SLDS Topical Webinar Summary
Strategies for Engaging Early Learning Stakeholders

Developing a successful early childhood integrated data system (ECIDS)—a longitudinal data system incorporating data from early childhood programs—involves a diverse set of stakeholders actively guiding the project through a collaborative decisionmaking process. ECIDS stakeholders include early childhood programs, children and their families, state advisory councils, academic researchers, legislators, federal policymakers, and any other group with a stake in the project's outcomes. Effective stakeholder engagement helps ensure the ECIDS provides the information these groups need to make important decisions about early childhood—from families deciding whether to enroll their child in a specific program to federal policymakers deciding how to modify program requirements and funding. When ECIDS stakeholders understand the system's benefits and take ownership of its management, they become vital advocates for its future growth and sustainability.

This publication explores the diverse roles of stakeholders in developing and implementing an ECIDS. It covers strategies for promoting positive stakeholder engagement and lessons learned from Wisconsin and Illinois for involving stakeholders in all stages of an ECIDS project. It also highlights the differences between stakeholder engagement and data governance activities.

Who Are ECIDS Stakeholders?

An ECIDS stakeholder can be any agency, group, or individual responsible for the outcomes of the ECIDS project or affected by the system's use. ECIDS stakeholders often fall into three categories: state advocates and leaders, program representatives, and partners.

State advocates and leaders might include the governor's office, statewide early childhood councils, and other cross-agency leadership. Program representatives are early childhood program administrators, including those from cross-agency and cross-program initiatives. The partners group can include agencies involved in broader K12 or P-20 longitudinal data systems, parents and families, universities and researchers, and other local or private early childhood foundations or forums.

When categorizing ECIDS stakeholders and developing an engagement plan, it is useful to first identify general stakeholder roles that will be essential to the project. A stakeholder role is defined by its relationship to the ECIDS, which will determine the communications individuals receive and their expected involvement in various stages of the project. These roles might include supporter, implementer, leader, user, decisionmaker, and consultant.

> ### Early Childhood Advisory Councils
> A state's federally established early childhood advisory council can be a particularly effective ECIDS stakeholder because of its role as a centralized coordinating body for strategic planning and early childhood data analysis. The advisory council includes representation from a diverse set of leaders and is likely already developing processes and policy questions related to data sharing across early childhood programs.

Once key roles are identified, the next step is to determine which agencies, executives, spokespeople, and staff members best fit those roles. The process of identifying and categorizing stakeholders should be documented. Stakeholders need to understand early in the process the nature of their role and be comfortable with the expectations and responsibilities of their involvement.

> **State Tip**: New stakeholders can come on board at any stage in the ECIDS project. In Wisconsin, project leaders keep presentation slides on hand that quickly and concisely speak to the vision, mission, and purpose of the project, as well as training materials for new staff and leadership. Leaders also keep up with personnel changes within stakeholder agencies and help new staff acclimate quickly to the project plan.

What Do Stakeholders Need to Engage in ECIDS Activities?

By virtue of their individual work and experiences, stakeholders naturally will bring to the table unique perspectives on ECIDS activities. But to participate effectively in discussions and decisions about the project, stakeholders will need to continually refine their understanding both of the ECIDS and of their role in several key areas, including

- the state data landscape;
- the benefits of a coordinated data system to their programs;
- the data their programs can offer to add depth and breadth to the system;
- their program-specific audiences and data consumers, and those individuals' priorities; and
- questions they would like to answer but are not yet able to.

Understanding these key elements allows stakeholders to recognize how the ECIDS can benefit their programs, identify and articulate the goals they hope to reach by being involved in the project, and represent their programs and audiences in constructive conversations about the system.

ECIDS project leaders can help stakeholders understand the project through regular communications, meetings, and other collaboration opportunities. However, stakeholders cannot be only passively engaged. Project leaders must encourage stakeholders to ask questions throughout the process and seek out information from their own agencies and beyond that will help them contribute to group decisionmaking. Although not all stakeholders will have equal influence over each decision being made, it is imperative that stakeholders be prepared to contribute accurate and thoughtful feedback when their input is needed.

