



First Things First Strategic Plan

State Fiscal Years 2024-2027

 **FIRST THINGS FIRST**



Improving Outcomes for Arizona's Youngest Children

The first five years of a child's life have a powerful impact on their future and on the future of our state. These early years offer an unmatched opportunity for our state and local communities to build a solid foundation for success for Arizona's youngest children. As Arizona's only public funding source dedicated exclusively to early childhood, First Things First (FTF) is an essential leader and key partner in creating a family-centered, comprehensive, collaborative and high-quality early childhood system. Since its inception in 2006, FTF has supported the development, health and early learning of children birth to age 5 to help more young children enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

Vision

All Arizona's children are ready to succeed in school and in life.

Mission

First Things First is an essential leader and partner in creating a family-centered, equitable, high-quality early childhood system that supports the development, well-being, health and education of all Arizona's children, birth to age 5.

First Things First Values

1. **Arizona's children, birth to age 5, and their families are our central focus.** We provide the best opportunities to prepare Arizona's children for success in school and life, while ensuring each child's well-being.
2. **Equity-Focused** – We acknowledge, address and work to solve the unique challenges facing many children and their families.
3. **Innovative and Continuously Improving** – We are flexible and open and do what is best for children and their families.
4. **Accountable** – We demonstrate that our work truly improves the lives of children and their families.
5. **Strong Stewards** – We demonstrate transparency and sound financial management of public and private funds and we advocate for additional investments in early childhood development and health to address unmet needs.
6. **Diverse and Inclusive** – Our partners, regional council members, staff and Board are essential to the equitable delivery of the mission. We are inclusive and strive to reflect the diversity of our state. We treat everyone with dignity and respect.
7. **Collaborative and Cooperative** – The success of our work depends on others and we maintain a diverse, inclusive and equitable culture of strong collaboration and cooperation both internally and externally.

This report summarizes the FTF State Fiscal Years 2024-2027 (SFY24-27) strategic plan and its extensive two-year development process. FTF is deeply grateful for the time, thoughtfulness and dedication of the many Arizonans who participated in this in-depth planning process. This includes the FTF Board and Strategic Planning Committee, FTF regional council members representing Arizona's rural, urban and tribal communities, as well as state and regional partners. Their commitment and expertise have significantly contributed to the FTF Strategic Plan and FTF's next level of statewide excellence. (See Appendix for full acknowledgements.) In addition, we appreciate all those who submitted public comments during the public comment period. Those comments contributed to this plan and will continue to help inform regional planning as well as the strategic plan implementation phase.

Why a High-Quality Early Childhood System Matters for Arizona

About 90% of a child's brain growth happens before they start kindergarten, and the quality of a child's experiences in their first five years helps shape how their brain develops. Children with positive, nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers – such as high-quality child care and preschool experiences – go on to do better in school and in life. Research shows they're more likely to read at grade level, more likely to graduate from high school and more prepared for college and careers.

Arizona's children face numerous challenges on the path to success. In 2021, of the approximately half-million children under 6 in Arizona:

- 1 in 4 lived in poverty;
- 1 in 6 had two or more adverse early childhood experiences; and
- 2 out of 3 did not attend preschool.

These and other factors may limit the quality early experiences that Arizona children need to do well in school. High-quality early childhood programs give children a solid start in life and a foundation upon which they can build. The individuals and organizations that support children's health and development must work together in order to ensure all of Arizona's children have the opportunity to start school prepared to succeed.

Historical Framework

In 2010, First Things First convened the first Early Childhood Task Force to establish a vision and design a model early childhood system that addressed not just early education, but all facets of young children's health and development. The 2010 Task Force recognized that the model system must be one in which all of Arizona's early childhood partners — including families, early educators, health providers, state agencies, tribes, advocacy organizations, service delivery organizations, philanthropies, faith-based institutions, business representatives, policymakers and others — played a role.

