



STRATEGIC **DATA** PROJECT

SDP FELLOWSHIP CAPSTONE REPORT

Data Governance Implementation at the State Level: Vision and Strategy to Make It Work

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SDP Fellowship Capstone Reports

SDP Fellows compose capstone reports to reflect the work that they led in their education agencies during the two-year program. The reports demonstrate both the impact fellows make and the role of SDP in supporting their growth as data strategists. Additionally, they provide recommendations to their host agency and will serve as guides to other agencies, future fellows, and researchers seeking to do similar work. *The views or opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of SDP or the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.*

Introduction

I remember getting and reading the email that tapped me to participate in the Strategic Data Project (SDP) as an Agency Fellow – I was sitting at soccer practice waiting for my two sons to finish up so that we could go home and eat dinner. It was late and I was tired and hungry. I had been in a management position for just about six months and I was still getting my management feet wet and honing my skills, and the day had been particularly stressful trying to juggle all the balls I had in the air. I read the email with interest and the day suddenly got brighter. The idea of getting free professional development (through Harvard no less), being exposed to other professionals doing similar work as I do, and being involved with effecting change in education seemed too good to be true. I remember reading some of the email out loud (“...premier professional development opportunity of your career”) to a fellow soccer mom and good friend who has a high-ranking management job at GE. She didn’t hesitate to say “Go for it”. I agreed and replied right then and there that yes, I was interested and wanted to do it. It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made and am grateful and proud to be able call myself an SDP Agency fellow.

SDP Participation and Impact on Key Responsibilities

My position at NYSED is that of Assistant Data Director in the office of Information and Reporting Services (IRS). The office of IRS is responsible for the collection and reporting of P-12 data from public school districts and charter schools across the state. There are a lot of moving parts in the office and our workload is complex, wieldy and almost always overwhelming. One of my main responsibilities is to serve as ED Facts Coordinator for the State, and in this role I am responsible for ensuring that all federal data submissions to the United States Education Department (USED) are timely and accurate. The term “data governance” is one I heard often in this role as ED Facts Coordinator. Just before becoming an SDP agency fellow I was tasked with re-launching NYSED’s stalled data governance initiative and moving it toward a sustainable direction. There had been two prior attempts that had failed to gain momentum. My involvement in SDP transformed the way I approached this re-launch and directly influenced the success and sustainability of the data governance initiative at NYSED. I effected real change through the knowledge, empowerment, contacts and support I gained through SDP.

Generally, data governance can be defined as both an organizational *process* and a *structure*. It establishes responsibility for data and organizes program area staff to collaboratively and continuously improve data quality through the systematic creation and enforcement of policies, roles, responsibilities, and procedures. The general purpose of data governance is to codify leadership through the

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acknowledgement that data are a critical resource and the commitment that the data will be managed and used as such in support of the agencies' and programs' missions. It provides strategic direction by creating a framework for decision making about and accountability for how data will be managed across the agency. It assigns stewardship responsibilities for participating program offices' data and empowers the data management committee to establish more detailed interagency standards and processes.

Data governance is a relatively new term at the New York State Education Department and, I would argue, in the education field in general. When I joined NYSED 5 years ago it was a term that I had never heard of and wasn't one that my new work colleagues used. It's a term and process that has quickly gained attention and momentum and is a critical part of making data-driven decisions in any organization, but especially in the data shop of one of the largest state education agencies in the country. In order to make better data decisions, NYSED needed an active data governance board and process that was implemented and moved forward in a sustainable way. The end goal was fairly simple, at least on the surface: Establish a sustainable data governance model and get a data governance process in place.

By identifying data governance as a problem of practice I was able to get feedback and advice on issues that were being encountered and that had led to the demise of the prior attempts to get things going. Participating in fellows workshops, group discussions and hearing the terms "agent of change", "data-driven decision making" and "strategic" changed my thought processes by making me realize that I **could** take risks, **could** make change happen and that through participation in SDP workshops and support from SDP I was **empowered** to do so. SDP workshops discussed the mission of why we do things and gave us tools to use to help navigate different personalities, challenging office cultures and inefficient practices. It was exposure to these things that helped me be brave enough to step back from the data governance initiative work that had been done so far and go out on a limb to tie the initiative and necessary work to the mission of NYSED itself – something I had never seen been done before, in any work stream. Implementation of this approach, after careful planning with staff I knew valued and were committed to data governance, resulted in transformation. The meeting where the connections were made to the data, our work and the mission of the agency was remarkable. People were on board, energized, and the new and improved Data Governance Board was up and running.

