A&M Education

IES SLDS Grant Considerations
College and Career

This paper is part of a series drafted in collaboration between Alvarez & Marsal Public Sector Services, LLC and the Council of Chief State School Officers in the interest of highlighting strategic considerations for state education agencies (SEAs) pursuing 2023 State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grants. They are organized based on the priority areas and key features of the 2023 application guidelines and address some major themes and challenges for states seeking to expand or develop their longitudinal data systems in alignment with the guidelines.

Problem Statement

In addition to goals such as having an educated citizenry and preparing youth to become life-long learners and pursue their interests, states invest in education and workforce programs to achieve specific attainment goals and grow state economies. The relative progress learners make toward those goals often is not known until years after initial investments in education and training are made, and data that shed light on key outcomes of interest are typically contained in systems that are disconnected from K-12 data. Incorporating college and career data into SLDS makes it possible to answer key ROI questions of interest for state legislators, state and district education leaders, and parents and students. However, delivering such answers is complicated by challenging measurement and data collection questions (in addition to linkage and interoperability issues which are covered in a separate SLDS grant priority area).

Grant Summary

Applicants are directed to describe specific policy questions related to assessing students' college and career readiness focused on improving postsecondary education and workforce outcomes. SEAs are encouraged to rely on their own linkages rather than strictly purchasing data from an external organization. Investments could include feedback reports with data on postsecondary outcomes and earnings, analyzing the alignment of preparation programs and the needs of the workforce, or analyses related to educator labor markets. Applications should include details on what data would be used to support the analyses, where they are housed in the SLDS, any new linkages necessary to complete the analyses, and how analyses would be used to inform programs and policies.

How Should States Think About This?

While program providers are an important audience of SLDS and many states have developed or are developing reports to provide information on the post-high school outcomes of various career technical education (CTE) pathways, an emerging area for systems is the development of prospective reports with students as the audience. Program requirement data spanning K-12 and postsecondary, as well as graduation and earnings data can help inform student decisions about which courses to take starting early in high school, and which programs of study or institutions to enroll in after high school. The Department of Labor's My Next Move website is an example at the national level that can provide answers to questions like: *What occupations exist in my area of interest? What education/training is needed for these careers? What*

is the salary range currently, and what growth is likely in this industry? The SLDS can be used to localize and customize these reports to a much greater degree including factoring in pre-requisite courses, patterns of achievement required for acceptance to various programs, and much greater geographic specification. Michigan's pathfinder tool is one example.

Another way to complement the feedback loop of examining the outcomes of program completers is decomposing the skills that are the focus of K-12 and postsecondary career pathways and examining their alignment. This can provide another view into whether CTE or other work-based learning programs are truly preparing students for the expectations and needs of industry prior to them entering the workforce. For example, the New Hampshire Department of Education has partnered with industry groups, the Department of Labor, and occupational health and safety agencies to develop competency profiles specific to a variety of career clusters that are broken down to discrete knowledge and skills critical for success in that pathway. They have also mapped each element of those profiles to corresponding components of state ELA and math standards and developed a corresponding rating scale. While ideally these profiles are designed around the expectations of postsecondary programs and industry groups, they can be compared for alignment on an ongoing basis and adjusted over time to complement what is learned from reports on credential attainment and earnings of graduates.

With the incorporation of support for Work Based Learning (WBL) in several forms of recent federal legislation, including ESSA, Perkins, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, more states and districts are growing work-based learning programs as a complement to traditional school based CTE programs. As states seek to learn about the relative outcomes of different preparation experiences they are investing in, program stewards are having to think through how to define and collect key data on aspects of work-based learning programs. The SLDS can play a role in highlighting the relative availability of WBL opportunities by location, the variety of industry placements available, and credits and wages earned. If the skill decomposition work described above has been done, it is also possible to develop reports on skills gained. Washington state has developed guidance for categorizing and tracking key aspects of work-based learning experiences. Iowa has developed a portal for searching work-based learning opportunities by district, WBL type, career focus, and course name.

A further challenge to providing the full picture of student outcomes is understanding long-term outcomes for students that cross state lines for employment and postsecondary, and particularly students that attend school in metro areas, such as Cincinnati and Kansas City, that span state lines. Traditional SLDS linkages to workforce data rely on state unemployment insurance wage records, which only cover residents of the state and wages earned within that state. But complicated combinations of education, work and residence locations over time across state lines make it incredibly difficult to paint a complete picture of education outcomes. According to the Department of Labor, all 50 states have now signed on to the State Wage Interchange System (SWIS). While public reporting must be done at aggregate levels, data on individuals are available through the interchange in order to facilitate linking across datasets and incorporating outcomes for students that state systems may not capture. While the SWIS data sharing agreement does not permit accessing credential attainment data from other states, it does facilitate accessing records on earnings and wages. A proposed amendment to the SWIS agreement would allow incorporation of SWIS data into each state's SLDS. An additional strategy that many states are using to better understand cross state labor markets is facilitated by the National Association of State Workforce Agencies. They currently serve as a hub for multi-state data collaboratives in which 32 states participate. This collaboration takes advantage of facilities provided by the Coleridge Initiative and its secured environment and risk minimization protocols.

