

Planning in Head Start

Topic #3: Program Goals and School Readiness Goals—Understanding the Relationship

The Head Start planning system and its related activities are an essential part of program operations.

While thoughtful planning has always been critical to successful programming, it becomes even more so as Head Start programs shift from an indefinite grant period to one based on a five-year project period. The Head Start National Centers created this series of papers to support programs in developing and implementing their planning system and in making optimal use of the five-year period. **This paper clarifies the relationship between program goals and school readiness goals.**



Program Goals

The Head Start Program Performance Standards require programs to develop long-range program goals and short-term objectives. Program goals are broad statements that support the program's mission to serve children, families, and the community. They ensure the program's commitment to establishing strong management, fiscal, and service delivery systems. Programs set long-range goals to be accomplished by the end of their five-year project period. The management team and governing bodies review these long-range goals as part of their annual planning process. Most continue as goals throughout the five-year period, while a few may be met in a shorter timeframe or revised. Having stable goals over five years enables programs to measure progress annually and to assess the program impact at the end of the five-year period.

Programs also develop short-term objectives. Objectives support the attainment of a goal by breaking the goal down into **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic, and **T**imely elements, often represented by the mnemonic **SMART**.

Program goals are derived from the annual Self-Assessment (SA); community assessment (CA); other child, family, and community data sources; and relevant research. Program goals may relate to health, finances, family engagement/family services, facilities, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and so forth. Program goals may emerge from SA and CA results in any system or service area, or one single goal may encompass multiple services and systems.



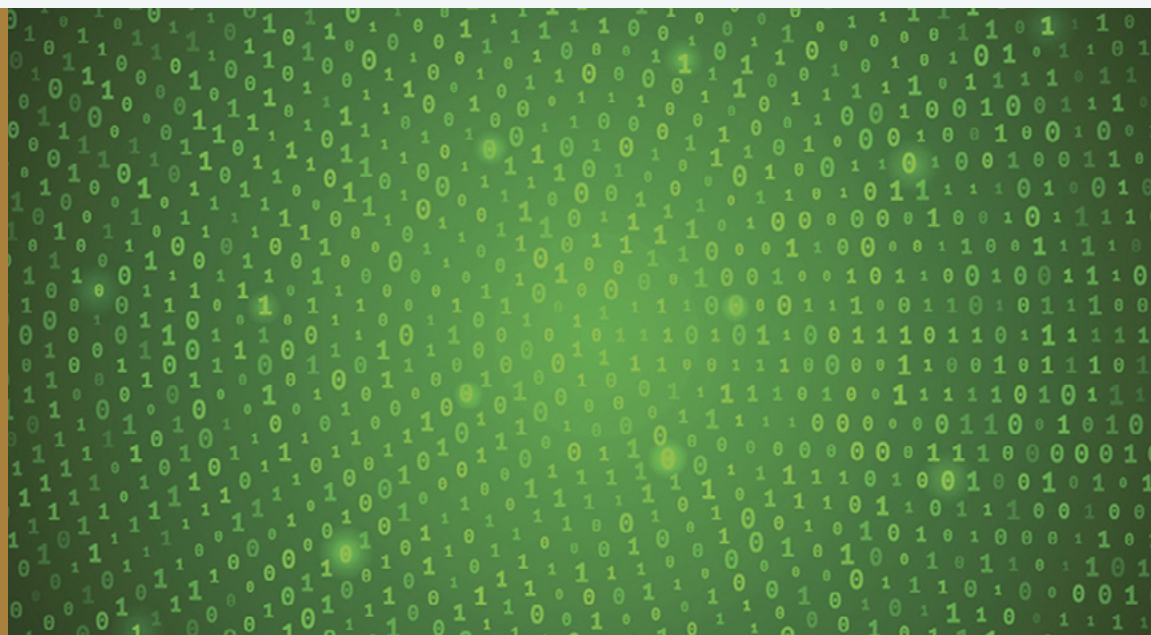
Prioritizing Program Goals

Head Start programs frequently ask how many programs goals they should have. You can answer this question with the juggling test: How many balls—goals—can your program “keep in the air”?

Consider the following questions when you develop your goals and objectives:

- What is your data telling you, and what are the most urgent family, child, and community needs?
- How will you develop and communicate your goals both internally (e.g., to staff, families, governing body, and Policy Council members) and externally (e.g., to community partners and funders)?
- How would each of these stakeholder groups embrace and articulate these goals?
- How are you going to track, monitor, and evaluate activities and progress? How much data do you currently have to measure progress and how much new data will you need to collect to be able to do this?

Your answers to these questions will help you see that you are more likely to achieve your program goals if you, your staff, your governing body and Policy Council members, and your stakeholders are able to remember and continually address them. When you determine your program’s direction, you can prioritize your goals so that you have a manageable number and a clear method for achieving your expected outcomes. Remember, though, that the decision on the number of goals is ultimately guided by your data.



