**Now Playing:** The Splendid Table

(https://www.opb.org/)

Local (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/local/) Nation (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/nation/)

World (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/world/) Economy (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/economy/)

Environment (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/environment/) Politics (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/politics/)

Health (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/health/) Education (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/education/)

Español (https://www.opb.org/news/topic/spanish/)



# The Strange Case Of Susie Strangfield, Part 2: The Database

by **Rob Manning** (https://www.opb.org/contributor/rob-manning/) Follow () OPB Aug. 17, 2018 3:45 p.m. | Updated: Aug. 20, 2018 4:37 p.m. | Salem, Ore.

The official reasons Susie Strangfield was forced out as the first female chief information officer at the Oregon Department of Education cover two areas: her interactions with co-workers and her management of a few specific projects.

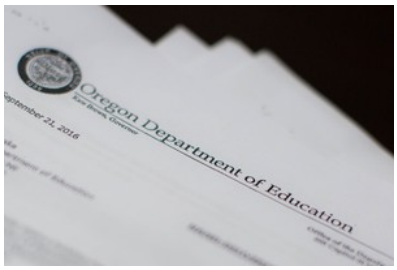
Strangfield believes the root cause of her ouster had less to do with what appeared in her official 12-page "pre-dismissal notice" and more to do with her persistent questions about a politically important data project.

RELATED COVERAGE

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS:

become a sponsor (https://www.opb.org/su

## Related Content




(https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-department-education-chief-information-officer-resigns/)

ODE Chief Information Officer Resigns After Months On Forced Leave (https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-department-education-chief-information-officer-resigns/)

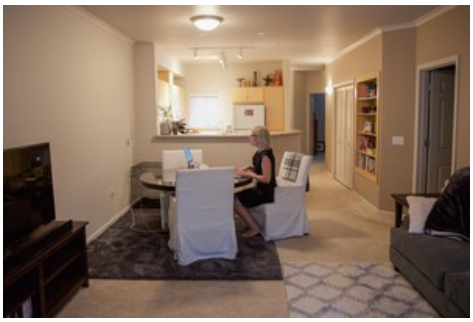
"After reviewing all of what happened to me, you can see where the [Statewide Longitudinal Data System] was the beginning of the end," Strangfield said.

The Statewide Longitudinal Data System, or SLDS, is a massive database the state has been planning and building for a decade. It ultimately aims to contain information on Oregonians from birth through school, college and into the workforce. In time, the SLDS intends to integrate personal health information, foster care records, as well as data from the juvenile detention and adult corrections systems.

As the system's been built, only programmers in Salem have had access to it.

But the SLDS is almost ready for prime time. OPB got a rare glimpse of the "beta" version of what the public could see this fall.

## The Database

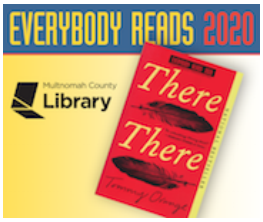


(https://www.opb.org/news/article/susie-strangfield-oregon-department-of-education-investigation/)

The Strange Case Of Susie Strangfield, Part 1: The Investigation (https://www.opb.org/news/article/susie strangfield-oregon-department-of-education-investigation/)

OPB

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS



(https://www.opb.org/become-a-supporter/partners/)

Chief Education Office Communications Director Lisa Morawski demonstrated the interface recently. She scrolled over to cohorts of students in one corner, then selected a specific variable, like math assessment results.

As it stands now, the system can generate reports based on data from the Oregon Department of Education and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

“You can pick what you want to look at,” Morawski said as she pointed out the available data fields. “Math, reading, science, whether students passed assessments … the idea is that you’re looking at different factors in the students’ experience and then looking at how they do over time, so whether they graduated, college, et cetera.”

The data system displays grouped student data, so information on individual kids isn’t available to the public. Individual student information is in the database, however, and it’s what allows the database to populate generalized reports. In the future, researchers could access the raw data to do their own inquiries out of the multi-agency data set.

()

Oregon education officials look at a “beta” version of the Statewide Longitudinal Data System in August 2018.

Rob Manning/OPB

The SLDS already contains more than 300 million records on millions of Oregonians who’ve attended public schools and universities dating back years. The system’s potential is enormous, argues Chief Education Officer Lindsey Capps, the state’s top education official.

“The data that’s provided through the longitudinal system provides opportunities for long-term, longitudinal studies, to look at root causes and barriers that may exist across the system,” Capps said.

