



## Planning in Head Start

# Topic #1: Understanding Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, Progress, and Action Plans

**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 an overview of the key terms and processes involved in program planning.**

The terms “goals,” “objectives,” “outcomes,” and “action plans” are widely used in the research, evaluation, and education communities. The purpose of this paper is to define these terms in the Head Start context and to provide information that can help grantees develop program goals, objectives, expected outcomes, and action plans that result in more effective services to children and families.

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# Introduction

**Do you want to lose weight, buy a house, get an interesting new job?** If so, you may set a personal goal to achieve this. Likewise, effective Head Start and Early Head Start programs engage in goal setting as part of their planning process. Head Start often attracts people who want to make a positive difference in the lives of children and families.

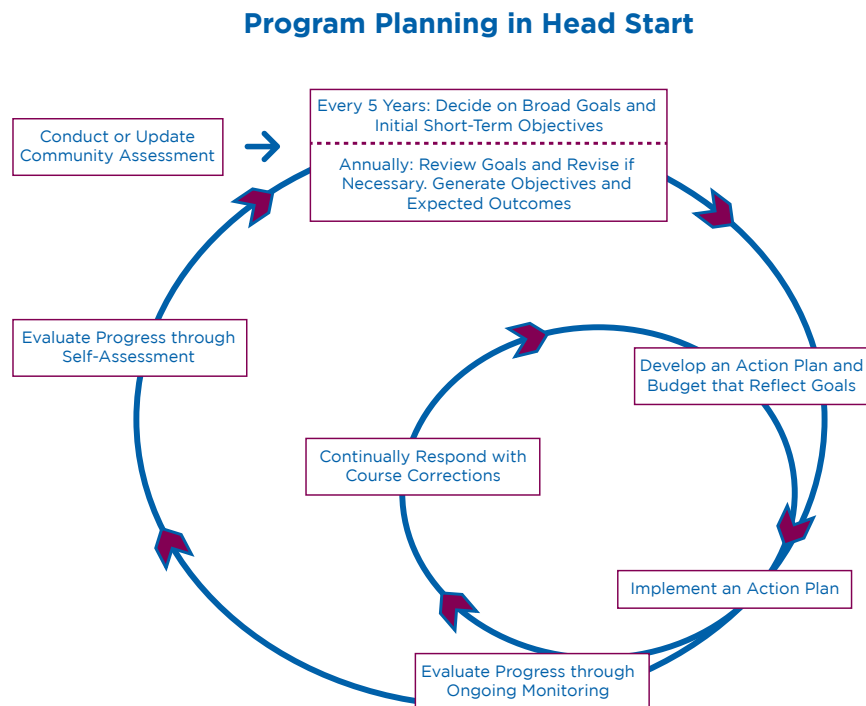
The Head Start Program Performance Standards require programs to develop long-range program goals and short-term program objectives. School readiness goals must be included in a grantee's baseline funding application. A focus on, for instance, family engagement or fiscal accountability can be prioritized as a program goal or can be objectives that support school readiness goals and program goals. In each subsequent year, grantees report on progress towards achieving the goals and objectives.



## Source Documents for Head Start Planning Requirements

- > [Head Start Act 641\(A\)\(g\)\(2\)\(A\)](#)
- > Head Start Program Performance Standards
  - [1304.51\(a\)](#)
  - [1307.3](#)
- > [Information Memorandum ACF-IM-HS-14-02, Federal Oversight of Five-Year Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies](#)

**The Head Start program planning cycle graphic shows how programs take these goals and objectives and, from them, develop an implementation plan that enables them to accomplish their goals.**



## What Is a Program Goal?

**You have probably heard the expression “Keep your eye on the prize.”** Goals are broad statements that describe what a program intends to accomplish. Head Start/Early Head Start programs establish program and school readiness goals. Program goals support the program’s mission to serve children, families, and the community; and they may include goals related to parent, family, and community engagement; finances; service provision; and so forth. School readiness goals are a subset of overall program goals and focus on child development and early learning outcomes in the five essential domains. These goals are that ultimate prize you want to keep your eye on!

Keep in mind the acronym “**BROAD**” as you write your goals: **B**old—**B**eyond current expectations, **R**esponsive, **O**rganization-wide, **A**spirational, and **D**ynamic. Then use these **BROAD** qualities to inform the goals you write. These goals will give voice to the shared vision within your program and help everyone (staff, governing body and Policy Council Members) focus on priorities. In Head Start, programs review their goals annually based on a community assessment; Self-Assessment; and related child, family, and community data. Throughout the process, programs modify their goals as needed.

# Tips for Setting Program Goals

“If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.”