School Readiness Goals



Section 641A(g)(2) of the Head Start Act requires that programs establish program goals for improving the school readiness of children participating in their program. School readiness goals are a subset of overall program goals and focus on child development and early learning outcomes in the five essential or core domains of birth-to-five school readiness: **(1)** language and literacy, **(2)** cognition and general knowledge, **(3)** approaches to learning, **(4)** physical well-being and motor development, and **(5)** social and emotional development.¹ School readiness goals have two

key features. They are broad statements that articulate high expectations for the progress children served in Head Start and Early Head Start will make to be ready to succeed in kindergarten. They also focus on what progress children will make in developing skills and knowledge and how this progress will be measured.

Examples of school readiness goals for preschool children can be found on the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning webpage on the ECLKC (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/sr-goals.pdf>). Examples of school readiness goals for infants and toddlers can be found on the Early Head Start webpage, at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/docs/school-readiness-goals-infants-toddlers.pdf>. Many programs serving both infants and toddlers and preschool children develop one set of school readiness goals appropriate for children from birth to five.

Section 1307 of the Head Start Act requires programs to establish their school readiness goals in consultation with families whose children are participating in the program. Multiple avenues exist for programs to include family input in decisions about school readiness goals and plans. Many programs form a school readiness committee that includes staff and parents. Programs can also look at data gathered in parent interest surveys, through home-visiting conversations, and by requesting family input on lesson plans. For more information about engaging parents in children's assessment, go to <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/family-engagement-and-ongoing-child-assessment-081111-1.pdf>.

1. Office of Head Start. (2013). *My leadership planner: A professional journal and action plan*. Second National Birth to Five Leadership Institute, 17.

Comparing Program Goals and School Readiness Goals

| Program Goals: Characteristics | School Readiness Goals: Characteristics |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are broad statements of strategic direction that are compelling and that engage everyone in the program • Answer two questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is to be accomplished? • Why is it important? • Describe the program’s focus and priorities • Support the attainment of school readiness goals (most program goals do this) • May include goals related to parent, family, and community engagement; health and disability services; school readiness; fiscal management; specific groups such as dual language learners or fathers; etc. • Are phrased as statements and begin with words similar to “Program will . . .” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are broad, measurable statements of expectations of children’s status and progress across the five essential domains of the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (HSCDELF) • Reflect the age of the children being served² • Answer two questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is to be accomplished for all children? • Why is the goal important for kindergarten entry? • Describe what we want children to know and be able to do • Encompass the range of children served (e.g., are applicable for children who are dual language learners and children with disabilities) • Are phrased as statements and begin with the words “Children will . . .” |
| Program Goals: Process for Development | School Readiness Goals: Process for Development |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are typically developed for the baseline application of the Head Start and Early Head Start five-year project period as a result of the organization’s strategic planning and the Head Start planning process • Are developed during the Head Start planning process using the annual Self-Assessment, updated community assessment, and program-specific data sources, including aggregated parent, family, and community engagement data (e.g., summaries of conversations and observations, family strengths and needs, surveys of family satisfaction with services and referrals, and family partnership agreements) • Are developed with input from and approval by the governing body and Policy Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are aligned with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (HSCDELF), • state early learning guidelines, and • the requirements and expectations of schools • Are developed in consultation with the parents/ family members of the children participating in the program • Are developed in consultation with and approved by the governing body and Policy Council • Are mapped to align with indicators of child outcomes from the child assessment system |

2. *Head Start Program Instruction ACF-PI-HS-11-04: School Readiness in Programs Serving Preschool Children* provides recommendations on how Head Start grantees can comply with the Head Start Act’s school readiness requirements.

Program goals and school readiness goals work together to ensure high-quality, comprehensive services to children and families.

| Program Goals: Revisions | School Readiness Goals: Revisions |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are reviewed annually • Are revised (or new goals created) as necessary (e.g., in response to program data and/or changes in identified community need) • Are revised as previous goals are accomplished and program priorities are modified • Can also be revised based on a change in context (e.g., national or state priorities) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not necessarily change from year to year unless the context changes (e.g., there is a shift in program demographics, a need to realign with LEA or the state, or a need to incorporate parent input) |
| Program Goals: Tracking and Analyzing Progress | School Readiness Goals: Tracking and Analyzing Progress |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Related program objectives break down goals into measurable parts so that programs can understand progress annually and at the end of five years. • Progress toward goals is tracked by using different tools or methods and by analyzing relevant data sources. (See “Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans” for examples of tracking tools and methods.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is based on ongoing child assessment data that is aggregated and analyzed three times per year • Includes the measurement of data that reflects such features as teacher-child interaction, professional development, environment, curriculum fidelity, etc. |

Conclusion

Understanding the similarities and differences between program goals and school readiness goals is an important part of planning. Ultimately, program and school readiness goals need to work together to ensure high-quality, comprehensive services to children and families. Section 1307.3 of the Head Start Program Performance Standards requires that “programs establish program goals for improving the school readiness of children participating in its program in accordance with the requirements of Section 641A(g)(2) of the Head Start Act.” All program goals support children’s school readiness either directly or indirectly.