

## Management Matters: The Head Start Program Planning Cycle

Pat Fahey: Hello. I'm Pat Fahey, Principal Investigator for the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations, known as PMFO. On behalf of PMFO, I'd like to welcome you to this Management Matters presentation on the Head Start Program Planning Cycle. My colleague Sherrie Rudick and I will be your guides for the presentation. We are so pleased that many of you have already learned about the program planning cycle graphics through our conference presentations.

Many of you may be asking: What's the big deal? The cycle simply depicts what programs that use management systems outlined in the Head Start Program Performance Standards already do. We hope that it does; however, we've learned from program leaders who have seen this cycle that the graphic helps them think about all of their program level planning processes as part of an integrated whole.

Through this recording, we hope to orient you to the Program Planning Cycle, introduce PMFO's online data module, and discuss ways in which you can use the cycle in your work. We'd like to begin by sharing the evolution of the Program Planning Cycle graphic. When the office of Head Start asked the PMFO to develop training materials to support Head Start programs on using data for decision making, we began by exploring planning and management materials that others had produced for Head Start in the past. Not surprisingly, we found that many planning and data use resources were built about the idea of a continuous improvement cycle. Programs that followed this cycle plan their work, implement their plans, check on the success of the implementation, reflect on the impact of their plan, and modify the plan based on their reflections. While the generic continuous improvement cycle describes the planning processes that most programs use, program leaders often have questions about the management systems outlined in the performance standards and how they map onto this continuous improvement cycle.

Many also have questions about the difference between ongoing monitoring and self-assessment. You may already be familiar with PMFO's constellation graphic of the Head Start planning related systems. We thought it was important to bring those systems that are related to planning into the continuous improvement cycle graphic to show how everything fits together. You will notice that the systems most closely related to planning are the ones in dark purple on this slide. So, from there, we ask ourselves how we can expand on the original continuous improvement graphic to highlight the systems that were most related to planning, how we could help programs to sort out the difference between ongoing monitoring and self-assessment, and how we could support programs in integrating the various goal and plans that they're developing so that program leaders could see how everything connected.

We came up with the Head Start Program Planning Cycle graphic that represents what effective programs already do in planning. The graphic illustrates how the required Head Start management systems are part of a predictable annual planning process. Through this process, programs develop, monitor, and evaluate the impact of program improvement, school readiness, and T/TA goals.

To learn more about how this graphic represents the planning process, let's follow the arrow around the planning cycle. Progress begins at either community assessment or self-assessment. Existing programs begin at the self-assessment and combine community assessment data with the findings of their annual self-assessment. New programs, those who have not already delivered services, begin with the community assessment. Based on information from the community assessment and self-assessment, the program's planning team decides on broad goals. They communicate the goals to all of their stakeholders, including the governing body, Policy Council, and staff. The program then develops a plan of action complete with objectives, action steps, and timelines, and a corresponding budget to carry out the program's school readiness and T/TA goals. As the program implements that plan, staff use the record keeping and reporting systems to collect data about their work. The program continually evaluates progress towards its goals through its ongoing monitoring system. Effective monitoring systems are built around program requirements.

For example, programs use a system to monitor their success in completing health screenings and to assess children's progress toward school readiness goals. Based on ongoing monitoring findings, programs can continue with their plan and/or make course corrections that may require changes in program activities or levels of effort. These steps in the cycle are represented by the inner circle of the graphic. This inner circle is ongoing and continuous throughout the year. Finally, the program evaluates progress on all of its program, T/TA, and school readiness goals during the annual self-assessment process.

In summary, we think that this graphic can help program leaders to link required Head Start and Early Head Start management systems into a predictable annual planning process. It can help them view their program, school readiness, and T/TA planning efforts as part of an overall cycle. It can help them to differentiate between ongoing monitoring and self-assessment and see how the two are linked. And finally, it can help them to develop, monitor, and evaluate the progress towards their program, school readiness, and T/TA goals.

We next wanted to show how data relates to every step of the cycle, so we added the yellow boxes that explicitly show the relationships at every step. The bullets in the boxes are examples of data-related activities that could happen at each step. This graphic illustrates the important role that data plays in each step of the planning process. For example, when programs decide on goals, they need to ensure

that the goals reflect conclusions from key data sources. When they develop their plan of action, they need to adjust their record keeping and reporting systems to be sure that they are collecting data that they will need to assess the progress on all of their goals. We found that once program leaders get the big picture, it's easier for them to see the importance of each step. When they see how the steps and systems are connected, they take them more seriously and they view the steps as part of a meaningful planning process rather than as a collection of activities that they do to satisfy Office of Head Start Compliance Requirements.

As we've presented this cycle graphic at conferences, we've encountered a number of questions from program leaders. We'd like to address four of those most frequently asked questions. My colleague, Sherrie Rudick, will share the first question. Sherrie?

Sherrie Rudick: Thank you, Pat. So, as you see on the slide the first question is about how the Program Planning Cycle relates to family services, health, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness goals. Here's our thinking. Goals that relate to family services, health services, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness may be part of the program goals, and as we saw in looking at the cycle graphic, these program goals are developed based on data that emerges from the community assessment and self-assessment. So, in other words, program goals that emerge from self-assessment and community assessment results may be related to any individual service area or to several service areas at once.

So, here's an example. The program may learn from its community assessment that there are pockets of new immigrant communities in its service area, and when staff members review child enrollment records, they may also find an increasing number of children who are dual language learners. So, in fact, the child enrollment data substantiates the community assessment data. Based on this, the program may develop an overarching broad goal, maybe something such as, the program will connect with parents, families, neighbors, and staff to enhance their understanding of cultures, values, and beliefs within their community, a big goal. As they then develop their action plan in relation to this goal, staff are likely to realize that some of the activities that they carry out to achieve this goal would be handled by health services staff, others by family services staff, and still others by classroom teachers and education managers. And to support cultural and linguistic responsiveness, they may choose to use the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Program Preparedness Checklist to collect data throughout the year on their progress towards meeting the goal. Back to you, Pat, for the second question.