Almost two years later, the Data Governance Board remains active, although sustainability and maintaining relevance are continual concerns associated with it. The work of several workgroups that were convened (data inventory workgroup, personally identifiable information (PII) workgroup and data access workgroup) has had varying degrees of success. A PII handbook has been developed and is being

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integrated into the orientation process of all new employees in the Agency. Through the data access workgroup, a process has been established for program offices to request that their data be included on NYSED's soon-to-be launched public data site. The goal of the data inventory workgroup – to inventory all data in the Agency – has been a huge struggle and has been extremely difficult to move forward.

The concept of data governance still remains abstract to many players and many still struggle to wrap their heads around it. It's a new way of doing business, breaking down silos and requiring collaboration, and it will take time to thoroughly incorporate it into standard operating procedure.

Ensuring the success of NYSED's Data Governance Board will take initiative and more staff than we can currently devote to it. It takes considerable time to properly organize, plan and execute the principals of data governance. There are currently just a small team, myself and two others, who carry the burden of keeping things going and without us the project would die a quick death. I am committed to preventing this from happening and am confident that it won't.

My experience as an SDP fellow has been, as promised, the premier professional development of my career. I am graduating from cohort 3 a better manager, better employee, and better person. I've gained so much more than skills to make my work better. I've also forged lasting friendships and made invaluable contacts with people who are in educational data for the right reasons – to make a difference for kids.

Lessons Learned

- Data governance, once established, has required active monitoring, flexibility and frequent support on my part. This is one of the biggest lessons learned from this endeavor – **effecting change is not an end in itself**. You must sustain the change and build on it in order to be truly successful. Data Governance at NYSED is still, in many ways, a grassroots effort. It has yet to be 100% folded into the mindset of executive management and how NYSED does business. This will not happen by itself and requires the agents of change to push it up, to advocate and to make voices heard. We need to constantly use the words data governance and show how it can improve situations, work and outcomes. We need to push back when policies and procedures established through data governance are not followed, even if the pushing back is on our superiors.
- A successful and properly run data governance initiative in an agency the size of NYSED requires at least one FTE who is dedicated solely to it. In a time of tight fiscal constraint, getting this FTE is extremely difficult but not impossible. A cost-benefit analysis (an exercise at one of the cohort 3 workshops) is an excellent tool to make a case.

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- It's OK to let things fail if the failing will get needed attention. In terms of data governance, lack of participation and/or lack of staff resources may mean that a necessary process doesn't get in place, or that NYSED is cited in monitoring for failing to have proper oversight or controls in place. It's important to think ahead and identify possible failures but it's not necessary to prevent every failure. You must, however, be strategic in what fails (i.e. don't let something catastrophic fail if you can prevent it!).
- It's OK for you to fail. If you never try anything new you will never grow as a person and you will never affect change. Again, be strategic.
- Change is hard. Take baby steps and enlist people one at a time, little by little. Lead by example and let the results do the convincing.
- Flexibility is key. Recent data governance meetings have been a little stale and there is a risk of disengagement by attendees. To mitigate this risk, the frequency of meetings is being changed from monthly to every other month to ensure that agendas are robust, engaging, and worth everyone's time
- Bravery is required. This hasn't been something I've ever really thought about in relation to work, but it's so needed. I sometimes repeat "be brave, be brave, be brave" in my head when embarking on something I know people will roll their eyes at or talk about at the water cooler when I'm not around.
- It takes effort to keep the mission of our work in mind while at the same time trying to effect change and implement data-driven decision making through being strategic
- If you have an open mind and a strong work ethic, SDP can do a great job at giving you the tools you need to be a strategic agent of change.