

Updated State Discussion Guide: Communicating Assessment Data to Empower SSIP Stakeholders

NCEO Report 448

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In fall 2023, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) facilitated a Peer Learning Group (PLG), *Partnering with Stakeholders to Use Data to Meet Assessment-related State Identified Measurable Results (SiMRs),* to support state education agency (SEA) staff whose State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs) involved state assessments. NCEO facilitated six virtual meetings for state education agency (SEA) staff, including state special education and assessment office representatives, and parent center representatives from October through December 2023. The content of this discussion guide was informed by the PLG participants, and is a summary of the information, strategies, and resources that were shared during the PLG.

List of States Participating in PLG

Staff from eight states participated in the virtual meetings. This guide would not exist had it not been for their active participation. The participating states were: California, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas.

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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) implemented Results Driven Accountability (RDA) to help improve the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. As part of this initiative, states are required to develop and implement a State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), which is a multi-year plan designed to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, and to commit to a State-Identified Measurable Result (SiMR) focused on student outcomes. OSEP's guidance for the SSIP process requires involvement of stakeholders in all stages of the planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.

Engaging stakeholders (e.g., parents, families, teachers, community members, policymakers, etc.) in the SSIP process is not only a requirement, but also a best practice for successful change efforts. Involving stakeholders supports the development of improvement strategies that are grounded in practical needs and realities. SSIP teams from state education agencies (SEAs) engage stakeholders in several ways, such as by convening advisory committees, workgroups, and implementation teams. They work with stakeholders through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Input, feedback, and co-creation with key stakeholders can help support effective SSIP improvement efforts.

Each year, states must evaluate and report on their SSIP progress, including their SiMR. SEAs identify areas of need for students with disabilities and implement evidence-based practices with the goal of improving outcomes. For example, a state might identify a need for improved reading outcomes in the elementary grades. To address this need, an SSIP might be developed that focuses on literacy instruction and intervention in elementary schools with the goal of improving outcomes through teacher professional development. The state SiMR statement might be to "improve the percentage of students with disabilities who are proficient on the state reading assessment at grade 3" with annual targets for improvement of scores.

Purpose

The purpose of this discussion guide is to support SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) in states with assessment-related SiMRs in communicating assessment data in ways that are useful to stakeholders, and in improving data literacy among stakeholders so they can meaningfully participate in key SSIP improvement efforts. The guide is organized around five steps that SEAs can take to better communicate data to all stakeholders involved in the SSIP process:

Step 1: Identify key stakeholders

Step 2: Understand the assessment literacy needs of stakeholders

Step 3: Make data accessible to all stakeholders

Step 4: Consider communication strategies for the target audience

Step 5: Disseminate accurate information

Each step includes background information and questions for SEAs to consider as they plan their improvement work. This guide also provides information about resources available to support work with stakeholders (see Appendix A).

Step 1: Identify Key Stakeholders

States are required to involve stakeholders in key SSIP decisions and improvement efforts. Although OSEP provides some general guidance as to who must be involved in stakeholder engagement activities (e.g., the stakeholder group must include parents that represent impacted communities), the stakeholder groups involved in each state's SSIP are unique because each SSIP varies in its goals and implementation. See Appendix B for additional information about the federal requirements regarding stakeholders.

In most states, SSIP work is led by an SSIP team consisting of three or four specialists at the SEA. SSIP teams are responsible for identifying who their key stakeholders are and for using effective engagement strategies to authentically involve stakeholders. Stakeholders are sometimes referred to as "education partners."

In addition to parents, states may include stakeholders from the immediate school community, such as students, families, teachers, and school administrators. Other stakeholders might include government officials, policymakers, business leaders, community members, and others. Because the SSIP is designed to improve the academic results of students with disabilities, disability specific stakeholders such as staff of related state agencies and advocacy organizations might also be included. To ensure the SSIP effectively addresses identified needs, it may be crucial to involve stakeholders who possess direct understanding of those specific needs and can contribute relevant insights to the development and implementation process.

