

Community Engagement Is Crucial for Successful State Data Efforts

Engaging communities is a critical step toward ensuring that data efforts work for their intended audiences. People, including state policymakers, school leaders, families, college administrators, employers, and the public, should have a say in how their state provides access to education and workforce data. And as state leaders build robust statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) or move other data efforts forward, they must deliberately create consistent opportunities for communities to weigh in. These engagement efforts not only build trust with communities but also improve data efforts by ensuring that these systems, tools, and resources are valuable to the people who will eventually use them.



The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) defines community engagement as a strategic process designed to include outreach, dialogue, and shared decisionmaking with people to address issues that affect their lives. For state education and workforce data efforts, these audiences can include any person or group of people who have a vested interest in the data effort—including a variety of data users like policymakers, students, job seekers, researchers, and the general public. For example, a state education agency may engage the state legislature to seek feedback on a new data tool to make sure it works for the legislators who will use the tool to make decisions. Or a state may seek feedback from a wide array of

community members to inform the state's data priorities and improve its SLDS to create necessary resources.

Without robust community engagement, states run the risk of building data systems and tools that do not meet people's needs, are not trusted, or are clunky and not as effective as they could be—ultimately resulting in expensive, time-consuming processes that lead to tools that gather dust. Investing in ongoing community engagement to seek input from communities at all stages of data efforts can ensure that data leaders have the information they need to move their work forward with the support of the communities the leaders intend to serve.



The Value of Robust Community Engagement

States are at different stages of building robust SLDSs, but community engagement has a role in developing any successful data effort. When states prioritize community engagement for state data efforts, data leaders can:

- **Center people's data access needs.** Incorporating feedback from and making decisions with key audiences (e.g., contributing agencies, institutional researchers, families, the general public) hones the strategic direction of state data efforts.
- **Develop strong data tools.** For tools to meet the needs of the people they are meant to serve, communities should be involved in decisions about what tools should be developed and delivered first and serve as test users of those resources.
- **Build trust in data.** People won't use data they don't trust. Robust community engagement can create iterative feedback loops that showcase how states are implementing feedback from communities. This process can build trust with communities over time and ultimately drive data use.

As state leaders think about community engagement, they should consider the resources and capacity their state has to dedicate to engagement. Community engagement can take many forms depending on the type of data effort, state capacity, and project timeline. (See box below.)

Outreach efforts are usually a lighter lift for states in terms of capacity, but they also are less likely to result in communities feeling engaged. State efforts to engage in dialogue with communities require more capacity than outreach efforts, but two-way communication with communities can result in conversations that produce helpful insights for state leaders. Engagement efforts are ongoing and therefore the heaviest lift, but these efforts have the highest potential to yield meaningful feedback from communities that results in a more successful data effort and builds trust with communities over time.

Which Communities Should Be Included?

These questions are a good place to start when determining who should be included in community engagement for a particular data effort:

- Whose input would help ensure that the effort is successful?
- Who collects the necessary data?
- Who is represented in the data?
- Who should be able to use the tools and resources being developed?

OUTREACH	DIALOGUE	ENGAGEMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● One-way communication.● Communities are passive recipients of information from decisionmakers.● Examples can include a press release or public announcement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Two-way communication.● Communities have conversations with decisionmakers to influence their final decision.● Examples can include focus groups, public forums, or opportunities for public testimony.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ongoing, two-way communication.● Communities have formal decisionmaking power.● Communities understand how their feedback was used, what changed, and what comes next.● Creates iterative feedback loops and builds trust over time.