The vision developed by the 2010 Task Force was clear:

All Arizona children by the time they are 5 years old have a solid foundation for success in school and in life because we have worked together to create a family-centered, comprehensive, collaborative and high-quality early childhood system that addresses the child's development, health and early education.

Six Desired Outcomes

The model early childhood system developed in 2010 identified six outcomes that are still relevant today. When the early childhood system is successful, everyone will benefit from living in communities where:

1

All children have access to high-quality, culturally responsive early care and education that promotes their development.

2

All early childhood education and health professionals are well-prepared, highly-skilled and compensated based on their education and experience.

3

All children have access to high-quality preventive and continuous health care, including physical, mental, oral and nutritional health.

4

All families have the information, services and supports they need to help their children achieve their fullest potential.

5

All Arizonans understand the importance of the early years and the impact of early childhood development, health and education on Arizona's quality of life. As a result, they substantially support — both politically and financially — a model system that delivers these benefits.

6

The early childhood system is high-quality, centered on children and families, coordinated, integrated and comprehensive.

These six system-level desired outcomes have since guided the collective work of building an effective early childhood system in Arizona. During FTF's comprehensive strategic planning process, these six desired outcomes were the organizing basis for an extensive review of FTF's past and current work.

FTF SFY24-27 Strategic Planning Process

Figure 1.



The FTF strategic planning process spanned two years and was completed in six phases. The first phase identified the need to more clearly define FTF’s priorities and more explicitly link FTF’s work at the regional, state and systems level. This, in turn, would allow FTF’s contributions to system-level outcomes to be more clearly identified.

The most intensive phase of the planning process was the work of 13 Strategy Area Review groups that included Board members, regional council members and system partners with expertise in the particular area of focus from across the state (see Appendix for full participant list). The work of these Strategy Area Review groups spanned a period of nine months — from September 2020 to May 2021. Each group completed an in-depth SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of current FTF efforts. This analysis included a review of:

- work being done at the statewide and regional levels, including programmatic strategies as well as systems building work;
- the impact and effectiveness of systems building and programmatic strategies;
- the alignment of current programmatic strategies and systems building work with the FTF state statutes.

In addition, the groups conducted an external scan to identify other entities’ responsibilities and authority in the strategy area and current partner efforts. The groups also examined the effectiveness of FTF work in their assigned area, including implementation challenges. Finally, the groups considered best practice opportunities, including potential innovative practices and alternative approaches.

The chart on page 7 aligns the 13 strategy areas that were reviewed with the six desired early childhood system outcomes identified by the 2010 Early Childhood Taskforce.

Six Desired System Outcomes



13 Strategy Area Review Groups



As a final Strategy Area Assessment step, each strategy area was evaluated using a consistent assessment process to elevate opportunities for enhancement and improvement and determine recommended actions for the new strategic plan.

These recommendations for each of the 13 strategy areas were then reviewed by FTF regional council leaders from throughout the state in a series of virtual meetings in September through November 2021. Regional council feedback from these discussions were reviewed by the state Board’s Strategic Planning Committee, which made final recommendations to the full Board.

In addition to the review of the FTF mission, vision and values by the state Board, strategic plan guiding principles were developed as well as an FTF Equity Vision statement. These principles, as well as FTF’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, were elevated throughout the strategic planning process and will continue to be prioritized during the implementation of the plan.

Strategic Plan Guiding Principles

The following Guiding Principles shape the implementation of FTF's SFY24-27 Strategic Plan. This is the framework through which all objectives and actions should be pursued, viewed and understood.

1. With an emphasis on the whole child, FTF will serve Arizona's children:
 - birth to age 5, and their families and caregivers;
 - across diverse socio-economic, geographic, cultural, and educational backgrounds;
 - with a priority on lower socio-economic, at-risk children and their families; and
 - a focus on the cognitive, physical, health, and social and emotional well-being of each child.
2. FTF's Board in conjunction with Regional Partnership Councils will continue to partner to:
 - equitably and effectively serve both urban and rural communities;
 - collaborate with state agencies and tribal nations; and
 - foster public/private collaboration and collective impact.
3. FTF will continue to lead the early childhood system, with a focus to:
 - leverage its subject matter expertise across the state;
 - convene and align stakeholder partners; and
 - position for sustainable equitable statewide future funding
4. FTF will foster a data-informed approach, that:
 - continuously improves programs and strategies; and
 - actively promotes a more vibrant data sharing network amongst our partners.