Strategies for Engaging Stakeholders in Developing an ECIDS

The following four strategies can be incorporated into an engagement plan to give stakeholders a variety of opportunities to contribute to the ECIDS project.

Strategy 1. Conduct a data roundtable with stakeholders

A data roundtable brings stakeholders together to discuss high-level issues related to ECIDS development and use. It is a chance to share important project information with a large number of people at once and to make sure stakeholders are on the same page regarding project goals, milestones, and how to communicate with others about the project. A data roundtable can be an effective kick-off event to generate stakeholder support and excitement at the start of a project.

> **Wisconsin's Data Roundtable**
> Wisconsin held a data roundtable for all of its ECIDS stakeholders during the planning phase of its project. The full-day, retreat-style event was hosted by state project leaders and featured input from outside experts from the SLDS State Support Team and the Ounce of Prevention Fund. During the event, stakeholders learned about Wisconsin's project, saw model data systems from other states, contributed to policy questions and data discussions, and initiated workgroups to support specific aspects of the project moving forward. A meeting summary was circulated afterward, and a post-event survey allowed leaders to follow up on activities set in motion at the roundtable.

Strategy 2. Invite stakeholders to develop essential policy questions

In 2009, the Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC) held a meeting with thought leaders from across the country to discuss issues that early childhood programs nationwide were attempting to address through data analysis and research. Out of that meeting came a set of six key policy questions summarizing those issues:

1. Are children, birth to age 5, on track to succeed when they enter school and beyond?
2. Which children have access to high-quality early care and education programs?
3. Is the quality of programs improving?
4. What are the characteristics of effective programs?
5. How prepared is the early care and education workforce to provide effective education and care for all children?
6. What policies and investments lead to a skilled and stable early care and education workforce?

Many states have used the ECDC questions as a starting point for generating their own policy questions to guide ECIDS work. A state's essential questions are based on its unique policy priorities and the information that will be available through its ECIDS. Inviting stakeholders to contribute to the essential questions helps ensure that the principles guiding ECIDS activities accurately reflect users' goals and that stakeholders understand how the system will be used.

More information about developing essential questions can be found in the SLDS Issue Brief *Answering Key Questions with an Early Childhood Data System.*

Wisconsin's Essential Questions

Based on the ECDC example questions, Wisconsin's essential questions incorporate guidance from the Data Quality Campaign and project stakeholders to fit the state's early childhood policy goals.

1. Are children, birth to 5, on track to succeed when they enter school and beyond?
2. Which children and families are and are not being served by which programs/services?
3. Which children have access to high-quality early childhood programs and services?
4. What characteristics of programs are associated with positive child outcomes for which children?
5. What are the education and economic returns on early childhood investments?

Strategy 3. Create stakeholder workgroups to inform ECIDS development and keep users engaged

Workgroups are targeted teams of ECIDS stakeholders focused on specific topics related to the system's design, implementation, and use. Workgroups can hold discussions and produce working papers in areas such as system architecture, governance, unique identifiers, privacy, or sustainability. They draw on the strengths, interests, and expertise of individual stakeholders in a forum where action can be taken more quickly than in large-group settings.

Although workgroups include only the subset of stakeholders most closely concerned with a particular topic, workgroup leaders should be individuals who are actively involved in the general management of the ECIDS so the workgroup does not become disconnected from larger project goals.

In order to create an open and productive forum for stakeholders to address complex issues and develop workable solutions, workgroup leaders need to ensure a balance between those stakeholders interested in the workgroup's topic and those with decisionmaking authority or responsibility in that area. If the group's membership is too narrow, its efforts might lose support from the broader

State Tip: In Illinois, project leaders clearly identified stakeholder roles to be filled by state agencies and those for non-government stakeholders. This step ensured decisionmaking responsibilities were kept within the agencies with appropriate authority. To gain input and advice from non-government sources without violating procurement regulations, the state asked external groups to sign waivers allowing them to take part in discussions about the project but prohibiting them from bidding on any resulting contracts or sharing information with prospective bidders.

stakeholder community. If it is too inclusive, too many voices might result in less effective discussions.