These longitudinal systems are a national trend. All but three states received federal grants under the Obama administration to build these big, multi-agency

databases. Oregon received $10.4 million in 2009, under Project ALDER (Advancing Longitudinal Data for Educational Reform) — an initial effort by the state Department of Education to build a single database with student, workforce and teacher data.

In 2015, federal funding under Project ALDER was replaced by state funding for the SLDS. At the same time, the effort moved from the Oregon Department of Education, where K-12 data is kept, to the Chief Education Office — a far smaller education oversight agency.

The SLDS started to take shape in May 2015, as now-project director John Starr arrived as a contractor to shepherd the project through the "Stage Gate" process with Oregon's Department of Administrative Services. The SLDS would be the first big data project to go through Stage Gate, which legislators created to bulletproof big technology projects in the wake of the Cover Oregon health care insurance debacle (https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-oracle-cover-oregon-healthcare-exchange/).

## Strangfield Joins ODE

Around the same time SLDS got underway, Susie Strangfield was starting as an IT manager with the Oregon Department of Education — the agency that held much of the data the SLDS would need.

Starr said he observed a challenge in getting IT officials to share information that they're accustomed to protecting.

"Culturally, you've had discrete ownership of the information, right?" Starr said. "Now you're asking for that ownership to be relieved to a point where people are actually sharing data. Culturally for IT people, that's difficult and it takes time to make that cultural change."

Soon, ODE promoted Strangfield to chief information officer — the department's first woman in that position. Strangfield saw Starr's challenge less as a cultural challenge and more as a need to satisfy legal requirements related to data security and student privacy.

According to public records provided to OPB by ODE and the Chief Education Office, a pattern emerged throughout the project's development: the Chief Education Office wanted access to more data and IT managers wanted to keep that data limited to only what was required by written agreements.

As the CIO responsible for data belonging to millions of current and former Oregon students, Strangfield was at the center of the conflict.

()

Susie Strangfield worked from her apartment for months, as the Oregon Department of Education investigated her. The department's first female chief information officer resigned under pressure in June 2018.

Rob Manning/OPB

In March 2016, Strangfield passed along concerns she was hearing from school districts to her boss at the time, then-deputy superintendent of public instruction, Salam Noor.

"They want to know if they'll have any recourse if they disagree with the released data/reports," Strangfield wrote to Noor. She said districts are accustomed to checking data before it's published, and wondered about a similar process for the SLDS.

"Districts have also asked for more transparency into the project," Strangfield said, suggesting a webpage to pass along issues.

The project picked up speed in 2016.

At that point, Strangfield sounded eager to help, writing to SLDS staff, “Could you let us know if there are other tools you need so we can plan accordingly? We know you guys are hopping.”

Strangfield said she supported the project because big data could help identify problems facing school children in a state that has struggled with low high school graduation rates (https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-graduation-rate-high-school-national-rank-average/). But Strangfield was also protective of those kids’ data.

## A Fight Over Access

In July 2016, Strangfield signed off on a secure transfer of specific data sets for the SLDS. But two months later, the Chief Education Office was pushing for greater and more direct access to student data. ODE and the Higher Education Coordinating Commission was “required to provide a direct connection to source data,” according to Capps, the chief education officer, in a Sept. 27, 2016 email.

ODE head Salam Noor sent the message to Strangfield with the message, “Please review and let’s discuss how to respond.”

Capps sent another message in early October, applying more pressure, saying that his earlier statements “need to be understood as directives of the project, and for that

purpose carried out as seamlessly and expeditiously as possible."

Strangfield responded a few weeks later with a six-page memo to Capps, Noor and Starr, detailing legal, privacy, security and logistical concerns with allowing direct access to the student database by an outside agency. It outlined 13 specific steps, including security plans, access logs and training that were necessary to "mitigate risk."

FULL COVERAGE

(https://www.opb.org/news/series/classof2025/)

Class Of 2025: Follow Students From 1st Grade To Graduation (https://www.opb.org/news/series/classof2025/)

Oregon leaders have promised to ensure that every child graduates on time by 2025. OPB has followed a group of students from

Despite her concerns, ODE provided the access shortly after.

Records show Strangfield attended a meeting Oct. 18, 2016, with Capps, Starr and other state education executives. Strangfield told OPB that tensions that had been building exploded in that meeting and Capps yelled at her. Capps wouldn't comment on that or other questions related to Strangfield, saying her case is a personnel matter in a separate agency.

