

Build a Culture of Data Use: Host a State Data Conference

A Checklist for State Education Leaders

States have a role to play in developing a culture of data use. One strategy for states to ensure that data is useful, usable, and used to support student success is to host a statewide data conference. State data conferences help make data use possible by showing how everyone from school staff to district leaders to education agency officials and researchers can use data to uncover best practices, inform decisionmaking, and take action to improve student outcomes. From a gathering of local education agencies focusing on high-quality data collection to a convening of researchers and local and state education agencies facilitating engagement and collaboration using data, states can hold data conferences to communicate and build relationships with those who can make data work for students. When conference attendees see the benefits of education data on a large scale and how data is being used statewide, state and local agencies prioritize data use, which can in turn improve data quality. This checklist will help state education leaders host an effective state data conference that serves as a tool to build a culture of data use.



Create a Vision

Before bringing a state data conference to life, develop a shared vision and outcomes for the conference. Whether the goal is to improve data quality, share best practices in using data to inform policy and practice, or ramp up stakeholder engagement to advance a culture of data use (or all of the above), allow the vision to drive what the conference will look like. Ensure that the data conference is aligned with the state's goals for teaching and learning and secure leadership support and buy-in.

TIP: Invite state education leaders—the heads of the key state agencies—to keynote the conference. Having leaders participate in the state data conference shows that creating a culture of data use is a priority!

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Who within the state education agency needs to buy in and support a data conference? Who will decide the goals and outcomes for the conference? Are there ways to include the perspectives of an array of state staff or potential attendees in the vision planning? Are there important updates to state data collections or policies that need to be shared? What is the current data conversation in the state (e.g., evidence-based policymaking, data for equity), and how can the conference align with these discussions?



Identify the Target Audiences

Based on the vision for the state data conference, determine the target audiences, which will shape the outreach and what the conference will look like. Consider whether and how to use the conference as an opportunity to break down silos among the early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors and think about who should participate from each sector.

TIP: When identifying potential target audiences, consider additional stakeholders, such as education researchers or legislators, who can talk about the many ways they use data to support student success.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Is the key audience district data managers, school administrators, or other local support staff? State agency administration or program staff? How can the state data conference be used to build relationships between state and local staff? What are the best ways to identify audiences that can speak to the current data conversation in the state?



Plan Logistics to Realize the Vision

No matter the size of the conference, whether it is 50 or 500 people, logistics can't be planned overnight! Consider planning months or even a full year in advance to account for all the moving parts and to ensure that the conference aligns with the vision. Finding the right venue location, keynote speakers, session presenters, and convening dates can be challenging. Give the target audience as much notice as possible so that they are available to attend. Ensure enough time for tasks like preparing materials. Allow time to carefully plan to make the data conference as effective as possible.

TIP: Think about the target audience when considering location. Is convening at the state capital or the hometown of the state education agency easier for potential attendees? Is holding a conference in the geographic center of the state better? Is there a popular city that will attract attendees from around the state? Also consider other logistics, such as parking and hotel availability.

TIP: Be thoughtful about scheduling the conference. Avoid times of year when the target audience might not be able to attend (annual assessment windows, seasons with inclement weather, spring break, summer vacation). Be aware of other statewide conference schedules. Be strategic about timing to increase attendance!

TIP: Plan for sustainability. Consider a multiyear contract with a venue (e.g., hotel, convention center) to ease financial and logistical burdens. Develop relationships with vendors that meet the state's needs. Create processes that can be replicated for future conferences (e.g., mailing lists, templates).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What sources of funding (e.g., state budget, grant) will be used for the data conference? Have state legal and procurement offices approved the use of funding for a state data conference? How much of the staff will be dedicated to planning the conference? Does some planning need to be outsourced to an external vendor? What time of year will the conference be held? Where will the conference be held? Will food be provided at the conference, or will the location of the conference have nearby amenities? What is the length of the conference? How frequently will the state hold the conference (annually, every other year)?

The Data Quality Campaign thanks representatives from Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin for sharing their state data conference insights to inform the development of this resource.



Engage and Communicate with Attendees

Consider what will attract attendees to the data conference and tailor communications to each target audience. Will the conference provide information for school and district staff to make their jobs easier? Will state officials give a keynote address? Will the conference be held in a popular city filled with amenities? Emphasize that the state data conference can be an opportunity for attendees to share promising data practices, network, and build face-to-face relationships.

TIP: Be open to feedback and take that feedback into account when planning for subsequent years. Attendees are fuel for the event, so seeing the experience through their eyes will only strengthen the data conference!

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How will the target audience, and local and state education agencies, learn about the data conference (e.g., email invitation, listserv announcement, website, blogs, social media)? What other agencies or organizations can the state partner with to reach a wider audience? What incentives will be available for attendees (e.g., free registration or food)? How will the state provide an avenue for attendees to give feedback about their conference experience (e.g., survey)? How will the state assess if the vision and goals were met and whether the state is creating a culture of data use?



Bright Spot

The [Kentucky Center for Statistics \(KYStats\)](#) holds two types of data conferences to meet the needs of different audiences. In odd years, it hosts a large data convening in Louisville that showcases its data resources, highlights how different agencies work together, and provides a forum for providing KYStats with feedback about its work. In even years, KYStats holds mini conferences throughout the state—it hosted six in 2018. These mini conferences are held in each of the local workforce development areas and are often hosted by the local chamber of commerce. They draw 50 to 100 local attendees from K-12, postsecondary, and workforce agencies. At the mini conferences, KYStats staff and local attendees talk about how data is used locally from the perspectives of K-12, community colleges, chambers of commerce, and others. The mini conferences provide opportunities for state staff to meet as many people as possible across the state. Both of these efforts are focused on stakeholder engagement to build data champions and help develop a culture of data use in Kentucky.



The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to bring every part of the education community together to empower educators, families, and policymakers with quality information to make decisions that ensure that students excel. For more information, go to www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@EdDataCampaign).