The Art of the Possible

Cross-Agency Data Governance Lessons Learned from Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington

DQC DATA QUALITY CAMPAIGN

CASE STUDY

High-quality data governance, a body or process designed to make decisions about how state education data is linked, used, accessed, and protected, is key to establishing a culture of effective data use in states. A culture of effective data use helps states measure what matters by being clear about what students must achieve and having the data to ensure that all students are on track to succeed. By securely linking and governing data across all agencies that are critical to student success—from early childhood and K–12 to postsecondary and the workforce, including other state agencies that support students, such as child welfare—states are equipped to understand the student and school outcomes that matter to their communities.

Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington are three states with high-quality, formal, and transparent cross-agency data governance structures and therefore are examples that other states can look to. Each of these states has a sustainable, multi-tiered cross-agency data governance committee that

- establishes the vision and mission of the cross-sector data governance work, sets policy, and ensures that the policy and data work is carried out;
- has executive leadership responsible for final decisionmaking;
- includes executive-level policy or content-based representatives from agencies that share data;
- is governed by a chairperson who represents a broad perspective or cross-sector view;
- makes data-related decisions that are policy focused, formalized, and transparent;
- has internal processes that are formal, documented, and transparent; and
- is proactive in communicating with external stakeholders and advocates for the governance committee and its value.

The three data governance bodies featured in this paper—the Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics (KCEWS), the Maryland Longitudinal Data System (MLDS) Center, and Washington's Education Research & Data Center (ERDC)—reflect the unique context of each state and have broken down the silos that tend to exist among state agencies that use data to support education and workforce efforts. Rather than just reacting to compliance requirements, they strive to be forward looking and lead

WHAT IS DATA GOVERNANCE?

Data governance institutionalizes a state's commitment to data quality and use. Data governance provides state agencies a structure in which to define the roles and responsibilities needed to ensure clear processes for collecting and reporting education data and to ensure accountability for data quality and security. To make informed policy decisions across agencies, such as the state education agency and early childhood, higher education, and workforce agencies, cross-agency data governance is needed. Data governance is more than an information technology issue. States can think broadly about data governance as a base on which to build the relationships and trust needed to securely share data across agencies to answer questions such as "How well do state higher education institutions' educational programs and capacity align with the state's current and anticipated workforce needs?"

proactive thinking about data. They conduct research and provide information that is timely, actionable, high quality, and accessible so that policymakers, parents, teachers, and communities can make the best decisions for students.

This paper summarizes the lessons learned from these three leading states in the initial development of their data governance bodies. Drawing on site visits, interviews, and document reviews, this paper describes how these states were able to take the first steps in creating a culture of data use—starting with cross-agency data governance. Demonstrating the art of the possible in creating a high-quality data governance body, states in the beginning stages can learn from their experiences. For more information and recommendations on developing a high-quality data governance body, see *Roadmap for Cross-Agency Data Governance*.

How Can States Develop High-Quality Data Governance?

1. Demonstrate that governance matters.

For a state that does not currently have a formal data governance body, demonstrating the value of something that has never existed could prove challenging. But leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington realized that it was critical to *show* how important having strong data governance is to ensure that their states have high-quality data to measure progress toward state goals. Leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington found the following steps helpful for demonstrating that data governance is valuable to everyone in their states.

Find a data champion. States can think broadly about where to find a data partner who can be a champion for high-quality data governance. Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington found success with the help of a data champion in an executive or legislative position (e.g., state legislator, governor) who was able to garner initial support for the development of the data governance body. States can also look to sectors outside of education, like business, to find a data champion. What matters most is finding someone who can authoritatively and authentically collaborate with state leaders and the leaders of the data governance body to demonstrate its value externally. A high-quality data governance body will be able to continue even when this data champion is no longer in his or her position.