Strategy 4. Develop communication tools to reach various stakeholders and the agencies they represent

The key to effective stakeholder engagement is communicating clearly with stakeholders about their roles, the work being done on the project, and what duties and outcomes they can expect from their involvement. Communication tools need to provide stakeholders with information about the project as well as a means to offer feedback and represent their agencies in collaborative efforts. Specific tools will vary depending on the stakeholder and the purpose of the communication, but they must allow project leaders to maintain productive relationships with stakeholders. An effective communications plan will allow leaders to:

- *Be responsive and timely*. Stakeholders not only need to know that their input has been heard, they need to see how it has been used to make decisions or why it was not useful.
- *Use technology to help*. Webinars, webpages, conference calls, document servers, and other electronic communications can disseminate information as well as facilitate interaction and collaborative project planning.
- *Give stakeholders dates and times to expect materials and publications*. By establishing a communications plan and sticking to it, project leaders build trust among stakeholders and facilitate ongoing communications.

Wisconsin's Communications Plan

Wisconsin's communication tools include:
- Website
- Newsletters
- Meetings and presentations
  - Status and planning
  - Project kick off
  - Departmental briefings
  - Outreach to partners
- Data Roundtable
- Data Governance Workshop

Stakeholder Engagement Versus Data Governance

Stakeholder engagement and data governance are both key processes in the development of an ECIDS. Both require close collaboration among ECIDS partners to achieve project goals. Although they are often confused, these two processes serve different purposes and need to be approached with those ends in mind. While stakeholder engagement involves a wide spectrum of groups in discussions and decisions about a range of ECIDS issues, data governance is an effort undertaken specifically by agencies that contribute data to the ECIDS to ensure proper handling and use of that data.

The table below highlights important differences between stakeholder engagement and data governance. For more information on data governance, see the SLDS Best Practices Brief *P-20W Data Governance: Tips from the States*.

	Stakeholder Engagement	Data Governance
Definition	The use of stakeholders as participants in a collaborative decisionmaking process that guides the creation and execution of a defined scope of work.	The overall management of the availability, usability, integrity, quality, and security of data. The process establishes the means of collaboratively and continuously improving data quality through the systematic creation and enforcement of policies, roles, responsibilities, and procedures.
Groups Involved	All users of ECIDS data and those directly or indirectly affected by its use.	Representatives from agencies and programs that contribute data to the ECIDS, including leadership, program, and IT staff.
Level of Engagement	Varies by stakeholder group. Engagement will increase and decrease over the course of the project depending on need and focus.	High and consistent throughout the life of the project. Will continue after the system is developed.
Responsibilities and Decisionmaking Authority	Members inform and influence the overall direction, priorities, and implementation of the ECIDS.	Members determine the overall direction, priorities, and implementation of the ECIDS.

Additional Resources

Early Childhood Data Collaborative
http://www.ecedata.org/

Early Childhood Project Planning/Management Self-Assessment Tool
Available upon request, support@slds-sst.org

Early Childhood Project Planning Guide
Available upon request, support@slds-sst.org

Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Center for Technology in Education
http://education.jhu.edu/research/CTE/

The Ounce of Prevention Fund
http://www.ounceofprevention.org/home/index.php

SLDS Best Practices Brief: P-20W Data Governance: Tips from the States
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/brief4_P_20W_DG.pdf

SLDS Best Practices Brief: Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best_practices.pdf

SLDS Early Childhood Planning Guide
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Early_Childhood_Planning_Guide.pdf

SLDS Issue Brief: Answering Key Questions with an Early Childhood Data System
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/publications.asp

Stakeholder Engagement Plan Guide and Template
Available upon request, support@slds-sst.org

Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit: Traversing 'Stakeholder Land'
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/target_team_stakeholderland.pdf

Wisconsin Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System Project
http://wise.dpi.wi.gov/wise_p20ec