

Executive Summary

I. Introduction

Established in 1965, Head Start has a long history of preparing children for school. It is only recently, however, that local grantees have been formally required to develop school readiness goals and to analyze data on children's progress toward these goals. The process of setting school readiness goals and analyzing school readiness data is expected to improve program quality across both low- and high-performing Head Start programs.

In fall 2012, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted with the Urban Institute to conduct a study to learn how local Head Start and Early Head Start grantees are interpreting and implementing the school readiness goals requirements that were enacted in 2007. The goal of the two-year School Readiness Goals and Head Start Program Functioning study was to improve understanding of how local Head Start and Early Head Start grantees define, measure, and communicate 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. Study results are expected to inform ongoing training and technical assistance (T/TA) efforts on effectively using school readiness goals to improve program quality.

The study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What school readiness goals do Head Start and Early Head Start grantees set?
2. What does the process of setting school readiness goals look like?
3. How do grantees analyze data and report progress? That is, how do grantees use and analyze data to monitor progress toward goals? How do grantees report progress on goals?
4. How do grantees use school readiness goals and data to inform program planning and improvement efforts?

II. Methods

The research design combined a telephone survey of Head Start and Early Head Start program directors and managers with follow-up site visits to a subset of these grantees to learn more about how they set and

use school readiness goals. In addition, researchers conducted in-depth telephone interviews with program directors and education managers of four American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) grantees. All data collection occurred during the 2013–14 school year.

The telephone survey was designed as a 45-minute, largely closed-ended survey of Head Start and Early Head Start program directors (or education managers) from grantees across the United States. A purposive sample of 90 grantees was selected, stratified across grantees operating only Early Head Start (EHS-only) programs, only Head Start (HS-only) programs and grantees operating both programs (HS/EHS); 73 of these grantees (81 percent) completed the survey. Raking weights were applied to adjust sample estimates to account for nonresponse and the disproportionate sampling of grantees with certain characteristics. 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, AIAN grantees, grantees in US territories, and interim grantees.

During follow-up site visits to a subset of 11 of these grantees, the research team conducted qualitative interviews with program directors, program managers, governing body representatives, Policy Council members, teachers, home visitors, and parents. Visited grantees included five HS-only grantees and six HS/EHS grantees. Researchers reviewed and analyzed the written school readiness goals from those same 11 grantees.

Finally, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with Head Start directors and education managers of four AIAN grantees. Because a sufficiently large number could not be included in the telephone survey, the team instead conducted interviews with open-ended questions to gather and report exploratory information on the specific experiences of AIAN grantees.

III. What School Readiness Goals Do Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees Set?

Prior to this study, little information existed regarding Head Start grantees' written school readiness goals. Chapter 3 presents the findings from a review of school readiness goals documents that were collected from the 11 grantees participating in the site visits.

What Do the Goals Look Like?

There is substantial variation in the format and specificity of the local goals documents provided by the 11 programs. Four programs shared simplified documents that listed the goals by the domains identified in the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework* (the *Framework*), with little or no additional information. One of these documents was a pamphlet to be handed out to parents. Seven of the 11 programs provided more comprehensive documents that included information about assessment tools and objectives related to the goals. Four of these seven did a cross-walk matching their own goals with state and/or local school guidelines.

How Closely Do Programs Align Goals with the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework*?

Four of the 11 grantees structured their school readiness goals around all 37 domain elements identified in the *Framework*; no additional goals were included. Five grantees structured their goals around the five broad dimensions in the *Framework*, but defined their own subgoals within these domains. Two grantees used a combination of the five broad dimensions from the *Framework* as well as other goals.

How Many Goals Do Grantees Set?

The number of goals set by the 11 grantees ranged from 5 to 37 goals. As mentioned, four programs wrote a goal for each of the 37 domain elements from the *Framework*. Two grantees had only five goals, based on the five broad dimensions in the *Framework*; however, they tied multiple objectives or subgoals to each goal.