—Yogi Berra

“What the mind can conceive and believe, and the heart desire, you can achieve.”

—Norman Vincent Peale

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.”

—Beverly Sills

We use our acronym **BROAD** to help organize our tips:

## **B**old—Beyond current expectations

**Think big and reach for the stars:** In their 1994 book called [Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies](#), James Collins and Jerry Porras coined the term “Big Hairy Audacious Goals.” They encouraged organizations to dare to think big, to set goals that reach to the stars.

**Imagine:** Where would you like your program to be at the end of five years? What do you expect to be able to accomplish? What will your program legacy be to the children, families, and communities you serve?

**Go beyond compliance:** Think “innovation” in addition to “compliance” as you set your goals. What new, exciting initiatives would you like your program to embark on and accomplish over the next five years?

**Continuously improve:** Generate goals that will help your program not only meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards but strengthen, strive, and innovate for more effective services for children and families.



## Responsive

**Have an eye on the future.** **BROAD** goals aren't accomplished overnight. Most are written to be accomplished during the five-year project period. In most cases, goals stay the same so you can measure progress and impact over the five-year project period. The objectives or the actions/strategies that help you implement your objectives may be more likely to change than **BROAD** goals.

**Determine your goals based on your data.** Goals should not be a rewritten standard. They are developed based on data and the critical needs that have emerged for children, families, and the community. The community assessment, results of your Self-Assessment process, and other program-specific data sources help your program develop, prioritize, and refine goals.

**Make sure family voices are represented.** To ensure that the family voice is represented on a program level, programs can look for opportunities to listen, learn, and collect data from parents and family members. Focus groups and surveys designed for family members and administered through Parent Committees and their Policy Council provide ideal vehicles for gathering important information from the family voice. The strengths and needs assessment and the family partnership process can also be forms of input on what is most important for families.

**Consider what related research can contribute to efforts to prioritize program goals.**

What research or evaluation data in the field is available to inform the development of particular program goals? Take advantage of the Office of Head Start National Centers, which play an informative role in translating research to practice for programs.

## Organization-wide

**Develop overarching goals that engage all levels of the organization.** Program goals require and inspire commitment from many players within the organization, including governing body and Policy Council members and families. The goal of improving attendance and reducing absenteeism is an example of an organization-wide goal. Everyone—from bus drivers and teachers to center directors; eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment, and attendance (ERSEA) staff; family service and health staff; and most importantly families themselves—can have an important role to play in helping the program achieve this goal.

**“Be practical as well as generous in your ideals. Keep your eyes on the stars, but remember to keep your feet on the ground.”**

**—Theodore Roosevelt**

Consider how your program goals relate to your school readiness goals. All of these goals work together. Aligned goals are likely to produce more effective results.

## Aspirational

“Try to turn as many soft, aspirational goals as possible into success criteria, and make them specific enough that you can actually tell whether or not you’ve met them.”

—Erin Kissane

**Motivate by engaging emotions.** In their 2010 book [SWITCH](#), Dan and Chip Heath maintain that change is more likely to happen if both our rational and emotional sides are engaged. Goals that speak to the heart as well as to the head will help with buy-in and the implementation of related plans.

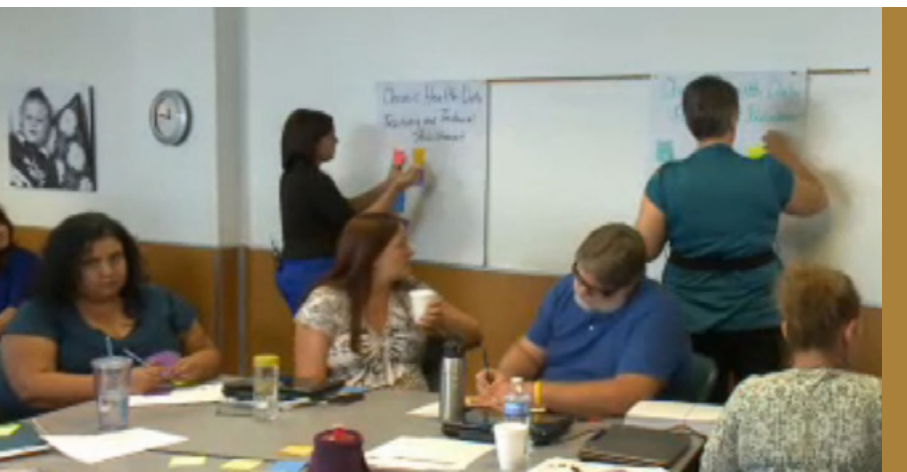
**Write them with intention.** School readiness goals begin with the words “Children will . . .” In a similar vein, program goals usually begin with such words as “The program will . . .”