First Things First Equity Vision Statement

Advancing equity is essential to First Things First's mission and we aspire to embody our vision for diversity, equity and inclusion through all facets of our work.

To be effective partners and contribute to a world in which Arizona's children birth to age 5 of all backgrounds have access to high-quality early childhood experiences, we must create and maintain an equitable workplace, work in partnership with the communities we serve and ensure that our funding practices align with our equity-centered values, particularly focusing on those who are most in need.

First Things First recognizes the pervasive inequities historically and currently faced by the Black, Indigenous and Latino communities and all people of color, and we strive for a world in which they will thrive. We also recognize that individuals and groups have been marginalized due to factors such as race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, mental and physical ability, national origin, income, language and religious affiliation and that people of color are particularly affected across these factors. We commit to increasing our understanding about these and all matters that create inequities and to bettering our actions internally and among the communities we serve.

This important work starts from within. As such, we strive to cultivate and maintain a workplace that:

- Reflects the diversity of our state within all levels of the organization (i.e., staff, leadership, regional partnership councils and state Board)
- Cultivates a community in which all members are welcome, seen, heard and valued
- Supports and expects each individual to engage in candid, introspective learning about equity and inclusion
- Engages an intentionally diverse, representative set of voices in key decision-making, centering on the voices of families and the community whenever possible
- Employs equitable workplace practices that yield high satisfaction, morale and career success consistently across all demographic groups
- Responds swiftly to address workplace inequities
- Ensures that our work as a funding organization – from planning to implementation to assessment – reflects our commitment to equity

Through our DEI strategic priorities and individual growth, we will be better able to meet the needs of Arizona's youngest children, serve as a trusted ally for equity and fulfill our vision that all Arizona's children are ready to succeed in school and in life.



FTF Strategic Direction: The Next Level of FTF Excellence

As an essential leader and partner in helping to build an effective early childhood system in Arizona, FTF recognizes the opportunity with this SFY24-27 Strategic Plan to focus collective efforts for maximum impact while honoring the local flexibility and decision-making that has been the hallmark of the FTF shared governance model.

The FTF Board committed to an FTF-centric strategic plan that:

- is clear, concise, data-informed, equity- and outcome-focused ensuring equity in all FTF's work;
- coordinates, collaborates and seeks to achieve collective impact with other state agencies;
- includes appropriate metrics for informative and accountability purposes; and
- provides a path for a more stable and sustainable funding structure.

As this plan is finalized in early 2022, it is important to acknowledge the rapidly shifting external context and potential changes that may arise between now and when the implementation of the plan begins in SFY24 (July 1, 2023). Recognizing that federal or state government decisions over the next 18 months may impact the implementation of this Strategic Plan, the FTF Board has taken care to include as much flexibility as possible, while still providing guidance and direction as FTF regional partnership councils develop regional funding plans for SFY24-27. This will help to ensure alignment of regional funding plans with the FTF Strategic Plan.

One fundamental direction for the FTF Strategic Plan is establishing statewide priorities in order to best ensure statewide sustainability of FTF's early childhood programs and services. About 94% of FTF annual revenue comes from tobacco taxes, which have been declining steadily since the agency's inception. As FTF faces expected ongoing dramatic declines in tobacco tax revenues – SFY30 estimated revenues are expected to be less than 41% of baseline SFY08 revenues which is about \$67 million less per year – this Strategic Plan seeks to focus declining resources for maximum impact.

This Strategic Plan focuses on FTF's unique role in achieving outcomes that have a positive impact on Arizona's youngest children. One organization cannot do this alone and FTF remains committed to collaborate with partners to ensure the equitable and effective support of the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of young children. This Strategic Plan focuses on FTF's unique role in achieving outcomes that have a positive impact on Arizona's youngest children.

