PMFO Tip Sheet

Ideas for Your Annual Self-Assessment Process

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The Annual Self-Assessment is a long-standing element of the Head Start program calendar. Congress affirmed the importance of the process in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 when it articulated the need for every Head Start grantee and delegate agency to conduct a comprehensive self-assessment of its effectiveness at least annually[i,ii]. OHS sees the Annual Self-Assessment as a crucial element in a grantee's role in providing effective oversight.

Over the years, programs have conducted self-assessments in a variety of ways that range from adapting a federal monitoring tool to using materials specifically designed for self-assessments. Whatever the instrument selected, programs that conduct meaningful self-assessments include a number of specific practices, such as involving the Policy Council and community members; thoroughly reviewing data; and developing recommendations for growth, improvement, and new directions. Recent PMFO workshops and focus groups revealed that program leaders from across the country continue to use these time-tested practices and that are experimenting with new approaches that 1) take full advantage of all of the data they have already collected and 2) streamline their self-assessment process. Program leaders have also told us that the Program Planning Cycle graphic (below) has provided them with new insights into how the Annual Self-Assessment informs and strengthens their program's annual planning process. In the tips below we've incorporated some of these innovations and insights along with tried and true practices.

Program Planning Cycle
The inner circle of this represents the ongoing monitoring that is part of the larger cycle of continuous improvement. The outer circle represents key aspects of the Self-Assessment.

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Program Planning Cycle

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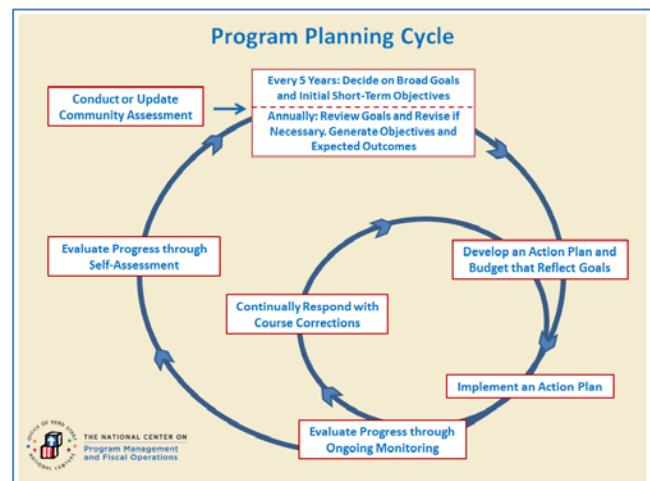
[i] 45 CFR 1304.51(i)(1). Head Start Program Performance Standards and Program Guidance. 2006. English.
[ii] Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (PL 110-134). HHS/ACF/OHS. 2008. English.

Preparing by strengthening existing data systems.
Head Start programs collect a massive amount of data about virtually every aspect of program operations through the year. When they strengthen the systems that gather this data, programs gain increased confidence because they know that their data is reliable and provides an accurate picture of their program.

Programs are preparing for their Annual Self-Assessment process through the year as they collect data and remain alert to the story it is telling. The Annual Self-Assessment then creates the ideal time programs to examine that data— what they have been gathering during the course of the year, through the ongoing monitoring to ask, "Are we doing this right (and on time)?" However, they use the Annual Self-Assessment to ask, "Are we doing the right things?"

Ongoing Monitoring:
Are we doing things right?

Self-Assessment:
Are doing the right things?

The Annual Self-Assessment also provides the opportunity for the program to look for consistent data messages from across all areas of operation. However, rather than overwhelm the Self-Assessment team with every piece of data that best represent the reality of their program. They can begin to determine which of their data they should share with the Self-Assessment team by asking the following questions:

- Which data highlight our strengths?
- Which data suggest areas of concerns?
- What do the data tell us about our progress in meeting goals?
- Are there patterns across data sources that we need to attend to?

View the Annual Self-Assessment as a time to focus on the "big" issues.
Throughout the year, program leaders and staff continually track the effectiveness of program operations and progress towards goals through their ongoing monitoring system. During the Annual Self-Assessment, staff, leaders, parents, and partners reflect on that same data and compare data across content areas to address higher-level systemic issues. By asking pertinent questions—such as "How can we better serve the children and families in our community?" "Where are we at risk?" And "How can we improve or streamline operations?"—programs can critically examine the overall direction and impact of their systems and services. Through this examination they can then determine if they are using their human and financial resources to achieve their goals.

