Strategies to Involve Stakeholders for Successful Data Initiatives

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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.

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Stakeholders are critical to the success of data system efforts. Effectively engaging stakeholders is a key component of ensuring that a state’s SLDS is sustainable and that it continues to meet the needs of policymakers, families, program staff, and the public. For stakeholder engagement to be successful, states must carefully plan their communication and outreach efforts.

Representatives from Mississippi, Illinois, and Hawai‘i share their strategies for including stakeholders in prioritizing, defining requirements for, developing, and rolling out their data initiatives.

Illinois’s Outreach Team

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) used its fiscal year (FY) 2015 SLDS grant to create the Ed360 data system. ISBE introduced Ed360 in three phases: gathering user feedback and identifying key stakeholder engagement practices, implementing a pilot phase, and launching the product statewide (FIGURE 1 on page 2). During the first phase, ISBE created a strong stakeholder engagement plan to ensure that Ed360 met data user needs. Before development began on Ed360, ISBE held a stakeholder planning session with the SLDS State Support Team. Staff identified key stakeholders and discussed the importance of stakeholder engagement, as well as how to engage stakeholders regarding SLDS sustainability. Strategies included

- leveraging existing partnerships and systems;
- selecting organizational leaders to serve on internal and external stakeholder groups;
- engaging stakeholders throughout each step of the data system initiative;
- creating a wide spectrum of champions to support the data system initiative;
- evolving the visions for Ed360 through a series of stakeholder engagement activities;
- establishing an Outreach Team and brand;
- ensuring that stakeholders have ample opportunities to be involved in the data system process and that all voices are heard; and
- identifying the Outreach Team as key members of the SLDS development team.

ISBE next identified internal stakeholders as well as key partners such as Illinois’s 39 Regional Offices of Education (ROE) and 852 school districts, the
Based on the outreach work completed during Ed360’s development and rollout, ISBE developed a “5C” stakeholder outreach approach:

- **Communicate.** The Outreach Team provides an initial opportunity for stakeholders to participate in Ed360 by informing district leaders about the product’s capabilities and offering a chance to pilot it.
- **Collaborate.** Stakeholders are invited to participate in webinars and in-person presentations.
- **Create.** The Outreach Team is embedded within the Development Team and considered a core component of it.
- **Connect.** The Outreach Team continues to communicate with stakeholders after the product launches. Ed360 offers a feedback tool so that users can suggest updates and enhancements, and there is a dedicated email inbox for quick customer service inquiries.
- **Celebrate.** ISBE involves stakeholders in Ed360’s successes. ISBE recently celebrated the tool’s birthday with one of its key partners, the Illinois Principals Association.

**Garnering support for Ed360**

ISBE began its Ed360 stakeholder engagement efforts by building awareness of the data system initiative and gathering user feedback about data use needs and system requirements. It presented at annual superintendent conferences with mockups of the system and administered two statewide surveys in April 2016: an educator data survey and a technology use and policy survey. These surveys sought information regarding stakeholder needs and requirements and solicited volunteers for pilot sites and focus groups. Following the surveys, pilot testing for Ed360 and focus group events began.

During the surveys, stakeholders identified classroom assessment data as the most critical need for instructional support, so ISBE conducted an additional pilot using a formative assessment tool. Stakeholder engagement and participation grew, and ISBE not only received support from the districts participating in the pilot, the Outreach Team also received increased requests to collaborate with other districts and to present Ed360 dashboards at conferences and meetings. By the time Ed360 launched statewide, ISBE had created 15 dashboards based on pilot and focus group feedback.

**Creating a financial dashboard**

To address the fiscal equity and transparency portion of its SLDS grant project, ISBE began developing a financial dashboard in February 2019. As with Ed360, ISBE rolled out the dashboard in a three-phase process. First, it identified internal stakeholders and key organizational leaders across the state to determine key stakeholder data requirements. The Outreach Team met face to face with more than 70 district and ROE leaders to gather requirements while simultaneously building relationships. ISBE also collected information through a series of surveys that were sent through the state superintendent’s existing Weekly Message. These surveys were sent to external stakeholders such as principals and superintendents.