Do Grantees Prioritize Their Goals and, If So, How?

All goals are mentioned and given equal weight in the written goals documents. However, in interviews, some respondents felt that some goals were prioritized more than others in terms of the emphasis placed on activities to support work on that goal. Literacy was cited as a priority by respondents in seven programs and socio-emotional skills as a priority by respondents in five programs. Math and physical health were also mentioned. However, some respondents within these same programs said that all goals were important.

IV. What Does the Process of Setting School Readiness Goals Look Like?

A primary motivation for this research was to better understand the process through which Head Start grantees set their school readiness goals. Chapter 4 presents findings on this topic based on data from the telephone survey, site visits, and tribal interviews.

How Do Grantees Approach the Process of Setting School Readiness Goals?

According to the survey, most grantees (89 percent) established a “special committee to help with the school readiness goal-setting process.” Further details gathered during site visits suggest that approaches to collaboration varied. The process of writing school readiness goals was more management driven in some programs; in others it was more characterized by collaborative teams, high levels of parent involvement, or being TA driven.

Education managers were most often responsible for managing the day-to-day work of setting the goals (59 percent of grantees), and Head Start and Early Head Start program directors most often provided overall direction and supervision (53 percent of grantees). Many others—including other managers, classroom staff, site directors, Head Start parents, and Policy Council members—had a moderate-to-high level of involvement in deciding on goals. Other groups of staff and external stakeholders—including home visitors and family service workers, governing boards, local education agencies, community partners, and external consultants—were somewhat less likely to be involved, according to survey data.

What Resources Do Grantees Consult When Setting Goals?

Survey and site visit data indicated that when setting goals grantees often started with the *Framework*, state early learning standards, and their curriculum and assessment tools. Other important resources included guidance from the Office of Head Start (OHS) on the goals requirements and materials from ACF’s online 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. When asked what helped move along the goal-setting process, several program directors and managers mentioned the support received from OHS-sponsored T/TA specialists and ACF regional Head Start program specialists.

The comprehensive assessment tools that most grantees were already using before the goals mandate played a large role in shaping the goals that were selected, according to site visit interviews and open-ended responses to the telephone survey. In addition, the process of developing school readiness goals often involved looking at their child assessment data from the previous year, or multiple years if available, to determine which areas were in need of improvement.

What Are Grantees' Plans for Revising School Readiness Goals?

According to the survey data, just over two-thirds of grantees (68 percent) thought they would revise their school readiness goals every year. Other grantees thought they would make revisions every few years or, in some cases, throughout the course of each year. A similar pattern was seen in the site visit interviews; most grantees described their goals as a living document they planned to revisit, revise, and/or update to reflect changes in their focus over time.

What Challenges Were Faced When Setting School Readiness Goals?

According to the telephone survey, nearly three-fourths (74 percent) of grantees felt that finding time for the school readiness goal-setting process was a big or medium challenge. Despite this challenge, a large majority of grantees (84 percent) reported that setting school readiness goals was a good use of time.

Close to three-fourths (74 percent) of grantees also reported that engaging parents in the process of setting goals was a big or medium challenge. However, relatively few (only 18 percent) reported that parents had little to no involvement in deciding on school readiness goals.

More than half (60 percent) reported that obtaining enough information about OHS expectations about what would meet the requirements for setting school readiness goals was a big or medium challenge. This concern was also raised in site visit interviews. For example, grantees described being unclear on OHS expectations for how many goals they should have, how detailed the goal statements should be, and whether grantees needed to set specific benchmarks for progress. Several grantees felt it would have been helpful to have had more specific guidance before they were expected to begin the work of setting goals.

