and when they use its products and services.

Understanding

Many people outside SLDS partner agencies—and likely many within—will not immediately recognize the term “SLDS” or understand the value of a longitudinal data system. Branding makes the system more accessible by communicating in simple terms what the system is and inviting stakeholders to use it or learn more about it.

Differentiation

Education and other state agencies often use several data systems for different purposes. Some of these systems may contribute to the SLDS, and some may not. Branding helps distinguish the SLDS from other systems and data use efforts.

Transparency

The process of developing an SLDS brand is an opportunity to invite stakeholders into a conversation about what the system is, what it will do, and how it is perceived both within the partner agencies and among external audiences. A strong brand will communicate information about the system’s purpose and role.

When starting a conversation about branding, consider the following questions:

- What are you trying to accomplish with the data system?
- What will success for the system look like?
- What are the benefits and features of the system?
- Whom will the system benefit, and how?
- What do stakeholders already think of the system?
- What qualities do you want stakeholders to associate with the system?

This product of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) SLDS Grant Program was developed with the help of knowledgeable staff from state education agencies and partner organizations. The content of this brief was derived from an SLDS regional meeting held in May 2014. The information presented does not necessarily represent the opinions of the IES SLDS Grant Program. We thank the following people for their valuable contributions:

Stephanie Butler and Kerry Thomas
Alaska

Marcia Bohannon
Colorado

William Henderson
District of Columbia

Kathy Gosa
Kansas

Charles McGrew
Kentucky

Ross Goldstein
Maryland

Jennifer Fox
Minnesota

Jamey Ereth and Susan Mohr
Montana

Carla Howe
West Virginia

Steve Duarte, Baron Rodriguez, and
Robin Taylor
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>.



The branding process has three primary steps: creating a visual brand or logo for the SLDS, developing a website and materials that reflect the brand, and implementing a branding and communications strategy. The following sections explore how several states have approached each step.

Creating a Visual Brand



West Virginia: Building a Shared Vision

With procedural delays over vendor selection holding up construction of the SLDS, West Virginia's data governance team sought an "early win" by creating an identity for the SLDS and letting users know what they could expect from the new system. The new data governance manager initiated a branding process to learn more about the SLDS project as well as encourage the SLDS team to think critically about a shared vision and purpose for the system. A subset of the data governance committee began the design process by generating many brand ideas and gradually eliminating the weaker ones. After narrowing the options to three potential names for the SLDS, the full committee considered several logos created for each name by in-house designers. The committee settled on ZoomWV as its SLDS identity and a simple, clean logo in the Department of Education's colors of blue and yellow.

While considering several different branding ideas and designs, the data governance manager kept the process moving forward with instant polling during meetings to evaluate designs and by focusing the team's attention on choosing a brand that supports the system's goals. As construction on the SLDS continues, educators are already becoming familiar with the system through the brand. The data governance team is planning a ZoomWV website with content tailored to different stakeholder audiences. As the brand's visibility grows, the team is also thinking about how to address privacy concerns and other questions that might emerge about the system.



Minnesota: Designing a Multipurpose Logo

Minnesota worked with a graphic designer through an existing vendor contract to generate about two dozen logo designs for its SLDS. The final design selected by the data

governance team uses imagery suggestive of column charts and introduces the SLEDS acronym to refer to the system.

Minnesota has started incorporating the logo and color-blocked design elements into report covers, infographics, and other products developed for the SLDS. A simplified alternate version of the logo was developed for use at smaller sizes on the web and mobile applications.



Additional Examples of Brand Development



Faced with frequent stakeholder confusion over the separate roles of its student-level data system—Kansas Individual Data on Students (KIDS)—and other education data collections in the state, **Kansas** decided to expand the scope of its KIDS brand to cover more aspects of its SLDS work.



Maryland uses the abbreviated identity MLDS Center to brand its data system rather than its full title, Maryland Longitudinal Data System. Its logo incorporates recognizable elements from the Maryland state flag and the slogan "Better Data • Informed Choices • Improved Results" to communicate the system's purpose and vision.

Developing a Website and Materials



<http://acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS>

Alaska: Creating a Common Language for SLDS Partners

ANSWERS, the Alaska Navigator: Statewide Workforce and Education-Related Statistics data system is a collaborative effort among several state agencies, all of which have an equal stake in the P-20W SLDS. To emphasize the joint effort, the ANSWERS website features the logos of each partner—the University of Alaska system, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and the Alaska Commission

on Postsecondary Education—alongside the ANSWERS branding, which was selected by consensus. The brand development process was an opportunity for the partner agencies to develop a shared vision for the SLDS as well as a common language to use when discussing ANSWERS with their own audiences and stakeholders. Frequently asked questions about the system are compiled on the ANSWERS website and circulated among the partners so that information is communicated consistently across agencies.

The ANSWERS logo, which features an image of the Big Dipper and North Star based on the Alaska state flag as well as columns suggesting a data chart, is incorporated into document and presentation templates used in connection with the system. To further raise the visibility of the system, ANSWERS partners conduct an annual briefing for legislative staff members to help them learn more about it.