Although the financial dashboard was initially planned as a separate data system, user feedback determined that it was better to house the dashboard in Ed360 so that ISBE could leverage its existing systems and create a single place to access instructional and financial
information. ISBE created a pilot advisory group to test the system. During this phase, the Outreach Team held advisory webinars to demonstrate the system and gather immediate feedback. A statewide launch webinar was also held once the financial dashboard was available to the entire state.

Mississippi’s Communication Strategy

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) serves 150 local education agencies (LEAs) and approximately 460,000 students. The work MDE completed under its FY2015 SLDS grant was part of a larger, multi-year project to modernize MDE’s data system, which is more than 20 years old and is primarily used for state and federal reporting compliance. As a result, MDE had modernization in mind as it prepared to build its annual Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) report cards and update its website. The department also wanted to redesign the way it communicated data to the public. At that time, state report cards were published as a downloadable PDF. Other data were available online in spreadsheets or very basic tables.

To do that, MDE first had to communicate with members of the public to determine their data reporting needs and preferences. The agency’s communications team held several regional road shows with parents, advocacy groups, and other key stakeholders. During these shows, MDE incorporated gathering input into a larger discussion about changes happening within the state. Stakeholders reported that important indicators of student success are:

- academic growth and proficiency;
- graduation from high school;
- college and career readiness; and
- good communication skills.

Important indicators of school and district success identified by stakeholders were:

- safe, orderly, nurturing, and visually appealing schools;
- family and community involvement;
- school and district culture that celebrates success;
- all students progressing toward college and career readiness;
- data-informed decisions to benefit student learning; and
- transparency in local report cards.

Transparency in local report cards was particularly interesting to MDE, as most parents were not even aware the information was available.

FIGURE 2. MDE created a new, user-friendly data reporting website in response to user feedback.
Branding and rollout

In response to the gathered feedback, MDE created a mobile-friendly reporting website that displays a snapshot view of school and district data (FIGURE 2 on page 3). Data download features are available for users who wish to do more in-depth research.

When the website was released, MDE spread the word to the public through social media alerts and encouraging local media to report on the new website. MDE representatives also revisited the conferences and meetings they had previously attended to show participants that their input was heeded.

Branding was a critical step in engaging stakeholders. MDE called the website and its subsequent road shows “Mississippi Succeeds” to connect the website with the state’s education accomplishments and to tell a larger story about the state as a whole. MDE continues to use the “Mississippi Succeeds” brand for reports that highlight successes. By including the site in its branding and communications, MDE regularly draws stakeholders back to the website to view updates and new features that have been added.

Successful communication must also come from outside the state education agency to be truly effective. MDE created a series of communication toolkits that LEAs, parent organizations, and other stakeholders can use to inform others about topics that are of high interest to the public or that help build understanding of MDE’s programs. These toolkits include one-pagers, infographics, PowerPoint slides, frequently asked questions, and other materials. Each item in the toolkit displays the “Mississippi Succeeds” branding.

Continuing the momentum

When MDE originally asked for feedback from its stakeholders, it received many requests that it could not act on due to time and capacity. Feedback requests have continued to come in after the website’s release. To communicate that it is listening to its stakeholders, MDE created a roadmap (FIGURE 3) to show future plans for the website. By placing requests on a timeline, MDE helps stakeholders feel involved and that their opinions are being heard.

Hawai‘i’s In-Depth Inquiries

The Hawai‘i State Department of Education (HIDOE) serves 293 schools and 179,331 students, and it employs 22,000 full-time employees. Unlike other states, HIDOE serves as both the state education agency and a single LEA. Schools across the islands are organized into complex areas, which function similarly to districts.