STATE EXAMPLE: MARYLAND

Former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley (D) led efforts to collect and use data to improve student achievement. O'Malley established a statewide vision and worked collaboratively to develop a plan to build and use statewide longitudinal data systems that protect data privacy and security and improve outcomes for students in Maryland. This plan led to the creation of the MLDS Center, which the governor hoped would help stakeholders determine how students are performing and whether they are graduating from high school college and career ready. O'Malley publicly stressed the importance of education data in improving Maryland's school performance. He used his executive leadership role as governor to unite state policymakers, education leaders at all levels, and technical data users behind the goal of having a data governance body that could use longitudinal data to improve student success. Chapter 190, also known as Senate Bill 275, strengthened this unity by establishing in law a requirement for these actors to share data with the MLDS Center and develop and maintain relationships with one another in the process.

> "We owe it to our students, parents, teachers, and administrators to uphold the highest standards of accountability and transparency, and that starts with establishing quality education data systems to ensure Maryland students graduate high school prepared for college and highly skilled careers."
>
> ***—Martin O'Malley, former Maryland governor, 2010***

Recognize that being able to answer key policy questions requires high-quality data governance. A high-quality data governance body is clear about its main role. In Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington, this unique role is to use key data linked across systems and sectors to answer pressing questions that are not possible to answer with data from one agency alone. Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington all have research agendas that break down silos across state agencies and prioritize their efforts in linking data across systems and sectors to answer policy and programmatic questions that inform statewide decisionmaking and resource allocation. These questions include the following:

- **Kentucky:** How well is the pipeline of students that is progressing through the state's education and training systems aligned to the projected needs of Kentucky's workforce, both currently and in the anticipated near term?
- **Maryland:** What are the workforce outcomes for Maryland high school students who complete career technical education coursework and either enter the workforce directly or also obtain postsecondary education or training?
- **Washington:** How are students from specific high schools performing at the postsecondary level, and what are the strongest predictors of postsecondary success?

Governance in Action: KCEWS Executive Director Dr. Kate Akers demonstrated the value of cross-agency data linkages to key stakeholders from state agencies by creating valuable resources like high school feedback reports as soon as possible. These resources were most effective when coupled with in-person conversations and helped show agency leadership that collaboration was key to linking and governing education data.

> "Producing early wins like the high school feedback report showed the benefit and value-add of the work to many stakeholders, which made it easier to gain support and funding."
>
> ***—Dr. Kate Akers, executive director, KCEWS***

2. Build trust and maintain relationships.

Securely linking and sharing data both within and outside of education requires a great deal of trust. Barriers to linking and sharing data often are not technical but rather are people related, such as siloed state agency staff working within traditional boundaries, skepticism about the quality of other agencies' data, and wariness about how data will be used by another agency. These challenges can be overcome with high-quality data governance. High-quality data governance bodies formally require people to come together and work through these challenges to determine and unite around shared state goals. Leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington found the following steps helpful for building trust and maintaining relationships.

Develop strong communication. Strong communication allowed Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington to address relationship-building challenges, including developing the trust necessary for data sharing to happen across sectors both within education agencies (e.g., early childhood, K–12, postsecondary) and outside of education (e.g., workforce, human services). Strong communication is frequent, clear, and inclusive of multiple stakeholder groups, both within the data governance body and with external audiences, such as legislators and the business community. All three states found that in-person meetings were critical to the initial development of their data governance bodies.

Communication in Action: Staff at the MLDS Center built external relationships by having frequent in-person meetings with new leadership at state agencies and explaining what the MLDS Center does. As a result, the MLDS Center has become increasingly involved in policymaking conversations and processes.

STATE EXAMPLE: WASHINGTON

When ERDC was first established, contributing agencies were hesitant to change their ways and trust ERDC with their data. In-person meetings became a requirement of participating with ERDC, which led to frequent communication about what exactly ERDC would do and how securely linking and sharing data from early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce agencies benefited each agency and the people of Washington.