Even better, because one of the keys to successful goal setting is to motivate and inspire, consider starting your program goal statement with inclusive words, such as “We, at Always Cutting Edge (ACE) Head Start and Early Head Start program, will . . .”

## Dynamic

“One of the ways that Webster’s dictionary defines dynamic is “energetic or forceful.”

Steven Covey, in his video clip, *Goals—Four Disciplines of Execution*, invites us to consider “the energy and creativity that are unleashed when everyone in the organization is committed and involved in achieving the goals.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQnOMY98fGg>





# What Is an Objective?

**Objectives are elements of goals.** Like goal statements, they are written as things to be accomplished. 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**. If goals are your destination, objectives are your mile markers along the way.

## Tips for Developing Objectives

**Break down goals into achievable parts.** If goals enable you to keep your eye on the prize, objectives help you hit the nail on the head. One goal is likely to have several objectives.

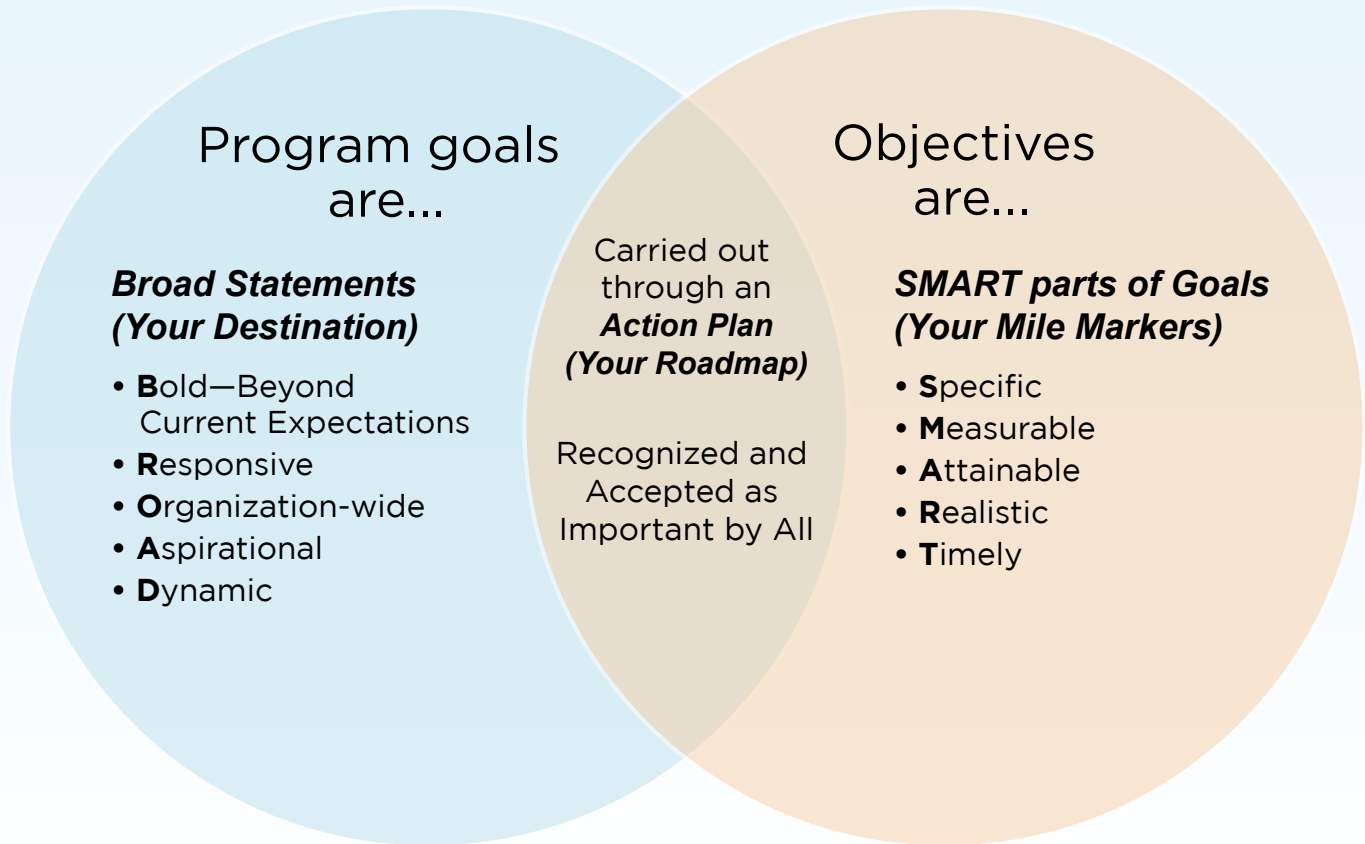
**Be careful to distinguish between objectives and actions/strategies.** Objectives are really miniature goals. They are still statements of what a program wants to achieve—not yet statements of how the program will get there. That will come in the action plan.