FTF SFY24-27 Strategic Plan Direction

The in-depth analysis of FTF's current 13 strategy areas led the FTF state Board to prioritize six strategy areas. The FTF SFY24-27 six priority strategy areas were selected based on the FTF vision, mission, statutory objectives as well as FTF's unique role, other organizations' roles and areas of need which are not already the responsibility of another agency. The prioritized six strategy areas include:

1. Quality First
2. Access to Quality Care
3. Professional Development for Early Childhood Education Professionals
4. Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years
5. Educating Families and Caregivers
6. Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

These six strategy areas currently account for 85% of FTF funding statewide and include the FTF strategies below (see diagram). The seven non-prioritized strategy areas including health-related areas are still available for FTF regions to invest in and are discussed in this document on pages 30-41.

Desired System Outcomes

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Access to high-quality, culturally responsive early care and education

Quality First

- Quality First
- Quality First Program Assessment
- Quality First Coaching and Incentives
- QF Licensing Subsidy

Access to Quality Care

- Quality First Scholarships
- Start-up Expansion and Learning Lab

Information, services and support for families

Educating Families and Caregivers

- Home Visitation
- Parenting Education
- Family, Friend and Neighbor Care
- Language, Literacy and Culture in Tribal Communities
- Community Based Language and Literacy

Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

- Family Resource Centers
- Helpline
- Family Support Coordination
- Home Visitation Coordinated Referral System
- Service Coordination

Well-prepared, highly skilled and appropriately compensated professionals

Professional Development for ECE Professionals

- Registry and College Scholarships
- Professional Development of ECE Professionals
- Child Care Health Consultation
- Language, Communication and Literacy in Early Care and Education Settings
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
- Quality First Academy

Public understanding and support

Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years

- Community Outreach
- Community Awareness
- Media
- Parent Kit

The FTF state Board has established the following SFY24-27 Strategic Plan Foundational Guidance and Strategic Priorities. The guidance and priorities reflect the Board's desire to balance collective focus with maximum impact, while recognizing that individual regions may also have unique considerations.

Foundational Guidance #1

Setting statewide priorities for the work of FTF is necessary in order to achieve greater impact, yet the Board appreciates the need to maintain flexibility for individual FTF regions to address unique local considerations, needs and opportunities. In order to balance statewide collective impact with local flexibility:

1. Regions shall fund strategy areas in accordance with FTF state Board funding priorities and their regional needs and assets reports, with a recommendation that each region allocate at least 80% of regional funding to the six prioritized strategy areas.
2. If there is no regional need for certain strategies within the Board-identified priority areas, or if lack of capacity within the region prevents implementing services within the prioritized strategy areas, the region should present this information and context within its proposed funding plan.
3. If the region does not meet the recommended funding level for the Board-identified priorities, then the regional funding plan should include data from the regional needs and assets report, as well as information from the regional strategic planning process, that supports funding other local priorities.
4. When funding strategies outside the Board-identified priorities, if there are public system partners who hold primary responsibility in that area, the regional funding plan should describe how the region will engage those partners to increase system-wide accountability.
5. In recognition of FTF's commitment to equity and its prioritization of under-resourced and underserved children and their families, FTF regions shall include a description of how their funding plan promotes equity and support of under-resourced and underserved children and their families.

Foundational Guidance #2

The Board has also provided foundational direction in relation to Quality First, FTF's signature program which works to improve the quality of early care and education for infants, toddlers and preschoolers in Arizona.

