



topic 2

five-year planning in head start



Getting Started


As discussed in Topic 1, strategic planning is a systematic process that organizations use to envision a desired future. Then they translate this vision into program goals with measurable objectives and an action plan with a series of action steps. The program planning cycle is Head Start's approach to five-year planning. The HSPPS do not require you to adopt any specific type of planning process. Instead, HSPPS give you the flexibility to choose how to go about planning based on what works best for your program and community. However you choose to proceed, be mindful that whatever you do should be aligned to your five-year plan.

The following describes the values driving Head Start's¹ approach to five-year planning.



Learning Objectives

Programs consider how the planning cycle emphasizes a solutions-oriented mindset with honest dialogue and an examination of challenges and barriers. Programs will become familiar with a range of tools and techniques to advance strategic planning, such as "appreciative inquiry" and 'The 5 Whys.'

 Effective strategic plans are manageable but fluid, precise and adaptable.

Planning that Is Precise and Fluid

Planning is an essential way that programs move forward in a changing and uncertain environment. Thus, it is critical to understand the fundamentals of planning and how to create effective, meaningful plans that enable you to achieve your goals. In a 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled, “Strategic Plans Are Less Important than Strategic Planning,” Graham Kenney describes how travel plans and blueprints are plans with “a specific beginning and end with precise steps along the way.”² Effective strategic plans are manageable but fluid, precise, and adaptable. Although such plans provide a clear, pre-determined step-by-step guide to follow, they should not be seen as carved in stone. Kenney shares four principles for strategic planning.


1. Think of the plan as a guidance tool.
2. Realize that the very process of preparing the plan has you thinking about the future and assembling resources.
3. Focus on the organization and key stakeholders, not individual actions.
4. Assume the plan is a work in progress. A strategic plan is not a set-and-forget instrument. It’s a living and breathing document that guides decision-making and helps marshal resources.

Head Start programs that operate within a community action agency, school district, municipality, or other umbrella agency are likely to engage in an organization-wide strategic planning process. Through organization-wide strategic planning, the entire organization and all of its programs have a voice in deciding what issues to prioritize over the upcoming years (strategic direction) and how it will get there (strategic goals). In this situation, the Head Start program goals should align with the organization-wide goals.

The organization-wide strategic planning process often follows an analysis of internal and external environmental factors. One common methodology looks at **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats—and is called a **SWOT** analysis. A program conducts a SWOT analysis in order to look ahead to obtain an objective review of: where it can improve; what are the strengths and threats; and what are promising opportunities. Results from a SWOT analysis inform strategic plan development and typically look ahead over a three- to five-year period. They link long-term strategic directions and strategic goals to the organization’s vision, mission, goals, and objectives. While the planning team often writes a strategic plan for the organization as a whole, that plan should encompass and influence Head Start operations.

Regardless of whether you are part of a planning process that is organization-wide or specific to your Head Start program, it is important for your program to engage in a strategic planning process. It is the road to successful implementation of the five-year plan. It is critical for both single-purpose and umbrella agencies to engage in long-term strategic planning. In strategic planning, you focus on the forest not the trees. This is a key part of moving into the future regardless of your program’s size or structure.

SWOT:
Strengths
Weaknesses
Opportunities
Threats

 In strategic planning, you study the forest not the trees.



Elements of an Effective Planning Process

Strategic planning is not a linear process.

- Consider the program's core values.
- Identify internal and external environmental factors. Annual self-assessments identify internal successes and issues. Community assessments provide an understanding of external strengths and challenges.
- Know your value proposition—what you are promising to those being served. Value proposition comes through in the five-year plan and the outcomes a program expects to achieve.
- Formulate program goals and measurable objectives into an action plan.
- Implement a strategic performance management system that measures and monitors progress. A responsive ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement system is instrumental in the planning process.


Common Features of Head Start Plans

A Head Start program will likely develop a variety of plans over time. Among these are plans that link to the strategic planning process and plans that guide operations. While each plan has a different focus, all effective Head Start plans share three important features.

1. They describe how the local program intends to implement the requirements in the Head Start Act and the HSPPS to respond to its community's unique needs and resources.
2. They are developed with input from and approval by the governing body/Tribal Council and Policy Council.
3. They are shaped and informed through feedback from community partners, parents, and other groups such as the Health Services Advisory Committee. ■



How did your analysis of internal and external environmental factors impact your strategic plan?

 Think of your action plan as a GPS for your program. It offers step-by-step guidance for arriving at a desired destination.