**Think of objectives as your yardstick or scale.** Objectives enable you to measure incremental progress toward your goal.

**Remember to include financial objectives as well as program objectives.** Not only is this a requirement in the Head Start Program Performance Standards, but financial objectives ensure that the program is financially committed to its priority goals.

*Note:* Financial objectives are not necessarily written in the same format as program objectives. They may be represented in your program budget and budget narrative and can appear as the designated and secured source of financing that will support your action plan. Even the best plan, if it requires money, will not happen if that money is not available. In addition, a program might also fashion an independent fiscal goal that is not simply an objective within the scope of an existing goal (for example, securing funds to increase the pay of classroom teachers). If a program has a fiscal goal, it should contribute toward overall program quality through more effective management and use of financial, property, or human resources.

The Venn Diagram below shows the similarities and differences between goals and objectives.



## What Is an Expected Outcome?

If a goal tells you where you're headed, an outcome tells you the result of your actions. Very simply, outcomes are the results achieved each year, like making progress toward the achievement of school readiness or the treatment of maternal depression. Remember, outcomes are annual results. Impact shows results at the end of five years.

The term "outcome" is also commonly used to refer to *expected outcomes* or *expected results achieved*. The Head Start application instructions ask programs to specify expected outcomes in their baseline application. For example, the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Outcomes (PFCE) in the blue column of the [PFCE Framework](#) are *expected outcome areas*. Programs might get more specific than this by creating a goal of improving the financial stability of their families (PFCE Expected Outcome: Family Wellbeing). They may have several objectives to support this goal, but they would hope or expect to see an outcome of improved financial stability for the majority of their families.



# Tips for Identifying Expected Outcomes

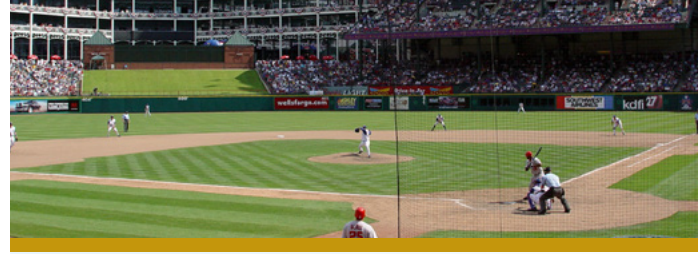
**Think of expected outcomes as your program's hoped-for results for children, families, and the community.** Frame your outcomes with the answer to this question in mind: "What results do we want?"

**Expected outcomes relate directly to goals and objectives.** What do you expect to achieve as a result of meeting your objectives? For example, if an agency sets a program goal of developing and maintaining an exemplary system of program governance, one fiscal objective might be to ensure that "governing body members fully understand and effectively use all fiscal information." An expected outcome might be that "all fiscal areas of noncompliance will be eliminated."

**Just as one goal might have several objectives, several objectives might lead to more than one set of results or outcomes.** The important thing is to identify ALL the expected outcomes you hope to see for a particular goal and set of objectives. Once an action plan is implemented, you can determine whether you have met your objectives and made progress toward achieving your outcomes.

## What Is Meant by Progress?

As you enter the five-year project period, your program is required to identify expected, measurable outcomes in its baseline application and to report progress in yearly continuation applications. Progress is defined as forward movement toward achieving goals, objectives, and expected outcomes but remember, long-term progress isn't always even. Progress is demonstrated by data that indicates what, if any, change has occurred. To understand what progress has occurred, you must first know where you started. To understand what progress has occurred, you must first have "baseline data" that can be used for comparative purposes.



## Goals, Outcomes, and Impacts: What's the difference?

Try on this sports analogy to help clarify the difference between goals, outcomes, and impacts.

Every professional baseball team wants to be a winning team.

The team's **GOAL:** To win the World Series

The **OUTCOME:** At the end of the baseball season, they've won (or lost) the series. They became the world champions (or not).

The **IMPACTS** (if they won): Fans rally around the team. There is increased interest in baseball in the community.

More children join Little League teams, resulting in a measurable decrease in obesity among children in the community.

Season ticket sales increase. The additional revenue generated by this increase enables the team to contract with higher-priced, better players.

More people come to games. Restaurants and businesses in the area surrounding the stadium report increased sales before and after games, and more restaurants and businesses open in the area.