Through Quality First, FTF has created an effective and recognized quality improvement infrastructure and standard for early childhood education in Arizona. In recognition of the significant importance of Quality First and the need for FTF to continue its leadership role in this area:

1. The Board will pursue a systems-wide, statewide goal to achieve 70% participation of licensed and regulated child care programs in Quality First at some level. This will be a long-term goal and will necessarily include additional potential funding streams other than FTF.
2. To help achieve this scale, the Board is committed to offering FTF regions more flexibility in order to maintain quality early education in the most cost-efficient manner. This means ensuring that the model allows some choice of varying levels of support for Quality First participants, which can also increase responsiveness to the varying needs of participants.
3. The model may allow for moving participants between levels of support based on progress in achieving and maintaining quality ratings.
4. While providing FTF regions this greater flexibility, yet still encouraging movement toward the statewide Quality First scale goal, the Board will continue requiring a "floor" for investment in Quality First. The floor will be the percentage of funding a region allotted to Quality First in SFY20.

Foundational Guidance #3

Finally, the Board has provided foundational direction in relation to Quality First Scholarships, which help more children access quality child care. In the interest of providing greater flexibility to FTF regions, new participants in Quality First will not be automatically guaranteed child care scholarships. Instead, FTF regions will be able to choose if vacated slots will or will not receive scholarships when refilled with a new participant. This would also be the case for newly created Quality First slots. Per existing Board policy, FTF regions can continue to target scholarships based on age bands and/or ZIP code. Additionally, FTF will continue to require that the base distribution model be fully funded for scholarship-eligible participants with star ratings 3 and above before being able to fund access at the 2-star rating level.

FTF as a Partner in Systems Building Efforts

The FTF Strategic Plan prioritizes six strategy areas and the corresponding FTF programmatic and systems building strategies that are included in those areas. However, while programmatic funding is targeted largely to these areas, FTF should continue to play an important role in systems building efforts in all strategy areas. The following pages outline the strategic direction for each of the 13 strategy areas. Many objectives focus specifically on increasing systems building efforts.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #1

Quality First

Desired System Outcomes

Access to high-quality, culturally responsive early care and education

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Quality First

- Quality First
- Quality First Program Assessment
- Quality First Coaching and Incentives
- QF Licensing Subsidy

Context:

The quality of early learning environments can have a profound effect during the first five years of life. Longitudinal studies spanning more than 40 years demonstrate that quality care and education from birth to age 5 results in higher IQ scores, higher graduation rates and lower crime rates. Young children with high-quality early experiences have been shown to have increased vocabulary; better language, math and social skills; more positive relationships with classmates; and higher scores on school readiness assessments. In short, these children are better prepared for school.

FTF created Quality First — Arizona’s Quality Improvement and Rating System — to establish a unified, measurable standard of care, to inform parents on providers’ proximity to that standard, to improve quality and to promote school readiness. Quality First participating providers receive supports to improve and maintain the quality of their programs. These supports include five individualized components: coaching with individualized guidance and support based on the needs of the provider; assessment leading to a Quality Star rating; financial incentives to remove barriers to achieving quality; a specialized assistance base package which includes access to child care health consultation; and finally, professional development support.

Investments in Quality First are showing results as participants continue to significantly improve the quality of early learning options available to Arizona’s families. When programs were first rated (2013), 25% of 857 participating rated providers met or exceeded quality standards (3- to 5-star rated). Over the past seven years, both participation and quality levels have improved. In 2020, 79% of 1,016 participating rated providers met or exceeded quality standards.

As the FTF signature program, Quality First is always undergoing improvements. A Quality First Advisory Committee (made up of Quality First providers) offers wisdom, guidance and input into operational programmatic improvements. In addition, a national research panel provides guidance for research and ongoing evaluation studies that impact Quality First as a tiered-rating and improvement system. To date, FTF has commissioned three phases of Quality First evaluation.

Quality First provides quality regulated early care and education settings to about 44,000 children annually through the 3- to 5-star programs currently in Quality First (over 65,000 children if you include programs working on quality improvement). However, it is clear that there is more work to be done. Currently, only 35% of the total number of regulated early care and education programs in the state participate in Quality First. While this does not include an anticipated up to 800 additional providers that will be added to Quality First through federal pandemic relief funds, there is no plan to sustain these providers in the program once that funding ends. As noted in Foundational Guidance #2 above, FTF will pursue a systems-wide, statewide goal to achieve 70% participation of licensed and regulated child care programs in Quality First at some level. This will be a long-term goal and will necessarily include potential funding streams other than FTF. Objective #3 below aligns with that goal.