Plans Linked to a Program's Strategic Planning Process

As part of the strategic planning process, your program may consider developing a comprehensive five-year plan and action plans that outline strategies for addressing school readiness goals.

Five-Year Plan. Beginning with the baseline application and then annually, the five-year plan provides an outline of what the program intends to accomplish over the entire project period. This plan establishes the five-year program goals, objectives, and outcomes (the results achieved). It identifies expected outcomes and expected challenges. For example, if a program sets a goal to improve child passenger safety after reviewing community data about the number of children injured in motor vehicle crashes, some expected outcomes over the five-year period might be:

- An increase from 25 percent to 50 percent in the number of Head Start families who attend a car seat inspection night to learn how to choose the right car or booster seat for their child and install it properly.
- An increase in the number of families from 50 percent to 60 percent who attend a car seat inspection night after the distribution of child passenger safety educational resources in families' home languages.
- An increase in the number of families from 60 percent to 75 percent who attend a car seat inspection night after the program recruits and trains staff as Certified Passenger Safety Technicians (CPST) qualified to host additional inspection events.
- An increase in the number of families from 70 percent to 85 percent who attend a car seat inspection night through a new partnership with local businesses that offer Head Start families access to free car seats or seats at a discounted rate.

An expected challenge might be providing access to information in multiple languages to help families choose and properly install a car seat in their vehicle. Another challenge might be finding affordable car seats.

Action Plans. An action plan can outline how a program intends to accomplish its overall goals and objectives from year to year and are aligned with the five-year plan. The action plan is developed by determining what actions will be undertaken each year. They enable the program to make progress towards the established goals and objectives. Think of the action plan as a global positioning system (GPS) for your program. Imagine the data put in the GPS to be the contents of the five-year plan instead of an address. The action plan is the destination the GPS guides you to. The action plan focuses on when actions will take place, where they will happen, and who will carry out the series of steps necessary to achieve the goal. It also identifies resources needed, like financial supports, as well as measures of success, including the evidence or data sources that confirm that success. Action plans may also include quarterly status updates.

School Readiness Goals. School readiness goals are especially influential in shaping a program’s action plan. Many programs form school readiness teams to organize their efforts in delivering educational program services. This planning should address all program models, ages of children served in the program, children who are dual language learners, and children with suspected developmental delays or diagnosed disabilities. Developing program-wide school readiness goals, a key part of planning, is also required by the HSPPS.³ The *Implementation Guide: Using the ELOF to Establish School Readiness Goals* guides programs on how to establish or revise school readiness goals that are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) for children ages birth to 5. School readiness goals should address all five areas of the ELOF central domains. Programs should establish these goals in consultation with families whose children are participating in the program.

There are a variety of ways programs can include family members in decisions about school readiness goals and planning. For example, programs can invite parents and key family members to participate on the school readiness teams. In developing school readiness goals and planning for children’s school readiness, programs can also draw on aggregated data from sources like parent/teacher conferences and weekly conversations between home visitors and parents in home-based programs. ■

Tips and Tools that Support Strategic Planning

To develop feasible program goals and measurable objectives, your strategic planning process will need to include a focus on identifying and analyzing the patterns, trends, and issues that might prevent you from successfully implementing your goals. Understanding these challenges will enable you to anticipate and address obstacles before they occur. Just as importantly, it will move your program away from providing band-aid solutions and toward addressing the root causes of systemic problems. The Institute of Cultural Affairs uses the analogy of weeding dandelions to illustrate the importance of addressing root causes.⁴ If you cut down the dandelions, they grow back within a few days; if you dig down and remove the tap root, the dandelion is removed permanently. Focusing on the root cause of challenges or barriers to successful service delivery is strategic planning’s way of digging deeper. It is also a practical step in mapping out the strategic direction.

What challenges lay ahead? There are typically three types of responses to this question: lack of money, lack of staff, or lack of time. It is important to look beyond what is lacking and dig deeper. Another analogy from the Institute of Cultural Affairs demonstrates this message: “Imagine watering plants in a garden when the water running from the hose suddenly stops. You don’t just stare at the hose and shout, “There’s no water.” Instead, you turn to see if there is a kink in the hose, if someone stepped on it, or if someone turned off the water.”⁵ Likewise, in strategic planning, you must move from what’s lacking to what is preventing your forward movement.

How should we include family members into planning and goal setting?




How do your strategic plans address your program goals?



