

DEEP DIVE

BEST PRACTICES FOR LEGISLATION to Ensure Sustained Education and Workforce Data Capacity

Legislators looking to create lasting data access, use, and transparency that meet their state's priorities must codify cross-agency data governance. Use this guide to understand the components of best practice cross-agency governance legislation, see how different states are using legislation to fit their state context, and measure state legislative efforts against best practices.

Why Legislation?

Legislation is the most effective way to ensure that contributing state agencies come together for shared decisionmaking and that a state's vision of its data system lasts across changes in political leadership. Codifying governance in law means that the right people must consistently be at the table and maintain a clear vision and purpose for the statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) to guide their decisionmaking. Legislation can also clearly and transparently outline—to policymakers, state leaders, and the public—what data governance is, what it is for, and who is in charge by including components such as:

- A clear purpose for the SLDS aligned to policy goals;
- Leadership-level membership of the board including at least the head of each contributing agency (e.g., Department of Education, Department of Higher Education, and Department of Labor);
- Authority for the board to make decisions about data to meet policy goals;
- Requirements for transparent meetings;
- Requirements for outputs, like reports, research agendas, and dashboards, that advance access to data;
- Mechanisms for ongoing public engagement;
- A neutral managing entity outside the agencies contributing data to the SLDS (i.e., an office or center) that oversees the SLDS with an executive director who reports to the governing board;
- Clear policies for safeguarding individual data; and
- An outline of the board's responsibilities (e.g., data privacy, research agenda development, setting a mission and vision).

GOVERNANCE 101

Cross-agency data governance is a leadership-level board responsible and accountable for making decisions about how data linked between state agencies through an [SLDS](#) is connected, secured, and accessed to meet state education and workforce goals. Best practice cross-agency data governance lays the foundation for secure, effective data use across the P–20W (early childhood through workforce) spectrum.

Data governance is the most important step toward making SLDSs more accessible and useful for people. It ensures that leaders work together to decide how data is collected, linked, and shared and make transparent decisions that prioritize the education and workforce questions that policymakers, students, families, and researchers need to answer.

Centers or offices that act as managing entities for SLDSs can look different across states. Most commonly, these centers are housed in an agency that does not contribute data to the SLDS, in a newly created standalone office, or at a university.

Best Practices in Data Governance Legislation

Data works as an effective tool only when supported by an ecosystem of policy conditions that address important sustainability and decisionmaking questions, demonstrating the importance of cross-agency data governance legislation. Legislators have the opportunity to enact legislation that positions their SLDS to support decisionmakers at all levels to take action to support student success.

The following tables offer state leaders a place to start by detailing the components that should be present in any best practice data legislation, including provisions that ensure that the cross-agency data governing board has the authority and responsibility to make the state’s SLDS work for its people. The second section of tables includes essential provisions for the data system and managing entity that are necessary to promote sustainability and a transparent data ecosystem. While each state’s approach may look different, together, these foundational components represent best practices for building effective data governance through legislation. At a minimum, a piece of legislation should establish or codify the SLDS, provide for a best practice governance structure, and establish the managing entity for the system.

GOVERNING BOARD STRUCTURE

The mandated who, what, and how of the governing board

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Mandates a governing board to oversee the data system	Strong, sustainable data governance is the foundation for secure, effective, and meaningful use of cross-sector data. A cross-agency governing board provides structure for how states connect, secure, and access data—and helps states create a culture of data use focused on continuous improvement.
Provides decisionmaking authority over the SLDS and managing entity	To drive meaningful progress, the governing body must have clear authority to make decisions about the SLDS—not just serve in an advisory capacity. Mandated authority ensures clear roles and responsibilities and accountability for data quality and access.
Mandates leadership-level representation from (at a minimum) agencies contributing data to the system	The governing board must include decisionmakers from each agency contributing data to the system. This structure ensures that the data system meets the needs and policy priorities of the state. It also promotes shared ownership of decisions about data.
Mandates representation from groups beyond contributing agencies	Including representatives from agencies and communities beyond those that contribute data—such as economic development, health and human services, and criminal justice—ensures that the system can serve a broader set of priorities.
Requires the inclusion of members of the public	Formally engaging members of the public (e.g., those representing K–12 schools, community colleges, and cities and those who bring unique expertise) brings vital perspectives into data governance conversations. This engagement helps ground the work in user needs, increases transparency, and builds public trust in how data is used.

