Building Robust SLDS: Strategies for Framework Integration

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As the landscape of State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) continues to develop, a wealth of resources has emerged to support system efforts. These resources are designed for broad accessibility by different stakeholders within a SLDS, and can include guiding questions, frameworks for decision-making, examples of best practices, visual and data infrastructure design tools, advice for security and privacy, suggested research agendas, and more. Users and designers of SLDS inevitably rely on many resources to guide and inform their efforts, but how can publicly available tools be best leveraged to support stakeholders? Among the wealth of resources and knowledge, what policies and practices emerge to promote and reinforce robust, modern SLDS? The following is a series of strategies, with examples of successful implementation, for integrating the **Education to Workforce Indicators Framework***, or other similar frameworks into SLDS development efforts.*

Identify and Engage Stakeholders and Champions:

Stakeholders of a system include local education agencies, parents, teachers, and other direct users, as well as participating state agencies, advocacy organizations, funders, and researchers. Recognizing and remembering the diversity of perspectives within a system is an important step when promoting resources aimed at the whole-system level.

Champions differ from stakeholders in that they are individuals with strong personal and ideological stakes in the system. There can be more than one champion in a given system; one that acts as a thought-leader type of champion (like a governor) and a more technical visionary (data architects). These leaders at the state level are critical for providing vision and energy behind systems – and their efforts can be amplified with targeted resources.

Finding spaces where these groups are already meeting and collaborating is a good access point for new resources. System framework tools can create shared goals and language, which help expand local or single-agency efforts into statewide or even cross-state efforts. For example, Maryland holds legislative lunch and learn sessions that inform decision-makers, build trust, and establish common language.

Promote Awareness and Adoption:

One **communication strategy** that can help introduce resources to new audiences is tapping into conferences, training, webinars, and workshops.

Existing **professional development** programs could benefit from knowledge and resources contained in frameworks like the EW-Indicators Framework. Kentucky's KYSTATS video library, Wisconsin's WISEtraining online classroom, and Connecticut's Data Capacity Building workshops are all good examples.

Whenever possible, encourage participation in **cross-state convenings** and networks, such as those offered by the U.S. Department of Education's STATS DC Conference. These platforms can facilitate the sharing of best practices and innovations related to SLDS and framework integration.

Suggestion: Frame the tool as laying a foundation for continuously improving systems, rather than as a "one-stop-shop"

Address Barriers to Adoption

Data Privacy and Security are increasingly common concerns for stakeholders, and confusion around best practices can block forward progress. In states where legislation does not yet exist, creating formal governance structures first is the best way to address complex concerns before work on the system begins.

In cases where frameworks cannot fulfill all needs (security details, data governance, federal reporting standards, example legal language, etc.), point to other **trusted and recommended** resources.

Building trust and writing formal agreements between state agencies and local entities is crucial. Continuous dialogue with local districts can evade misunderstanding and distrust, easing the collaboration process.

Leverage Policy Opportunities

State Legislation and Grants: State SLDS legislation and federal grants are the biggest and most obvious engines of system formation. But other legislative efforts, like easing a state's restrictions on reporting across states or the federal government, can open new doors for system improvements.

Ties Between Funding and SLDS Development can facilitate advancements. Private and federal grants are important, but other changes to state finances can have impacts on SLDS. Some advances in Tennessee's P20W system can be linked to the redesign of the higher education funding formula.

Keep an eye on policy windows: Changes to federal standards were the initial push for SLDS, and further changes may push system development. COVID-19 created opportunities to reevaluate and integrate new data indicators. Future shifts in policies and practices may open new windows for change.

Develop User-Friendly Tools and Dashboards

Encourage the development of **dashboards** and highlight the ways they can be made more accessible and actionable for decision-makers by using existing frameworks as a starting point**.** Indiana's GPS dashboard is an example of how user feedback can be used to create an intuitive and effective tool.

Use **iterative design processes** where drafts are shared with stakeholders for feedback. This ensures that the final product meets the needs of all users. This process will also encourage **strategic thinking** around the system.

Evaluation and Feedback

Solicit Diverse Feedback from advisory and working groups. These groups should include cross-sector stakeholders, who collectively have broad and deep SLDS knowledge, and are well-equipped to give feedback. New Mexico's Project Steering Committee or Data Governance Advisory Council, or Michigan's P20 LDS Advisory Council are examples of groups with this capacity.

Engaging existing research groups, like those in university programs associated with the SLDS, can be useful entry-points to larger networks that can provide feedback. Researchers can also be helpful in designing tools for feedback (surveys, focus groups, etc.), and contributing resources to the effort.

Understand the Limitations of SLDS Efforts

Not every piece of data may be appropriate to add to a statewide system. In the case of local agencies, sensitive student and teacher data might be **best kept locally**.

Frameworks for designing SLDS may be especially useful for strategic planning, agenda-setting, and building common language across sectors. Other tools, like CEDS, may be better for deciding on governance structures or mapping out options for data relations. Others still might be better for security requirements, system self-assessment, or data visualization. Knowing that **no single tool can do it all** will help set expectations for a given resource.