Community Engagement Best Practices for States to Consider

Regardless of how states approach community engagement, leaders should consider these recommendations for robust engagement:

- **Set a vision.** Setting a vision and identifying who will lead the data effort is a crucial first step to ensure that policymakers and the public alike understand the scope of the decisionmaking process and the actionable goal of the data effort (e.g., to create a state report card or build an SLDS). Communicate the vision publicly and articulate a shared commitment to meaningfully engaging key audiences—community engagement should not be a box-checking exercise.
- **Fund it.** States must ensure that they have the resources to effectively engage communities. These efforts can include:
 - Dedicating funding to full-time employees whose role is to work on community engagement;
 - Eliminating common barriers to participation in engagement efforts by providing communities with services that enable them to engage fully, such as child care, interpretation services and translated materials, access to WiFi, mobile-accessible materials, or meals;
 - Compensating communities for their time; and
 - Offering hybrid or virtual participation options for those who cannot attend in-person meetings and providing meeting recordings publicly.
- **Partner with intermediaries.** Intermediaries are valuable partners that may be able to reach audiences that state leaders cannot reach as effectively. Intermediaries can include membership organizations that represent key interest groups, community-based organizations, direct service providers, advocates, or faith leaders. Seek feedback from intermediaries on the planned community engagement process. Collaborate with a diverse set of intermediaries to engage new or harder-to-reach audiences that may not have otherwise heard about the state's data effort. This work also helps begin to build trust, and ultimately broader support, for the data effort.
- **Communicate to build trust.** How states communicate about engagement efforts has a significant impact on the efforts' success. Seek out ways to garner widespread publicity for feedback opportunities and develop public interest in the data effort. Engage communities at natural gathering points, both in person and online, to get the word out about opportunities for engagement. Provide communities regular updates at public meetings about how their feedback informed decisionmaking, what will happen next, and further opportunities for engagement to create a two-way feedback loop.
- **Evaluate it.** Determine ways to measure which community engagement efforts were most successful to replicate those efforts and redirect less-effective efforts. Engagement is not a one-time activity, so community engagement efforts can and should evolve over time.

Engaging Communities to Build or Improve an SLDS

Some state data efforts might be focused on building or improving an SLDS, which is a complex data effort that requires additional considerations to be successful. Establishing cross-agency data governance is the most important step that states can take as they work to build or improve an SLDS and ensure that these systems enable access to data for people. As state leaders engage communities about their state's SLDS, here are three specific things to think about:

- **Cross-agency data governance** can aid in effectively engaging communities by including key audiences at the table and sharing decisionmaking power with members of the public.
- **Codefying data governance** in legislation is the most effective way to ensure that contributing state agencies come together to make decisions in the sunshine and that data governance efforts last across changes in state priorities and leadership. Best practices for data governance include establishing an independent leadership-level body with representation from all agencies that contribute data to the system *and* members of the public who have a stake in data collection and access.
- **Advisory boards** that include members of key communities can create opportunities for people to share their perspectives and facilitate collaboration with the governing board. Requiring the governing board to administer the SLDS through open meetings can incorporate public conversation into the work of the governing body as it sets priorities for the data system, which ultimately helps make the data system design and implementation processes as inclusive and responsive as possible.



Bright Spots: Community Engagement in Practice

CALIFORNIA



From the beginning, California has centered families, communities, and practitioners in developing its SLDS, the [California Cradle-to-Career \(C2C\) Data System](#). This commitment to community engagement is consistent across both the legislative framework for and practical execution of the state's SLDS. California's focus on continuous public engagement is evident through:

- The structure of the governance board. The board consists of 21 members, including members of the public. Each governing board member has equal decisionmaking authority, demonstrating how the state is centering equity by sharing power with the public and disrupting the usual power dynamics involved in the use of data.
- Regular, publicly available meetings that are required under the California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act. At the meetings, members of the SLDS governing board can gather community feedback and suggestions to improve the C2C user experience and ensure a transparent and inclusive decisionmaking process.
- Advisory groups consisting of researchers, policy experts, local education leaders, advocates, and the general public. The recruitment materials for this engagement tool are also available in Spanish, underscoring the state's commitment to diverse representation.

ILLINOIS



In Illinois, community engagement has been essential in helping leaders create and maintain the [Illinois Education and Career Success Network Dashboard](#). The Success Network Dashboard is used primarily by members of the [Illinois Education and Career Success Network](#), whose mission is to support Illinois communities to increase meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment so that Illinoisans realize education, economic, and social success. Members of this network include "leadership communities," which are communities with systems in place to drive meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment. These leadership communities can include postsecondary institutions, community organizations, employers, etc. and must have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in place that outlines their shared goals, details their commitment to using data for continuous improvement, and identifies intermediary organizations that can help

drive their work. As these leadership communities use the Success Network Dashboard to work toward the goals outlined in their MOU, the data team in Illinois solicits real-time feedback on their tool and is able to consistently update it based on that feedback.