GOVERNING BOARD CHARGE

The mandated responsibilities of the governing board

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Charges the governing board with ensuring that the system delivers value to users and/or advances state goals	Giving the governing board a clear charge to align its work with the state's education and workforce priorities ensures that the system is focused on delivering value. The charge frames the board's decisions and holds it accountable for making sure the system drives impact for individuals, communities, and the state.
Specifies that the board appoints and oversees the executive director of the managing entity	The executive director should report to the cross-agency governing board—not the leadership of a single agency. This structure reinforces the system's objectivity and ensures that data use is not driven by one agency's agenda or needs.
Requires the governing board to establish a research agenda	A clearly defined research agenda ensures that the system is proactively answering the questions that matter most. When the governing board sets and owns the agenda, the board is accountable for it and can drive intentional work across sectors.
Makes the governing board responsible for data privacy	Assigning responsibility for data privacy to the governing board creates clear lines of accountability. The public knows who is responsible for safeguarding their data, and the board is empowered to create policies that protect privacy while enabling meaningful use.
Requires that meetings be open to the public	Public meetings promote transparency, foster trust, and ensure that decisions about the use of data are made in the sunshine.

THE DATA SYSTEM

The requirements for the state's data system

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Establishes an SLDS or modifies and/or codifies an existing SLDS	Legislation codifying an SLDS should outline a clear purpose for the system, provide sustainability through funding and structure, and create the legal framework for sharing data across systems and sectors.
Outlines a purpose for the system	A well-defined purpose helps ensure that the SLDS is more than just an information technology project. Connecting the system's purpose to state goals—such as improving education attainment or workforce readiness—reinforces its value and encourages long-term investment and use. Legislation can task the cross-agency governing board with developing the mission and/or vision aligned to the system purpose.
Requires specified agencies to contribute data to the SLDS	Mandating the participation of specific agencies in the SLDS creates the legal framework for sharing data across agencies and helps foster trust.
Cites data access for nonpolicymaker audiences as an explicit purpose for the system	While early SLDS efforts focused primarily on policymakers and researchers, more recent legislation mandates providing access to students, families, educators, and communities.
Provides guardrails for data requests	Data governance should ensure that all agencies have a voice through the governing body, while maintaining clear, consistent processes for accessing and using data. No single agency should have the authority to veto a data request unless the request presents clear privacy and/or personally identifiable information issues; to deny a request, agencies must provide appropriate rationale for the governing body to consider. This structure strengthens collaboration and protects the integrity of the system's purpose.

MANAGING ENTITY STRUCTURE

The mandated who, what, and how of the SLDS managing entity

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Establishes a dedicated office or center to manage the system	Creating a dedicated office or center ensures that an executive director and team are responsible for the day-to-day management of the SLDS. This coordination is key to maintaining system quality, supporting users, and keeping the work aligned with the state's broader goals.
Specifies that the managing entity is governed by and responds to the authority of the independent governing board	Making the managing entity accountable to the cross-agency governing board helps ensure objectivity and balance. This structure reduces the risk that one agency will dominate the system's priorities and keeps the data in the SLDS "neutral" from any given agenda.
Requires that the managing entity be housed outside agencies contributing data to the SLDS	Locating the SLDS outside of the agencies contributing data to the system reinforces that the system is objective and is a source of neutral data, separate from the goals of any one agency.
Designates the managing entity as the authorized representative of contributing agencies for purposes of research and reporting	Authorizing the managing entity to act on behalf of contributing agencies allows the SLDS to generate insights and meet reporting requirements more efficiently, reducing the burden on individual agencies and ensuring that the system provides value to contributing agencies.

MANAGING ENTITY CHARGE

The mandated responsibilities of the SLDS's managing entity

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Tasks the managing entity with performing research and analysis	The managing entity should be explicitly tasked with using the SLDS to carry out research and analysis aligned with the research agenda established by the governing board. This alignment fosters timely, relevant insights that support state goals and meet the needs of data users.
Makes the managing entity responsible for staffing the system	Designating the managing entity as the home for SLDS staff ensures that the system is consistently supported by dedicated personnel. This structure provides stability and ensures that staff are in place to conduct research, support the governing board, and respond to data user needs. Some states also have liaison staff who work part time for the SLDS managing entity and part time for one of the contributing agencies. These shared staff focus on answering the specific questions of individual agencies and using the SLDS to meet agency-specific reporting requirements.
Specifies that the managing entity will provide technical assistance to data users	Charging the managing entity with supporting data users ensures that the system is accessible to a wide range of populations. Offering technical assistance helps make the system more visible and usable, especially for those without advanced data skills.
Includes a mechanism for community feedback	A feedback mechanism gives the public a voice through tailored avenues for input on decisions about data and elevates user needs. One way to collect this feedback is through formal advisory boards.