Discussion one: Who are our key stakeholders?

To effectively involve stakeholders in the SSIP process, it is important to clarify who the key stakeholders are (e.g., parents, families, teachers, community members, policymakers, etc.) and how they can participate in the process (setting goals, reviewing data, etc.). Remember, parents must be included as stakeholders.

Questions to consider:

1. Based on our goal, who needs to be part of the discussion? What individuals or groups are affected by our work? What individuals or groups affect our work?

2. How will we engage hard to reach communities?

3. What other departments and organizations can we partner with?

4. What questions do we need stakeholders to answer?

Step 2: Understand the Assessment Literacy Needs of Stakeholders

When engaging stakeholders in the SSIP process in states with assessment-related SiMRs, it is important to consider the assessment literacy knowledge that participants will need to engage as partners. Some stakeholders may already have strong assessment literacy skills and be ready to engage in data analysis. However, other stakeholders, from inside and outside of the education profession, may need additional support and scaffolding to meaningfully discuss assessment data and help make informed decisions.

SEAs need to be prepared to support building the assessment literacy of educators so they can effectively engage in evidence-based decision making. Similarly, stakeholders may need to build some assessment literacy skills to better understand data they are asked to review. A factor in determining the assessment literacy needs of stakeholders is consideration of how they will be involved in the SSIP process. For instance, a committee may be contributing to the setting of growth targets. An SSIP team would need to consider how to present the growth data in ways that are meaningful and accessible to stakeholders.

SEAs may want to identify what they consider the key components of assessment literacy to guide the development of resources. The members of the National Center on Educational Outcomes' (NCEO) peer learning group (PLG) identified several assessment literacy standards as priorities for a broad range of stakeholders (adapted from Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017):

- Recognize that balanced assessment systems use varied methods of assessment and communication.

- Recognize that effective classroom assessment and high-quality instruction are both critical to student learning.

- Know how to use multiple sources of data over time to identify trends in learning and to set goals for future learning.

- Know that assessments closer to the classroom usually have a greater impact on improving student achievement.
- Know that important decisions about schools, educators, or students should be made based on multiple sources of accurate data.
- Understand that an effective assessment system must balance different purposes for different users.
- Understand that different assessment methods are used to measure different learning targets.
- Understand that different types of assessments provide different types of information about what students know and can do.

Discussion two: How will we build stakeholder capacity to understand assessment data and practices?

A challenge when planning for stakeholder engagement is participants' differing background knowledge and experience with assessment practices, processes, and data.

Questions to consider:

1. What background information is essential to understanding our state's SSIP and SiMR?
2. What activities will we use to build stakeholder capacity to understand and use data?
3. What accommodations can we put in place for all stakeholders?
4. Have we avoided unnecessary jargon and technical language?

Step 3: Make Data Accessible to All Stakeholders

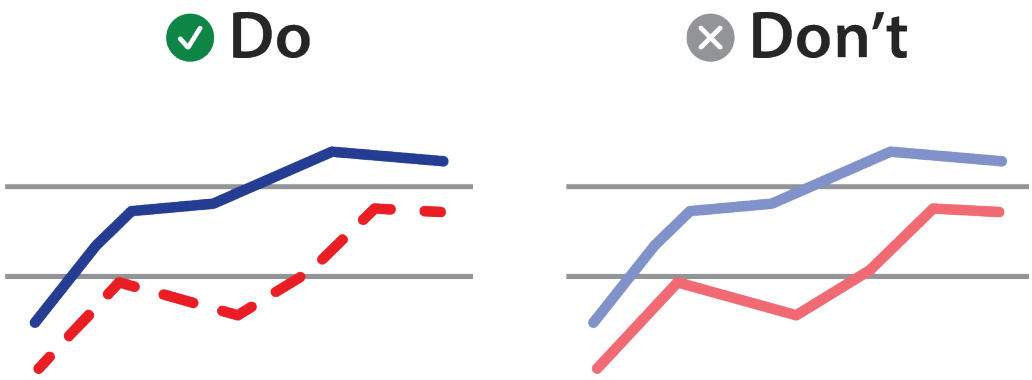
When representing data, it's important to design data representations that are accessible and understandable for the target stakeholder audience. Stakeholders should easily understand what the data represent (e.g., proficiency rates, growth, participation rates), and how it can be interpreted. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) (*Introduction to Understanding WCAG*, n.d.) provide recommendations for creating accessible data representations.

