Making the Connection Between Head Start and ECIDS: Navigating the Vendors

Head Start is one of the most comprehensive early childhood programs offering services to children and families. States should include Head Start data in early childhood integrated systems (ECIDS). Doing so will help build a complete picture of existing early childhood services and identify service gaps and opportunities for partnerships. Additionally, by being part of a state ECIDS, Head Start grantees can access data from other county- and state-level programs and organizations that can be used for community assessment planning, school readiness reports, program evaluation, and other federal requirements related to their services and data collections.

Head Start grantees often contract with multiple information technology vendors for data-related services, which can make obtaining Head Start data challenging. This brief provides tips for how state ECIDS project teams can partner with Head Start grantees to obtain data from vendors.

Ensure that Head Start Grantees Understand the Benefits of Integrating Data

The Head Start data environment

In general, Head Start programs have collected or used data primarily to comply with reporting requirements mandated by federal regulations or the Head Start Act. Each grantee must comply with all of the reporting requirements outlined in those sources.

The Office of Head Start has recently provided additional guidance about what data grantees should collect and the level of detail. Specific language on data use can be found within the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework (PFCE) and in Regulation 1307, which enforces accountability via data-driven decisions.
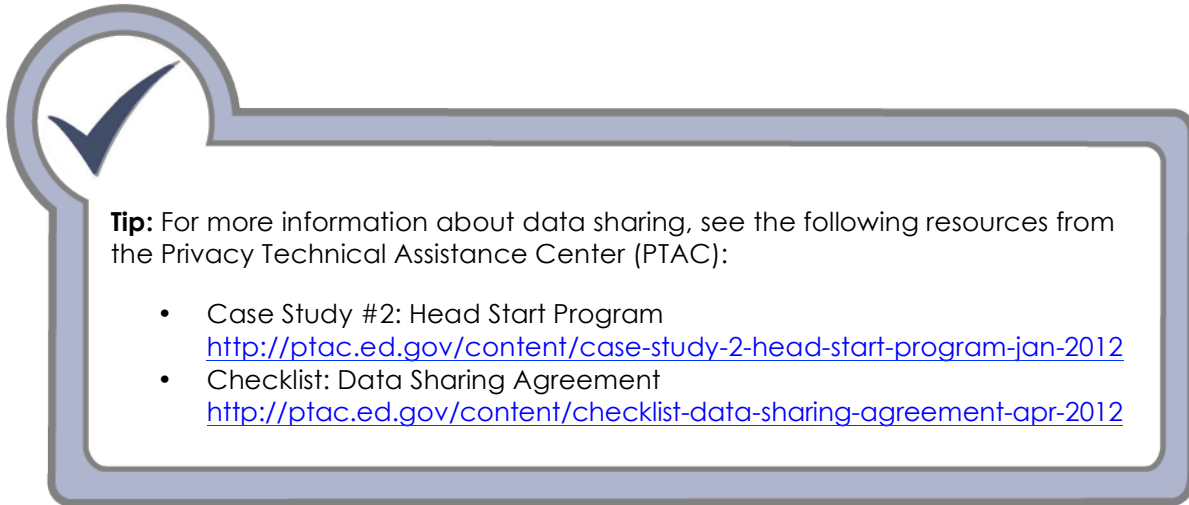
The use of data is entrenched in every area of the Head Start program, including

- Performance Standards that require grantees and delegates to collect information about children and families for program planning and individualization;
- program data used to conduct annual self-assessments and inform professional development for staff; and
- Head Start Act requirements that dictate how the Office of Head Start uses the collected data to determine future funding awards.

Data are the driving force for developing, implementing, and evaluating program effectiveness in Head Start programs.

The value of integrating Head Start data with additional data in an ECIDS

The prevalence of data-driven decisionmaking across education programs highlights the need for all organizations and partners to collaborate, as well as to integrate and share data. It is vital for Head Start grantees to reach out to state agencies and community partners to leverage existing data systems so more informed decisions can be made. No organization has the resources—either fiscal or human—to duplicate work. Integrating data across Head Start and an ECIDS requires appropriate data sharing agreements. These agreements should clearly articulate what data elements will be shared and how the data are gathered from the vendor. That ensures that the data are sustainable beyond any one vendor agreement.

Tip: For more information about data sharing, see the following resources from the Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC):

- Case Study #2: Head Start Program
  http://ptac.ed.gov/content/case-study-2-head-start-program-jan-2012
- Checklist: Data Sharing Agreement
  http://ptac.ed.gov/content/checklist-data-sharing-agreement-apr-2012

Work with Head Start Grantees to Identify and Find Solutions for Contract Provisions that Might Hinder Data Integration

State programs should work with Head Start grantees to review vendor service-level agreements and other related documents. This allows them to identify any clauses or restrictions that may potentially prevent them from integrating data with an ECIDS. For example, a vendor contract may include language limiting the number of reports and customizations that can be made in an existing system. In this case, states and Head Start grantees may need to review their request to the vendor. Requests should make clear that the product needed for ECIDS integration is a dataset or a copy of the grantee's own data rather than a new report or system customization. Allow the vendor to provide options for fulfilling the request, and offer agency resources—such as developers—to assist when possible.

