



## SLDS Issue Brief

### *Everyone On Board: How to Engage Reluctant Stakeholders and Stakeholders Experiencing Leadership Transitions*

For a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) project to be successful, it is vital to engage stakeholders who have meaningful contributions to make to the design, development, and usefulness of the data system. Not only will these stakeholders provide content expertise to the project, their contributions will help ensure long-term sustainability. Stakeholder engagement is one of the first challenges facing an SLDS project, and it is one that must be revisited throughout the project lifecycle. This publication covers the following situations in which engaging stakeholders may be challenging:

- approaching new stakeholders who are resistant, reluctant, or ambivalent to joining the project;
- working with stakeholders who lose interest or have goals that compete with those of the project; and
- maintaining stakeholder engagement through leadership transitions.

### Engaging Reluctant Stakeholders

#### Bringing on stakeholders who are resistant, reluctant, or ambivalent

An SLDS project's stakeholders are the individuals or groups either directly or indirectly affected by its development and use. Stakeholders become involved in the SLDS—either through invitation or on their own initiative—due to the value they bring to the project. This value is the key to engaging stakeholders who are resistant, reluctant, or ambivalent. Some stakeholders do not understand the value they can contribute to the project because project leaders do not or cannot clearly articulate the stakeholder's roles and responsibilities. Other stakeholders may be resistant because the benefits they will receive from the system have not been clearly explained or their concerns about the system have not been fully addressed. Following are some suggestions for dealing with reluctant stakeholders.

*Anticipate potential resistance from stakeholders.*

Use the process of developing a stakeholder engagement plan to think through and identify which stakeholders might be resistant and why. Then consider each stakeholder's internal goals, values, or positions on issues that are relevant to the SLDS project. Identify the specific issues that may be contentious and brainstorm ways that the SLDS team can reduce or eliminate potential barriers. Some common stakeholder concerns identified by states include

- uncertainty about how privacy and confidentiality will be protected;
- fear of losing control or ownership of data;
- fear of what data might show about a stakeholder's work regarding data quality;
- fear of revealing gaps in data collection;
- concern about how data may be used; and
- concerns about the amount of time, money, and staff resources needed to participate.

**SST Tip:** When working with multiple agencies, it is important to recognize that each agency has a different culture. First, be aware of your own agency's culture so you know what you bring to the table and the lens through which you are viewing data. Although you cannot modify the cultures of stakeholder groups, you can figure out common interests and ways to work together.

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Kathy Gosa  
Cathy Rinehart  
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Meredith Fergus  
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Curt Keifer  
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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>.*

*Articulate clearly how stakeholders' participation will benefit the SLDS project and the value to stakeholders once the project is completed.*

When stakeholders voice their reluctance, explore their reasons in a one-on-one conversation. If questioned in a large group meeting or setting, the reluctant stakeholder is likely to become defensive, if not combative. Once the stakeholder has taken this stance publicly it is extremely difficult to turn it around. Try to put yourself in the reluctant stakeholder's shoes and understand his or her point of view on the issues or concerns.

*Look for common ground and/or compromises.*

Make sure stakeholders understand what is being asked of them; how their data, feedback, and support will benefit the project; their roles and responsibilities as stakeholders; and what they can gain from being involved. Consider processes, procedures, or policies that could be established to address stakeholder concerns, such as modifications to data collection practices, security, access, reports, or other products coming out of the SLDS. If stakeholders believe their input is not valued, re-evaluate how stakeholder feedback is sought and used. It is essential that all stakeholders believe their input is important and valued.

*Ask other stakeholders to help.*

There may be another stakeholder or group of stakeholders who hold some weight with the reluctant stakeholder—perhaps due to similar missions, needs, structure, or practices—and can be an advocate for the SLDS project. Seek out these stakeholders and solicit their help in engaging the reluctant stakeholder.