WCAG's four principles of accessibility provide a framework SEAs can use to ensure data representations are accessible to all audiences, including individuals with disabilities. WCAG organizes the criteria using the acronym "POUR", which stands for Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust.

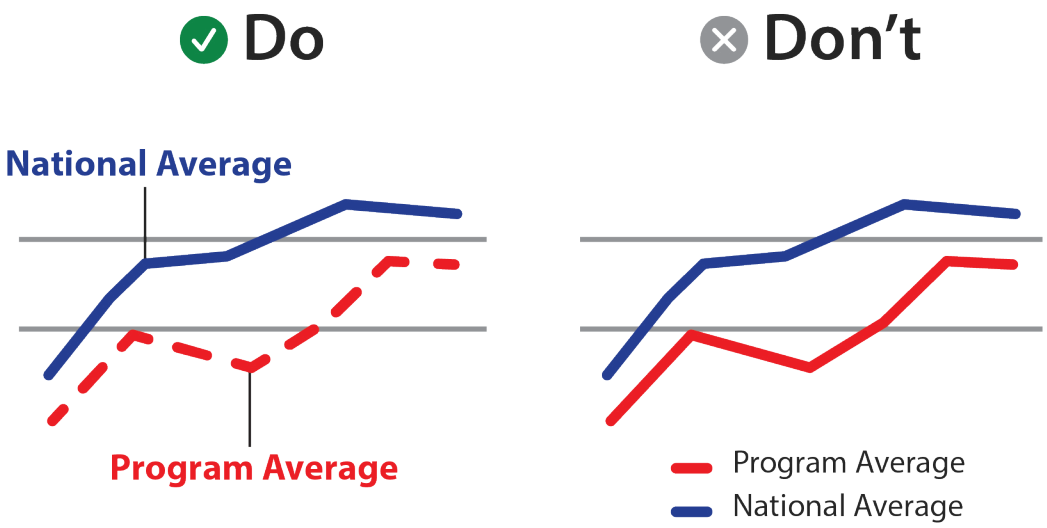
- **Perceivable**: Users must be able to perceive the information being presented. In other words, it cannot be invisible to all their senses.
- **Operable**: Users must be able to operate the user interface.
- **Understandable:** Users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the website.
- **Robust**: Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.

Tips for satisfying accessibility principles include:

