



POLICY BRIEF

Measuring Quality in Early Childhood Education



FIRST THINGS FIRST

Ready for School. Set for Life.

Quality Early Learning

Every young child in Arizona deserves a high-quality early learning experience. In the first five years of life, a quality education plays a critical role in the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children. Neuroscientists, economists and educators agree: early care and education pays dividends as children enter kindergarten; and it continues to serve them as they move through elementary school, transition into college and career, and become citizens in their communities. Science tells us that more than 85 percent of brain development occurs between the time a child is born and the time they reach kindergarten.ⁱ So, developmentally, these early years put children at a crossroads: we can set them on a path to success, as curious and engaged learners with strong foundational skills; or we can leave them on the far side of the achievement gap, forcing a costly and difficult game of catch-up that leaves many children behind.

Number of Arizona children ages 0 to 5^a: 643,783

Number of Arizona children under 6 needing outside of home care^b: 321,630

Number of Arizona women in the labor force with children under 6^b: 97,395

The right kind of care can have a profound effect during the first five years of life. Longitudinal studies, spanning more than 40 years, show us that quality care and education from infancy through age 5 results in higher IQ scores, higher school graduation rates and lower crime rates.ⁱⁱ Young children with high-quality experiences have been shown to have increased vocabulary, better language, math and social skills, have more positive relationships with classmates, and score higher in



school-readiness tests – these children are better prepared for school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Early learning may take place in the home, through experiences such as singing and telling stories with a grandparent or neighbor; interactive play with a mother, or daily reading with a father or caregiver. Early learning can also occur in informal family, friend and community settings, or in the more formalized programs provided in centers, schools and home-based care. Census figures show that many Arizona children spend part or all of their day learning in child care, preschool or other early childhood education programs. Families that choose these programs do so for a variety of reasons. But the desire for quality care — and the positive results it offers — is the common thread among them.

This policy brief outlines the measurement of quality in Arizona's early learning settings and current efforts to improve that quality.

a) FTF Regional Allocation; 2000 Census Summary File and Population Estimates Protocol

b) Data from American Community Survey, US Census, 2006-2008.

High Quality Programs

High quality early childhood programs are defined by several characteristics: responsive and engaged teachers that support a child’s learning; indoor and outdoor environments that are safe, child-centered, stimulating and well-stocked with materials; predictable and balanced daily schedules and routines; evidence-based, culturally sensitive curriculum; supportive assessments of each child’s progress; and ample opportunities for family involvement in their child’s education.

In ideal circumstances, every child care provider would offer all of these characteristics. But the availability of these features differs widely from provider to provider, and the overwhelming reason is cost. Improving and maintaining high quality in early learning programs can be expensive. FTF is analyzing data from the Arizona Cost of Quality Study to determine the cost differential between levels of low and high quality. This study provides critical information about the actual costs of delivering early care and education and how these costs rise with increasing levels of quality. For example, some very specific measures of a higher quality center, such as low staff-to-child ratios and higher education levels of caregivers, are more expensive for providers to supply. Preliminary studies indicate that higher quality care does cost more among Arizona child care providers. The average annual operating cost for a quality, medium sized center-based early learning program was \$6,142. For the highest quality programming, the cost was \$12,916. Compare this to \$9,716, for a year of in-state college tuition and fees at Arizona State University. High costs force many Arizona children – especially those from low-income families – into settings where high quality is not attainable or not the priority, which can be a barrier to their development.^{iv}

The child care options currently available in Arizona’s communities can contain vast differences as to the quality of care and education provided. This puts a substantial burden on parents, who must find and accurately assess prospective providers to find good care

for their children, at an affordable price. But even the concept of “good” remains vague without an accepted standard of quality. That is why 45 states are in some stage of implementing quality ratings and improvement systems (QRIS) for their early child care providers: to create a unified, measurable standard of care, and inform parents on their local providers’ proximity to that standard.

Efforts to recognize and measure quality early learning programs have historically been national initiatives, conducted through accreditation agencies like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC). Despite these efforts, just 15% of early care and education centers and less than 1% of family child care homes in Arizona are accredited by a national system – and these systems have long been the only measure of quality available in the state. A comprehensive state system may be better-suited to: a) support local child care providers with vigilance and depth, b) assess providers in the context of the advantages and challenges specific to the surrounding community, and c) align their quality criteria with state licensing requirements and the state’s K-12 education system.

Arizona’s current licensing regulations ensure basic health and safety requirements. But they do not address higher standard issues such as an optimal adult-child ratio, group size, well-qualified personnel, and strong curriculum and instruction. Arizona can address this gap by expanding on the current licensing system to establish our own statewide quality system that also acts as a viable consumer tool for parents.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Nationally, a number of states have implemented Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) in an effort “to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.”^v Quality First, Arizona’s QRIS and one of FTF’s signature programs, was established in response to this educational reform effort to improve quality and promote school readiness. The Quality First Rating Scale, which measures quality on a 5-star scale, incorporates evidence-based predictors that lead to positive child outcomes. The scale ranges from a 1-star rating –where the provider demonstrates a commitment to examine practices and improve the quality of care beyond regulatory requirements – to a maximum rating of 5-stars, where providers offer lower ratios/group size, higher staff qualifications that support significant positive outcomes for young children, curriculum that aligns with state standards and child assessment, and nurturing relationships between adults and children that promote emotional, social and academic development.