Use parents, community members, and partners as "fresh set of eyes."
Congress requires Head Start programs to involve their Policy Council in the Annual Self-Assessment; however, that legislative body also recommends that programs involve community members, thus ensuring an outside perspective. Parent and community partners can provide me insights as they work with program leaders to examine data. Governing body members may be recruited as well. In particular, the governing body Early Childhood expert can add value to the review of educational services, while the governing body fiscal expert can critique financial systems.

Let the data lead the way.
Head Start's array of services it too complex and its environment too fluid to allow programs to rest on their accomplishments. An honest review of program data typically points to a variety of ways that programs can improve, make adjustments, or change direction. In some cases, the Self-Assessment team may conclude that a particular service needs a tune-up. In programs where systems and services are working well, the Self-Assessment team may suggest areas for innovation.

Effective Self-Assessment teams draw conclusions from the review of program data and use those conclusions to form recommendations. These recommendations guide program leaders to 1) check in on progress on goals and objectives, 2) identify systemic issues, and 3) explore innovations and new directions—program, fiscal, T/TA, and school readiness.

Summarize the effort.
The Annual Self-Assessment process is not complete until the hard work of the team is summarized in a report that can be shared with the governing body, the Policy Council, program staff, and the funder. While there is currently no required length or format for the report feedback from the Head Start and Early Head Start programs as well as Regional Program Specialists suggests that a meaningful Annual Self-Assessment summary should do the following:

- List the members of the Self-Assessment team with their titles.
- Briefly describe the process the team used.
- Indicate the data sources the team reviewed.
- Report the findings that the data revealed.
- Share the conclusion that the team reached.
- Summarize the team's recommendations for program improvement.

Jigsaw Reading Group #3 END

Continue the cycle.

Because the Annual Self-Assessment is part of a cyclical planning process, the end of one year's assessment marks the beginning of next year's planning. During annual program planning, program leadership, including members of the governing body and Policy Council, uses the Self-Assessment report and recommendations as they review progress on five year program goals and shorter term objectives. The Self-Assessment report informs program planning for the next year. For the most part goals stay stable over the five year project period; however information from Self-Assessment may occasionally lead a program to add or adjust a program goal. Additionally the Self-Assessment report may confirm that short-term objectives have been achieved. In this case program planning may result in new or additional objectives to support the related goal.

As they develop the plans that emerge from the Self-Assessment team's direction—plans for the program, for school readiness, and for T/TA—program leaders take care to ensure that the objectives and activities in each plan align with those of the other plans.

Example:
If the Self-Assessment team recommends a focus on improving or expanding services to children who are dual language learners, the program may adopt the following:

- School readiness activities such as Planned Language Approach that intentionally and systematically supports children's language and literacy devilment and increased competency in their home while developing proficiency in English.

- Program activities that focus on selection of classroom language models based on language of teachers and of children, which may involve hiring additional classroom staff who speak children's home languages and working together with families to best support their children's learning and development through appropriate strategies and activities at home.

T/TA activities that include professional development for classroom and family services staff on not only understanding and communicating the importance of home language development as children learn English, but also on approaches and strategies for supporting children's language acquisition in both home language and English.

As programs develop their new plans, they also must determine if they need to collect new types of data through ongoing monitoring to 1) track their success in implementing their new goals and 2) later assess the impact of the goals through the following year's Annual Self- Assessment. This development phase is the ideal time for the program to identify for the coming year the new questions that they would like answered during the next Annual Self- Assessment.

Sample Question for Dual Language Learning:
Have we successfully implemented activities to support children who are dual language learners? Have children's language and literacy outcomes improved?

The program's Federal and Technical Assistance staff can assist in identifying resources to support accomplishment of new goals. For example, in the dual language learner example above, the program may decide that the interactive Program Preparedness Checklist or A Planned Language Approach resource (developed by the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness) would provide valuable information to supplement the data they already collect through classroom observations and review of family records.

Finally, with goals, objectives, activities, and data collection plans in place, the program begins the implementation and data collection tasks that set the stage for a new year of ongoing monitoring and self-assessment activities. The cycle of continuous improvement is complete—and begins again.

Jigsaw Reading Group #4 END