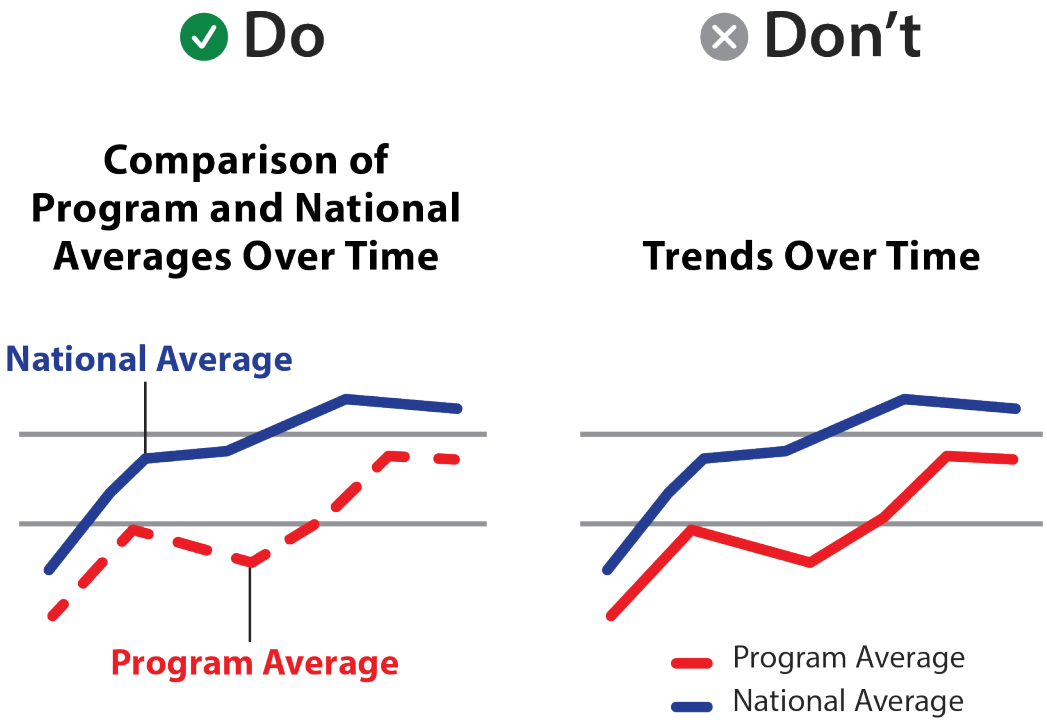
- **Use alternative text**. Alternative text should describe the meaning of the data or chart in concise and specific language. Using alternative text makes the information ***perceivable*** to people who cannot see visual representations.
- **Consider color**. High-contrast colors and additional differentiation like dashed lines help ensure that people with color blindness can ***perceive*** and interpret the chart. For example:



- **Label data directly.** Data labels should be on the chart itself, when possible, to ensure the graph can be understood without dependence on color. Labeling data directly helps people to ***perceive*** and understand the information. For example:



- **Use descriptive titles.** A title can be used to introduce the major insight that the author wants to convey. This provides an opportunity to communicate the important information to people who might not ***understand*** the chart or those using assistive technology to ***perceive*** and interpret it.



- **Provide additional formats**. By providing robust information in a ***variety*** of formats, more people will be able to access the information. Consider presenting the data being visualized in table format, as it is more easily read by assistive technology.

Comparison of Program and National Averages: 2000 – 2020

Year	Program Average	National Average
2000	75%	77%
2005	80%	88%
2010	77%	89%
2015	89%	94%
2020	88%	92%

- **Use a data visualization checklist.** Data visualization checklists provide tips on how to visualize data to be accessible and effective, such as using descriptive titles, focusing on the message for the intended audience, and reducing clutter. For example, the Institute on Education Sciences (IES; n.d.) provides a data visualization checklist.

Discussion three: How will we represent data to stakeholders?

When representing data, SSIP teams should consider whether the data are perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust for the stakeholders with whom they are communicating. If the data representation does not meet the POUR principles, it should be refined to increase accessibility.

Questions to consider:

1. What are our organization's policies or procedures around accessibility? Who can support us in meeting those policies?

2. What strategies or communication methods do we plan on using to share data with our stakeholders?

3. How will we ensure that our data representations meet good design principles?

4. What accessibility guidelines make the most sense for the data we are communicating and the method(s) we are using for communication and dissemination?

5. Would it be helpful for us to use a data visualization checklist?

Step 4: Consider Communication Strategies for the Target Audience

Many SEAs are working to improve the effectiveness of their communication strategies to better reach key parent and community stakeholders. Effective communication refers to content, materials, or messages that are tailored to the needs and preferences of the target audience. SSIP Teams should consider how to most effectively reach key stakeholders when writing emails, planning committee meetings, sharing data, and more. For instance, when sharing data with stakeholder committees, SEAs need to be sure that data is accessible to stakeholders who use assistive communication devices or speak other languages. The goal is to ensure that assessment data is clear and accessible for the intended stakeholder audience(s).