Strategy Area Direction:

From a programmatic and systems perspective, FTF has created significant and effective infrastructure in early childhood education quality improvement and has a unique role in this work.

It is imperative that FTF continue its leadership role in early childhood education quality improvement.

OBJECTIVES:

1. FTF will continue to refine the Quality First package as it is robust in terms of incentives and support no matter what an individual provider's needs may be. This offers an opportunity to develop more flexible, differentiated levels of support that can decrease the Quality First package cost and thus expand the ability to support more participants. This will also allow differentiated levels of support based on a provider's actual needs rather than a one-size-fits-all model. A variety of adjustments can be made, including setting coaching hours based on need and star rating level, adjusting incentives to provide greater support to programs with lower star ratings and extending time frames between assessments for programs at higher star ratings.
2. FTF will use Research and Evaluation products, and feedback from the National Advisory Panel, to continue to refine and improve the Quality First model (e.g., consider strengthening the role of fidelity to curriculum implementation and child-level assessment in the Quality First model).
3. FTF will focus systems building efforts on these areas:
 - a. Working with partners, including state and local governments, to build and expand funding to support quality improvement for early care and education.
 - b. Partnering with child care providers to help build their capacity in effective business practices.
 - c. Continuing to identify areas for collaboration to maximize resources and impact.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #2

Access to Quality Care

Desired System Outcomes

Access to high-quality, culturally responsive early care and education

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Access to Quality Care

- Quality First Scholarships
- Start-up Expansion and Learning Lab

Context:

The need for investment in this area is directly linked to poverty and achievement. In Arizona, 1 in 4 young children live in poverty and only 1 out of 3 attend preschool. While Arizona is improving in other measures of educational attainment (third graders reading proficiently has increased to 46%, eighth graders proficient at math and high school graduation rates are holding steady, and college attainment is up to 46%), the state is actually getting worse when it comes to children with access to high-quality early learning (down to 22%), based on the Arizona Progress Meter.

It is clear that work in the area of access to quality early learning must include system partners and other opportunities outside of FTF. However, even with the support of current statewide system partners, access to regulated early care and education settings for children living in households where all adults work outside of the home is, at best, reaching 26% of those who likely need access. For families that are not able to afford quality early care and education, tuition support for access is even more limited at 13% (66,887) of the total number of children birth to age 5.

Through Quality First Scholarships, FTF has been able to help over 8,000 children in low-income families to access child care annually.

Quality First Scholarships were started as emergency scholarships in 2009 when the recession resulted in the elimination of state General Fund support for child care subsidies (approximately \$60 to \$80 million per year). This left many families without access to child care. The state funding has never been fully restored (the current General Fund investment in child care subsidies is \$7 million per year within the Arizona Department of Child Safety budget). Quality First Scholarships also were intended to support families up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) who would not qualify for the federally funded subsidies (whose current eligibility is up to 165% FPL for DES child care assistance, and 100% FPL for Head Start).

Child care deserts in Arizona are areas where children cannot reasonably access any type of early care and education, let alone quality care. The Bipartisan Policy Center estimates that 25.2% of the children in Arizona who have a potential need for child care cannot reasonably access child care by driving, which the Center calls a child care gap. However, when looking at the gap between rural and urban parts of the state, we see 37.3% versus 23.1%, respectively. Over the past seven years, FTF has helped fund the start up or expansion of 27 programs. Of all the programs that have started up or expanded, the majority of them are still in operation and have achieved a quality rating level of 3- to 5-stars.

Strategy Area Direction:

Increasing children’s access to quality early learning is highly important for FTF, with a greater focus needed on systems building efforts.

FTF will refine child care scholarships to prioritize children with the greatest need and focus on coordination/collaboration opportunities that address systemic issues, such as affordability, child care deserts and lack of infant and toddler care.