Setting goals appeared to be somewhat more challenging for EHS-only and HS/EHS grantees than for HS-only grantees. Eighty-three percent of HS-only grantees agreed they had the information they needed to set goals, but only 54 percent of EHS-only and 55 percent of HS/EHS grantees agreed with the statement. Site visit respondents further explained that they were initially uncertain how to proceed with

setting goals for EHS because the guidance on school readiness goals for infants and toddlers was released after the guidance for preschoolers. Similarly, during site visits, programs operating different service options reported challenges establishing goals that would be applicable, and feasible to implement, across center-based, home-based, and other settings.

Grantees in site visits also felt it was challenging to implement the school readiness goals requirements at the same time as other transitions, such as the concurrent shifts to a new assessment tool. Some grantees also mentioned confusion about how Head Start school readiness goals requirements related to other Head Start goal requirements (e.g., parent, family, and community engagement and overall program goals) and concern about how to integrate these different sets of goals. Finally, some grantees had concerns about the potential that the focus on school readiness goals would encourage a focus on academically oriented outcomes rather than the whole child.

What Does the Process of Setting School Readiness Goals Look Like among AIAN Grantees?

Like grantees in the main study, the four grantees interviewed for the AIAN case studies took different approaches to the work of setting their goals, ranging from a heavily management-driven approach (with input from others at various points) to a more collaborative approach involving management, frontline staff, and parents. Three of the four grantees said OHS-sponsored T/TA specialists were useful; the fourth relied instead on peer support networks. Two of the four programs highlighted the importance of integrating culture-specific objectives into their school readiness plans and provided examples of how they accomplished this. AIAN grantees interviewed for this study described many of the same challenges that non-AIAN programs confronted when responding to the school readiness goals mandate, including lack of clear guidance from OHS initially and difficulty engaging parents.

V. How Do Grantees Analyze Data and Report Progress?

The Head Start school readiness goals mandate requires grantees not only to set goals, but also to use data on school readiness to evaluate progress toward goals. Chapter 5 presents survey, site visit, and tribal interview findings on this topic.

How Do Grantees Measure Progress toward School Readiness Goals?

A first step toward evaluating progress toward school readiness goals is to specify progress measures related to each goal. Most grantees (86 percent) reported having measures for all goals, and the remaining 14 percent have measures for most goals. Three-fourths said it was no challenge (45 percent) or a small challenge (31 percent) to find measures to align with their goals; only 11 percent reported it was a big challenge.

Several grantees in the site visits described the process of selecting measures to assess progress toward goals as involving a mapping of their goals against the items in their primary child assessment tool. In conversations with staff during the site visits, it appeared that some staff made little distinction between the developmental objectives in their assessment tools and the school readiness goals adopted by their program.

What Is Grantees' Capacity for Collecting and Analyzing School Readiness Data?

Only a minority of grantees reported shortages in technology or staff capacity for collecting and analyzing school readiness data. Many grantees (62 percent) reported making improvements in their technological infrastructure as a result of the school readiness goals requirements, and three-fourths (75 percent) of grantees reported having the technology needed to manage and analyze data.

Survey results also suggest that most grantees have enough staff to collect school readiness data, and relatively few grantees hired additional staff to implement the mandate. However, during in-depth interviews, concerns were raised about increased time burden on the teaching staff as a result of collecting data on child outcomes.

Survey data suggest that EHS-only grantees may be less confident than HS-only or HS/EHS grantees that they have enough staff to collect data or that their staff were knowledgeable about collecting reliable data.

How Often Do Grantees Conduct Aggregate Analyses of School Readiness Data?

All programs reported looking at aggregate school readiness data three times a year or more, and in some cases monthly or even weekly.

What Challenges Do Grantees Face with Data Analysis and Interpretation?

Despite reviewing data throughout the year, a majority of grantees rated analyzing data related to goals as either a medium (43 percent) or big (22 percent) challenge. Much of the concern centered on staff capacity; staff are still learning to produce and use school readiness data. Although a majority of grantees (65 percent) expressed confidence that their staff were knowledgeable about *collecting* valid and reliable data, only one-third (34 percent) agreed that staff were knowledgeable about *interpreting* data reports.

