

# **Statewide Student Information System RFI**

## **Final Recommendations**

**July 2, 2021**

Issued by the SSIS RFI Project Team



## Purpose

Over the course of the last 18 months, the AOE and Agency of Digital Services (ADS) Partners conducted a Request for Information (RFI) in response to specific feedback from LEA partners post-Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) implementation which asked why Vermont hadn't pursued a statewide student information system (SSIS). This recommendation memo summarizes final elements for consideration as part of completing the Request for Information (RFI) for exploring and SSIS solution.

## Summary

As part of the SLDS project close-out, the current AOE Data and ADS at AOE Leads engaged in a lessons learned exercise, culminating in some specific areas for targeted improvement as outlined in the whitepaper [State Longitudinal Data System \(SLDS\) Lessons Learned](#).

Priority areas to address included:

- Communication and Leadership
  - Priority Need: Early communication and co-planning with districts
- Project Management (PM) Practices
  - Priority Need: Ensure state PM support throughout project
- Infrastructure
  - Priority Need: AOE enterprise data system vision
- Skills Gaps and Training Needs
  - Priority Need: Dedicated FTEs for regular training and communication

Work began immediately on these priority areas through efforts like:

1. Deployment of a survey eliciting feedback from stakeholders conducted in late 2020 with 53 respondents,
2. Outreach to other states with SSIS already in operation (Montana and South Carolina),
3. Outreach to other states with alternate models (e.g., Ed-Fi implementations) (Wisconsin, New Hampshire)

AOE teams used this information and lessons learned from the SLDS project as well as the Statewide Shared School District Data Management System (SSDDMS) project to conduct a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of potential SSIS initiative. This work led to issuing the RFI to explore what implementing a SSIS might mean for Vermont.

After reviewing the responses, the AOE and ADS teams [shared their findings with LEA partners](#), and elicited participation in a series of focus group sessions to compile recommendations for AOE Executive Leadership to consider for next steps in this work.

The proposed SSIS RFI options reviewed with LEA representatives were:

- Option 1: Required SSIS
- Option 2: Stand up AOE Operational Database Store with Ed-Fi API to LEA SISs (SSIS for LEAs without an SIS)
- Option 3: State Master Contract with selected SIS Vendors

- Option 4: Keep Current State (Do Nothing)

These options, and related RFI findings, were shared on March 8th in a meeting for Superintendents, Principals, Business Managers, and Data Managers. The slides for this presentation are located on AOE's [website](#).

The LEA Representatives who participated in this work came from the following SU/SDs:

**Table 1. SU/SD Focus Group Membership**

SUID	NAME
SU068	CENTRAL VERMONT SU
SU047	WINDHAM NORTHEAST SU
SU009	CALEDONIA CENTRAL SU
SU022	FRANKLIN WEST SU
SU023	MAPLE RUN SD
SU055	SAU 70
SU007	COLCHESTER SD
SU028	ORANGE SOUTHWEST SU
SU056	SPRINGFIELD SD
SU003	ADDISON CENTRAL SU
SU024	GRAND ISLE SU
SU032	WASHINGTON CENTRAL SU
SU063	TWO RIVERS SU
SU061	BARRE SU
SU020	FRANKLIN NORTHEAST SU
SU021	MISSISQUOI VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT
SU016	SOUTH BURLINGTON SD

## Focus Group Findings

### Identified Need: Shared Data Standards and Practices Statewide

Uniformly, the Focus Group participants raised that there is an excessive amount of complexity in the operations across Vermont LEAs when it comes to the variability of SIS use and data management. This complexity is difficult and overly time-consuming to manage for users at all levels (e.g. school, LEA, and SEA personnel respectively).

Nearly all participants highlighted that efficiencies, opportunities for collaboration and peer-learning, as well as a general reduction of burden on all users—LEA, School, and SEA alike—could be found through sharing data standards across the state as opposed to continuing to operate in siloed ways.

### Identified Need: Training and Messaging to SU/SD Leaders Regarding Data and Reporting Responsibilities

Many Focus Group participants shared that they felt they had to message upwards to their leadership about the existing required data reporting responsibilities that LEAs hold, timelines for their execution, and the importance of their fulfilment (e.g. funding determinants are derived from data reported by SU/SDs). They identified this as a serious issue in terms of their ability to ensure the required work was completed to the quality needed.

Participants recommended that there be more direct means of communicating responsibilities, standards, and requirements to SU/SD leadership across the state so that data reporting work could be afforded the attention and resources it requires.

## Focus Group Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

### SWOT - Option 1 – Statewide Student Information System Implementation

#### Strengths

- **Everything looks and works the same:** All SU's using the system allows easier support and training opportunities to be provided by the state.
- **Economies of scale:** There should be cost savings associated with having a larger contract with a single vendor, vs. smaller contracts with multiple vendors.
- **State Hosted/Administered:** Alleviates some tasks/concerns for local IT Admins, moves burden of system to state.