<http://gems.opi.mt.gov/>

Montana: Increasing Visibility within an Existing Branding Framework

The Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) approached the branding of its Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students (GEMS) SLDS with the dual goal of integrating it with the office's existing logo while also distinguishing it from other education improvement initiatives. OPI requires that all materials published by the office carry its logo, including any products generated from GEMS. An in-house designer created a logo for GEMS that echoes the rays of sunlight imagery used in OPI's logo and uses a complementary color palate so the logos can be used together effectively. Branding for Montana's P-20 initiative, Getting Every Montana Student College and Career Ready, also incorporates the sun rays imagery.

The GEMS website initially housed mostly historical reports and datasets. To encourage greater use of the site, OPI began posting AYP reports to the site rather than mailing them out to schools each year. Initial feedback from school administrators revealed how many were unfamiliar with the site and had never used it before that point. Montana now plans to move all reports currently on OPI's website to the GEMS site. To further increase awareness of the SLDS, the state releases updated GEMS brochures approximately twice a year.

Implementing a Branding and Communications Strategy



**KENTUCKY CENTER FOR
EDUCATION & WORKFORCE STATISTICS**

Kentucky: Language-Based Branding and Promotion

Kentucky's approach to branding its P-20W SLDS, which is operated by the Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics (KCEWS), places strong emphasis on the language used to talk about its research and data work. Rather than branding the data system itself, Kentucky focuses on establishing KCEWS as an independent, trustworthy, and secure information source supporting policy decisions in the state. Communications with stakeholders and public materials discuss "linking" records, not "sharing" or "matching" them; KCEWS generates information based on "statistics" instead of "data"; and when talking about its data collection, KCEWS avoids the word "education" to reflect the fact that it also contains workforce data and may incorporate other social services information in the future. The center's goal is to present itself as the research arm of the state rather than as an IT operation. The conscious use of specific language reinforces KCEWS's track record of data work and its legal status as an independent state resource, helping to boost recognition of its purpose and value among legislators and stakeholders.



Colorado: Lessons Learned from Changing Courses on Branding

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) in its 2009 SLDS grant allocated funds for an organizational change management (OCM) vendor to help with the transition and adoption of several key pieces of technology. The OCM vendor advocated that the SLDS grant and its associated strategic objectives/outcomes were in need of some brand identity. The OCM vendor helped the CDE develop and roll out the Relevant Information to Support Education (RISE) brand. Several challenges surfaced, including a difficulty in promoting new SLDS products and features due to the vendor's focus on building top-down executive buy-in at the expense of bottom-up support from the technology users. Another challenge was actively promoting the benefits of RISE to stakeholders without effectively managing expectations for timelines and practical limitations. Additionally, CDE had identified 64 different stakeholder groups for the system and struggled to tailor its outreach and support for so many groups. Political and territorial issues further impeded collaboration efforts among the SLDS's

P-20 partners, and the project suffered from a lack of support and buy-in from leaders at partner agencies.

Through the RISE branding process, Colorado learned the importance of fostering realistic stakeholder expectations about the RISE, of creating a communications plan targeted at a manageable number of stakeholder groups, and of allocating sufficient staff time and resources to promoting new RISE products and updating public information. Also, establishing responsibilities for RISE work within the agency and encouraging divisions to take ownership of their roles was, and continues to be, critical.

Additional Example of Branding and Communications Strategy



The **District of Columbia** recently reinvigorated interest and participation in its Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLED) by focusing outreach to key partner

agencies and setting a preliminary data-use agenda aimed at delivering nutrition, health, and dental services to children. With a new logo based on that of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and a sales approach to demonstrating the system's benefits to partner agencies, the district successfully met its agenda and secured support for future data efforts.

Branding Tips from the States

- Use branding as an opportunity to establish shared values and vision for the SLDS. Involve stakeholders in a discussion of the brand's meaning to increase buy-in. Branding can be an effective team-building activity.
- Make the logo simple. Focus on an overarching concept rather than trying to fit in too much detail.
- Look at the logo and branding elements on the materials where they will be used to spot any problems or awkward visuals.
- Take a sales approach to promoting the SLDS—let stakeholders know that you have a product they will want to use.
- Be aware of perceptions about the SLDS. Determine whether specific language or approaches to communicating about the system are likely to gain or lose support from certain audiences. Perceptions are not reality, but they can cause challenges for the SLDS.
- Address questions and concerns about the SLDS head on, and try to turn negative perceptions into positive ones.
- Do not get bogged down in the details of logo design. Find something that works for the system and move forward.
- Do not forget that the logo by itself is just a symbol; the products, tools, and services of the SLDS are what give the brand its meaning.

Additional Resources

Quick Guide to Branding and Promoting an SLDS

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Quick_Guide_to_Branding_and_Promoting_an_SLDS.pdf

Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education

<http://acpe.alaska.gov/>

Colorado Department of Education

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/>

District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education

<http://osse.dc.gov/>

Kansas State Department of Education

<http://www.ksde.org/>

Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics

<http://kcews.ky.gov/>

Maryland MLDS Center

<https://wcp.p20.memscdc.org/>

Minnesota Office of Higher Education

<http://www.ohe.state.mn.us/>

Montana Office of Public Instruction

<http://opi.mt.gov/>

West Virginia Department of Education

<http://wvde.state.wv.us/>