EHS grantees were somewhat more likely than HS grantees to report concerns about interpreting data reports. In addition, collecting child assessment data was harder for staff working in home-based services and family child care than for teachers in center-based programs, according to site visit data.

During the site visits, education managers expressed different levels of comfort with data analysis; some expressed unease about their math and data analysis skills. In some cases, this was due to lack of familiarity with relatively new computer assessment systems. Program staff at all levels generally expressed more comfort looking at the school readiness progress of individual children.

How Do Grantees Report on Progress to Parents, the Policy Council, and the Governing Body?

Although three-fourths of grantees reported sharing program-level aggregate data with parents, parents who were interviewed focused on reports describing their own child's progress. Many parents reported receiving more formal reports three times a year, often in parent-teacher conferences or home visits, with interim reports produced on a more casual basis. Parents enjoyed getting information about their child's progress, and found it useful to see how their child was doing developmentally.

All programs share aggregate data with the Policy Council, and 99 percent share such data with the governing body, according to the survey data. Site visit data suggest that written reports are typically presented to the Policy Council and the governing body at scheduled meetings and are often accompanied by presentations walking through the reports.

How Do AIAN Grantees Analyze Data and Report Progress?

All four AIAN grantees reported looking at school readiness goals data at least three times per year. Three of the four grantees mentioned giving parents information about their own child's school readiness outcomes. Like grantees in the main study, AIAN grantees share this information through parent-teacher

conferences. All four grantees also share aggregate data on progress toward goals with their program's Policy Council and tribal government.

VI. How Do Head Start Grantees Use School Readiness Goals and Data to Inform Program Planning and Practice?

According to federal regulation, Head Start grantees are required to set school readiness goals, collect data to measure progress toward goals, and to use that data “in combination with other program data . . . to direct continuous improvement related to curriculum, instruction, professional development, program design and other program decisions.” Chapter 6 draws on data from the telephone survey, site visits, and tribal interviews to offer a first look at how grantees are using their goals and related data to inform program planning and practice.

Do Grantees View School Readiness Goals As Useful?

Grantees had positive feedback when asked about the usefulness of the school readiness goals mandate. Ninety-three percent of survey respondents agreed “having school readiness goals will be useful,” and only 7 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. None of the survey respondents disagreed with the statement, reflecting the widespread buy-in of program directors and education managers in the usefulness of school readiness goals.

Although the majority of EHS-only grantees saw benefits to school readiness goals, they were not as overwhelmingly positive as other grantees. According to the survey data, 77 percent of EHS-only grantees agreed that having school readiness goals will be useful, compared to 100 percent of HS-only and 91 percent of HS/EHS grantees. Yet during the site visits, many Early Head Start program directors and staff said they welcomed being part of a school readiness discussion that is sometimes limited to Head Start preschoolers.

How Are School Readiness Goals Used by Program Staff?

Survey respondents reported that having goals is useful for a range of purposes, including staff professional development, teacher planning for daily classroom activities, programwide strategic planning, and teachers' work with individual children.

Ways in which school readiness goals were helpful to program managers with planning and decisionmaking were further elaborated during site visits. First, data tracking progress toward school readiness goals were used to both plan programwide professional development activities and to target training and support to specific teachers. In addition, school readiness goals helped managers allocate resources for classroom materials and make staffing decisions. Finally, program directors and managers in several of the programs visited reported they use data more frequently and purposively than they had prior to the school readiness mandate.

Site visit respondents reported that school readiness goals helped teachers be more intentional in planning and instruction. In addition, teachers used school readiness goals and data when identifying the specific needs of individual children. Several teachers also mentioned that reviewing data reports has helped them to identify areas in which they need additional training and support. A few teachers mentioned that school readiness goals were useful in validating their work as teachers. Finally, teachers and home visitors felt that having a clear set of school readiness goals helped them communicate more effectively with parents. Staff commonly reported seeing an improvement in parents' understanding of what school readiness means.