FUNDING

Mandated provisions for funding the system

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Ensures ongoing funding for technology needs and required staff	SLDSs need ongoing funding to sustain and upgrade the system as needed. While federal and philanthropic dollars can provide needed start-up or innovation funds, ongoing state funds are also needed to sustain the system. Additionally, dedicated funding for full-time staff positions is essential for building and sustaining capacity within the managing entity. Clear <u>investment in staffing</u> helps ensure that the system is equipped to conduct research, support users, and continuously deliver value over time.

TOOLS AND OUTPUTS

Required outputs from the SLDS, including dashboards, reports, tools, and more

BEST PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Requires the system to support access points (tools or reports)	Legislation should clearly charge the managing entity with creating and maintaining public-facing tools or reports. This requirement ensures that the SLDS produces insights that are accessible and useful to the public, researchers, and policymakers. Requiring the release of user-friendly tools or dashboards increases transparency and builds public trust. Such tools demonstrate that data is being used not only to guide policy but also to empower students, families, educators, and communities with information they can use.

STATE SPOTLIGHT: CALIFORNIA

Codified statute is vital to sustain effective governing bodies that can safeguard student and worker data, elevate community voices, and adapt to emerging state goals and needs. California state leaders and legislators recognized that strong leadership, shared decisionmaking, and transparency were required to advance their state's data needs and answer the questions of a diverse student and worker population.

After years of trailing most states in their efforts to make data work for students, policymakers in California passed a much-needed [data system law](#) in 2021 mandating and governing the [California Cradle-to-Career \(C2C\) Data System](#). The law requires the state to create a robust and user-focused statewide data system that connects data longitudinally across early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and the workforce. Critically, the legislation establishes best practice cross-agency data governance with a mandated, leadership-level governing board. California went further than other states by including multiple provisions that help ensure not only that individuals, communities, and decisionmakers have

the information they need but also that their voices are heard in the development of the state's system:

- California requires advisory boards for the governing body that consist of researchers, policy experts, local education leaders, advocates, and the general public. Having public advisors for a state's governing board ensures shared decisionmaking and creates built-in feedback from data users. As of April 2026, 32 members of the public serve across C2C's two advisory boards.
- California's law also requires specific outputs from the system that focus on supporting individuals. Within four years of codification, C2C is supporting the scaling of the [California College Guidance Initiative](#) and has published [dashboards](#) about how California students navigate to and through college, providing students and families with information about postsecondary pathways, return on investment, and more. Access to this information enables individuals to make more informed decisions and reinforces the user-centered focus of California's data system.

Other States With Cross-Agency Data Governance Legislation

Following in the footsteps of three early leaders on data governance (Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington), nine additional states have adopted cross-agency data governance: Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. Leaders looking to codify cross-agency data governance can draw inspiration from the following bills.

STATE	BILL/CODE	YEAR
Washington*	RCW 43.41.400	2007
Maryland	Chapter 190 (S.B. 275)	2010
Mississippi ^A	Miss. Code Ann. § 37-154-3	2011
Kentucky	KRS 151B.132	2013
Connecticut	Sec. 10a-57g S.B. 1250	2017 (updated 2025)
California	A.B. 132	2021
Alabama	H.B. 109	2023
Montana	H.B. 949	2023
Rhode Island	H.B. 5200 H.B. 5076	2023 (updated 2025)
Colorado	H.B. 24-1364	2024
Georgia	H.B. 1302	2026
New Jersey ^A	A. 5802	2026

*Washington's 2007 legislation was the first of its kind and has provided a blueprint for other states to look to for almost 20 years. However, Washington's Education Research & Data Center (ERDC) does not have a governing board, making answers about accountability and sustainability for state data decisions less clear. While Washington's model has evolved over time and ERDC continues to provide value for the public and policymakers, best practice would include codifying a governing board in legislation.

^ANeither Mississippi's nor New Jersey's governance legislation mandates leadership-level representation on the governing board. While the states require representation from contributing agencies, leadership-level representation is important to ensure that the appropriate people come together to make decisions about a state's data collection, security, access, and use.

Conclusion

Codifying the SLDS and its governing board ensures that they last across changes in state priorities and political leadership. States that have sustained their SLDSs by codifying cross-agency data governance into law have created decisionmaking authority, defined responsibilities for data, and promoted access. While states can pursue other ways to build and sustain their data systems, best practice cross-agency data governance is the most critical element.

For additional information on best practices and examples of state legislation on cross-agency data governance, see these resources:

- [Data Governance 101: Cross-Agency Data Governance Accelerates State Education and Workforce Data Capacity](#)
- [Principles for Education Data Legislation](#)
- [State Data Legislation](#)

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.