



Elevator Speeches

Brief 6

Updated July 2019

best practices brief



SLDS Best Practices Brief

Elevator Speeches

Regardless of whether states are planning for modernization and other major system efforts or focused on training and outreach to leverage their statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) to meet stakeholders' data use needs, it is important to keep in mind the objectives behind the work. When given an opportunity to highlight their projects, SLDS teams too often fall into a comfort zone of providing technical specifications or sharing the latest report release. SLDS directors and key staff should understand that technology is a *tool* to work through some of education's toughest challenges—but technology is not the *solution*.

This document describes best practices that states use to communicate with and gain support of key stakeholders for the SLDS through a 30-second “elevator speech” to explain the SLDS to high-level, nontechnical decisionmakers or policymakers. In addition, this brief shares examples of states' elevator speeches.

Do:

- ✓ Do identify the intended audience.
- ✓ Do understand your audiences' priorities.
- ✓ Do answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” or “Where do I fit in?”
- ✓ Do update your message regularly.
- ✓ Do remember that delivery is important.

Do Not:

- ✗ Do not use overly technical jargon.
- ✗ Do not go into too much detail.
- ✗ Do not assume anything.
- ✗ Do not speak the way you write.

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This product of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) SLDS Grant Program was developed with the help of knowledgeable staff from state education agencies. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the IES SLDS Grant Program. We thank the following people for their valuable contributions:

Jon Enriquez
Maryland Higher Education Commission

Chandra Hailset
Maryland State Department of Education

Kim Nesmith
Louisiana Department of Education

Glenn Mayer and Tuhin Verma
Nevada Department of Education

Jennifer Verbrugge
Minnesota Department of Education

Kathy Gosa
*SLDS Grant Program,
State Support Team*

Carla Howe, Ph.D.
*SLDS Grant Program,
State Support Team*

For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program, additional Best Practices Briefs, or for support with system development or use, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.

Do:

Do identify the intended audience.

Describing your SLDS to the governor versus the state superintendent of accountability versus a district superintendent might require entirely different approaches, so it is critical to consider with whom you are speaking and the message they need to hear. The state superintendent of accountability, for example, might take greater interest in education outcomes and measures provided by the SLDS, whereas information about the SLDS's connection to the broader state education agenda and state strategic goals would likely be more effective with the governor.

Do understand your audiences' priorities.

In the prior scenario, describing *why* the SLDS is valuable is far more important than *how* it works. Think about why the SLDS is important to a particular stakeholder group—such as the governor,

legislators, the state superintendent, parents, teachers, or principals—and explain that importance to the stakeholder group. Save the details of exactly how the SLDS will provide a particular function or service for a future discussion.

**"A great idea,
poorly explained,
ceases to
appear great,
and the cost is
tremendous."**

Lee LeFever, *The Art of
Explanation: Making your
Ideas, Products,
and Services Easier
to Understand*

Do answer the question, "What's in it for me?" or "Where do I fit in?"

It is important to provide a reason for your audience to care about the SLDS. This should be done as simply as possible so that the audience sees the value and understands why it makes sense to do or continue to do certain actions. When people care about an idea, they are often motivated to learn more.

For example, if you know that the governor's key education agenda is focused on early childhood well-being, you should frame the work of the SLDS around that effort:

"Governor Smith, the Statewide Longitudinal Data System will be able to answer that persistent question you have regarding the effectiveness of our state's early childhood program in preparing children for entry

State Example: Illinois

Audience: The Public

Ed360 is a free data dashboard created by the Illinois State Board of Education that provides access to near-real-time information from Illinois' education data system. Administrators and teachers utilize the dashboard to make data-informed decisions about instruction and educational supports. Ed360 saves users time by compiling metrics from multiple sources in a one-stop shop. Users can view student growth individually, by grade or class, and across a school or district, depending on their role. Additionally, Ed360 connects administrators and teachers with targeted professional development resources. Users can submit feedback quickly and easily via a dedicated email inbox.



State Example: Nevada

*Audience: Legislators/
Higher Education Partners*

Nevada faces some unique economic and geographic challenges. We suffered tremendously from the recent economic downturn and lost a lot of educated workforce in our state, as well as professional positions to states that are recovering faster. We're trying to connect the information from K12, higher education, and workforce in order to be able to research, affect, and align our educational practices with our workforce needs in the state to provide a higher quality workforce, retain our higher education graduates, and employ them in meaningful and productive jobs that help improve our economy.



into kindergarten. We will be able to measure the progress of those enrolled in the program versus those who aren't so that you can make informed decisions about future funding allocations for that program."

Do update your message regularly.

It is vital to communicate up-to-date capabilities of your SLDS program and how it is relevant to current stakeholder priorities. Suppose you get a second opportunity to speak with a high-level stakeholder, you should discuss progress toward the outcomes you mentioned in your initial conversation. Secondly, being aware of any current risks and challenges to the SLDS is critical. For instance, if your local or state newspaper recently published an article about parental concerns around the privacy of student data, that issue should be addressed in your elevator speech.

Do remember that delivery is important.

Finally, it is imperative that the delivery of the message comes in a confident, well-informed package. Practice your speech and salient points so that when the opportunity affords itself, you are ready to deliver.

Do Not:

Do not use overly technical jargon.

All too often, SLDS teams lose their audiences in the weeds of "techno-speak." The word "data" can be enough to cause your audience to stop listening. Your elevator speech should articulate your audience's outcomes without using words such as "database" or "technology." Instead,

State Example: Minnesota

Audience: The Public

Before the launch of the Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System, pervasive questions about early childhood stumped educators, legislators, researchers, and other stakeholders. We can now begin to connect the dots about the public programs and services in which Minnesota's youngest kids and their families participate, and how those children fare developmentally and educationally afterward. As we pull together data from three state agencies and strip any identifiable information, we can see retrospectively how groups of our preschoolers, kindergartners, and third graders are doing. We can also identify where we might be letting those kids down and make better policy decisions that will benefit them and Minnesota's future children.



focus on terms like "information." such as "database" or "technology."

Do not go into too much detail.

Remember that your audience likely has very little time. Make concise, relevant points that highlight the links between their priorities and the SLDS work. Generally, you should plan on a 30- to 60-second elevator speech. You will want to get their attention and then highlight the

State Example: Maryland

Audience: The Public

One of the most critical needs facing our state is the need to ensure that students who come out of high school are ready to succeed in college and the workplace, especially in high-skill fields where we have shortages. We have great information on how to help people succeed, but it's in five different places. The SLDS brings that information together so that everybody—teachers and professors, students and parents, and employers—can see that information at every point along the way. That will make it easier for people to make transitions and to have success and make Maryland a better place to work and live.



relevance of the SLDS to their goals. Once your audience is “hooked,” you can set up future meetings to discuss the details.

Do not assume anything.

Do not assume that your audience has any background knowledge about the SLDS, and remember that simpler is better. There might be a trade-off between simplicity and thoroughness, but it is better to focus on the bigger ideas and give the listener a basic understanding than to be overly precise about the SLDS and lose them in the details.

Do not speak the way you write.

It is important for your speech to be genuine. Although you do need to memorize the important points of your speech, you should know your SLDS project well enough to speak casually and confidently based on your well-informed understanding of the work you are doing. Practicing your speech will help ensure that you come off as sincere and knowledgeable.

State Example: Louisiana

Audience: The Public



The Louisiana Department of Education serves approximately 780,000 children from birth to 12th grade. In order for child care providers, schools, school systems, and the department to support these children and their families, data must be accessible and easily digestible. EdLink will do just that—consolidate data submissions and safely and securely provide data resources back those closest to the children so that they can be better served.