As a part of tailoring content, materials, and messages to the intended audience, it is important to recognize that communication needs to also be generationally appropriate. Generationally appropriate communication refers to content, products, services, or approaches that are tailored to the characteristics, preferences, and needs of specific age groups or generations. Considering the significant impact that technology and social media have on different generations, it is important to recognize that communication needs and preferences differ by generation. Each generation, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X), Millennials, and Generation Z (Gen Z), has distinct historic, social, economic, and technological influences that shape their behaviors and expectations (Van Edwards, 2024). Generationally appropriate communication considers these factors to effectively engage and connect with different age cohorts. For example, Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980, often prefer receiving and using short, brief messages as opposed to lengthy ones (Van Edwards, 2024). While Generation Z, those born after 1997 and 2012, are often thought of as digital natives with no memories of the pre-internet age. They grew up in a world of advanced technology and social media, where attention spans may have been significantly reduced compared to previous generations due to the overwhelming amount of fast and highly interactive information at their fingertips (Rue, 2018).

Discussion four: How will you communicate with key stakeholder groups?

SEAs can work to make data easily understandable and meaningful for key stakeholders involved in the SSIP process. SSIP teams should thoughtfully consider the preferences of their stakeholders and ensure they are communicating with these members in a way that meets their needs.

Questions to consider:

1. What are the preferences and needs of our target stakeholder audiences?

2. Are there community leaders who we might collaborate with to determine which methods of communication and dissemination will work best? If so, how will we connect with the community leaders?

3. What content, products, services, or approaches make the most sense when we communicate with our stakeholders?

4. How will we measure whether our communication strategies are working?

Step 5: Disseminate Accurate Information

It is important that data shared with stakeholders is as accurate as possible and is reported in a timely manner. Accurate data is needed for good decision making. Low-quality data can lead to poor and uninformed decisions, which can have negative consequences. Similarly, poorly designed data visualizations can lead to inappropriate interpretation. High-quality data presented in easy-to-understand formats supports good decision-making. States that measure their SSIP efforts with assessment data would benefit from putting systems into place to help ensure that information shared with stakeholders is as accurate as possible. SEAs and LEAs often make a considerable amount of information available via their websites. However, information about assessment policies, procedures, and results can quickly become out of date and inaccurate if not updated regularly. Similarly, data posted on third party websites (e.g., regional teams, community organizations, parent associations) can be out of date and inaccurate as well. SEAs should plan to review websites and ask partners to review theirs on a regular basis to ensure data accessed by stakeholders is accurate and current.

If there are data limitations, they should be pointed out to stakeholders because not being transparent about data limitations can lead to stakeholders losing trust in the system.

SEAs can use these strategies to ensure stakeholders have access to accurate and understandable information:

- Disseminate high-quality, easy-to understand information through targeted communications to stakeholder communities.

- Ensure that data are provided in accessible and understandable formats.

- Point out any data limitations.

- Be transparent about the decision-making process and the role of stakeholders.

- Build lines of communication to share information with and gather information from parents, families, and community organizations.

- Circulate frequently asked questions (FAQs) documents that address concerns and questions and concerns from target stakeholder communities.

- Create dissemination plans (that include social media, newsletters, etc.) to reach parents, families, and community organizations via their preferred communication methods.
- Provide training and resources to support LEAs in their efforts to engage stakeholders.

Discussion five: How will we ensure that stakeholders have access to accurate information?

SEAs are responsible for ensuring that stakeholders have access to accurate information. Without accurate information, stakeholders cannot meaningfully participate in the improvement process.

Questions to consider:

1. How do we ensure that data reported to stakeholders is accurate, and presented ways that will support appropriate interpretations?
2. What challenges do our communities and families face in accessing information on our website and social media? How can we use these tools to enhance our communication?
3. What support, training, or resources can we provide to assist LEAs in communicating accurate information?
4. How can we evaluate and track our communication efforts?

Conclusion

Data only matters when stakeholders have access! Improving outcomes for students with disabilities is the primary purpose of SSIP work in states with assessment-related SiMRs. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is an essential part of this process. SEAs need to take the time to discuss who their key stakeholders are, how to effectively communicate with them, and how to make assessment data accessible to all stakeholders. Parents, families, teachers, communities, and policymakers must have access to the information they need to make informed decisions at all levels of the system. SSIP teams must also ensure that they are honoring the preferences and needs of their stakeholders and are disseminating accurate information.