OBJECTIVES:

1. With potential changes in federal and/or state funding to help address access to quality child care, FTF will be responsive to system changes and refine its approach accordingly in order to address gaps in the system. A focus will be on children with the greatest need, such as the infant and toddler population and families who do not qualify for Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) subsidy, for example.
2. In order to maximize resources and increase parental choice for families who qualify for child care subsidies, FTF will work with DES and providers to increase the number of providers that receive FTF child care scholarships to also be contracted with DES.
3. FTF will fund efforts and/or partner with external experts to help leverage funding sources that address the child care infrastructure, including child care deserts. FTF will partner with business and government entities to expand access to quality early childhood education, such as providing information, establishing defined infrastructure, etc.
4. FTF will support efforts to increase demand for quality early education by increasing awareness about the value and impact of quality early education.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #3

Educating Families and Caregivers

Desired System Outcomes

Information, services and support for families

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Educating Families and Caregivers

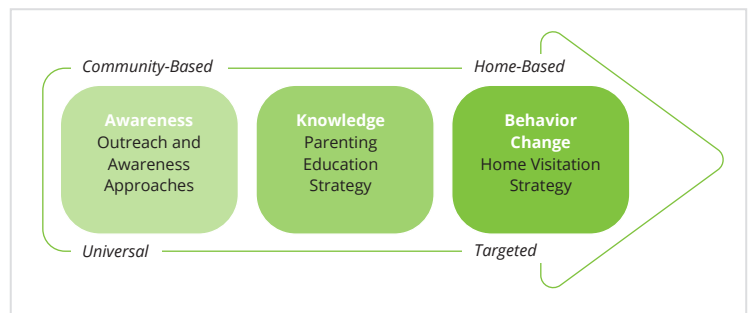
- Home Visitation
- Parenting Education
- Family, Friend and Neighbor Care
- Language, Literacy and Culture in Tribal Communities
- Community Based Language and Literacy

Context:

Research shows that parents, caregivers and families who provide positive and responsive relationships support optimal brain development during a child's early years and promote better social, physical, academic and economic outcomes later in life. Knowledge of positive parenting practices and child development is also one of five key protective factors that improve child outcomes and reduce the incidents of child abuse and neglect.

The family support approaches used by FTF fall along a continuum to meet the varying needs and preferences of families. As depicted in this image, the services offered by FTF increase in intensity, frequency and duration, addressing universal needs of all families of young children to very targeted needs of specific populations of families and caregivers. The image also depicts the impact of these approaches from building awareness to increasing knowledge to promoting behavior change.

First Things First — An Impact Model for Family Support Strategies



FTF is the primary public funder of parenting outreach and awareness as well as parenting education programs in the state. FTF is creating a new programmatic strategy within the Educating Families and Caregivers Strategy area, titled Community Based Language and Literacy Strategy. This will ensure a focused effort on this important role of parenting education in supporting language and early literacy. FTF will invest in parenting education models that meet local needs and are designed to increase evidenced-based language and literacy practices within the home and strengthen family literacy routines and community connections.

In addition, in recognition of the important need to support Native American children and families in their connection to their native language and culture, the former Native Language Preservation Strategy is now titled Language, Literacy and Culture in Tribal Communities Strategy. This new title better reflects the intent of this work and will help FTF continue to ensure that programs are effective for these communities.

Another new focus within this strategy area is addressing the needs of Family, Friend and Neighbor care providers within this area as a caregiver education approach. This shift is a recognition that the majority of these caregivers are not interested in becoming certified educators and allows a new approach to supporting them.

In regards to the most intensive approach — home visitation — FTF also plays an essential role as the largest single funder of this proven prevention strategy. Investments in home visiting programs come from a mix of federal and state funding, including funding from FTF, the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) (with federal funding from the federal Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) Program), the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS), some of Arizona's tribes and nations, and Arizona Early Head Start grantees. Of the approximately \$40 million invested statewide in home visitation programs, FTF contributes slightly more than half of this total investment.