### **Elevator Speech: Oklahoma**

*Audience: Local education agencies, specifically those uninformed or anxious about the SLDS*

“The value of our SLDS will be determined by its wide range of users for whom the data need to be accessible, timely, of high quality, and actionable. As we work to expand data use, the State Department of Education (SDE) also needs to streamline data collections—thereby allowing educators and others to focus on using, rather than inputting, data. A key to achieving this vision is for the SLDS to support SDE reporting obligations in ways well aligned with local priorities and needs.”

*Demonstrate early wins.*

Show all stakeholders, not just the reluctant stakeholder, the desired outcomes of the project. If there is an existing product or activity that clearly illustrates how stakeholder contributions will be used, show it so stakeholders can concretely understand the outcomes and can see the benefits of participating. When possible, the most powerful tool is to show stakeholders how they already use SLDS information or products and how their support will improve those resources.

*Modify outreach approach as needed.*

Is the stakeholder more responsive to phone calls, emails, in-person meetings, meetings held in a particular location, communication from a specific person, or other outreach methods? Use that information to plan future communications with that stakeholder.

## **Engaging Reluctant Stakeholders - State Examples**

### **Minnesota**

During the initial SLDS grant period, postsecondary and K12 stakeholders held differing opinions on the project's value added. For K12 stakeholders, the project's value lay in supporting compliance with federal requirements and providing descriptive information about system performance. Postsecondary stakeholders were interested in the potential longitudinal research aspects and the SLDS's potential to provide data for program improvement. However, the two entities had very little history of working together for research purposes, and postsecondary stakeholders had concerns about K12 control of the SLDS.

Initial negotiations among K12, postsecondary, and workforce stakeholders resulted in expansion of the SLDS deliverables to include longitudinal research deliverables and data for program improvement, but control of the project remained with K12 due to federal funding. Stakeholders used the SLDS grant period to form a multi-agency management structure and improve working relationships among researchers.

Over time, the project became an increasing priority for the postsecondary stakeholder. After the SLDS grant period, leadership and state funding of the project shifted to the postsecondary stakeholder, although the system still relies on the multi-agency management framework.

### **Kansas**

In Kansas, funding structures for some stakeholders depend on those stakeholders providing certain data on their work. Stakeholders must realize that if the data are not provided, they will not receive the funds.

## Managing stakeholders who lose interest or have goals that compete with the project

Just as the SLDS project can be expected to change over time, stakeholder goals, needs, and interest in the project will also change. What can be done when a stakeholder begins acting in a way that runs counter to the goals of the project, or loses interest in the project entirely? Some suggestions include:

- *Revisit the stakeholder engagement plan to anticipate how stakeholder needs might change over time.* Use tailored communications and messaging to keep stakeholders engaged in the face of changes.
- *Listen actively to stakeholder concerns.* Have they lost confidence in the project? Have they determined the costs are not worth the value? Do they feel the need to pursue their goals independently rather than in partnership with other stakeholders? Listen and brainstorm ways that the SLDS team can directly address such concerns.
- *Re-establish common ground and shared interests.* Demonstrate how the stakeholder's needs and goals are still aligned with the project, and how his or her participation will help accomplish those goals more easily than going it alone.
- *Use elevator speech(es) to communicate value.* Continue to develop messages and communicate the outcomes and the value to stakeholders.
- *If the stakeholder decides not to participate further in the project, determine how that stakeholder's role and responsibilities might be realized by other stakeholders.* Consider how stakeholders with similar interests can fill the void.

## Navigating Leadership Transitions

At some point in an SLDS project, there will be leadership changes within an agency or across agencies that could affect stakeholder participation in the project. In some cases, the transitions are smooth with few to no changes in stakeholder participation or engagement. In other cases, a stakeholder or group of stakeholders cannot or will not participate until the new leadership gives the nod. Further, in some situations, new leaders may change the individuals who were involved as stakeholders. Some ideas for staying engaged or re-engaging with stakeholders during a leadership transition include

- recognizing the new leadership's vision and determining how the SLDS can support it;
- paying attention to legislative and policy priorities, national issues, and local needs to see how the SLDS can fit into each and being ready to articulate such rationale;
- reaching out to new leadership early to introduce and reiterate the value of the SLDS project;
- keeping slides, elevator speeches, and other introductory materials up-to-date and on hand so they can be shared quickly;
- demonstrating early wins from the project; and
- using expected project deliverables and outcomes to keep up momentum for the project during the grant period.