Members of the project team, like director Starr, were feeling pressure to deliver that same month.

kindergarten as they start their educational journey toward high school. Sixth grade is underway for the Class of 2025. These are some of their stories.

"We need to show movement here," Starr wrote to Strangfield, after a meeting with executives above him.

Strangfield apologized at the time for being hard to reach. But in retrospect, she told OPB she chafed at the political pressure she was feeling to move the project ahead, even as she had legal and security concerns.

"When I see that state and federal regulations are being ignored, or misinterpreted, and I'm being asked to put my professional reputation and my responsibility aside for a political win — I just, I can't do that," Strangfield said.

## Strangfield Not Alone

Officials in school districts across Oregon said they share Strangfield's concerns about protections for student privacy and security, though they declined to speak on the record to preserve relations with ODE and the Chief Education Office. Multiple analyses from the U.S. Department of Education also laid out security concerns with how Oregon education officials handle data.

Worries came from others at ODE, too.

“One thing I want to be clear about — it wasn’t just Susie who had concerns,” said Amy McLaughlin, the supervisor of ODE’s information security team until she left in 2016. “I had concerns; my team had concerns about making sure that we were in compliance with FERPA.”

FERPA is the federal law that prohibits education institutions from sharing data on individual students, without documented research or audit plans.

Strangfield said the law requires specific, detailed agreements to share student data.

“There needs to be a clear understanding of the use of that data, who has access, when they’ve accessed it, and for what purpose,” Strangfield said.

Strangfield reluctantly agreed to provide greater access to the data.

Soon after, she was moved further from the department’s senior leadership, as her supervisor changed from the deputy superintendent, Salam Noor, to his chief of staff. It would be the first of three steps down ODE’s organizational chart — moves that Strangfield believes were tied to her vocal concerns about the SLDS.

“I felt as though when I voiced my concerns about the lack of those controls, or the unlawful approach to the sharing of that data,” Strangfield told OPB, “that is when it was decided that I needed to go.”

In 2017, as the Chief Education Office faced possible closure, Gov. Kate Brown backed Capps as having "sole authority over the state's education entities." Brown called out the SLDS database specifically as a project Capps was leading. Staffers at ODE said it felt like pressure. Capps disagrees.

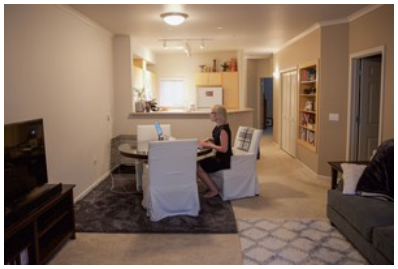
"I don't view that letter as saying 'get in line,'" he said. "I think it was a clarification that this is a role of the Chief Education Office, and this is a deliverable, and we need to work together and get this done."

Strangfield said she was told the specific inclusion of the SLDS came about because her objections had slowed the project. Starr denies that, saying any suggestion like that "did not come from me or my team."

Records show the Chief Education Office was considering using the governor's letter to apply further pressure on Strangfield and IT staff at ODE.

"Data and information are critical to achieving the Governor's vision of a unified and seamless educational

RELATED COVERAGE



(https://www.opb.org/news/article/susie-strangfield-oregon-department-of-education-investigation/)

The Strange Case Of Susie Strangfield, Part 1: The Investigation (https://www.opb.org/news/article/susie-

system/continuum," read the draft memo co-authored by Starr and the Chief Education Office's systems integration director, Michael Rebar. "In order to accomplish this, the traditional educational system boundaries need to be blurred."

strangfield-oregon-department-of-education-investigation/)

The memo concludes by saying their boss, Capps, would make final decisions over conflicts between education agencies.

The same month that memo was written and apparently shelved, Strangfield found herself bumped down the organizational chart again. Her new boss was Josh Klein, a former CIO at the state Department of Education, filling a newly created assistant superintendent position.

Strangfield described his first day as starting well.

"We had a great interaction in the morning," Strangfield recalled.

But that situation quickly turned.

"He went upstairs for a meeting with HR and a meeting with the chief of staff, and said, 'You know, Susie, I'm not sure if I'm here to help you or to fire you.'"