Pat Fahey: Thanks, Sherrie. The second question is about how the Program Planning Cycle works when goals are developed mid-year. For example, sometimes programs have the fortunate opportunity to begin a new initiative in the middle of their program year. They may receive special one-time finding

from the Office of Head Start or receive an unanticipated grant from their state or foundation. In order to incorporate this new initiative into their program's annual planning cycle, the program will need to develop a goal related to the initiative and plan an action for the goal. They also need to decide how they're going to track progress for meeting that goal. As they develop the goal, then they want to revisit the findings of their previous community assessment and self-assessment for relevant information that may affect their plan of action.

For example, if the special project relates to services to dual language learners, the program will want to consult their community assessment and self-assessment to find out if there are particular sections of their service area that would benefit from these targeted services. Sherrie, can you take the next question?

Sherrie Rudick: Sure, Pat. Thanks. The next question is about how service area plans fit into the program planning cycle. So, service area plans are closely tied to the inner circle of the program planning cycle. Much of the data that Head Start and Early Head Start programs collect is what we think of as operational data. It's data that relates to how the activities in the service area plans are being carried out. So, the data answer questions such as, are we completing our screenings in a timely manner, or what percentage of our families have a medical home, or are we up to date in our home visits for each family? Review of this data may lead to course corrections and to new activities. So, essentially, this is the ongoing monitoring part of that planning cycle in all its glory. The service area plans also relate to the cycle in that the goals in service area plans are tied to the broad program-wide goals, and if the program does start a new initiative mid-year, then the service area plans also get updated to incorporate the new initiative. And now, Pat will answer the final question.

Pat Fahey: Thanks, Sherrie. And the last question is about how the cycle relates to plans for individual children and families. While parts of the planning process for individual family and child goals are similar to the steps in the Program Planning Cycle, others are not. Because the steps for developing and tracking goals for individual children and families do not directly align with the Program Planning Cycle, we don't recommend it for individual planning. Next, I'm going to ask Sherrie to talk about how the planning cycle comes to life through an activity in PMFO's online learning module, "Data in Head Start and Early Head Start, Creating a Culture That Embraces Data."

Sherrie Rudick: Thanks again, Pat. PMFO has developed an online interactive module about using data. It's called "Data in Head Start and Early Head Start, Creating a Culture That Embraces Data" and it's available on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. The first activity in the module is called "Plan to Succeed," and it shows how the Program Planning Cycle works by using a case study. The case study illustrates how "Cynthia," a Head Start, Early Head Start director, uses the planning cycle

around the issue of attendance. In the activity, users follow the steps that Cynthia and her team took to, one, decide on a goal related to children's attendance based on findings of their annual self-assessment and community assessment. Two, develop a plan to achieve the goal. Three, implement the plan of action. Four, monitor progress toward the goal by examining ongoing monitoring data. Five, make mid-course corrections to their plan's activities based on findings. Six, defer ideas about changes in long-term activities until the annual self-assessment. Seven, evaluate progress toward the goal by examining a full year's worth of data during the annual self-assessment process. And eight, begin the goal setting process again. The activity, by the way, also has a link to a sample action plan.

In the Cynthia case study, not only did children's attendance increase, but the program was able to demonstrate that children with good attendance had better school readiness outcomes than children who didn't attend regularly. So, while the Cynthia case is fictional, we selected the example of attendance as a program goal intentionally, and we selected it for several reasons. First, because of its power to inspire managers, staff, parents, governing body, and Policy Council members to coalesce around the goal. It's so easy to communicate the compelling research on the importance of attendance in children's learning, and then to garner buy-in from all those stakeholders. Secondly, we chose it because of the obvious connections to activities in several areas of the program. As we've been saying during this presentation, developing an action plan that requires multiple staff and stakeholders to contribute makes success more likely. In this example, education, health, family services staff, and management are all pulling toward the same goal. And finally, because, like most goals, while a goal of improving attendance doesn't use the words "school readiness," as you know, it does, in fact, have a huge impact on children's school readiness. The attendance goal is an example of a program goal, but the process works equally well for school readiness and training and technical assistance goals. By raising questions such as, what do our self-assessment or community assessment findings tell us about staff development needs, or what do the findings tell us about what our children need in order to be ready for school; planners can use the cycle for training and technical assistance and school readiness goals. Wise leaders look for ways to develop goals that inspire and engage their staff and stakeholders in accomplishing them. And now, Pat, it's your turn to summarize this Management Matters presentation.

Pat Fahey: Thank you, Sherrie. During this recording, we've talked about an integrated planning cycle that connects to Head Start management systems related to planning and shows how data is integrated into the cycle. Because programs that use an integrated approach to planning and data are more effective, it is important that program leaders reframe their way of thinking about planning and using data. You can use the Program Planning Cycle graphic to clarify the planning processes for your staff, your governing body, and your Policy Council. PMFO believes that thinking about planning as a yearlong, integrated process will help your program be more successful in setting and meeting its goals.

Thank you for taking the time to view this Management Matters presentation. We hope that you found the presentation and the related materials to be helpful. We really value your feedback, both about the Management Matters presentation and about the Program Planning Cycle. We invite you to submit any comments or questions that you have through the PMFO Info Line at [PMFOinfo@edc.org](mailto:PMFOinfo@edc.org). Thank you again.