Help Head Start Grantees Develop Talking Points to Use When Requesting Data from Vendors

Head Start grantees contract directly with web-service vendors via annual subscriptions or similar terms. As the vendor's client, the Head Start grantee must remain the primary point of contact with the vendor when requesting data for ECIDS integration. If an ECIDS project leader or state official contacts the vendor directly requesting access to or a copy of a Head Start grantee's data, the vendor will deny the request because the vendor is not authorized to release the data. A vendor may also claim that this type of data request is not covered by its service agreement with the grantee.

ECIDS teams can help Head Start grantees ensure clear communication with vendors in several ways:

1. *Start initial conversations with questions, not demands.* Avoid statements such as "we need all our data," as these can make a vendor reluctant to keep the conversation moving forward. It is also unlikely to be realistic. Based on its governing policies, the ECIDS have a reason for the elements to be brought into the system. A direct relationship should exist between policy questions to be addressed by the ECIDS and the data elements loaded from each of the source systems, including Head Start. Head Start representatives should also have the opportunity to serve on all governing committees for the ECIDS. This involvement will give Head Start representatives a clear understanding of data use and security issues as well as a voice in decisions about the data that are made publicly available.

2. *Determine* how—*not* if—*the Head Start grantee can access its data.* The grantee can begin conversations with the vendor by asking, "How can we gain direct access to our data?" It is important that the Head Start grantee receives and reviews the data before they are incorporated into the ECIDS to identify and address any quality issues. Direct data transfers from the vendor to the ECIDS should be avoided. Direct access to data in the vendor's system may not always be an option due to cost, complexity, or other prohibiting factors. It also might not be a service the vendor offers. In these cases, approach the subject in small steps by asking direct questions:
    i. What are the current systems capabilities for data extraction and/or interoperability with other systems?
    ii. Do any of your other clients currently integrate their data with other internal or external programs or agencies?
    iii. Are there any additional services that offer this capability?
    iv. Can we be of any assistance to your team in helping resolve any technical challenges?

3. *Discuss the potential for the ECIDS team to work directly with the vendor.* Vendors might be hesitant to complete or consider any third-party requests that are not outlined in its contract or initiated directly by the client (i.e., the Head Start grantee). Grantees can include provisions in their vendor contracts—or revise contracts as appropriate—to allow for identified third parties to work directly with the vendor and/or on behalf of the grantee. If this option is selected, it is essential that the Head Start grantee be involved and receive the data for program planning.

Work with the Head Start Grantee to Determine the Data Needed from the Vendor, the Format, and How the Data Will be Provided

States should develop a standard communication document that Head Start grantees can share with vendors to clearly state the request (for example, direct data access, time to meet with technical staff, etc.) and, more importantly, the reason for the request. Vendors may not have the capacity to support the state's request, or they may believe that fulfilling it could compromise their internal security controls. Such a document provides an opportunity for open communication so concerns and potential roadblocks can be identified and addressed. States can also provide and support opportunities for cross collaboration and partnerships with the vendor.

The communication document should address the following:

1. *Data elements.* Head Start programs are required to collect data to ensure that services are being provided and that program requirements are being met. Yet the data collected generally reside within each child's file or record and are not necessarily aggregated for other purposes. For example, the Office of Head Start requires minimal data to be uploaded annually to its data collection systems. These data are part of the Program Information Report (PIR), and enrollment is reported in total monthly numbers.

2. *Level of data.* Head Start grantees may collect data at the classroom, site, grantee and/or community levels. They may also have data only at the site level and not compiled for the full grantee. The level of data requested should be explicit. One way that ECIDS integration can support Head Start is to provide data aggregated across the various Head Start programs in the state. State-level information can help identify opportunities for collaboration and

supports to inform Head Start program planning. Head Start grantees need to know at what level they plan to share data so that they can make their vendor request accordingly.

3. *Format.* States and programs should understand that data can be made available in several formats (e.g., spreadsheets, HTML, database extracts, direct export/imports). For this reason, the ECIDS team should outline its requirements and the ideal data format. Keep in mind that grantee staff may not be familiar with working with data outside their own internal requirements, and they may not have the necessary skills to understand technical requirements. Grantee staff may not have experience delivering data in other formats, such as dashboards or query tools. Documenting format requirements will help inform grantee staff about expectations for ECIDS data and build their data knowledge.

4. *Frequency.* Include items such as expected frequency of data integration and delivery timeframes in the request to the vendor. Vendors can be more receptive to working with non-real time data requests and might be open to delivering datasets via data tape backups or similar means.

