



## Planning in Head Start

# Topic #2: Plans in Head Start

**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 provides a grounding in several types of Head Start plans.**

**Head Start programs develop many different types of plans.** They each have different functions and are developed by staff and partners at varying levels of the organization. Effective programs integrate their plans and align them with their goals and objectives. This paper serves as a primer on the types of plans that Head Start and Early Head programs most commonly create and implement and the processes used to create them.

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# The Program Planning Process

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) require programs to develop long-range program goals and short-term program objectives. The standards describe program goals as broad statements that support the program’s mission to serve its children, families, and community.

These goals typically address needs that fall into one of two categories:

- 1) the need to respond to a program-wide or community-based issue (e.g., community assessment data and family intake data reveal a rise in the number of eligible dual language learners); or
- 2) the need to make significant changes in targeted service areas or systems (e.g., ongoing monitoring data reveal that the health services staff continue to struggle with dental referrals in spite of efforts to address the situation).

The HSPPS also require the active participation of parents in the program decision-making process. This important participation is secured in a number of ways. The Policy Council (PC) and/or policy committee gives parent leaders a venue for providing input in the planning process and helping to guide program decisions. Effective programs also

- offer training for parent leaders on their roles and responsibilities as PC members,
- provide opportunities for parents and family members to be involved early in the development of plans so they can review and approve plans with efficiency and timeliness and avoid rubber stamping, and
- encourage parents of diverse cultures to participate in the process by creating an environment that welcomes and values their contributions.



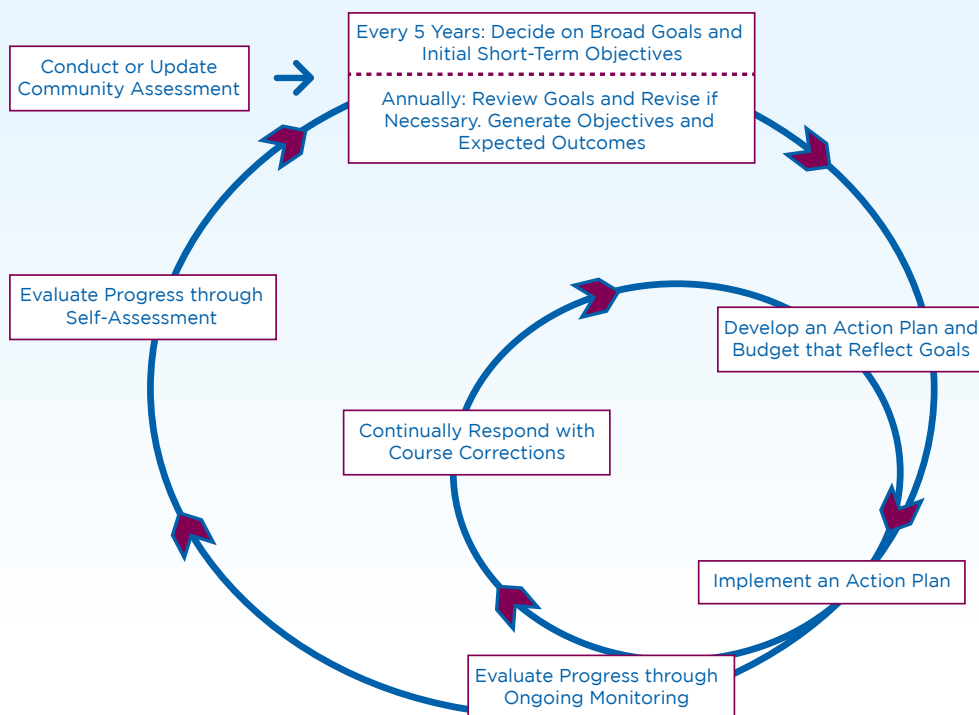
Programs can also use aggregated data from family assessments and family partnership agreements to ensure that a wide range of family voices are represented in decisions. Trends and patterns identified from these aggregated data can inform program goals and objectives.

