



How Head Start Grantees Set and Use School Readiness Goals

Highlights from a Research Study

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Established in 1965, Head Start has a long history of preparing children for school. Only recently, however, under the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, have local grantees been formally required to develop school readiness goals and evaluate children's progress toward these goals.

This brief presents highlights from a research study that describes how local Head Start grantees set school readiness goals, how they collect and analyze data to track progress toward goals, and how they use these data in program planning and practice to improve program functioning (Isaacs et al., 2015). The study was conducted by the Urban Institute under contract to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). A companion brief focuses on grantees' use of data for continuous quality improvement (Derrick-Mills, forthcoming).

Findings are based on a telephone survey of Head Start and Early Head Start program directors and managers from a sample of 73 grantees across the United States and follow-up site visits to a subset of 11 of these grantees. All data collection occurred during the 2013–14 school year.

How Head Start Grantees Set School Readiness Goals

Setting Goals Required Involvement from Program Leaders, Staff, and Parents

According to survey results, most Head Start and Early Head Start grantees (89 percent) established a special committee to help with the goal-setting process.¹ Education managers were typically

responsible for managing the day-to-day work of setting the goals (in 59 percent of grantees); overall direction and supervision of the process fell to Head Start and Early Head Start directors and assistant directors (in 53 percent of grantees).

As shown in figure 1, many other individuals, including classroom staff, site directors, services managers, Policy Council members, and Head Start parents, were moderately to highly involved in the process of setting goals. Other groups of staff and external stakeholders had lower levels of involvement, according to survey responses.

FIGURE 1

Who Was Most Involved in Goal Setting?



Source: School Readiness Goals and Head Start Program Functioning Telephone Survey.

Note: Respondents were asked to rate the involvement of each person or group of people from one to five, with one indicating “not at all involved” and five indicating “very heavily involved.”

Grantees Used Different Approaches to Setting School Readiness Goals

In-person interviews with a range of staff, parents, and stakeholders during follow-up site visits to 11 grantees suggest programs followed different general approaches when writing their school readiness goals:

- Management driven.** In some of the 11 grantees, the director, education manager, or other designated staff member wrote the goals and, in some cases, shared drafts with staff to get feedback.

- **Collaborative teams.** Other grantees had a more collaborative approach: staff gathered into teams to review resources, plan a course of action, and discuss potential goals. They often divided the effort to draft the written goal statements.
- **High level of parent involvement.** In other grantees the research team visited, program directors and managers provided parents with a particularly active role: parents helped identify and write goals for children in the program.
- **TA-driven.** For a few of the visited grantees, OHS-sponsored training and technical assistance (T/TA) specialists played a large role in facilitating goal-writing. For example, in one rural area, the state T/TA specialist coordinated a meeting for grantees across the state.

Grantees Consulted Many Resources When Setting Their School Readiness Goals

- **The *Framework* and state early learning standards.** When beginning to set goals, grantees referred to the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework* (the *Framework*) and their state early learning guidelines. The *Framework* identifies five broad domains of school readiness: physical development and health; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and literacy development; and cognition and general knowledge.
- **Assessment tools and curriculum.** Grantees relied heavily on their curriculum and assessment tools; several grantees in the site visits described a process of selecting goals based on measures available in their comprehensive child assessment tool. Others mentioned reviewing their child assessment data from previous years to identify the specific skills and behaviors they should target.
- **Other important resources.** These included guidance from the Office of Head Start on the goals requirement and materials from ACF’s Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), Head Start’s National T/TA Centers, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). A few grantees mentioned attending webinars and national training conferences.

Language and Literacy Examples

Example 1. Children will engage in conversation and increase vocabulary knowledge.

Example 2. Children will increase their language and communication skills by engaging in meaningful experiences that require them to effectively express their ideas about feelings, listen, and understand others. Children will understand basic concepts about books or other printed materials, the alphabet, and letter sound relationships.

Written Goals Varied Substantially in Format and Specificity across Grantees

Grantees have the flexibility to set goals that reflect the needs of the children and families they serve.

- **Number of goals.** Although the number varied across the 11 visited grantees, each grantee set a minimum of five goals—one for each of the five broad domains in the *Framework*. Four of the 11 sites visited had 37 goals—one for each of the specific 37 domain elements in the *Framework*.
- **Specificity.** Some goals were written with broad language, sometimes with sub-goals or objectives; others were more specific and detailed.
- **Benchmarks.** Few of the 11 programs explicitly set progress benchmarks to determine whether a goal was met; rather, most identified the school readiness goal and how it would be measured.

In most cases, the grantees visited described their goals as a living document that they planned to revise or update to reflect changes in their focus over time. According to the survey data, just over two-thirds of grantees thought they would revise their school readiness goals every year. Others thought they would make revisions every few years or throughout the course of each school year.

