

101 DATA GOVERNANCE

Cross-Agency Data Governance
Accelerates State Education and
Workforce Data Capacity

Cross-agency data governance is not optional—it is the foundation for making data work for people, communities, and leaders, who are all making decisions that shape people’s journeys from education to the workforce.

The states with the best statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs)—those that are delivering insights to state leaders, communities, and students—have invested in enabling policies and practices to ensure that everyone has tailored access to information to drive student success, economic opportunity, and systemic change. **The first and most critical of those policies is to codify cross-agency data governance in state law.**

This brief gives state leaders the information they need to understand the value of cross-agency data governance; evaluate their state’s current policies; and identify concrete next steps to make improvements, regardless of their starting point.

What Is Cross-Agency Data Governance?

Cross-agency data governance encompasses the policies, processes, and leadership structures that guide how data shared between state agencies is connected, secured, accessed, and used. Cross-agency data governance helps ensure that education and workforce data brought together in an SLDS can be responsibly linked and used to inform decisions that support student achievement and successful transitions into careers.¹

Effective cross-agency data governance includes both **clear processes** and **designated leadership for making those decisions**. But not all governance bodies are created alike. Many states have established a cross-agency governing body that brings together policy and/or technical experts from the state’s education and workforce agencies to create guardrails and guidance for how data is shared, secured, and used. But too often, these bodies are structured as committees or task forces that lack any real decisionmaking authority about data transparency, data access, and how data should inform policy.

Every state has governance processes that define the legal and technical requirements for sharing data within their SLDS. However, far fewer states (12 as of May 2026) have established a sustainable, statutorily required cross-agency data governance structure that defines a clear purpose, roles, and responsibilities for participating agencies and ensures accountability for transparency

and data quality, privacy, and security. The difference is a data system that exists largely in the background versus one that state leaders and communities can actively use to understand outcomes and guide investments.

WHAT IS AN SLDS?

For decades, states have been investing in SLDSs that connect individual-level data from participating state agencies—at a minimum, early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce—over time. These systems have the potential to provide valuable insights that could help people seamlessly navigate their journeys through education and the workforce. But this potential is rarely fulfilled because governance of these systems is too often ad hoc, temporary, or disrupted during leadership transitions.



¹ An SLDS can also link data from other state agencies such as the Department of Health and Department of Corrections, with the goal of providing more holistic information about individuals’ education and workforce journeys. This brief focuses primarily on linking P–20W (early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce) data.

Why Data Governance?

While states have governance processes (e.g., data-sharing agreements, security policies) established for their SLDSs, those processes do not provide the SLDS with clear leadership, a purpose, or accountability for how decisions are made. Without that clear authority, decisions about how data is connected, secured, and accessed can happen behind the scenes and as one-off or one-time determinations—leading to limited transparency and accountability, inconsistent progress toward state goals, or goals that shift as leadership changes.

Governance matters because states collect data about their constituents and leaders should be accountable for what happens to it. Without a clear cross-sector structure, decisions about how data is connected, secured, and accessed may default to the one agency that houses the system, with little input—and little trust—from leaders in other agencies and sectors. Further, the most important decisions about how data is used are often made without clear ownership or continuity of vision as state administrations change.

As a result, states face common challenges:

- **Access.** Policymakers and the public often cannot access the information they need to understand outcomes or guide decisions.
- **Decisionmaking.** Without clear authority for cross-agency data decisions, responsibility for data privacy, access, and use is diffuse.
- **Transparency.** Decisions about data sharing and use occur behind closed doors, reducing public trust.
- **Vision.** Without stable leadership and codified governance, priorities for state data assets can shift or stall as administrations change.

Codified cross-agency data governance addresses these challenges by establishing clear leadership and authority for how data is used.

- **Accountability.** Ensures that leaders are accountable (by law and by the public) for data decisions and that those decisions are made transparently and in the open.
- **Policy Alignment.** Brings the agencies that contribute data to the SLDS together with a shared vision and purpose, ensuring that decisions are made through a coordinated, multiagency policy lens and are focused on priorities that require collaboration.
- **Privacy and Security.** Designates a single, responsible authority for protecting individuals' data, setting clear expectations for privacy, security, and appropriate data use.
- **Transparency and Trust.** Brings decisionmaking into the sunshine by conducting business openly and by including all data contributors at the table, building trust in both the SLDS and the governing body itself.
- **Sustainability.** Codifies decisions, roles, and priorities in law, ensuring that the SLDS and its mission remain stable and effective across leadership changes and political cycles.
- **Access.** Charges state leaders with the responsibility to determine how the SLDS is used to provide the public, agencies, and policymakers with timely and appropriate access to data and analyses.