KENTUCKY



In Kentucky, the [Kentucky Center for Statistics \(KYSTATS\)](#) has been a long-time leader in engaging communities to build trust in data. Significant factors in making these trust-building efforts possible are Kentucky's mature and robust cross-agency data governance and the fact that KYSTATS is an independent entity. KYSTATS has built trust across the agencies that contribute data to Kentucky's SLDS, and KYSTATS's governance structure enables multiple opportunities for engagement with contributing agencies, including quarterly meetings with the governing board. Further, due to its long history of public engagement around reports such as the [High School Feedback Report](#), KYSTATS has demonstrated its value as a public good. Because of this strong foundation of community engagement, as KYSTATS continues to work to use data to serve Kentuckians, its current community engagement efforts center less on building awareness of its reports and tools and more on the power and potential of its SLDS more broadly. This focus enables KYSTATS to respond to data requests from communities that are proactively seeking answers to their questions and trust KYSTATS to answer them.

MICHIGAN



Michigan's community engagement process for its [Parent Dashboard for School Transparency](#) demonstrates how focus groups can drive the development and evolution of a public-facing tool. Through focus groups (mainly with parents), examples of topics data leaders in Michigan were able to cover included:

- Data visualization and accessibility concerns, including the need to deliver information in language that is plain and easy to understand; and
- User experience feedback, including the need to have this information be compatible with and able to be viewed on a mobile device.

These focus groups drove the direction of the data effort and were crucial in developing a final product that works for the community the dashboard is intended to serve.

Further, data leaders in Michigan are able use webpage analytics to see that this resource continues to be one of the most-used dashboards within [MI School Data](#).

RHODE ISLAND



Leaders in Rhode Island used data to reach out to students who had started but not completed a postsecondary degree or credential to spread

the word about the [Rhode Island Reconnect](#) program. One initiative of the program focuses on upskilling, and program leaders engaged with employers to help promote this initiative. By engaging employers as intermediaries, the program saw an uptick in recruitment—an initiative that had room for about 100 participants saw about 500 applicants, demonstrating the success of this employer engagement.

Insights from Local-Level Data Efforts: The Importance of Intermediaries

BALTIMORE, MD

Baltimore's [Youth Data Hub](#) highlights the importance of engaging government agencies and community organizations as part of the community engagement process. Prior to the Youth Data Hub, the numerous agencies and organizations that serve youth and families in Baltimore operated in silos. Lack of coordination and information sharing made it difficult to see the full picture of what young people needed, identify service gaps, or address historical disparities. The Baltimore City Youth Data Hub enables agencies and organizations to securely share and access critical information about the populations they serve, helping them to more effectively and equitably support Baltimore's children, youth, and families. This initiative was made possible by a community organization, Baltimore's Promise, that took on the work of navigating legal and policy frameworks to negotiate all of the MOUs required for data sharing—an effort that took several years.

WASHINGTON, DC

To develop the [DC School Report Card](#), the DC Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) engaged in multiple rounds of feedback with DC families and communities. In total, OSSE was able to facilitate almost 120 in-person feedback sessions and circulated online surveys seeking feedback on the content and design of the new report card over the course of more than a year. This effort was possible in large part due to the fact that OSSE had strong relationships with intermediaries—OSSE partnered with 11 local community-based organizations that focused their work on family engagement to reach a broad, diverse group of parents.

★ Investing in Community Engagement Is Worth It

States have limited time and capacity. But investing some of that time and capacity in robust community engagement to inform state data efforts is worth it to ensure that states are building systems and tools that people trust and use—the first time around. Going back to the drawing board and rebuilding data systems and tools is much more expensive, frustrating, and time consuming than taking the time and energy on the front end to build state data systems upon a strong foundation of community engagement. Investing in that foundation can help state data efforts go further in the long run.