5. *Common definitions.* Each state has multiple Head Start grantees, with multiple data system vendors. Although vendors offer similar services to meet the specific federal regulations within the program requirements, they may use different terminology or rules for managing the data. Requests for data can be framed using the Common Education Data Standards (*http://ceds.ed.gov/*), which provides a common language for referring to data elements across the education domain.

Be Aware of Any Potential Costs to the Head Start Grantee

ECIDS teams should have continuing conversations with Head Start grantees to develop both short- and long-term plans for data integration. When the ECIDS team thoroughly understands the Head Start grantees' contracts with their vendors and the technical aspects of the vendors' data system, it can help the grantees work more effectively with the vendors.

Common Vendors of Head Start Data Systems

- CAP60
- ChildPlus.net
- COPA
- Galileo/Merlin (Assessment Technology Inc.)
- Genesis Earth
- PROMIS-Cleverex-HSFIS

Because the Head Start grantee holds the contract with the vendor, changing anything in the contract will typically require a change order and will have associated costs to the grantee. The first step in helping Head Start grantees understand potential costs is to learn about the vendors. A brief survey to all Head Start grantees is one way to identify the vendors and the version of the software they are using. Survey questions can include

1. How are you collecting and reporting the information required by federal mandates? (For example: Are you using a vendor product, a product built internally, or a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet; or are you collecting information on paper?); and
2. If you are using a vendor product, who is the vendor, what is the product, and what version is being used?
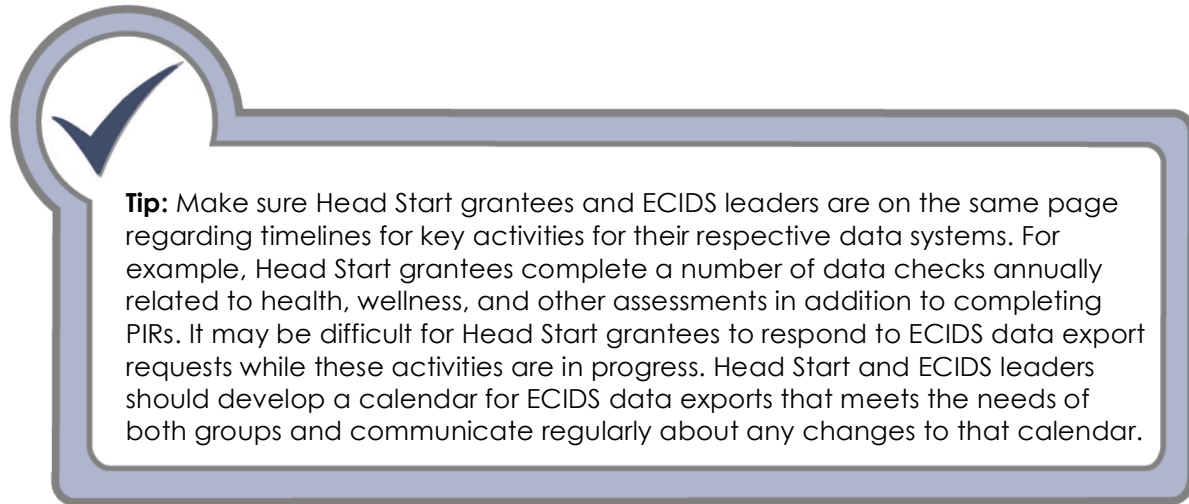
Remember that the purpose of the survey is to find out about vendor products. Grantees using an internally built product or an Excel spreadsheet have access to their own data.

After determining the vendors and the products and applications being used, the ECIDS team can better identify the scope of work needed to integrate Head Start data into the ECIDS. If a majority of grantees are using a single vendor product, the state can find leverage points with the vendor. All of the grantees using that vendor's product have to provide the same information, meaning that the vendor only has to "fix" the product once, not once for each grantee that uses its application. Through the help of the grantees, the state may be able to give the vendor an incentive to make changes from which all customers could benefit.

Tip: Make sure Head Start grantees and ECIDS leaders are on the same page regarding timelines for key activities for their respective data systems. For example, Head Start grantees complete a number of data checks annually related to health, wellness, and other assessments in addition to completing PIRs. It may be difficult for Head Start grantees to respond to ECIDS data export requests while these activities are in progress. Head Start and ECIDS leaders should develop a calendar for ECIDS data exports that meets the needs of both groups and communicate regularly about any changes to that calendar.

Additional Resources

Getting Started: Incorporating Head Start Data into an SLDS: SLDS Issue Brief
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2633

Head Start and SLDS: Getting to Know You: SLDS Webinar
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2735

Head Start Act
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pfcef

Moving Right Along: Incorporating Head Start Data into an SLDS: SLDS Issue Brief
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3421

What is an Early Childhood Integrated Data System? SLDS Brief
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/4441