WHY GOVERNANCE NOW?

States are navigating a rapidly shifting education and workforce landscape. Policymakers are making decisions about how to implement new and evolving priorities—such as Workforce Pell Grants, career and technical education, apprenticeships, dual enrollment, and skills-based hiring—while responding to broader policy and economic changes, including the growing impact of artificial intelligence.

These decisions require timely, reliable information about how students move through education and

into careers and which pathways lead to strong outcomes. But in many states, the data people need to answer these questions remains difficult to access and fragmented across agencies, so the systems are slow to produce meaningful insights.

Codified cross-agency data governance ensures that states can quickly generate the insights they need to guide policy decisions and implementation—for both today's priorities and those that will emerge in the future.

STATE LEADERSHIP IN DATA GOVERNANCE

Building on pioneering governance efforts in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington, several states have enacted legislation establishing cross-agency data governance structures, including:

- Alabama;
- California;
- Colorado;
- Connecticut;
- Georgia;
- Mississippi;
- Montana;
- New Jersey; and
- Rhode Island.

Best Practice Cross-Agency Data Governance

For states seeking to ensure that their SLDS delivers on its purpose to inform research, transparency, and/or individual decisionmaking, cross-agency data governance must be clearly structured, stable, and durable over time.

The foundation for achieving strong SLDSs with best practice governance is codifying cross-agency data governance in state law. Policy and practice in leading states show that effective governance laws share common components. At a minimum, statute should

establish a clear purpose for the system, define the governing body responsible for cross-agency data decisions, designate the entity responsible for managing the SLDS, and ensure that the system operates in alignment with its intended purpose and state policy goals.

The following four components draw on lessons from state-led policy innovation and highlight the features that are common to the strongest cross-agency data governance practices.

Component #1: The governing board includes leaders from all data-contributing agencies and external groups.

Answering questions about students' pathways from early learning into the workforce requires leadership from each education and workforce agency that contributes data to the system. At a minimum, the governing board should include the heads of those agencies to ensure that the leaders responsible for generating and stewarding the data are directly engaged in decisions about how it is connected, secured, and accessed.

The strongest governance structures also include representatives from outside of those agencies. Incorporating other voices—legislators, researchers, workforce and employer representatives, district and higher education leaders, and relevant members of the public—helps ensure that the system reflects interests that are broader than those of the contributing agencies alone. It also builds trust by ensuring that oversight incorporates multiple perspectives representing different state actors. While governing board composition will vary by state, designing a governing body that reflects the state's priorities and earns public trust is critical.

When structured this way, governing boards:

- Create formal and sustainable venues for cross-agency communication, joint decisionmaking, and problem solving among the leaders responsible for the state's education and workforce systems.
- Ensure that agency data practices align with shared expectations for privacy, security, and access.
- Incorporate outside expertise and public perspectives that strengthen the system's transparency, credibility, and usefulness.
- Promote a culture of shared responsibility for using data to improve outcomes across the education-to-workforce continuum, rather than working in silos.

If this structure is not codified in law, governance efforts lack the cross-sector authority and continuity needed to sustain collaboration—slowing progress in system development and transparency and weakening the credibility of the system.

Component #2: The governing board has authority over the SLDS's managing entity.

For leaders and the public to use the data in an SLDS to inform policy and practice, they must have confidence that the data and analyses the system produces are not shaped by the priorities of any single agency or political agenda. This independence is critical to building trust among policymakers, agencies, researchers, and the public that the system produces objective information that can be used confidently to inform decisions.

States with the strongest SLDS governance structures address this challenge by ensuring that the system's managing entity operates under the oversight of the cross-agency governing board rather than the direct control of any one data-contributing agency. This

structure helps ensure that decisions about how data is linked, analyzed, and shared reflect the board's collective direction rather than the priorities of a single agency.

In practice, states achieve this independence in different ways. Some house the managing entity in a neutral state office, like the state's information technology department. Others establish a standalone entity that is administratively attached to an existing state agency or locate the managing entity within a university or research institution. While the administrative structure varies, the defining feature is that the SLDS operates under the authority of the governing board.

Component #3: The governing board oversees the SLDS's executive director.

In best practice SLDSs, the executive director of the managing entity staffs and is accountable to the governing board and is charged with delivering on the SLDS's mission. By charging the governing body with selection and oversight of the SLDS executive director, states can ensure that the director is not beholden to any single contributing agency, avoiding real or perceived conflicts of interest.