### Navigating Leadership Transitions - State Examples

#### Kansas

SLDS leaders in Kansas realized that developing personal relationships within stakeholder agencies is an important part of stakeholder engagement. This effort cannot be focused solely on the top executive level; secretaries, data stewards, and program staff are doing the work on the project, using the data, and talking with their legislators about the project. These personal relationships can be used to figure out hot-button issues and identify which needs can be met to maintain SLDS progress. Sometimes having champions, working with them, and engaging them to pilot the system will encourage them to advocate to others about the project and its message.

Kansas also experienced a change of governor during its SLDS project. At one time Kansas had a governor-appointed P-20 council that provided helpful feedback and support for the SLDS. However, the new governor decided not to appoint anyone to the council, and the group ceased to meet. Postsecondary and K12 agencies decided to create an inter-agency coordinating council, giving the SLDS stakeholders another avenue to collaborate.

#### Wisconsin

When Wisconsin experienced a turnover in the governor's office, SLDS leaders approached the new administration to show how investment in the project at the state level would benefit local education agencies and save them money. The project's push to secure state funding also coincided with the development of a new statewide strategic plan. As state agency leaders put the plan together, they kept in mind the data systems that would be needed to support it and communicated that need to legislators.

**SST Tip:** Be able to clearly articulate to stakeholders what the SLDS project is all about without using technical terms. An elevator speech remains crucial to winning over new leadership or staff.

### **Elevator Speech: Vermont**

*Audience: District Superintendent*

“We understand that recent budget challenges have constrained resources, and we want to enable continued measures to improve program effectiveness. Vermont’s SLDS project has been designed with those budget constraints in mind. Our SLDS will lessen the burden of stakeholders by automating current processes and, more importantly, working with your team in training that your team has identified that will help to meet your operational and programmatic goals. We look forward to meeting with your team and working with them!”

### **Elevator Speech: New Hampshire**

*Audience: Recently Elected Governor*

“The SLDS project in New Hampshire provides a variety of high-quality information from a single source that can be used to improve school programs, develop education policy, evaluate curriculum, provide student-centered teaching, offer professional learning in schools, and provide information to other stakeholders to improve the education of each and every student. Critical to this system is a high-quality data collection called i4see (Initiative for School Empowerment and Excellence). As articulated in the name, the success is in our ability to deliver the information that we collect from the districts back to the schools for program improvement. Through our PerformancePLUS data analysis offerings, we help educators achieve the primary goal of promoting student success, leading to college and careers. This success leads to a strong economy and quality of life for the communities of our state. It supports our goal for young adults to ‘work, play, and stay’ in New Hampshire.”

### **Additional Resources**

SLDS Best Practices Brief: Elevator Speeches

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Brief6\\_Elevator\\_Speeches.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Brief6_Elevator_Speeches.pdf)

SLDS Issue Brief: Early Wins

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/early\\_wins.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/early_wins.pdf)

SLDS Spotlight: State Approaches to Engaging Local Stakeholders

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/spotlight\\_engaging\\_local\\_stakeholders.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/spotlight_engaging_local_stakeholders.pdf)

Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best\\_practices.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best_practices.pdf)

Stakeholder Engagement & Sustainability: Helping Stakeholders Get the Most from an SLDS

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Stakeholderengagement\\_Sustainability.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Stakeholderengagement_Sustainability.pdf)

Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit: Traversing ‘Stakeholder Land’

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/target\\_team\\_stakeholderland.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/target_team_stakeholderland.pdf)