Physical Development and Health Examples

Example 1. The child will control large muscles for movement, navigation, and balance appropriate for his or her chronological or developmental age.

Example 2. Children will develop gross motor manipulative skills. Children will be able to use objects for a range of physical activities such as pulling, throwing, catching, kicking, bouncing or hitting balls.

How Grantees Collect and Analyze Data

Grantees Reported Having Sufficient Capacity for Data Collection, but Some Raised Concerns about the Burden on Teaching Staff

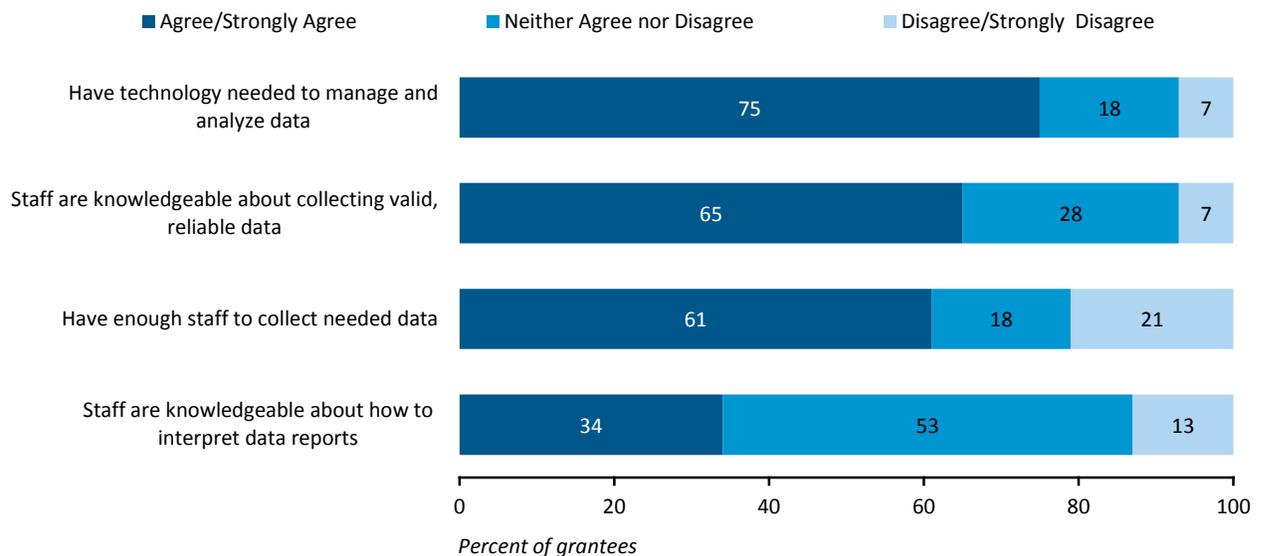
- **Most grantees reported having sufficient technology and staff for collecting and analyzing data.** Only a minority of grantees reported shortages in staff or technology. Three-quarters (75 percent) of grantees agreed they have the technology needed to manage and analyze data, and only one-fifth (21 percent) reported that they did not have enough staff to collect needed data (figure 2).
- **Collecting data was a time burden for staff.** Although survey results suggest most grantees have enough staff for data collection, staff raised concerns during the site interviews about the increased time burden on teaching staff. Teachers and home visitors must complete many steps to comply with the goals mandate: document children's work and behaviors, collect reliable

assessment data, enter data, review data reports, and tailor instruction. All steps required significant time and resources. As an education manager said, “If it’s not documented, it never happened.” She and other program managers worried about teachers not being able to spend as much time interacting with children.

- Perceived burden of data collection varied across visited sites.** In a few programs, teachers reported needing to share computers with multiple peers, not having reliable internet access, and needing to bring notes home to enter anecdotal evidence they collected because there was never sufficient time to do so during the work day. The increased demand on staff time appeared less burdensome in the few programs that had hired a data entry person, given teachers tablets to use for ongoing documentation in the classroom, or had half-day programs that allowed teachers to use afternoons for planning.

FIGURE 2

Grantee Views on Technological and Staff Capacity



Source: School Readiness Goals and Head Start Program Functioning Telephone Survey.

^a The statement on the survey was “We do not have enough staff to collect the data or information we need,” and 21 percent agreed or strongly agreed and 61 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. To ease interpretation, the question and response coding were inverted.

