



Quality Checkpoints in Head Start Program Monitoring

An Overview

In an effort to monitor and improve the quality of Head Start services and the management of Head Start programs, Head Start implements three major quality checkpoints:

Annual self-assessment¹

The self-assessment is a process of self-critique that each Head Start agency must complete every year. Agencies draw on numerous data sources, such as the Program Information Report, self-collected data on child development outcomes, community assessments, and triennial federal on-site monitoring reports. Among other domains, grantees are encouraged to evaluate their recordkeeping and reporting, fiscal management, community and childcare partnerships, and provision and tracking of educational, health, and mental health services to children and families.¹ Based on the self-assessment, grantees must create a program improvement plan and technical assistance plan for the coming year. Grantees are required to submit a summary of their self-assessment results to their OHS regional office as part of their annual refunding application. Regional offices request self-assessment summaries in an effort to gauge self-awareness and self-improvement efforts among grantees and will work with grantees that indicate a need for support. The self-assessments and resulting plans comprise an internal continuous improvement process designed to promote a more intentional self-examination among grantees of program quality, performance and improvement strategies.²

The self-assessment incorporates several aspects of quality, including:³

- How well the grantee individualizes the program to meet each child's unique characteristics and needs, including temperament, language, learning style and cultural background.⁴
- How well the written curriculum chosen or developed by the grantee supports child development and learning, and how well it is implemented in the classroom.
- The use of child outcome data to detect patterns of progress among participating children.
- Whether program goals and services reflect and respond to community resources and needs as established by the program's community assessment.

Triennial on-site federal monitoring review:

Each grantee must undergo an on-site federal monitoring review after the first full year of providing Head Start services, and again at least every three years thereafter. The review includes interviews with the director, management and key staff, as well as observations and reviews of child and staff files and other grantee documents. The review also incorporates an assessment of classroom quality using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Grantee performance is evaluated using key indicators in seven domains of program administration and service provision (including child health and safety, child development and education, family and community engagement, fiscal integrity, and program governance). If a grantee does not meet program requirements in any one of these domains, it is deemed "noncompliant" or "deficient." An uncorrected noncompliance or deficiency may result in program termination or denial of refunding.⁵

Grantees with deficiencies or noncompliances are assisted by regionally deployed Grantee Specialists, technical assistance (TA) personnel who work with grantees that have been identified by the Office of Head Start as needing additional assistance. Grantee Specialists provide TA specifically in the domain of management systems (including governance, reporting, funding issues, etc.). Head Start grantees interested in or needing additional support in early childhood education domains such as school readiness, parent, family and community engagement, staff development, and collaboration can tap into a larger network of technical assistance through OHS Early Childhood Education (ECE) Specialists.⁶

The monitoring system, which is overseen by the Office of Head Start (OHS), also includes unannounced on-site reviews for all grantees and follow-up reviews for grantees that are out of compliance.⁷



The Designation Renewal System (DRS)⁸:

The DRS is the newest addition to Head Start quality and standards legislation and is meant to ensure that funding is awarded to those agencies that can best serve Head Start children and families. The 2007 Head Start Act mandated the creation of this system, which became effective in December 2011.⁹ The DRS limits the grant funding cycle for Head Start agencies to five years, with continued funding contingent upon program performance. Only agencies with high performing programs are eligible for a renewed five year grant without competition. Agencies which are designated as “underperforming” are required to re-compete against other applicants to obtain another five year grant.

Underperformance is determined by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) using seven DRS criteria in three topic areas: service quality, licensing and operations, and fiscal and internal controls. Regional offices will provide specialized management systems technical assistance (through Grantee Specialists) as well as education and parental engagement related technical assistance (through ECE Specialists) to grantees who are required to re-compete, as these grantees will continue to serve children until the grant awards are determined.¹⁰ Agencies required to compete for a new grant must submit an application and are assessed by a panel of independent, non-federal reviewers and by ACF in various domains including a demonstration of community need, organizational capacity, past performance, financial capability and financial management systems.¹¹ Sensitive to the challenges implicit in establishing this new system, the Office of Head Start has commissioned a study that will examine the role of the DRS in improving program quality. The study will also evaluate the validity of the criteria used to differentiate higher performing programs from lower performing ones.