#### Weaknesses

- **Change Management:** Will cause a lot of disruption and change in current SU processes and practices. Regardless of vendor choice, more than half the state will need to learn a new tool, there is a cost associated with this that's hard to calculate.
- **Past Unsuccessful Experiences:** Concern about this being successful based upon past experience with state run systems such as the SSDMS and edFusion.

- **Resilience to failure:** Creates a single point of failure for the state's use of its SIS and reporting requirements.
- **Long-term planning:** This process will take a long time to fully implement, likely more than 5 years. At least 3 until a vendor would be chosen and rollout would start.
- **Funding:** It's not clear how this would be approved and paid for.

### **Opportunities**

- **Higher Quality Data:** Better standardization of practices and tools.
- **Better Support:** Systems training and support can be more tightly integrated to state reporting requirements. Tool can be more easily tailored to our needs with the right vendor.
- **Less Complexity:** Contracting and reporting requirements are reduced because they can be easily wrapped up in one system instead of several.

### **Threats**

- **Existing Data:** Without a migration plan, some orgs could lose historical data access.
- **Governance Model:** No one owns the whole system, there isn't clear governance on the roles involved yet. How would we ensure everyone's voice is heard who uses the system, or who do we consult when changes are required?
- **End User Training** Technical training needs to bring new/old users up to speed. The state has not performed well at this in the past.
- **Interconnected Systems Not Accounted For:** There are many ancillary systems that the SIS is used for, such as food service, Library and testing records, and messaging. Any SSIS needs to address these needs.
- **One Size Does Not Fit All:** Each SU has different needs and users for their SIS. One package might not address these needs.

## **SWOT - Option 2 – Statewide EdFi Implementation**

### **Strengths**

- **Less Churn:** Don't have to switch SIS, leaving current integrations with other systems/tools intact.
- **Lower Lift:** Doesn't require retraining the entire state
- **Real time, Quality Data:** Requires Field users to maintain their data on a regular basis, makes it more accurate and less of a burden at the end of year
- **Others already did the work:** Other states are already doing this; we can learn from their mistakes and achievements.

### **Weaknesses**

- **Not only solution for Quality:** EdFi is not a magic wand for data cleaning
- **Regular Maintenance Required:** Requires Field users to maintain their data on a regular basis

- **Customization Problems** Will require those with custom setups to conform to SIS vendor norms for how to store data. Some current "workarounds" in use might need to be reworked.

### **Opportunities**

- **Legacy Support Possible:** Could support flat file upload (if needed and AOE developed)
- **Regular Maintenance:** EdFi will have better data validation at source of input, supporting more continuous cleaning
- **Open Source:** no vendor lock in, easier to maintain and improve.
- **Real Time Collaboration:** The state and SU's will be able to exchange data more easily. Ad-hoc collections can be more easily implemented.
- **Quick access to common dataset:** This makes it possible for the state to provide tools useful to all SU's, such as teacher/student/parent dashboards.
- **Transfers Student Transcripts:** Will enable other SU's in the state to have easy access to a student's previous school data (if in state)

### **Threats**

- **No shared data standards** - It's possible for different SIS's and SU's to do things differently, and that might cause issues. Without a share resource and training, this is always possible and exists now.
- **Change is hard:** This is new, there will be problems to work through, and it's not a turn-key solution.
- **Slow Adoption:** There is going to be some folks who are resistant to change and it will be years before this is fully implemented across the state.

## **Final Recommendations**

After 18 months of engagement with LEA partners to collect feedback, executing the RFI, presenting those findings to LEA partners as well as posting on AOE's website for transparency, and holding structured focus groups with more than a dozen LEA staff members close to the work, the final recommendations for consideration are as follows:

1. Vermont should pursue Option 2, a statewide implementation of [Ed-Fi](#). It is an actionable strategy that preserves continuity of local SIS use while speeding both data submission and data quality feedback loops to the LEAs.
2. Vermont should explore the feasibility and value proposition for the state to procure a statewide SIS that LEAs could opt into using. This would likely provide better pricing due to broader purchasing power, which would help give access to a SIS for LEAs currently without one, thus addressing a currently existing equity gap.

While a statewide Ed-Fi implementation will not address this foundational data governance and data practice challenge, there is much room for positive work in the direction of building a culture of data quality across Vermont's education system by beginning to standardize data work, code sets, and procedures across LEAs.

This type of standardization would take time to implement as it is oriented more towards human practices in record keeping as opposed to a purely technological “fix”, but there is fertile ground to work in this direction as the AOE continues to improve communication and co-planning practices with LEA partners. Ultimately, this work will require LEA leadership and their staff, with support from SEA partners, to be empowered to work within their districts to ensure data quality standards are implemented and practiced regularly.