Effective Head Start programs engage in a cyclical planning process. As the graphic of the program planning cycle (below) shows, programs use the five-year and annual planning process to develop, monitor, and evaluate the effect of program, school readiness, and training and technical assistance (T/TA) plans. Prior to the first year of the five-year project period, the program's planning team decides on broad, long-range goals that are based on information from the community assessment;

Self-Assessment; and related child, family, and community data. These long-range goals set the course for continuous improvement and innovation.

Programs review progress towards their goals annually to ensure that they will be able to measure their impact on children, families, and their community throughout the five-year project period. Each year, the program planning team uses its planning process to affirm goals set in the first year. The team may also use its annual planning process to set new goals, if needed, in response to new data that reflect an emerging child, family, or community need. A word of caution: most goals should remain constant to enable programs to track progress over the five-year period.

### Program Planning in Head Start



# Common Features of Head Start Plans

While each plan has a different thrust, all effective Head Start plans share a number of common features:

- Plans describe how the local program intends to implement the Head Start Act and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) to respond to its community’s unique needs and resources.
- Plans are developed with input of and approval by the governing body and Policy Council. Plans are also frequently shaped and informed through feedback from community partners, parents and such groups as the Health Services Advisory Committee.

## Organization-Wide Strategic Plans

Head Start programs that operate under the auspices of a Community Action Agency, school district, municipality, or other umbrella agency and/or have multiple funding sources are likely to engage in an organization-wide strategic planning process. Through strategic planning, the organization makes decisions about what it intends to be in the future and how it will get there. This process frequently follows an analysis of **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats—often called a **SWOT** analysis. Strategic plans typically look ahead over a 3–5-year period and link long-term action steps to the organization’s vision, mission, goals, and objectives. While the strategic plan is often written for the organization as a whole, the results of the plan will directly influence Head Start operations. The organizational goals and the Head Start program goals should align, when appropriate. Single-purpose agencies may also consider their long-term planning process to be strategic planning.

## Plans Linked to the Program Planning Process

In the sections below, we describe the set of plans that emerges from a program’s planning process.

**Five-year Plans.** Five-year plans show in broad outlines what the program intends to accomplish over the five-year project period. They establish five-year goals and include expected outcomes. For example, if a program sets a goal to strengthen transition to school for children and families so that Head Start children succeed in kindergarten and beyond, some expected outcomes over the five-year period might be:

- An increase in the number of Head Start parents who attend kindergarten registration. For example, if baseline data indicate that last year 35 percent of Head Start parents with children transitioning to local schools attended kindergarten registration events, the program might propose increasing this number to 55 percent of Head Start parents attending by the second



project year and to have integrated the kindergarten registration into a seamless process so that, by the fifth project year, 95 percent of its Head Start parents attend these events.

- An increase from 10 percent to 80 percent over the five-year period in the number of parents who attend the Head Start parent meeting that PTA representatives attend.
- An increase from 30 percent to 85 percent over the five-year period in the number of parents who accompany their children on site visits to the school their child will attend.
- Participation in a home-school summer reading program that will help mitigate “summer fadeout” between Head Start and kindergarten. Because this is a new initiative, the program expects to have 20 percent of parents participating in the first year and to increase participation by 15 percent each year.

**Annual Action Plans.** Annual action plans (also known as “program plans”) spell out how a program intends to accomplish its overall goals and objectives from year to year. The program breaks into annual increments the goals and objectives related to its five-year plans or to program improvements that surface during Self-Assessment, ongoing monitoring, or the federal monitoring review. These plans outline the steps the program needs to take in order to achieve objectives and to measure progress.

Annual action plans are typically broader than written plans (also known as “service plans”; see below), which focus on each specific service area. A program’s annual action plan may include overarching goals, such as improving attendance or starting a healthy living initiative that engages participants across individual service areas. Annual action plans break down the goals and objectives from the five-year plan into a series of steps to be carried out over a one-year period by particular, assigned individuals in particular locations.