Klein left ODE last December and his new employer in the private sector declined to let him do an interview with OPB. In June, OPB requested records related to

Klein's departure, but ODE has not provided them.

Strangfield moved under another assistant superintendent, Rick Crager, in December 2017. When she returned from holiday vacation Jan. 2, the human resources department sent Strangfield home on administrative leave and said she was facing investigation.

## Forced Out

Human resources spent the next few months compiling allegations against Strangfield.

As OPB has previously reported, Strangfield contests the allegations that ultimately led to her departure (https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-graduation-rate-high-school-national-rank-average/), including that she yelled profanities at subordinates. The investigation took several strange turns, including an examination of Strangfield's walking with a coworker while wearing headphones.

A letter she received from former supervisor Klein was characterized as disciplinary in nature, though records suggest Strangfield had requested the letter to clarify Klein's expectations.

The investigation also appeared to rely on research conducted by one of Strangfield's subordinates while she was out on administrative leave. Director of IT operations at ODE, Joseph King, at one point wrote to

Human Resources Director Krista Campbell with his research of security policies Strangfield might have violated.

“Please let me know if you would like to me to keep looking, but I think this may be enough?” King wrote last April, as Strangfield’s at-home suspension stretched into its fourth month.

King’s research involved an email account that was suspiciously reactivated after an employee had left ODE. Strangfield was ultimately blamed for the problem, though Amy McLaughlin — the IT expert whose account was affected — suspects the CIO had nothing to do with it.

Ultimately, Strangfield said she felt ODE conducted a biased investigation intent on forcing her out because of her objections over data practices related to the SLDS database.

McLaughlin has her own questions about Strangfield’s ouster. She acknowledges the pressure that ODE’s IT team faced from the SLDS project staff.

But McLaughlin brings up something less complicated as a possible cause for the investigation: sexism.

“Under the previous male CIOs, I never observed constant skip-level meetings where ODE executives would meet with IT managers or IT staff without the CIO

present or without the CIO's knowledge," said McLaughlin, who worked with four different CIOs at the agency.

She said meetings like that happened often after Strangfield took a leadership role.

"It was very uncomfortable," McLaughlin said.

McLaughlin said Strangfield was also removed from the executive management team and had to deal with staff second-guessing and undermining her decisions. She said neither of those things happened under Strangfield's male predecessors.

As Strangfield prepares a possible lawsuit against ODE, gender bias is a claim her attorneys could try to make. It's one that top officials at ODE are likely to contest, too.

While ODE declined to answer a number of questions related to Strangfield's departure, the department provided a statement from the deputy superintendent in charge of the agency, denying any discrimination.

"Oregon Department of Education takes very seriously creating a culture of respect, equity and opportunity for all," said Deputy Superintendent Colt Gill. "The department has many women in senior leadership positions who provide incredible value every day."

## Future Of The Database

Officials said the SLDS completed its initial phase on June 1, 2018, including the public reporting interface

that OPB was shown earlier this month. That's eight months past its initial deadline of October 2017.

The data-sharing agreements that Strangfield had insisted on are still not final.

"We are at the cliff edge in getting that completed," said Starr, the project director.

The Chief Education Office insists there are agreements in place, just not the unified agreement with multiple agencies that top officials are working to finish. But IT officials at the state say the current documents are not sufficient. The lack of a final data-sharing agreement is significant, according to a spokeswoman for the chief information officer at the Oregon Department of Administrative Services.

"Absent a data-sharing agreement, the SLDS won't serve its legislatively-intended purpose," said DAS communications director Liz Craig.

"[The Oregon State Chief Information Officer] has always been clear that we wouldn't approve the project for implementation until we have a data-sharing agreement in place," Craig said, emphasizing this remains the agency's "current position."

Craig said the system can't "go live" until that data sharing agreement is complete.

The state has approved the data system through three of four steps of the Stage Gate process.

Strangfield insists that the SLDS is already in violation of federal privacy laws because it has been built before sufficient data sharing agreements are in place. But the Chief Education Office has said it does comply with FERPA.

Records indicate the Chief Education Office sought legal advice on FERPA and the SLDS from attorneys at the Oregon Department of Justice. OPB requested access to the correspondence with DOJ, but the Education Office denied that request, citing attorney-client privilege.

The Chief Education Office intends to share the SLDS with the public this fall.

And in the upcoming legislative session, Capps hopes to get lawmakers' support for an expansion of the data system to include data from the Oregon Health Authority and foster care information from the Department of Human Services.

