Stakeholder Communication
Tips from the States

best
practices
brief

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Institute of Education Sciences

SLDS
Statewide
Longitudinal
Data Systems
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SLDS Best Practices Brief

Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States

States agree: Effective communication with stakeholders (districts, program offices, postsecondary education leaders, other state agencies, legislators, etc.) throughout system design, development, and deployment is vital to the ultimate success of a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS). A group of state staff experienced with stakeholder communications efforts and the related challenges convened to share strategies, best practices, and lessons learned.

The SLDS Communications Mantra: *Connect. Listen. Respond. Sustain.*

Do:

- ☑ Identify and reach out to a range of key stakeholders early on.
- ☑ Be inclusive, but in a focused way and at appropriate times.
- ☑ Create realistic expectations in all communications.
- ☑ Form or leverage groups to lead the outreach effort.
- ☑ Identify key individuals as "ambassadors" and "point people."
- ☑ Create and follow a clearly-defined, carefully-conceived outreach plan.
- ☑ Acknowledge differences among stakeholder groups and tailor your style.
- ☑ View communications, in part, as a change management activity.
- ☑ Structure meetings around very specific questions or products.
- ☑ Listen and be responsive to stakeholder input.
- ☑ Implement some early wins to gain and sustain stakeholder support.
- ☑ Give stakeholders credit for help with system design and enhancement.

Do Not:

- ✗ Do not engage in large-scale, open forums.
- ✗ Do not ignore the political environment.
- ✗ Do not get "techy" with most stakeholder audiences.
- ✗ Do not assume that everyone is in sync on system goals.
- ✗ Do not fail to follow through on communications promises.
- ✗ Do not NOT communicate.

Do:

According to states, the following practices will support effective communication with stakeholders. (Note: These suggestions do not necessarily represent the views of the IES SLDS Grant Program).

Identify and reach out to a range of key stakeholders early on.

Ideally, SLDS components should be designed from the start with input from all of the intended user groups at both the state and local levels. Identify these key stakeholder groups early on to inform them about the project and begin to establish interest in and support for the system. Maintain close communication with these stakeholders throughout the design, development and deployment phases through direct engagements to collect input. Hold meetings, convene focus groups[1], and conduct surveys to gain input from the field on initial design, ongoing development, and deliverables such as reports and tools. Hold frequent meetings both within the state education agency (SEA), with legislative staff, and with districts. Convene meetings with local education agencies (LEA) at least quarterly to discuss any changes to the data system that will affect local staff directly, as well as developments occurring at the state level that may not have a direct impact. These methods can be very effective ways of engaging stakeholders, building a sense of collaboration between state and local staff, and collecting information about user needs. Use other forms of communication such as emails, webinars, and a website to share ongoing status updates (announcements, events, grant information, contacts, etc.).

Be inclusive, but in a focused way and at appropriate times.

Input from a full range of stakeholder groups will promote the ultimate utility and success of the SLDS, but too many voices can stifle progress and steer the project off track. Strike a balance by engaging with a manageable number of representatives from key groups and convening meetings on a schedule that matches project needs.

Create realistic expectations in all communications.

Be very clear and realistic when defining the purpose of the project and who it can affect. Be careful not to talk about the project in terms of benefits to teachers and students, and positive effects in the classroom unless it is known for certain that the project can achieve these goals. Too many SLDS projects have promised great things for teachers when, in fact, the state ultimately fails to provide the timely data that teachers need to affect the classroom. Communicate in such a way as to "under promise and over deliver."

Form or leverage groups to lead the outreach effort.

Task a key group (or groups) with coordination of the communications effort, utilizing existing groups whenever possible. Some successful models used by the states include:

- Executive group or steering committee including leaders from across the state to develop a communications plan, and coordinate outreach and information gathering efforts.
- Stakeholder advisory groups comprised of members from a range of stakeholder groups to gather feedback from and speak for their respective groups. Which particular groups are represented should be determined by the type of initiative being addressed. For example, do you need an IT or end-user perspective (or both)? A P-20W (preK through workforce) group of this sort may include school board representatives, superintendents, postsecondary representatives, representatives from other state agencies (e.g., labor, corrections, public assistance), policymakers, researchers, business leaders, teachers, parents, etc
- Association groups to engage stakeholders in-person and remotely to teach stakeholders about the system, promote the available reports and data portals, and gather user feedback.

Identify key individuals as "ambassadors" and "point people."

Identify individuals to serve as champions and point people on the SLDS or particular system features. For instance, representatives from regions around the state (one state calls them "ambassadors") communicate with the SEA on a regular basis and convey messages to and from local stakeholders. It is also beneficial to identify ambassadors from various peer groups. For instance, a highly regarded superintendent is more likely to have influence on other superintendents than would a school principal (and *vice versa*). This approach can help to 1) collect feedback from

the "ground" to shape state plans, and 2) keep the field informed about SLDS developments.

Create and follow a clearly-defined, carefully-conceived outreach plan.

Early on, develop a communications plan[2] that clearly defines key information about the planned outreach (e.g., audiences that should be kept informed of SLDS development news, authors or leaders of each communication activity, methods and formats of communication to be used, key messages of each communication, desired outcome of the communication, and the dates and frequency of communications. Also, determine when you will simply communicate about the project (one directional) and when you will actively solicit feedback (two directional). Be sure to identify an owner for the plan.

Acknowledge differences among stakeholder groups and tailor your style.