# Tips for Tracking Progress

**Identify which data will let you know how you are doing.** To be able to report on progress, programs need to first define what change they will measure and what their data sources will be for measuring change.

**Build your methods for tracking and analyzing progress into your ongoing monitoring.** You already collect data throughout the year through your ongoing monitoring efforts. As you analyze your data, consider the following questions:

- Are we doing what we said we'd do?
- How well are we doing it?
- Do we need to make adjustments to our plan?

**Consider consulting knowledgeable evaluators to help you select the right data tools and methods for tracking progress toward your identified objectives and expected outcomes.**

Analyzing data can be simple or complex. You may find it useful to enlist the help of professionals or academics who can help you think through program plans and progress measurement.

**Go beyond measures that simply count the number of things offered in a program.** Counting is important, especially when it captures the number of parents who showed up for an event, for example, or the number of evening classes offered. But going beyond counting is even more important, because then you start getting at the actual effect of your work.

**Remember:** Measures of effort count what and how much a program provides. They describe whether and to what extent activities were carried out as planned. Measures of effect measure changes in knowledge or behavior as a result of the program's activities. They track whether a program's activities have made a difference.



## Examples of Tools or Methods for Tracking Progress

Children	Families
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-Assessment</li><li>• Community assessment</li><li>• Child files</li><li>• Child assessment instruments</li><li>• Teacher observations, child portfolios, etc.</li><li>• Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-Assessment</li><li>• Community assessment</li><li>• Parent surveys</li><li>• Family partnership process</li><li>• Family assessments</li><li>• PFCE Markers of Progress</li><li>• Tool for family strength-based assessment</li><li>• Depression screeners</li><li>• Parenting intervention tools</li></ul>

## What Is Meant by Impact?

“Impact” means “the influence or effect.” To define this term in the Head Start context for program planning, programs can ask themselves, “Are children, families, and the community better off at the end of the five-year project period as a result of our program services?” The data you collect and analyze to measure your progress can also show you the cumulative impact of your program over the five-year project period.





# What Is an Action Plan?

**An action plan is a roadmap that can help you accomplish your goals and objectives.** Just as there are many ways to get to a destination if you are taking a trip, there are many routes a program can take to reach goals, meet objectives, and achieve outcomes.

## Tips for Developing Action Plans

**Include the three vital elements.** Action plans vary, but generally they include “what,” “who,” and “when.” Outline the steps that you will take to achieve your goals and objectives (the “what”), the person(s) responsible (the “who”), and the projected completion dates (the “when”).

**Add other ingredients.** Additional ingredients might include such things as how you will measure progress, your evidence or data source, places for quarterly status updates, financial supports, and resources needed.

**Start each action with a verb.** This will remind you that action steps are things to do.

**Consider which actions are sequential and which are not.** Some actions may be taken in chronological order because a specific action must be completed before the next can occur. However, sometimes actions may happen simultaneously, and some actions may occur repeatedly or be ongoing. Put those that happen sequentially in order in your plan with their related dates for completion. Note in the date column if actions are repeated or ongoing.

“There is nothing more satisfying than having plans.”

—Lalita Tademy

“Although goals are important, having a plan of action is vital to the success of those goals. Having a goal with no plan of action is like wanting to travel to a new destination without having a map.”

—Steve Maraboli

**Use the “Plan, Do, Review” process.** Many people are familiar with the High Scope process of “Plan, Do, Review.” This concept is equally useful for an action plan. Creating an action plan is a big project. It’s tempting to clap your hands when you complete it and proudly put it on a shelf as a job well done. But an action plan should be a living document that is reviewed and updated at least quarterly as part of the program’s ongoing monitoring process.

Reviewing your plan regularly offers opportunities to identify bright spots, celebrate small and large accomplishments along the way, and consider how your successes can inform your efforts in other areas of your program. It is also an opportunity to refine and adjust your strategies if you find they are not working, rather than waiting until your next Self-Assessment. “Plan, Do, Review” could actually be thought of as “Plan, Do, Review, and Revise as necessary.”

**Keep it current.** The best-laid plans do change as things go along. Make course corrections by adding additional action steps (or getting rid of ones that turn out to be unnecessary) and by changing timelines as needed. If you couldn’t accomplish something you had planned to do in January but it is now scheduled to take place in February, make sure your updated plan reflects this so that stakeholders are informed.

## Conclusion

By understanding goals, objectives, outcomes, progress, and action plans, you can more effectively carry out your vision and mission. As your program engages in the five-year project period, crafting broad, long-range goals, short-term objectives and expected outcomes becomes a critical part of understanding the positive difference your program makes for children, families and the community.