Quality First uses three tools, including two established and reliable assessment instruments, to determine a rating:

1. Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) (Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer. Teachers College Press)

- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS)
- Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS)
- Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale (FCCERS)

The ERS addresses quality components such as the arrangement of indoor and outdoor space, materials and activities offered to children, interactions between teachers and children, use of language in the home or classroom, and support for parents and staff. Assessors must complete a rigorous training process and demonstrate 90% internal reliability before conducting assessments for Quality First. Assessors are also checked for reliability during every 10th assessment, to ensure they maintain the 90% standard.

2. Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS) (Robert C. Pianta, Karen M. La Paro, and Bridget K. Hamre. Teachstone Training, LLC)

The CLASS is a valid and reliable observational assessment tool. It is used in addition to the ERS when a provider’s ERS average program score is at or above a 3-star level. The CLASS breaks high quality teacher-student interaction into three crucial domains:

- *Emotional Support:* Social and emotional functioning in the classroom is an indicator of kindergarten readiness. CLASS evaluates the dimensions of positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives.
- *Classroom Organization:* Classrooms provide the most opportunities for learning when students are well-behaved, active and engaged. CLASS considers behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning formats.
- *Instructional Support:* Good teachers make the most of opportunities to effectively support cognitive and language development through the curriculum. CLASS focuses on the roles of concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling.



Assessors using the CLASS must complete a rigorous training process and pass a reliability test before conducting assessments for Quality First. CLASS assessors must also re-certify annually. The CLASS tool is currently used only in center-based classrooms and home-based settings with children ages 3-5; however, the CLASS tool for infant/toddler settings was recently released, and will be used by Quality First assessors once training is available and completed.

3. Quality First Points Scale (see Figure 1) is an evaluation tool designed by First Things First. It assesses portfolio documentation in three evidenced-based quality areas that are not covered by the ERS or CLASS:

- **Staff Qualifications:** examines educational degrees and/or credits completed in early childhood education or related fields; and the early childhood experience of the program director or assistant director, lead teachers, assistant teachers and family child care providers.
- **Administrative Practices:** examines adult-to-children ratios and maximum group size for center and home-based providers; and retention rates (continuity of care and teaching staff) among the director or assistant director, lead teachers and assistant teachers in center-based settings.
- **Curriculum and Child Assessment:** studies the alignment of curriculum and ongoing, developmentally appropriate child level assessment with the Arizona Early Learning Standards or Infant/Toddler Developmental Guidelines; assesses communication with families on child activities and progress.

Early learning providers regulated by the state, tribal governments or the Department of Defense who voluntarily apply for and enroll in Quality First will receive supports to improve and maintain the quality of their programs. These supports can include: individualized coaching and specifically targeted consultation, financial incentive grants, and professional development scholarships. Participating programs will also receive Quality First Scholarships. These scholarships help offset tuition costs for low-income children enrolled in Quality First programs. Quality First Scholarships will be automatically allotted on a per program basis, with the number and amount of scholarships tied to increasing levels of quality.

Quality early learning experiences are essential to the future of Arizona. High quality early education prepares Arizona's children for school and lays a strong foundation for their future, and ours. Program improvement and rating efforts, like Quality First, offer transparent measures of Arizona's earliest educators and the quality of care they provide. When coupled with clear models on the costs of high quality care, these will become a vital resource for parents, advocates and policy makers. They will also mark an important step toward a system which supports improved school readiness, and closes the achievement gaps for Arizona's children.

Figure 1. Quality First Rating Scale

	ERS Average Program Score	CLASS Average Program Score	Point Scale
★ Rising Star	1.0 - 1.99	Not applicable	Not applicable
★★ Progressing Star	2.0 - 2.99	Not applicable	Not applicable
★★★ Quality	3.0 - 3.99 No classroom score below 2.5	ES 4.5 CO 4.5 IS 2.0	SQ 2 AP 2 CA 2 6 point minimum
★★★★ Quality Plus	4.0 - 4.99 No classroom score below 3.0	ES 5.0 CO 5.0 IS 2.5	SQ 2 AP 2 CA 2 10 point minimum
★★★★★ Highest Quality	5.0 & Above No classroom score below 3.0	ES 6.0 CO 6.0 IS 3.0	SQ 4 AP 4 CA 4 12 point minimum

Endnotes:

- i Children's Action Alliance, 2008. "A Decade of Data: The Compensation and Credentials of Arizona's Early Care and Education Workforce." www.azchildren.org
- ii Reported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study," <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/> and A Report from Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania, 2006. "Head Start and Pre Kindergarten in Pennsylvania: An Investment in Crime Prevention."
- iii National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 1999. "The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School." and Karoly, Lynn, et al., 1998. "Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions." RAND.
- iv Vandell & Wolfe, 2002. "Child Care for Low-Income Working Families." Focus, vol. 22 no 1.; "Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study", 1995; Helburn & Bergmann, 2002. America's Child Care Problem. New York: Palgrave.; Phillips, ed. 1995. Child Care for Low Income Families, Washington: National Academies Press.
- v National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/>