While the executive director should have strong facility with technology and data, their primary role is to staff

the policy-focused governing board and ensure that the board's decisions are implemented by a variety of staff representing different functions (e.g., technology, research, legal). In practice, this position serves as a key translator between the board, which provides vision and direction, and the implementation staff. The executive director works across agencies to build buy-in and deliver on the mission and vision established in statute and directed by the board.

Component #4: The purpose of the system is clear, and the governing board has a clearly defined charge and authority.

The strongest SLDSs have a purpose, defined use cases, and a governing board with clear responsibilities and authority. A clear purpose for the system goes hand in hand with a clearly defined charge for the governing board and ensures that governance decisions are aligned with state priorities.

For example, some states have codified SLDSs with language that defines that the purpose of their system is to help leaders better understand transitions between higher education and the workforce as well as the outcomes of different pathways. Statute should go on to specify the governing board's role in overseeing the SLDS and ensuring that the system operates in alignment with stated education and workforce priorities.

In practice, the governing board's responsibilities should include:

- **Oversight of the SLDS managing entity and executive director**, ensuring that the system operates in alignment with the board's policy direction as well as the purpose and use cases for the system.
- **Data privacy, security, and quality policies**, establishing clear expectations for how to protect and ensure that sensitive information is used responsibly.
- **Decisions about how linked data is accessed and used**, including establishing policies for researcher access; public reporting; and the development of tools that help students, families, and policymakers use data effectively.

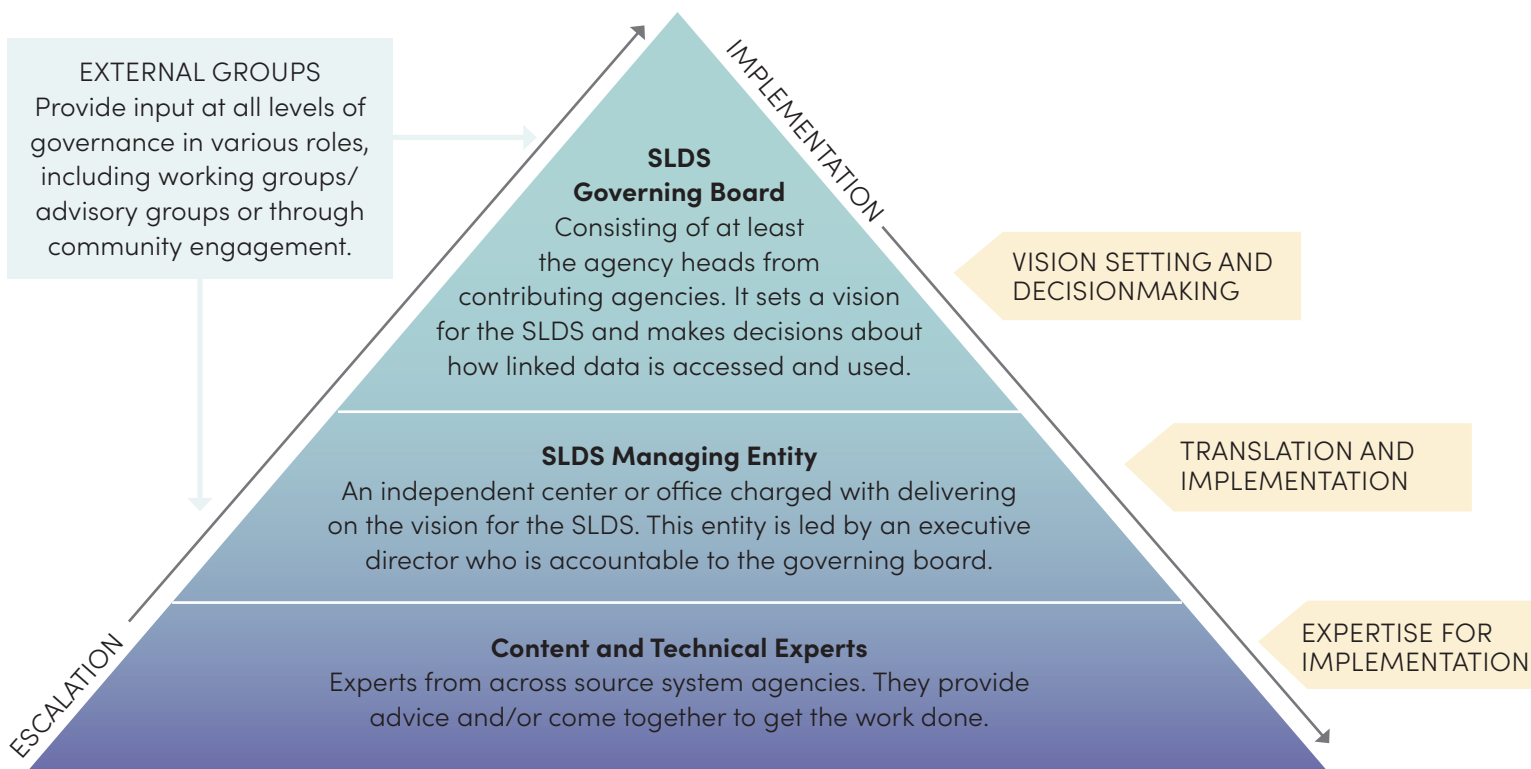
- **Transparency in decisionmaking**, including requiring open meetings and ensuring clear public communication about how the system operates.
- **Accountability to policymakers and the public**, such as reporting regularly to the legislature on system progress toward the purpose and use cases, outcomes, and opportunities for improvement.