***Editor's Note:*** *A previous version of this story erroneously reported the date of Salam Noor's resignation. He announced his resignation in Oct. 2017. OPB regrets the error.*

oregon department of education

## More News

(https://www.opb.org/news/article/homeless-portland-ted-wheeler-public-forum/)

Wheeler Addresses Housing And Homeless Services At Portland Forum (https://www.opb.org/news/article/homeless-portland-ted-wheeler-public-forum/)

(https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-legislature-short-session-2020-issues-bills-preview/)

The 2020 Oregon Legislative Session: What You Need To Know (https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-legislature-short-session-2020-issues-bills-preview/)

(https://www.opb.org/news/article/koben-henriksen-portland-police-de-escalate/)

Officer Who Killed Koben Henriksen Had De-escalated Similar Situation Weeks Before (https://www.opb.org/news/article/koben-henriksen-portland-police-de-escalate/)

(https://www.opb.org/news/article/plastic-bag-ban-oregon-survey/)

How Are You Adjusting To Oregon's Ban On Single-Use Plastic Bags? (https://www.opb.org/news/article/plastic-bag-ban-oregon-survey/)

## More OPB

(https://www.opb.org/opbmusic/article/dr-dog-

portland-roseland-theater-ticket-giveaway/)

Win Tickets To Dr. Dog At The Roseland Theater (https://www.opb.org/opbmusic/article/dr-dog-portland-roseland-theater-ticket-giveaway/)

(https://www.opb.org/opbmusic/series/sessions/roselit-bone-charlotte-mccaslin/)

On 'Crisis Actor,' Roselit Bone Challenges Genre, Stereotypes And Even Gender (https://www.opb.org/opbmusic/series/sessions/roselit-bone-charlotte-mccaslin/)

**About (https://www.opb.org/about/)**
FAQs (https://www.opb.org/about/faq/member/)
Employment (https://www.opb.org/about/careers/)
Volunteering (https://www.opb.org/about/volunteering/)
Internships (https://www.opb.org/about/internships/)
Producing for OPB (https://www.opb.org/about/produce/)
Accessibility (https://www.opb.org/about/accessibility/)
Hire OPB (https://www.opb.org/about/services/)
Pressroom (https://www.opb.org/pressroom/)
OPB Public Files (https://www.opb.org/about/#moreinfo)

## Contact (https://www.opb.org/about/contactus/)

Email OPB (https://www.opb.org/about/contactus/)
Newsroom (https://www.opb.org/about/contactus/newsroom/)
Connect (https://www.opb.org/about/connect/)
Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/oregonpublicbroadcasting?_fb_noscript=1)
Twitter (https://twitter.com/opb)
Reception Issues (https://www.opb.org/about/contactus/reception/)

## Mobile (https://www.opb.org/about/connect/apps/)

Podcasts (https://www.opb.org/ondemand/#podcasts)
Mobile Apps (https://www.opb.org/about/connect/apps/)
Newsletters (https://www.opb.org/about/newsletter/)
RSS Feeds (https://www.opb.org/about/rssfeeds/)

## Support (https://www.opb.org/support/)

Contribute (https://give.opb.org/opb/?)
Sponsorship (https://www.opb.org/support/partners/)
Philanthropy (https://www.opb.org/support/membership/leadership/)
Planned Giving (https://www.opb.org/support/plannedgiving/)
Vehicle Donations (https://www.opb.org/support/vehicledonation/)
Volunteering (https://www.opb.org/about/volunteering/)

## Legal (https://www.opb.org/about/termsofuse/)

**Privacy Policy (https://www.opb.org/about/privacypolicy/)**
Terms of Use (https://www.opb.org/about/termsofuse/)
FCC Public Files & Accessibility (https://www.opb.org/about/fcc-public-files/)
Editorial Policy (https://www.opb.org/about/editorialpolicy/)
Contest Rules (https://www.opb.org/support/drawing/)
SMS T&C (https://www.opb.org/about/sms-terms-conditions/)

Search OPB

(https://www.pbs.org/?station=KOPB) (https://www.npr.org/?station=KOPB_FM) (https://www.pri.org/)
BBC WORLD SERVICE (https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice) AMERICAN PUBLIC MEDIA (https://americanpublicmedia.publicradio.org/)

© 2020, Oregon Public Broadcasting (https://www.opb.org/)

()