Work on Hawai‘i’s Longitudinal Data System (LDS) began with an FY2009 SLDS grant. Early work on the LDS focused on technology and infrastructure. HIDOE was able to turn its focus to data use and support when it received an FY2015 SLDS grant. When shifting to data use, HIDOE wanted to ensure that stakeholders understood its commitment to continuous improvement and to supporting data use needs.
HIDOE created a multi-part stakeholder engagement strategy:

- Identify the key decisionmakers among HIDOE’s stakeholders.
- Document stakeholder inquiries and questions.
- Summarize and aggregate requests to help prioritization.
- Communicate with stakeholders.
  - Assess, prototype, and deliver “low-hanging fruit.”
  - Honor and provide feedback to all participants.
  - Plan and deliver effective training all year long, and measure, monitor, and provide continuous evaluation changes.

** Asking important questions **

Because HIDOE is a three-level organization, LDS staff needed to engage complex area and school leaders before working directly with school staff. HIDOE began engaging complex area superintendents and then solicited feedback from principals, vice principals, counselors, and registrars. Each stakeholder was asked specific questions about student voice, school design, and teacher collaboration. HIDOE also conducted tabletop exercises asking stakeholders to complete statements such as, “If I had … , then I could … .”

Stakeholders wrote their answers on sticky notes and placed them on posters, which HIDOE compiled into a spreadsheet (FIGURE 4).

Guidance from these activities provided HIDOE with easy-to-implement reports or LDS enhancements that showed stakeholders that it was listening to feedback. For example, HIDOE created Complex Area Reports that summarized some of the data necessary for Accreditation Reports, which were often time consuming for administrators. By providing some of the necessary data for administrators, HIDOE eliminated some of the 400 hours spent annually on Accreditation Reports. HIDOE also created an early warning system for chronic absences so that schools could identify students in need of additional support and take action.

HIDOE shared its stakeholder input with complex area leaders and showed them which data use needs it could meet immediately and which items would need additional time or resources to complete. HIDOE stressed to leaders that they needed to engage continuously with the LDS to help HIDOE understand gaps in data use and prioritize new enhancements and reports.

HIDOE then sought input from teachers on their data

![FIGURE 4. HIDOE asked stakeholders to answer the question, “If I had … , then I could … ” to help determine data use needs. The department collected and aggregated the answers to prioritize its LDS work.](image-url)
use needs. HIDOE asked teachers to identify specific data that could help them complete tasks. This activity lead HIDOE to create an On-Track Dashboard to help educators identify students who were on-track to graduate from high school. HIDOE also added more filters to its reports, a task that it could complete quickly and easily.

HIDOE’s stakeholder engagement activities proved effective. LDS use increased 487 percent over 4 years. The number of active users also increased. HIDOE continues to solicit feedback from its stakeholders. After each training session, participants are asked to evaluate their training, as well as suggest other data uses. HIDOE records these responses and reviews them to improve its LDS.

**Conclusion**

Effective stakeholder engagement requires states to work with stakeholders early in the process of each project. Strategy and continual evaluation are also keys to success both for engagement and for SLDS sustainability overall.

**Additional Resources**

- Illinois Ed360  
  [http://isbe.net/ed360](http://isbe.net/ed360)

- Illinois Site-Based Expenditures Report  
  [http://isbe.net/site-based](http://isbe.net/site-based)

- Hawai‘i State Department of Education Accountability Resource Center  
  [http://arch.k12.hi.us/school/strivehi/strivehi.html#](http://arch.k12.hi.us/school/strivehi/strivehi.html#)

- Mississippi Succeeds Report Card  
  [https://msrc.mdek12.org/](https://msrc.mdek12.org/)

- Mississippi Department of Education Communication Toolkits  
  [https://mdek12.org/OCGR/Home](https://mdek12.org/OCGR/Home)

- SLDS Issue Brief: Identifying SLDS Users and Their Information Needs  

- SLDS Issue Brief: Implementing and Evaluating Data Use Training Programs for Educators  

- SLDS Issue Brief: Stakeholder Training on Understanding and Using Financial Reports and Data Tools  

- SLDS Issue Brief: State Communications Plans  

- Stakeholder Engagement Plan Guide & Template  