Acknowledge that while some stakeholders will be receptive to SLDS efforts, others may not. This latter group may feel threatened by the impending changes. The potential need to learn new skills, alter the way they do business, or the perception of a loss of control of the data are all common sources of anxiety and resistance from staff. Try to anticipate which stakeholder groups are more likely to fit into each of these two groups (receptive or resistant) and tailor the messaging accordingly to avoid alienating any of your stakeholders. It is also helpful to identify and address the distinct perspectives and interests of each group. For instance, a teacher will be interested in an SLDS for different reasons than a district superintendent, so communications should be tailored to appeal to those distinct interests. Also, be sure to avoid technical or education jargon when communicating with particular groups who may not be fluent in those languages.

View communications, in part, as a change management activity.

Creating and implementing an SLDS involves change for many stakeholders. Good leaders use stakeholder communications as an important way to manage the change process. Beyond the function of information gathering, your communications serve to set expectations for the SLDS, alert users to changes in skills that may be required for use of the data system, and suggest resources that may be available. The range of skills that individuals may need to effectively use an SLDS will vary from few to many. The less intimidating the system is to stakeholders, the more likely they will be to accept and utilize the system. Therefore the more effectively the information is communicated to stakeholders, the less opportunity there will be for unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, and resistance.

Structure meetings around very specific questions or products.

When meeting with stakeholders to assess needs, structure discussions around specific questions the agency wants to answer. These questions should be those identified by the field as areas of need (as determined by surveys or focus groups). Give the group specific products to respond to and keep discussions focused, rather than starting with a blank slate. Strike a balance between presenting requirements that are very detailed and prescriptive and those that are too loosely defined. When engaging stakeholder groups, recognize that neither extreme will be ideal, so set the stage by acknowledging that reality. Even if the group decides to depart from your starting point, this approach will help to focus the effort and generate better quality feedback.

Listen and be responsive to stakeholder input.

As user satisfaction will ultimately determine SLDS success, be sure to listen to stakeholder input. But don't stop there. Make sure stakeholders know you have heard them by responding to and acting on what they have told you (within reason). Also be sure to communicate the revisions or changes that have been made based on stakeholders' feedback. Not only will this improve the system, it will also strengthen engagement and buy-in, and will help to foster a collaborative environment.[3]

Implement some early wins to gain and sustain stakeholder support.

Identify the deliverables that can be most easily completed and tackle them for some quick wins. Provide legislators, educators and other stakeholders with not only data, but answers to their questions. Show return on investment (e.g., short- and long-term student earnings after graduation, total

number of students leaving the state after graduation, time it takes students to find jobs after graduation, high school feedback reports on college success, etc.). Delivering this valuable information will show stakeholders the true value of the SLDS.

Give stakeholders credit for help with system design and enhancement.

Be sure to give credit where it is due. Acknowledge stakeholders for their input into system design and development. System success should not be attributed solely to state education agency leadership or IT staff.

Do Not:

Based on their experiences, states warn against the following common communications mistakes. (Note: These suggestions do not necessarily represent the views of the IES SLDS Grant Program).

Do not engage in large-scale, open forums.

Do not open the floor to a large group of stakeholders with vague guidelines for discussion. The more productive approach may be to engage with leaders of key stakeholder groups (superintendents associations, technical associations, school boards, principals, etc.) for focused meetings. Too many voices can slow progress, so if you do engage a big group, structure the meeting around a specific set of guiding questions or products and keep the discussion focused.

Do not ignore the political environment.

Political connections and support can be very beneficial when it comes to getting funding for system start-up and sustainability. Engage legislative and executive staff early on to discuss system planning; ensure that it is designed to meet their needs and that they feel ownership of the system. Make sure legislators understand how the system will meet their information needs and that they are convinced that it actually will. Another very successful strategy for winning political support has been to encourage district staff to serve as advocates and reach out to local legislators (through communications, presentations, committee hearings, etc.) to demonstrate the utility of the state system at the local level.

Do not get "techy" with most stakeholder audiences.

When communicating or meeting with a non-technical group, focus on the end user perspective of the system—the questions they want the system to answer—rather than the infrastructure that will make it possible to get those answers. Save the technical discussions for staff who will actually need to understand that side of the system. For instance, legislators will not likely be the people logging into and using the system, so save the discussion of system access and use for their staff.

Do not assume that everyone is in sync on system goals.

Regularly check in with stakeholders to make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to system goals and desired outcomes. Recognize when those aspirations evolve along the way and make sure stakeholders are aware of those changes.

Do not fail to follow through on communications promises.

If you do establish an expectation among stakeholders for continued communication, make sure you follow through on your communications promises. Not following through is as bad as not communicating and may be even worse. This will foster a lack of respect for the work and create an atmosphere of distrust. Even if the communicator doesn't have anything new to report, it is still beneficial to stay in touch with stakeholders.

Do not NOT communicate.

Lack of communication will imperil an SLDS effort. Period.

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[1] A detailed description of an approach used by Florida to gather and prioritize user needs is available at http://www.fldoe.org/ARRA/pdf/LIIS-MinStdHistory.pdf.

[2] A sample Communications Plan template is available at http://nces.ed.gov/Programs/SLDS/LDSShare/ DocumentDirectory/NewDocuments/7677_communications_plan_ template_with_instructions.doc.

[3] For a report on how the Oregon DATA Project implemented a comprehensive strategy for stakeholder input, which ultimately decided the direction of the project, see the report at http://oregondataproject.org/content/findings-field.