Strategic planning shifts the focus from “what’s lacking” to “what is preventing forward movement.”

topic 2: five-year planning in head start

 *The five in the 5 Whys technique derives from an anecdotal observation on the number of iterations needed to resolve a problem.*

The 5 Whys. The 5 Whys is one of many approaches to identifying and addressing challenges.⁶ The 5 Whys is a series of why-based questions that set the stage for deeper problem-solving. For example, a program might launch the first question with, “What challenges might keep us from achieving our strategic long-term goal to improve child passenger safety?” A team member might respond, “We may not be able to get parents to participate.” “Why can’t we get parents to participate?” The questions and responses continue on this theme until the root cause surfaces. The process is akin to peeling back the layers of an onion. Typically, you will be able to use the final response to document your expected challenge in the baseline Head Start grant application.

Be aware that the challenges you surface may require you to rethink, revise, or reframe your program goal or measurable objectives.

Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is another technique you can use to support strategic planning. The essence of Appreciative Inquiry is the search for the best in people and their organizations. It lifts up the notion of a focused dialogue. Professor Ron Fry from Case Western Reserve University encourages planning groups to “study what’s good if they want to get more good.” In other words, by examining what is going well, planning groups develop insights into ways to apply good practices in new situations. Conversely, focusing on what is wrong usually produces only incremental change. An expert in Appreciative Inquiry, Professor Fry advises that posing positive questions and encouraging storytelling about successes helps people see the bigger possibilities and go beyond the incremental “tweaks” to truly dig deeper for solutions.

Find a Solution through Focused Dialogue

What does focused dialogue look like? For an example, consider a situation where your data analysis is pointing to a family engagement goal. As your team begins to craft the goal, pull back and begin a dialogue focused on two questions:

- What is working well in this area?
- Why is it working well?

Identify Challenges

Move forward to identifying challenges with questions such as:

- What is not working well?
- Why is it not working well?

Analyze Data

Then, analyze the data through dialogue with questions such as:

- What aspects of “what is working” can be used to find a solution?
- What factors have been considered in reaching a solution?
- What else do we need to know before we decide?

Cont’d

Find a Solution through Focused Dialogue (cont'd)

Decide on course corrections

Next, decide on the course correction with questions such as:

- What changes do we propose?
- Do the changes advance our goals?
- Who is responsible for implementing?

Determine check-ins and follow-ups

Finally, determine when to check-in and follow-up with questions such as:

- What data needs to be reviewed and how often?
- What needs to happen to make sure the changes are working?
- Is it a short term or long-term solution?

Use that solution to inform the course correction. The team's dialogue will move from a simplistic listing of issues to a more substantive solutions-focused discussion. From that, you will be able to identify a more useful solution.

While successful strategic planning requires groups to adopt a forward-thinking mindset, programs nevertheless sometimes cling to once successful strategies, even after those approaches no longer work. Management literature calls this phenomenon “escalation of commitment.” There are several reasons why programs might be reluctant to alter course. First, people tend to value commitments and investments already made, particularly in terms of cost and resources expended. Second, individuals tend to worry that altering course might result in a possible loss of status. And third, groups have a strong desire to simply complete the task—see a project through. Karl Weick of the University of Michigan speaks to this escalation of commitment, asserting that organizational decision-makers must not ignore the events that weaken forward-thinking strategy.⁷ The leader's role is to create an environment of safety so that team members are comfortable to offer ideas, speak to concerns, ask for help, or even express ambivalence about moving forward with program goals and strategies that could be potentially ineffective or damaging. Ultimately, programs should strive to embrace innovative ideas and approaches that are consistent with the changing fluid environments in which Head Start programs operate today.

In summary, as Kenney infers at the opening of this topic, strategic planning is indispensable. Strategic planning is the process of digging deeply with dialogue-focused questions so that you are able to develop sound program goals and measurable objectives. It is a dynamic process resulting in a strategic plan that is a work in progress. ■



Escalation of commitment is a human behavior pattern in which stakeholders facing increasingly negative outcomes continue the same behavior rather than alter course.



Definition

Forecasting

is the process of making future predictions based on past and present data with an analysis of related trends. The Head Start Grant Application Instructions ask programs to identify expected outcomes and challenges in the baseline application. This is forecasting. Forecasting is an important part of strategic planning.



What role does collaboration and honest dialogue play in your planning process?



In **Topic 2** you learned how to use strategic planning tools and techniques to envision a desired future. In **Topic 3** you will build on this understanding and consider how to use different types of goals to provide responsive, high-quality services to children and families.