While comprehensive state data sets are ideal sources, state policy and other contextual factors have implications for the relative complexity of making use of unemployment insurance (UI) data in a given state. In some cases, third party data from sources such as Equifax or LinkedIn can be used in place of, but ideally to complement sources from government agencies. In these cases, it is recommended to do pilot studies with small samples to gauge the feasibility and value of such arrangements before establishing extensive and long-term contracts. These sources are often opt-in and suffer from coverage issues, may not provide precise wage data and the linkage quality may be less reliable than for a state source that uses social security numbers, but these sources may be a best alternative, or a most expedient means of tracking

students across state lines. Another model is the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, a tool made available by the US Census Bureau incorporating data from the 24 states sharing data with them. This provides institution and degree level data on the earnings and residence of graduates from participating postsecondary institutions in a given state, so for example, policymakers can find out the proportion of students in a given area of study that stay in the state versus those that cross state lines, and where they go if they exit the state. While the data do not cover the full universe of students enrolled in postsecondary, it gives a view into what's possible.

Finally, while the latest round of funding closed May 10, 2023, The Workforce Data Quality Initiative run by the Department of Labor is another source of support for states seeking to use their SLDS to answer key questions about the outcomes of investments in college and career preparation. These grants are on the order of $3,000,000 over a three-year period. New cycles of funding tend to open every two years.

Exemplar Use Cases

Alabama is developing a tool that connects students, postsecondary institutions and employers organized around explicitly defined competencies across a breadth of career paths and skills-based job descriptions. Employers are able to craft job descriptions from pre-set banks of competencies and skills and then post the job listings on a tool which feeds that demand data back to postsecondary institutions and workforce agencies and is searchable by students and other job seekers. This "digital learner wallet" allows for the verification of a students' skills to employers and can simultaneously recommend jobs to them based on aspects of their profile.

Rhode Island integrated data from their SEA, community colleges and trade schools, department of health, and department of labor and training to conduct analyses of the longitudinal earning potential of a wide variety of workforce credentials granted within the state. They developed public dashboards that can be filtered by industry, awarding agency, demographics and credential name and show the trends in earnings up to seven years post degree attainment. They also make data available on the total number of each credential awarded.

Through a partnership between the Department of Workforce, and the Indiana Business Research Center (at Indiana University), Indiana has been able to both generate a series of analyses to answer key policymaker questions (such as - What does the STEM pipeline in our state look like? What are the outcomes for various CTE concentrations?) and establish tools that sit on top of the same data sources with students and job seekers as the audience. The tools have a variety of entry points and users can explore them based on their fields of interest or their ultimate income goals. They also have views targeting employers and policymakers focusing on worker availability and job openings by industry.

Questions to Consider

What questions can you ask to help determine where to start and whether the college and career SLDS investments you are making can support decision-making in the ways you aim to?

1. **How do the reports and analyses you are developing align with the feedback loop for the preparation programs you are trying to influence?** How do you develop an understanding of the priorities of the business community? How timely are the data on demand for workers with various skillsets? How are you defining what high-wage, high-skill and high-demand jobs are? How frequently are the workforce data refreshed and what are the implications for students and preparation programs?

2. **How do students decide which career pathways to pursue, and what are the opportunities for data to influence those decisions?** When should you communicate what information is available to students? What short-term and long-term information should be available for consideration?

3. **What are the use cases for high schools to pay attention to postsecondary outcome data, and are reports designed with those needs in mind?** Are there predictive analytics that can be applied to highlight likely options

for the trajectory that students are currently on? Is it possible to analyze how particular patterns of coursework, or college-prep programs (e.g., dual-enrollment, AP/IB) impact attainment?

4. **How aligned are the reporting plans with the research agenda of relevant governing bodies?** How far back do historical data go and how does that limit the inferences you can make? For teacher labor market analyses, can you gain insight on what prompts teachers to leave the workforce, and what prompts them to return? (An analysis in Texas recently found that teachers re-entering the workforce tend to make up about 30% of new hires.)

5. **How can ongoing costs be reflected in decisions about the need to fill immediate gaps in data?** If it is necessary to purchase data (e.g., NSC, Equifax) are there long-term paths to alleviating the need for it? Are there opportunities to negotiate for a reduced price based on the length of agreement or type of usage?

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