"The most crucial challenge early on was figuring out what data to give people and what data could be shared. This challenge was resolved through the creation of the data governance body. We hammered out how to share data across sectors and gave the data contributors input into the process."

—Dr. Jim Schmidt, director and senior forecast coordinator, ERDC

Ensure that leadership has a cross-agency vision. The senior leader of a data governance body should possess a collaborative mindset and the ability to see education through a wide lens, always keeping in mind the various needs of agencies across early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and the workforce. No matter which level or agency the leader comes from, he or she should have a high-level, clear vision for education and the ability to use that vision to reach across different areas of interest to bring people and agencies together.

Broad Vision in Action: Dr. William E. "Brit" Kirwan served as chair of the MLDS Center's Governing Board until 2015. He also served as chancellor of the University System of Maryland from 2002 through 2015. Kirwan was able to build consensus both within and outside of the MLDS Center by hearing the concerns of many agencies and the public while maintaining a broad, inclusive vision for education. He displayed his strong leadership during Governing Board meetings by showing respect for everyone in attendance; acknowledging differing opinions and thoughts; and asking pointed, thoughtful questions. He made a point to acknowledge on record the great work of all MLDS Center staff, Governing Board members, and any other partners involved.

Keep people at the center. A data governance body is not meant to only conduct research for compliance purposes. Rather, high-quality data governance bodies should keep people at the center by thinking proactively about what data different stakeholders need and how they can benefit from the data. For example, a teacher in Kentucky who can access the state's high school feedback report via the KCEWS website can use that data to have conversations with her students and their parents about making informed decisions about going to college.

"We didn't just build a warehouse. We are also getting data out to be used by partners, colleagues, local education agencies, and researchers. We are showing the value of data through things like high school feedback reports. We are building trust among agencies and getting people to work together."

—Dr. Melissa Beard, data governance coordinator, ERDC

3. Embed data governance into a statewide culture of data use.

Data governance should not be a one-time project that comes to a completion when, for example, grant funding ends. States that are establishing data governance should embed it into an already existing statewide culture of effective data use. Leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington found the following steps helpful for fostering sustainable, high-quality data governance.

Ensure that state leadership prioritizes data governance and data use. Data governance is not possible without data and the support of state leadership. Data governance bodies can be a resource that state leaders, educators, legislators, and the public rely on for the information they need to make decisions. States can and should prioritize data governance by providing financial support. KCEWS, the MLDS Center, and ERDC have all received state funds as well as federal funding.

Consider formalizing data governance through legislation. The legislation that created the data governance bodies in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington provided a foundation that has allowed their work to be sustainable, even as state and internal leadership have changed. The laws also established these data governance bodies as independent entities. They are not housed within the state department of education or the state department of labor. This independence allows for autonomy and the ability to work freely across the entire education pipeline and with other sectors like child welfare or health. When crafting governance legislation, linkages across systems and sectors should be prioritized rather than prohibited.

> "KCEWS is an independent state agency with a home-grown system. Legislation has given us sustainability even as state leadership changes."
>
> ***—Dr. Kate Akers, executive director, KCEWS***

Prioritize stakeholder engagement and continuous improvement. Data governance is about people. Behind every data point is a student, and the data governance body should be willing and able to actively engage with those closest to students. Creating a culture of feedback between all participating state agencies has empowered leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington to prioritize continuous improvement. This focus has in turn allowed them to be forward looking and iterative to meet the needs of the policymakers, practitioners, and public in their states.

Stakeholder Engagement and Continuous Improvement in Action: ERDC gathered feedback from groups of stakeholders who use its website (legislators, parents, education providers) to make it more user friendly. Gathering this feedback is a direct display of ERDC's commitment to better meeting the data needs of the people in Washington.