These plans typically include schedules of events or activities. They focus on when things will take place, where they will happen, and who will carry out the series of steps necessary to achieve the



### Resources for Head Start Plans Linked to the Program Planning Process

- > Five-year Plans—<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/grants/5-yr-cycle>
- > Annual Action Plans—<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/docs/sample-action-plan.pdf>
- > School Readiness Plans—<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/steps>
- > Training and Technical Assistance Plans—<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system>
- > Written/Service Plans—[http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/health-services-management/program-planning/health\\_art\\_00580\\_090105.html](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/health-services-management/program-planning/health_art_00580_090105.html)

goal. Annual action plans also include measures of success, including evidence or data sources that confirm that success. They may include places for quarterly status updates, list the resources needed, and identify the necessary financial supports. (For more information, See “Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans” and “Topic #4: Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans—Program Examples” in this series.)

**School Readiness Plans.** The second step of the four strategic steps for school readiness, outlined in [\*ACF-Program Instruction-HS-11-04: School Readiness in Programs Serving Preschool Children\*](#), requires programs to create and implement a plan of action for achieving the established school readiness goals. School readiness plans address school readiness for children from birth to five. The goals must be established in consultation with families whose children are participating in the program. Multiple avenues exist for programs to include family members in decisions about school readiness goals and plans. To meet the requirements in Section 1307 of the HSPPS, many programs form a school readiness committee and invite parents and key family members to participate. In developing their school readiness plans, programs can also draw on aggregated data from such sources as home visit conversations and parent/teacher conferences.

**Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plans.** Programs develop a training and technical assistance plan in response to the Head Start requirements that they implement a structured approach to staff training and development (HSPPS Section 1304.52[1][2]) and provide pre-service and in-service training opportunities (HSPPS Section 1306.23[a]). The Head Start Act also requires that any T/TA that programs provide must be of high quality, sustained, and intensive. T/TA plans outline how programs will use their designated T/TA funds and any additional funds dedicated to professional development. These plans align with the goals in the five-year plans, annual plans, and school readiness plans and ensure that all staff have the knowledge and skills needed to enable the program to meet its goals and objectives, as required in HSPPS Section 1305.2(l)(3).

**Written Plans (or Service Plans).** Sections 1304.51(a)(iii) and 1308.4(a) of the HSPPS require programs to develop written plans for implementing services for

- Early Childhood Development and Health Services,
- Family and Community Partnerships, and
- Program Design and Management.

Often called “service area plans,” or “content plans,” these plans typically include protocols, calendars, descriptions, and staff assignments for the activities required to deliver services. The plans often reflect the values that underlie service delivery. They show how the service areas and systems support the program’s overall goals and objectives. These plans must be reviewed and approved annually by the governing body and Policy Council and revised and updated as needed.

# Plans Not Directly Linked to the Program Planning Process

Programs develop other plans that are critical to their operations:

- **Transition plans** describe program processes for supporting children and families as they move from Early Head Start to Head Start, or from Head Start to kindergarten or new early education placements. Transition plans frequently include memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the receiving Local Education Agencies (LEAs) or local providers. Program leaders can learn more about transition plans from the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning pages on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/center/transition/plan.html>).
- **Emergency preparedness plans** describe how the program will keep children safe during weather emergencies and other natural disasters and the steps the program will take to minimize any possible risk to children from violence, fire, or other occurrences while they are in the care of Head Start. Programs leaders can learn more about developing emergency plans from the *Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual* (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/center/ep/emergency-preparedness.html>).
- **Technology plans** can help organizations make wise decisions about securing up-to-date technology, networks that give access to information, and applications that are appropriate for an organization’s mission. Well-thought-out technology plans can lead to greater productivity, increased staff morale, and improved service to clients. The ECLKC contains several resources to support programs in their technology planning (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/WhatsInvolvedi.htm>).

## Conclusion

Plans—complete with goals, objectives, outcomes, measures of progress, and action steps—ensure that programs bring their ideas and intentions to fruition. The other papers in this series provide program planners with information on how to develop the various components that are part of the planning process.

## Resources for Head Start Plans Not Directly Linked to the Program Planning Process

- Transition Plans—<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/transition/plan.html>
- Emergency Preparedness Plans—[http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/ep/Head\\_Start\\_Emergency\\_Preparedness\\_Manual.pdf](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/ep/Head_Start_Emergency_Preparedness_Manual.pdf)
- Technology Plans—<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/WhatsInvolvedi.htm>