Grantees Were Still Learning How to Analyze and Interpret School Readiness Data

- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of grantees agreed that their staff were knowledgeable about collecting valid, reliable data. Respondents varied, however, in their confidence in staff ability to interpret data reports. Only one-third (34 percent) agreed that staff were knowledgeable about interpreting data reports; over half (53 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed that staff had sufficient knowledge for interpreting school readiness data (figure 2).
- During site visits, staff communicated different levels of comfort with data analysis. Some education managers, including those responsible for data analysis, expressed unease about their math and data analysis skills or noted their struggles learning new computer-based assessment systems. Staff seemed more comfortable tracking the developmental progress of individual children than comparing aggregate data for different groups of children.
- Few of the visited programs set explicit benchmarks and some staff had a hard time describing the process through which they determined how much progress was “enough,” at both the child-level and program-level. Most said that they reviewed whether children were meeting or exceeding the age-level expectations identified in their assessment tools. But in some cases, it was difficult to conclude whether or not a school readiness goal had been reached.

How Head Start Grantees Use School Readiness Goals and Data

Most Grantees Embraced School Readiness Goals and Reported Using Goals and Data in Different Ways

- Nearly all (99 percent) grantees set school readiness goals, and all programs reported producing and reviewing aggregate analyses of school readiness data at least three times a year.
- Nearly all (93 percent) grantees agreed “having school readiness goals will be useful”; 7 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and none disagreed.²
- Surveyed grantees reported that having goals would be particularly useful for staff professional development, teacher planning for daily classroom activities, program-wide strategic planning, and teachers’ work with individual children.

When asked about their initial perspectives toward the new mandate, most participants in the site visits (directors, managers, teachers, and home visitors) felt the requirement aligned well with the work they were already doing. Many staff reported they had already been implementing components of the mandate, specifically collecting data and planning activities based on children’s individual needs. But having written school readiness goals provided a motivation to formalize their work.

“I like school readiness goals because it causes teachers to have a different frame of mind. It’s one thing to have that [teaching] degree and another to implement it. It’s caused us to take a better look at our agency to think about how to improve. How can we better serve our parents and our community?” – Quote from education manager

School Readiness Goals Helped Program Managers with Planning and Decisionmaking

According to interviews with program directors and managers in the 11 grantee sites visited, having school readiness goals helped them to do the following:

- **Plan professional development and training and technical assistance for individual teachers.** Tracking progress toward school readiness goals helped program directors and managers identify strengths and areas in need of improvement. Nearly all visited programs organized staff trainings in response to the results of their child assessments.
- **Allocate funding for classroom materials.** Program directors and managers in half the programs visited described how having school readiness goals was useful when they had to make budgetary decisions about classroom resources. They looked at their data to see how they were progressing toward their goals, and if they noticed a particular area was lagging, they considered what supplies and materials could be purchased to make an improvement.
- **Make staffing decisions.** As grantees worked toward their school readiness goals, a few recognized the need for changes in staff positions and made strategic hiring decisions or adjustments to existing staff assignments. For example, one program hired a new director of curriculum to support implementation of their school readiness plan. Another program changed teaching team assignments to better match teachers who had different and complementary strengths.
- **Use data more frequently and purposively.** Going through the process of defining their school readiness goals encouraged grantees to start asking questions and examine their data in a more meaningful way. The use of online assessment tools and data systems, which were in some cases a recent addition to the program, also facilitated data use in new ways.

“We’re more intentional about how we use the data and how we integrate it into the everyday work we do. We’re making progress in that. The aggregation of the data helps support decision making at the program level to see where there are trends as an agency. At the day to day site level, the teachers know where the children are.”—Quote from program director

School Readiness Goals Helped Teachers and Home Visitors

Across the 11 grantee sites visited, staff pointed out ways in which school readiness goals were useful for teachers and home visitors. In particular, school readiness goals helped them to do the following:

- **Be more intentional in planning and instruction.** Program staff reported how teachers were better able to plan instruction and be more intentional in their teaching. The goals served as a guide and a reminder for where they needed to target and helped them prioritize.
- **Identify needs of individual children.** Observing and assessing children more frequently made both teachers and home visitors more aware of each child’s specific strengths and needs, thus improving individualization of instruction.
- **Identify areas where they needed additional training and support.** Teachers reported receiving periodic data reports that showed how their students were developing and the skills or domains in which they were lagging. Some teachers would reflect on these data with their supervisors and ask for recommendations for activities they could use or trainings they could attend to improve children’s outcomes. For example, in one program, teachers asked for more science training because they felt less confident in teaching that area.
- **Communicate more effectively with parents.** Staff reported that teachers and home visitors could use the goals to talk to parents about what skills their children need to be ready for kindergarten and how children can gain those skills. When asked about changes they have seen in the program as a result of the goals mandate, staff commonly reported seeing an improvement in parents’ understanding of what school readiness means.
- **Validate their work as professionals.** A few teachers specifically mentioned how school readiness goals validated and supported what they were trying to accomplish in their classrooms. The emphasis on school readiness goals was particularly important when communicating with parents, kindergarten teachers, and other stakeholders who sometimes misunderstood their role as teachers.