What Were Grantees' Concerns about the Goals Mandate?

One concern noted during the site visit interviews was increased time burden on teaching staff. Documenting children's work in the classroom, collecting reliable assessment data, entering and analyzing data, reporting on outcomes, revising goals, and tailoring instruction require a significant amount of time and resources. Some teachers and administrators worried about teachers not being able to spend as much time interacting with children. In a few programs, teachers reported some technological shortages, such as having to share computers with multiple peers or not having Internet access to use online data collection tools.

In addition, some site visit respondents were concerned that the increased focus on school readiness would lead to insufficient attention to Head Start's mission of addressing comprehensive child and family needs. Other respondents mentioned a concern that their program's goals would end up overly slanted toward outcomes that can be easily measured with a given child assessment tool. Some respondents also reported challenges in defining and measuring school readiness across ages and settings.

What Supports Do Grantees Want to Better Meet the School Readiness Goals Mandate?

When asked what supports their programs needed to better meet the mandate, several site visit respondents mentioned wanting additional technical assistance better tailored to their individual program and its needs. Some felt that the available T/TA materials were too generic and needed to better consider factors such as program size and state requirements to use particular assessment tools. In the same vein, respondents wanted additional opportunities to network with other grantees with similar characteristics. Another request was for clearer expectations from OHS about how written goals should appear. Finally, many respondents asked for help building capacity to better analyze data, including supports for enhancing electronic data systems, and further T/TA on data analysis and interpretation.

How Do AIAN Grantees Use School Readiness Goals and Data to Inform Program Planning and Practice?

Two of the four interviewed AIAN grantees felt that the school readiness goals were a positive addition to their program, and two had more mixed views. One grantee whose view was more mixed expressed concern that the goals requirements overlapped with requirements already in place. The other felt it was too soon to tell whether the requirements would be helpful to the program. All four AIAN grantees reported using school readiness goals and related data to identify strengths and needs at the program, classroom, and/or individual child or teacher levels.

VII. Conclusion

This research study provides the first systematic analysis of how Head Start and Early Head Start grantees are responding to the federal mandate to set school readiness goals for children in their programs and to collect and use data measuring progress toward the goals. Chapter 7 discusses six cross-cutting themes that emerged from the research and outlines implications for policy, practice, and further research.

Six Cross-Cutting Themes

- **Grantees have largely embraced the school readiness goals requirements and reported using the goals and data in various ways.** Grantees reported widespread compliance with key school readiness goals requirements. Moreover, the study's findings suggest that grantees'

acceptance of the school readiness mandate goes beyond mere compliance. For example, nearly all survey respondents agreed that setting goals was a good use of time and that having school readiness goals will be useful in general. Goals and data were seen as particularly useful for staff professional development and teacher planning for daily classroom activities. Although the in-depth interviews revealed some concerns about the time spent on school readiness goals and data collection and some questions about whether the mandate was necessary, overall, the research team heard more enthusiasm for the goals and school readiness data than might have been expected about a new mandate.