When these responsibilities are clearly defined in law, the governing board has both the authority and the accountability necessary to ensure that the SLDS operates as a trusted public asset.

Governance Pyramid

Effective governance requires a clear organizational structure that defines roles and responsibilities across policy leadership, cross-agency implementation, and technical expertise. Together, these components create the foundation for cross-agency data governance that is sustainable, transparent, and capable of delivering meaningful value from a state’s data system.

The following governance pyramid illustrates this structure—showing how states organize leadership, management, and technical capacity to support the responsible use of linked data across agencies.



START HERE: Learn more about your state’s SLDS and its governance structure

Understanding how your state’s SLDS is governed is essential to determining how it can meet the data needs of students, families, and policymakers. Review the following list and ask: Does the law in my state meet all of these standards? If not, there is room to improve your state’s SLDS governance to better support people’s education and workforce pathways.

Is my state’s SLDS governing body:

- Codified in law?
- Made up of leadership-level agency members?
- Authorized to make decisions about the linked data?
- Charged with data security and privacy?
- Charged with overseeing the SLDS’s executive director?
- Managed independently from the agencies that contribute data?

What State Leaders Must Do Now

1. Take Action

If your state lacks codified governance, take legislative action.

Legislators can enact legislation that improves their state's data ecosystem and fosters access to data through establishing cross-agency data governance. Best practice governance legislation establishes the governing board's structure, membership, processes, and charge.

- **See [Data Governance 101: Best Practices for Legislation to Ensure Sustained Education and Workforce Data Capacity](#).** Champion legislation to codify cross-agency data governance.
- **Spread the word.** Communicate with colleagues about the value of P-20W data access in connection with current state policy priorities.
- **Tell a story.** Identify a use case that aligns with current state policy priorities that could demonstrate the importance of broadening access to linked data.

If elements of governance exist, make it stronger.

Your state may have elements of best practice cross-agency data governance but be missing some pieces that are key to its success.

- **See [Data Governance 101: Best Practices for Legislation to Ensure Sustained Education and Workforce Data Capacity](#).** Most states do not have the needed policies in place to ensure robust SLDSs with strong governance. Identify gaps between your current state laws and best practice cross-agency data governance; if needed, champion legislation to address the gaps.
- **Take stock.** Collaborate with the governing body members or SLDS staff to assess the SLDS's assets and challenges to better prioritize improvements.
- **Ask questions.** Request reports or analyses that answer your education and workforce program questions to build demand for what the system can do.

If your state has best practice cross-agency data governance, hold leaders accountable.

- **Use the data!** Request reports or analyses that answer your education and workforce program questions.
- **Hold leaders accountable.** Ask your constituents if they have access to the data they need to make informed decisions and communicate their answers to the governing board.
- **Work in partnership.** Collaborate with the governing board to assess the SLDS's assets and challenges including staff capacity, technical infrastructure, or legal obstacles.

2. Learn More

- **Education Commission of the States** produced [Lessons in Data Governance for State Education Leaders](#), which notes that "data governance is a core obligation for leaders and staff across any agency that collects, stores, or uses individuals' data" and outlines six principles that state leaders can use in establishing effective data system governance.
- **George W. Bush Institute** evaluates SLDSs in four areas, and two are focused on cross-agency data governance: governance for coordination vision and governance for capacity and resources.
- **Watershed Advisors** released [One System, One Vision: Enhancing Education and Workforce Outcomes Through Unified Data Governance](#), which outlines how governance can overcome structural barriers that often hinder the effectiveness of SLDSs.

ABOUT THE DATA QUALITY CAMPAIGN

The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to ensure that data works for everyone navigating their education and workforce journeys. For more information, go to dataqualitycampaign.org.