ERDC's website before (top) and after (bottom) redesign

STATE EXAMPLE: KENTUCKY

Dr. Kate Akers, executive director of KCEWS, knows the importance of transparency and stakeholder engagement. One of the first things she did upon becoming executive director was paste a large KCEWS logo along with the agency's phone number and website on the front door of its office. This display showed KCEWS' commitment to being transparent and welcoming and to working with all agencies. When asked about the most effective way to engage stakeholders, Akers emphasized the importance of engaging directly by "getting out and about" to in-person meetings, claiming "you can't just put information up on a website. No one will look at it." She and the KCEWS staff regularly attend board meetings of agencies that participate in KCEWS and take note of any data needs or gaps in reporting. The staff are trained on what to look for and how to talk to different stakeholders about KCEWS. They also directly involve other sectors like business and manufacturing by conducting focus groups to get helpful information that may not have been obtainable otherwise. KCEWS staff engage legislators on a regular basis through legislative liaisons and one-on-one meetings. They welcome and respond to any and all questions from legislators and quickly establish relationships between new legislators and Akers to ensure that legislators understand the value of KCEWS.

Front door of the KCEWS office

How Do States Know When They Have Developed High-Quality Data Governance?

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) asked leaders from Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington about what has contributed to their success thus far in developing high-quality data governance bodies. It is important to note that none of these states see their data governance as "finished." They are each continuing to improve their relationships and processes and look for ways to provide more value to their states. Here is how these states talk about success:

- "Our focus is on developing usable and actionable reports for policymakers, practitioners, and the general public. Because our data is timely and accurate, we have a good reputation throughout the state."—Dr. Kate Akers, executive director, KCEWS
- "People across the state appreciate what we do. We can successfully link data across time and agencies, and we produce information that is meaningful and actionable."—Dr. Jim Schmidt, director and senior forecast coordinator, ERDC
- "Success means being integrated into how Maryland does business."—Ben Passmore, assistant vice chancellor for administration and finance, University System of Maryland

Leaders in Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington invested time and resources into creating high-quality cross-agency data governance bodies that reflect their states' unique needs. These states show their commitment to the effective use of data in service of students by having dedicated staff who focus solely on data governance. Kentucky, Maryland, and Washington have been able to successfully develop high-quality data governance bodies by demonstrating that data governance matters, building trust and maintaining relationships, and embedding data governance into a statewide culture of data use. These efforts have resulted in three high-quality, sustainable organizations that continuously leverage the power of data to improve outcomes for their states.

METHODOLOGY

DQC staff attended in-person meetings of KCEWS (April 2015), the MLDS Center (March, June, September 2015), and ERDC (March 2015). DQC also conducted phone and in-person interviews with staff from each data governance body in May through July 2015 and July 2016. Finally, a website review was conducted in October 2016 and again in October 2017 to further inform the research and writing processes.

Quick Facts

The tables in this section provide details on how each of the featured states structures its data governance body. Some details may have changed since the publication of this paper.

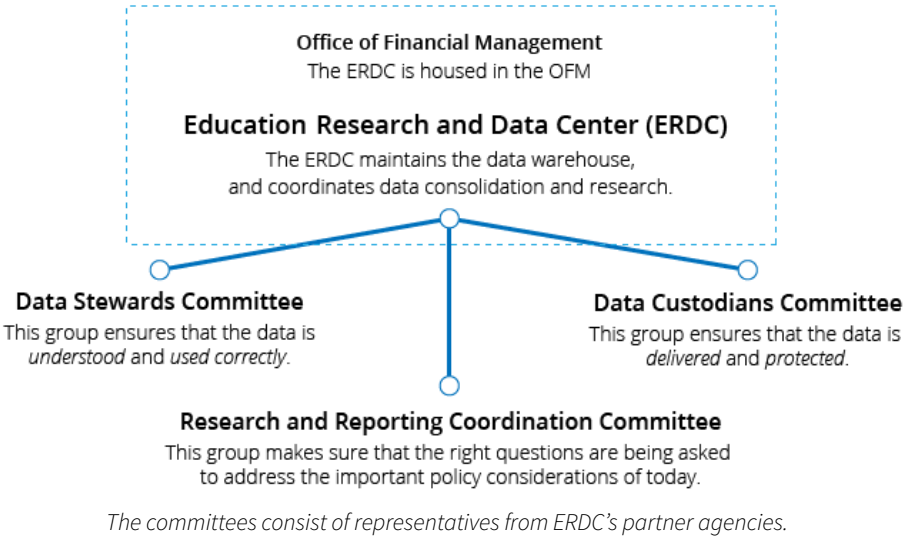
Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics

Year Established	2012
Establishing Legislation	KRS 151B.132
Housed Under	Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, Office of the Secretary
Leadership	Kate Akers, Ph.D., Executive Director
Number of Staff	42
Structure	• Executive Director • Leadership Team • Business Team • Research & Analytics Team • System Development Team • Bureau of Labor Statistics Team
Governing Board	Five members per KRS 151B.134—chair is the current secretary of the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.
State Agencies Involved	• Education Professional Standards Board • Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education • Kentucky Department of Education • Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet • Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority
Frequency of Board Meetings	Three times a year but required to meet at least twice a year per KRS 151B.134
Mission Statement	"The Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics collects and links data to evaluate education and workforce efforts in the Commonwealth. This includes developing reports, responding to research requests, and providing statistical data about these efforts so policymakers, agencies, and the general public can make better informed decisions."
Research Priorities	2017–19 research agenda includes the following: • Expand data access and use to inform impactful decisions related to education and workforce throughout the Commonwealth. • Evaluate outcomes for education and workforce programs over time. • Connect supply and demand for Kentucky's future workforce. • Measure the impact of out-of-state education and workforce migration.
Website	https://kcews.ky.gov/

Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center

Year Established	2013
Establishing Legislation	Chapter 190 (Senate Bill 275)
Housed Under	Independent unit of state government
Leadership	Ross Goldstein, Executive Director
Number of Staff	14
Structure	• Administrative Team • Agency Liaisons • System Management Department • Research Department—through an intergovernmental agreement with the University of Maryland, School of Social Work
Governing Board	Twelve members—chair is appointed by the governor.
State Agencies Involved	• Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation • Maryland Higher Education Commission • Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration • Maryland State Department of Education
Frequency of Board Meetings	Quarterly
Mission Statement	"The purpose of the Maryland Longitudinal Data System (MLDS) is to generate timely and accurate information about student performance that can be used to improve the State's education system and guide decision makers at all levels. To accomplish this task, the MLDS collects and organizes individual-level student and workforce data from all levels of education and the State's workforce."
Research Priorities	Research agenda includes the following: • K–12 readiness • postsecondary readiness and access • postsecondary completion • workforce outcomes
Website	https://mldscenter.maryland.gov/

Washington's Education Research & Data Center

Year Established	2007
Establishing Legislation	RCW 43.41.400
Housed Under	Office of Financial Management
Leadership	Jim Schmidt, Ph.D., Director and Senior Forecast Coordinator
Number of Staff	17
Structure	 *The committees consist of representatives from ERDC's partner agencies.*
Governing Board	No governing board
State Agencies Involved	• Council of Presidents • Department of Early Learning • Employment Security Department • Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program • Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction • Professional Educator Standards Board • Public four-year higher education institutions • State Board for Community and Technical Colleges • State Board of Education • Washington Student Achievement Council • The Workforce Training and Educational Coordinating Board
Frequency of Meetings	Quarterly
Mission Statement	"To develop longitudinal information spanning the P–20W system in order to facilitate analyses, provide meaningful reports, collaborate on education research, and share data."
Research Priorities	ERDC focuses on how people transition from one sector to the next and answering cross-sector questions in these areas: • early learning to K–12 • K–12 to postsecondary and workforce • postsecondary to postsecondary and workforce • workforce back to postsecondary • educator movement within public education and into other workforce sectors
Website	https://erdc.wa.gov