- **Assessment tools played a central role in shaping goals and data use.** As discussed throughout the report, comprehensive assessment tools played a central role in defining the goals and in shaping the approach to analyzing data. A review of written documents suggested many grantees derived all measures related to their school readiness goals from a single assessment tool. Moreover, several grantees in the site visits described selecting goals based on measures available in their assessment tool. Overall, grantees generally felt their comprehensive assessment tools facilitated and supported the school readiness mandate. This support means, however, that the developers of the tools played an indirect role in shaping the goals—and the specific measures and benchmarks—that grantees used in defining and measuring school readiness at the local level.
- **Time spent on school readiness goals and data was taken from other priorities.** During the site visits, some concerns were voiced about the time burden on teachers associated with collecting data on child outcomes. Another concern emerging from some of the in-depth interviews was that time and attention spent on school readiness goals took time away from work on parent, family, and community engagement goals. For the most part, the interviewees expressing these concerns also acknowledged the value of tracking children’s progress toward school readiness. Yet they felt it was important for the research team to know that it increased time burdens on teaching staff and posed a danger of displacing other priorities.
- **Grantees were still learning how to analyze and interpret school readiness data.** Grantees reported collecting child assessment data across multiple domains, with at least three observations on each child for most school readiness measures. Most, though not all, grantees said they had enough staff and technology in place to collect and manage data. A bigger concern was the ability of staff to analyze and interpret the data. Survey respondents expressed mixed views regarding staff capabilities in this regard, and during the in-depth interviews, some program managers mentioned their own limitations in math and data analysis skills. Program staff at various levels expressed much more comfort with tracking the school

readiness progress of individual children than with comparing data for different groups of children. Several respondents mentioned in site visits that they would like further assistance and training on data analysis and interpretation to support their work on school readiness goals.

- **Early Head Start grantees appeared to have more challenges in implementing school readiness goals requirements.** Early Head Start grantees set school readiness goals and analyzed data three times a year or more often, similar to other grantees. The majority of Early Head Start grantees expressed positive views about the usefulness of school readiness goals for their programs. However, the data suggest that these grantees may have had more challenges in implementing the school readiness goals requirements. For example, EHS grantees were more likely to report not having the information needed to set school readiness goals. Early Head Start grantees also were more likely than other grantees to report staffing challenges, such as not having enough staff, and not being sure staff had the capability to collect reliable data or to interpret data reports. These apparent differences merit more study because they were based on small sample sizes, but they suggest particular challenges for Early Head Start programs. Despite the challenges, many Early Head Start directors and staff interviewed during follow-up site visits told the research team that they welcomed the opportunity to be a part of the school readiness discussion that is sometimes limited to Head Start preschoolers.
- **OHS guidance and technical assistance provided important supports as grantees implemented school readiness goals requirements.** In developing their school readiness goals, many grantees looked to written materials from OHS and its training and technical assistance (T/TA) network. Many grantees relied heavily on the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework*. When asked what helped move along the goal-setting process, several program directors and managers also mentioned the support received from OHS-sponsored T/TA specialists and ACF regional Head Start Program Specialists. Grantees have a continuing need and desire for T/TA related to the school readiness requirements.

Implications for Policy and Technical Assistance

As grantees work to revise their goals, build capacity to analyze data related to goals, and increasingly use goals to inform program planning and practice, they will continue to rely on training and technical assistance from OHS and its T/TA network. Several ideas for future T/TA emerged from this study:

- Further guidance and T/TA on developing goals to help grantees better understand what is required per regulations and the options they have to take their school readiness plans to the next level;
- Ongoing T/TA on data analysis and data use, with such T/TA taking into account the needs of staff with different levels of expertise;
- More tailored T/TA on setting and using goals, in response to grantees' desire for T/TA that better recognizes their particular circumstances;
- Assistance identifying appropriate measures, including measures for outcomes that are hard to measure reliably with existing tools; and
- Support for technology investments and data systems, such as technology enhancement grants, for helping grantees to upgrade to their data systems.

Implications for Research

Implications for further research include studies that build on the current study by looking at school readiness goals in a broader sample, over time, or more in depth for Early Head Start, AIAN, and migrant and seasonal grantees. Further research also might delve more deeply into how school readiness goals and data affect program quality and child outcomes. Additional ideas include further research on benchmarks, grantees' technological and analytical capacity, and their use of comprehensive tools in meeting the goals requirements. Another potential study could identify best practices in setting and using goals across a diverse set of grantees. Research on these topics would help Head Start grantees with their ongoing efforts to use school readiness goals and data to improve program quality and child outcomes.