



## SLDS Issue Brief

### Mitigating Data System Misconceptions

*There are many perceptions—good and bad, accurate and inaccurate—about data systems. Because the success of a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) is closely tied to stakeholder support, public misconceptions about the SLDS can be barriers to maximizing data system value. At the March 2015 Best Practices Conference, SLDS and Workforce Data Quality Initiative grantees shared some common misconceptions heard from various stakeholders, including legislators, parents, privacy advocates, and educators. Despite the variability in factors such as states' political environments, population size, and progress with their data systems, many common themes emerged. This document shares those common misconceptions, as well as strategies for mitigating them.*

### Common Misconceptions

*The data systems track students, and students' privacy is at stake.*

By far the most common misconception states hear involves what information the data system collects, how the information is used, and the security of the information:

- ✘ States collect biometric data, religious preferences, psychological data, etc.
- ✘ Data are sold.
- ✘ Students' personal information is sent to the federal government.
- ✘ Individuals can be targeted.
- ✘ Data systems are “Big Brother.”
- ✘ Data are easily accessible and identifiable; data systems are prone to hacking by criminals.

*Effective data systems are quick, easy, and inexpensive to create.*

When stakeholders misunderstand how much effort and resources are involved in creating and maintaining the data system, unrealistic expectations can be placed on the SLDS team. These expectations can affect future support and the perceived success of the data system:

- ✘ Technology fixes everything.
- ✘ Data systems are as simple as an Excel spreadsheet.
- ✘ All agencies are connected and willingly share data.
- ✘ Data systems can “spit out” answers.
- ✘ All data are in the same format and entirely accurate from the start.
- ✘ Use of the data system will be a burden for educators.

*A sustainable SLDS is dependent on widespread use of the system and its data.*

Teachers and administrators may be reluctant to use the system because of the following misconceptions:

- ✘ Data will be used to penalize teachers.
- ✘ Using the data system is an unfunded mandate.
- ✘ Using the system will be too time consuming.
- ✘ The data are unreliable or inaccurate.
- ✘ There is nothing the data system allows me to do that I can't already do without it.

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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>.*

## Strategies for Mitigating Misconceptions

There are four primary strategies for mitigating misconceptions: communication/education, transparency, demonstrating value, and partnerships.

### *Communication/Education*

This strategy creates buy-in with stakeholders through engagement, helps to gain control of the message and get ahead of misrepresentations, and targets misinformation through education. Specific strategies may include the following:

- produce FAQs, one-page fact sheets, newsletters, and other materials written in non-technical, jargon-free language to explain and promote the work of the SLDS
- prepare presentations or webinars for local and state boards, legislators, parent-teacher associations, and other stakeholders
- be part of the conversation by meeting with privacy advocates, legislative liaisons, and potential naysayers—and be prepared to respond to their questions clearly and accurately
- produce new, useful reports and tools that illustrate the value of the SLDS work to stakeholders by answering questions that could not be answered before
- provide easily accessible demonstrations and presentations of SLDS tools, such as teacher dashboards and high school feedback reports
- support data users such as educators and administrators by providing sample datasets and producing toolkits to help them navigate the data system hold workshops and produce toolkits or sample datasets for data users such as educators and administrators

### *Transparency*

In order to target misconceptions and distrust, SLDS teams should publish as much information publicly as possible. This emphasizes accountability, shows there is nothing to hide, and can lead to a better-informed public. Documents such as the data governance policy and data dictionary, reports showing what requests for data have been fulfilled from the SLDS, and basic information such as what data the system collects and reports, should be readily accessible via a public-facing webpage.

Because stakeholder perceptions can change over time, be purposeful about engaging with them on a regular basis to keep them informed about what is happening with the data system. This will help prevent issues and misconceptions from catching the SLDS team by surprise.

### *Demonstrating Value*

Showing what the data system can do for its stakeholders increases buy-in with those stakeholders; illustrates positive outcomes of the efforts of data users such as educators; and markets the data system in a positive light. Use early wins—small outcomes or objectives that can be realized quickly—to garner support for the system, and identify “champions” who can speak to the system’s benefits and successes. Additionally, a customer service-oriented approach to data requests and inquiries can build good will and create further buy-in.

### *Partnerships*

There is strength in numbers. Having other organizations supporting the SLDS team allows for more resources to mitigate misconceptions, engage stakeholders, and produce early wins. Partners can also provide checks and balances and ensure that everyone is on the right track. Approach potential partners with the question, “How can we help each other?” Maintain successful partnerships by keeping communication lines open, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, and involving all partners in activities and future plans for the data system.

## Conclusion

Because stakeholder perceptions can change over time, be purposeful about engaging with them on a regular basis to keep them informed about what is happening with the data system. This will help prevent issues and misconceptions from catching the SLDS team by surprise. In addition, be sure to prioritize mitigation strategies: start with strategies that will have the greatest impact for the least amount of resources.

## **Additional Resources**

Early Wins: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5906>

Elevator Speeches: SLDS Best Practices Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5907>

Everyone on Board: How to Engage Reluctant Stakeholders and Stakeholders Experiencing Leadership Transitions: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5196>

SLDS Webinar: Identifying Workforce and Employment Outcomes

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/data-use/publications/7823>

SLDS Webinar: Using SLDS Data to Inform Human Capital Decisions

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/data-use/publications/7822>

SLDS Webinar: Adult Education and Postsecondary Collaboration Regarding Remedial and Developmental Education

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/data-use/publications/7115>

Stakeholder Communication: SLDS Best Practices Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2729>

Strategies for Situation-Based Communications: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5684>

Transparency Best Practices

<http://ptac.ed.gov/document/Transparency-Guidance>