“From my experience, the kindergarten teachers and school officials may say, “Oh, you’re preschool” and [having school readiness goals] might give us a more professional edge. When our teachers are talking to the kindergarten teachers, we have that lingo—that talk—to help bridge the gap.”—Quote from site supervisor

What Further Supports do Grantees Need to Implement School Readiness Goals Requirements?

The Office of Head Start and its training and technical assistance network have provided important supports to grantees as they have implemented the school readiness goals requirements. Further support is needed as grantees revise their school readiness goals, build their capacity to analyze goal-related data, and increasingly use goals to inform program planning and practice. The findings from this research suggest several ways OHS and its T/TA network can support grantees.

- **Create a toolkit to guide grantees through the goal-setting process.** Provide model examples of goals based on the work of real grantees with different characteristics, such as those operating both Head Start and Early Head Start, those using a commonly used child assessment tool as their only source of measures, and those using several data sources as measures. Specifically, provide clarity on how many goals are optimal, whether grantees should set benchmarks, and the best approaches to set those benchmarks.
- **Provide opportunities for grantees to network with others with similar characteristics.** State T/TA providers could facilitate these peer interactions by organizing conference calls or meetings where grantees can share their school readiness goals and discuss their experiences and challenges.
- **Offer T/TA on data analysis and interpretation.** Workshops could be designed to train data managers, education managers, and others who analyze school readiness goals data. It may be useful to develop training sessions for staff using common assessment tools (such as Teaching Strategies GOLD) and trainings tailored to those who do not use a common tool.
- **Develop additional online T/TA resources to give staff ideas on how to better use data for planning and decisionmaking.** Information could be tailored to grantees with different levels of technological and analytical capacity: those that use electronic data systems and those with limited technology. Particular modules could focus on helping home visitors meet school readiness goals while working with families. Other modules could target teachers of different age groups.

- **Provide further assistance on how to integrate school readiness goals and parent, family, and community engagement goals.** A T/TA webinar could be held to discuss how to set goals and develop action plans under these two frameworks. T/TA providers could be trained to address grantees' questions about integrating or aligning their goals, such as whether and how to make school readiness goals more inclusive of families.

What Additional Research Is Needed?

The full research study examines the initial process of setting school readiness goals and how grantees are analyzing data in the early years of the requirement. It looks across a diverse but small sample of 73 grantees drawn from ACF regions I-X and four American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) grantees from region XI. Further research could expand the available evidence by looking at some of the following topics:

- **How do approaches to school readiness vary among types of grantees?** The full report provides some information about how Early Head Start and AIAN grantees have responded to the requirements. However, more research is needed on these grantees as well as on migrant and seasonal grantees (a group not included in this study).
- **How does the goal-setting process affect program quality?** It would be valuable to have a deeper understanding of how program quality and teacher-child interactions have been influenced by the school readiness requirement. Are particular approaches to school readiness associated with higher-quality services? Is there an association between goals set and children's progress in those areas?
- **How does use of school readiness goals change over time?** This study examined the early years of implementing the school readiness goals requirements. Further research, conducted on a one-time or ongoing basis, could update these results. For example, it could be useful to monitor how and why programs revise their goals and measures over time.
- **What is the range of technological and analytical capacity across grantees?** A grantee survey could delve deeper into the topics explored in the survey for the current study, such as staff capacity to analyze and interpret data, and could take inventory of grantees' strengths and needs. The widespread use of particular assessment tools substantiates the need for further research on the use of these tools, their alignment with the *Framework*, and their potential limitations.
- **What is best practice regarding the use of benchmarks?** Such a study could consider the pros and cons of setting higher or lower expectations for children and of setting explicit quantitative benchmarks (as compared with more loosely stated expectations).

Further research on these topics would help Head Start grantees continue to use school readiness goals and data to improve program quality and child outcomes.

Notes

1. Percentages presented here and throughout the brief are based on the telephone survey findings, which are weighted to account for both the disproportionate sampling of grantees with certain characteristics (e.g., oversampling of Early Head Start grantees) and nonresponses (the response rate was 81 percent). Weighted survey findings represent the population of Head Start and Early Head Start grantees operating in 2011–12 (and still operating in fall 2013), other than migrant and seasonal grantees, American Indian and Alaskan Native grantees, grantees in the US territories, and interim grantees. Further details can be found in Isaacs et al. (2015).
2. Subgroup findings presented in the full report suggest that though the majority of Early Head Start grantees saw benefits to school readiness goals, they were not as overwhelmingly positive as Head Start grantees. Early Head Start grantees also reported more challenges with implementing requirements. However, these subgroup results should be interpreted with caution because of the small sample sizes.

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