This product of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program was developed with the help of knowledgeable staff from state education agencies and partner organizations. The content of this publication was derived from the work of the SLDS FY2019 Equity Workgroup. The information presented does not necessarily represent the opinions of the IES SLDS Grant Program.

For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS.

This publication is part one of a four-part series of lessons learned and considerations developed by the SLDS FY 2019 Equity Workgroup. The series will cover four aspects of using data to identify and address issues of education equity: defining equity, rethinking stakeholder engagement, determining indicators of equity, and creating reports and visualizations with equity in mind.

### Why Is Defining Equity Important?

Before determining how statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) use data to identify and address issues of equity, it is important to define equity for stakeholders. The definition will determine how equity will be measured, how data will be combined and analyzed, and how data will be visualized or displayed.

The term “equity” can mean several things, including:

- parity among student groups in terms of education access and outcomes;
- a fit between available resources and student needs; and
- adequate effort to lessen the effects of structural disadvantages that disproportionally affect different student groups.

Part of the conversation about equity includes deciding what achieving equity would look like, both optimistically and realistically. This discussion should include decisions about the definition of success and benchmarks toward a state of equity. Answering questions about stakeholders’ vision of equity ensures that all individuals are operating from a common understanding. A clear, concise definition of equity can help SLDS teams make decisions and navigate complex work and ensures that data are not misinterpreted or misapplied. It provides a foundation on which to ground the use of data to identify and address issues of equity and keep the work on track.

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Finally, discussing and agreeing on a common definition of equity as a group ensures that all communication and decisions are aligned and that the path from identifying data elements and conducting analysis to reporting findings is clear and direct.

**Considerations for SLDS Teams**

SLDS teams considering how to bring data together to identify and address issues of equity should consider the following factors in early conversations.

*Coordination, collaboration, and community engagement*

- Many states and state agencies have equity offices or individuals who serve as equity officers. SLDS teams should talk with these individuals to learn more about how each agency defines equity. Teams may be required to adopt the definitions approved by state leaders for SLDS work.
- Chose thoughtfully the stakeholders involved in defining equity. As you seek to select a diverse set of stakeholders, it is also important to honor and recognize the effort done by existing SLDS stakeholders over time and to leverage their work for equity tasks. Think critically about the perspectives that SLDS stakeholders bring and what additional perspectives may be needed to flesh out a definition of equity. Consider including representatives from groups whose data are included in your SLDS, and thoughtfully consider how to balance representation in the stakeholder group with the power dynamics among those that are at the table.
- Consider how to get meaningful input from people who are represented in the data you will be analyzing, using, and displaying. You may decide to include some of these individuals in your updated stakeholder group and to gather input from others in different ways.

*Definition and supporting context*

- Clarify differences between equity and terms such as “parity” and “equality.”
- Include a purpose statement about why the SLDS team is addressing equity to provide context to the definition.
- Be as clear as possible in the definition, including by defining which sectors (such as early childhood, K12, postsecondary, and workforce) will be represented.

*Process*

- If you are not required to use a definition of equity established by the state or agency, consider brainstorming as a group various definitions of equity that people use and coming to a consensus about what the group’s definition will be.
- Leave plenty of time for the team to work on and finalize this definition; do not rush your timeline.
- Once the group agrees on the definition, determine when it will be reviewed and revised.
- Data standards tools such as the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) may be leveraged to support documentation of local definitions of equity. Using the CEDS Connect tool, stakeholders can craft a consistent definition of equity using standard CEDS elements. These Connections can be shared internally to support local efforts in program offices or publicly for transparency and as a resource for other states that are considering establishing their own definition of equity.

**State Example: Virginia**

Staff members at the Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS) looked to policies already established in the state to define equity for the VLDS Research Agenda. Because the VLDS could become a critical tool in connecting state agencies to promote equity, the research agenda used the same definition of equity as a policy established by the governor at the time to cultivate and promote a diverse and inclusive culture across state agencies. Under that definition, equity refers to “the creation of opportunities for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access and equitable opportunity. Equity is also the process of allocating resources, programs, and opportunities to employees, customers, and residents, to address historical discrimination and existing imbalances.”

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State Example: Kentucky

The Kentucky Center for Statistics’ (KYSTATS) 2020-2022 Research Agenda focuses on addressing equity issues and barriers to education and employment outcomes for Kentucky residents. KYSTATS worked with its stakeholders and determined that defining equity would be both a collective and an iterative effort—one that would likely change over time depending on the needs of stakeholders and Kentucky citizens. The agency created a diverse committee that included members of the Kentucky Department of Education, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, and the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services to create a definition of equity. Members also included equity advocates and representatives from initiatives across the state such as Evolve 502, which helps provide pathways to postsecondary education for students in Louisville.

KYSTATS planned for the committee to meet six times. The committee’s first meeting was a level-setting opportunity in which KYSTATS representatives established the goals of the group for committee members and gained their input and buy-in. The agency wanted to underscore that its members not only would create the definition but also have ownership of it. During initial meetings, KYSTATS gathered feedback on committee members’ initial descriptions of equity as well as what they felt the committee’s purpose should be. Subsequent meetings continue to refine that definition, clarify the SLDS’s role in informing equity issues, and determine how to make equity data actionable for stakeholders.

Committee work is still in progress. KYSTATS has recently drafted a working definition based on the information gathered from members. The committee currently has reviewed the draft and provided initial feedback.

The group’s current definition of equity is based on 4 pillars:

- **Background**, or the identity or feelings belonging to a certain group. Background can include such traits as race, ethnicity, sex, geography, and socioeconomic status.
- **Experiences**, or actions or accomplishments that might influence outcomes for a group over time. Experiences may include early childhood environments, K12 curricula, and employment type.
- **Opportunities**, or the existence of education or social programs, employment training, health care, and other initiatives that could be beneficial to the individual. Opportunities can include job training programs, public preschool, and access to financial aid.
- **Access**, or an individual’s ability to take advantage of opportunities. Access includes factors such as broadband Internet availability and eligibility and access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid.

KYSTATS also uses committee meetings to identify other equity stakeholders who should be included in the process, such as postsecondary campus leaders and student groups. These new stakeholders ultimately will provide feedback on the definition of equity as well as explain how their respective group or agency might apply an equity lens to KYSTATS’ different products.

KYSTATS plans to revisit the definition at least every 2 years to ensure that it aligns with new research agendas.
Additional Resources

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy: A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration
https://aisp.upenn.edu/centering-equity/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Presentation:
Defining and measuring disparities, inequities, and inequalities in the Healthy People Initiative

Common Education Data Standards
https://ceds.ed.gov

Kentucky Center for Statistics
https://kystats.ky.gov/

SLDS Webinar: Identifying Indicators of Educational Equity

Virginia Department of Education
https://www.doe.virginia.gov/