The involvement of stakeholders not only fulfills a requirement but also greatly informs the improvement process by aligning strategies with practical needs and realities of local communities. By fostering collaboration with key stakeholders and data-driven decision making, SSIP teams can continuously refine their plans, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in driving improvements, and ultimately improved student outcomes.

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Appendix A

Resources

NCEO Empowering Families Toolkit. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide accessible materials for parents about topics related to assessment-related SSIPs and SiMRs. The toolkit includes short video clips and printed flyers. The materials are designed for dissemination through social media, state websites, and at meetings.

For each of the following four topics, the toolkit includes video clips and flyers for printing:

- Why are assessments important, and why should students with disabilities participate in assessments?
- What are the purposes of different kinds of tests, and how are they used in the SSIP?
- What is the SSIP and why do it?
- Understanding test data at SSIP stakeholder meetings.

The video clips are each less than three minutes long, and are designed to engage a variety of audiences (e.g., parents, educators, policymakers, etc.).

The printable one-page flyers provide information in easy-to-understand language. They are 508 accessible and can be read with assistive technology devices. The toolkit also includes sample social media posts for each of the four topics.

Assessment Literacy Standards. SEAs can use the *Assessment Literacy Standards* from the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) when planning for stakeholder engagement. They can use this resource to identify knowledge, skills, and dispositions for preparing stakeholders who will participate in goal setting, identification of appropriate assessments, and more.

Assessment literacy is defined by the MAC as, "… the set of beliefs, knowledge, and practices about assessment that lead a teacher, administrator, policymaker, or students and their families to use assessment to improve student learning and achievement."

This resource includes assessment literacy standards for multiple stakeholder groups:

- Students and their families
- Teachers

- Building administrators
- District administrators
- Local and state policymakers

The standards for each of the five groups are organized around:

Dispositions—Standards that address what individuals who are assessment literate believe regarding assessment.

Knowledge—Standards that specify the vocabulary, processes, and practices that assessment literate individuals need to understand.

Performance—Standards that address the skills and competencies by individuals who can demonstrate their proficiency.

Data Visualization: Bringing Your Evaluation Results to Life. This interactive data visualization toolkit from The Center to Improve Program and Project Performance (CIPP-4) was developed for the OSEP grantees to create data representations. It takes a deep dive into specific types of visualizations that can be created with data commonly collected through OSEP-funded projects and provides step-by-step instructions for creating each visualization.

Rhonda Weiss Center for Accessible IDEA Data. The Rhonda Weiss Center is an OSEP-funded center that works to improve state capacity to provide equitable access to data under IDEA. SEAs can use their tools, like the Accessible Data Analysis and Publishing Tool (ADAPT), to improve the accessibility of their data representations and communications in general.

Appendix B

Federal Requirements Regarding Stakeholder Engagement

SEAs report annually to OSEP on stakeholder engagement related to the SSIP as part of Indicator 17 in the State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR). OSEP has several requirements regarding stakeholder engagement, as detailed in the SPP/APR instructions:

Stakeholder Involvement must include:

I. The number of parent members and a description of how the parent members of the State Advisory Panel, parent center staff, parents from local and statewide advocacy and advisory committees, and individual parents were engaged in target setting, analyzing data, developing improvement strategies, and evaluating progress

II. Description of the activities conducted to increase the capacity of diverse groups of parents to support the development of implementation activities designed to improve outcomes for children with disabilities

III. The mechanisms and timelines for soliciting public input for target setting, analyzing data, developing improvement strategies, and evaluating progress

IV. The mechanisms and timelines for making the results of the target setting, data analysis, development of the improvement strategies, and evaluation available to the public. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

Section C of Indicator 17 specifies that, "The State must describe the specific strategies implemented to engage stakeholders in key improvement efforts and how the State addressed concerns, if any, raised by stakeholders through its engagement activities" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

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