Relationship between the triennial review and the DRS review:

The annual self-assessment, the triennial review and the DRS review are three separate reviews overseen by different entities and occurring at different times. Importantly, they all serve different purposes. The annual self-assessment, conducted by the Head Start grantee, is a self-critique meant to be shared internally in a continuous effort to improve quality and reach and exceed compliance with national program standards.¹² The triennial federal monitoring review, conducted by OHS, is an on-site visit and evaluation of a grantee designed to ensure program compliance in a standardized fashion. Lastly, the DRS review, conducted by ACF, is a review of all performance data available on a grantee for the specific purpose of determining grant funding eligibility.¹³

Despite the distinct purposes, timeframes and agents, these reviews do not operate independently of each other. For example, in the annual self-assessments, grantees are encouraged to consider information from their triennial monitoring reviews. Likewise, the triennial review considers the quality of the self-assessment and the seriousness with which identified areas of improvement are pursued. Lastly, the DRS review incorporates data from the triennial monitoring review (such as the CLASS assessment and school readiness goals) to determine whether an agency is eligible for renewed funding without re-competition. In this manner, each of these quality monitoring checkpoints influence one another, rather than operating in a vacuum.

Sources & notes:

¹ *Head Start self-assessment: Your foundation for building program excellence.* (2005). Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/Head%20Start%20Self%20Assessment%20Guide.pdf.

² Office of Head Start, personal communication, January 31, 2014.

³ *Head Start self-assessment: Your foundation for building program excellence.* (2005), op. cit.

⁴ Head Start requires and encourages individualizing early childhood developmental services for all children based on their interests, needs, learning styles, stages of development, and so on. Head Start uses the term ‘individualization’ in a general sense that goes beyond the specific meaning of individualization for children with special needs (including Individualized Education Programs). The Head Start program performance standards require that grantees’ approach to child development must be “developmentally and linguistically appropriate, recognizing that children have individual rates of development as well as individual interests, temperaments, languages, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles.” Head Start provides information and technical assistance for teachers and programs around how to tailor services to the personality and needs of each child and the Head Start triennial monitoring review (as well as the self-assessment) takes note of the degree to which the “program uses information from ongoing observations, and evaluations, as well as insight from parents to determine how best to respond to each child’s individual characteristics, strengths, and needs”. For more information on individualization in Head Start, click here. *Sources: Program performance standards for the operation of Head Start programs by grantees and delegate agencies, Education and early childhood development, 45 CFR § 1304.21* (2007). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1304>; Office of Head Start. (2013). *FY 2014 Office of Head Start monitoring protocol.* Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/mr/monitoring/fy-2014-pdfs/fy-2014-ohs-monitoring-protocol.pdf>.

⁵ Brown, A. & Weaver, R. (2013). *FY 2013 monitoring webcast.* Office of Head Start, Administration for Children & Families, U.S.

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Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/mr/monitoring/fy2013pdf/000736-fy-2013-monitoring-grantee-webcast.pdf>

⁶ Office of Head Start, personal communication, January 31, 2014.

⁷ Office of Head Start. (2009). *Report to congress on Head Start monitoring: Fiscal year 2009*. Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from

https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/mr/rc/FY2009_Head_Start_%20Monitoring_Report.pdf

⁸ Administration for Children and Families. (2011). 45 CFR Part 1307 Head Start program; Final rule (RIN 0970-AC44). *Federal Register (Part VII)*, 76(217). 70009-70032.

⁹ Office of Head Start. (2012). *Designation Renewal*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/dr>.

¹⁰ The Head Start roadmap to excellence: The training and technical assistance system. (2010). Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/sr/quality/TTA_System_Roadmap_to_Excellence_090810.pdf; Office of Head Start, personal communication, January 31, 2014.

¹¹ Understanding evaluation criteria for applications, Head Start criteria. (n.d.). Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/grants/grant-toolkit/criteria.html>.

¹² *Head Start Self-Assessment: Your Foundation for Building Program Excellence*, op. cit.

¹³ Office of Head Start (n.d.) *Report to congress on the final Head Start program Designation Renewal System*. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/mr/rc/Head_Start_Designation_Renewal_System_Final_Rule.pdf.