Recent analysis of families served through FTF-funded home visitation services shows that FTF is serving the target population of high-risk families. Outcome data of FTF-funded programs demonstrated there is a diverse representation of families enrolled in home visitation services, in terms of families' race and ethnicity, and other important characteristics (e.g. teen parents, single-parents, parents with less than high school education and families living in poverty). This evidence that FTF is effectively serving under-resourced and underserved families through home visitation is a positive success on which to build.

Strategy Area Direction:

As the primary public funder of parenting education programs and the largest single funder of home visitation programs in the state, FTF has an important role to play in educating families and caregivers. FTF will focus on targeting the populations served so that more under-resourced and underserved children and families are reached. In addition, FTF will continue to improve program implementation and infrastructure – including data collection to ensure effective measurement – to better meet the diverse needs of families throughout the state.

Along with a focus on providing effective parenting education programs and services, FTF will continue systems building efforts in this area and collaborate with local partners to refine parenting support approaches.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Families need to be reached in ways that are responsive to environmental conditions, so FTF will research virtual parenting education models that are backed by evidence and/or promising practice and consider adopting these models where appropriate.
2. In alignment with FTF's equity vision, home visitation will be targeted to those families most in need. FTF will also explore home visitation models and recommend improvements with a focus on cultural relevance, retention of both families and staff and consider evidence-informed and/or promising practice approaches.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #4

Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

Desired System Outcomes

Information, services and support for families

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

- Family Resource Centers
- Helpline
- Family Support Coordination
- Home Visitation Coordinated Referral System
- Service Coordination

Context:

FTF's work in the navigating and connecting families to resources area serves to provide information about programs and services and to increase coordination of early childhood development and health programs. In addition, this area serves to increase the availability of and access to high-quality family support services for families with young children and link families to other resources and supports to meet their needs.

The approaches in this area have one or more of these intended outcomes:

- increase access to services, resources and information
- help families enroll in services
- identify local needs and opportunities
- increase awareness of available services, for both families and local providers supporting families
- promote the Protective Factors Framework*, which defines five characteristics that have been recognized to promote family well-being and help families navigate difficult situations such as social connections and concrete support
- provide families opportunities that result in positive change
- provide systems building benefits such as increased collaboration and reduced redundancy

* The Center for the Study of Social Policy developed *Strengthening Families: A Protective Factors Framework* which recognizes five characteristics that have been shown to make positive outcomes more likely for young children and their families: 1. Parental Resilience, 2. Social Connections, 3. Concrete Supports, 4. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, 5. Social and Emotional Competence of Children.

Families have diverse needs and must be connected with services that meet their individual needs, so programs and services in this area make an effort to identify the specific needs of families in their communities. This is most obviously observed in the Family Resource Centers Strategy, a strategy that requires programming to be built around the specific needs of families living within an identified community.

Through approaches such as the Home Visitation Coordinated Referral Strategy, the Service Coordination Strategy, communities of practice and coalition building, many communities have come to know FTF as a trusted leader in local system-level work relating to coordination and collaboration. This work reduces competition and duplication, ensures that quality services are provided, helps families connect to appropriate services more quickly and assists providers to work more efficiently.

Strategy Area Direction:

Navigating and connecting families to resources is very impactful where infrastructure exists to support the work and where levels of trust are strong. FTF will continue programmatic efforts and increase engagement of partners in helping families to navigate and connect to resources and will explore opportunities to improve how outcome data can be shared among partners.

OBJECTIVES:

1. FTF will collaborate with partners to increase families' access to supports and services. This includes, for example, replicating community-based partnerships that have resulted in successful family resource centers in under-served communities, particularly in rural areas.
2. FTF will support efforts to coordinate resource and referral systems with partners. This will ensure that, no matter where families enter the system, they will receive consistent navigation support that meets their needs.
3. FTF will examine opportunities to leverage Arizona's new statewide closed-loop referral system. This system is designed to connect health care and community service providers to streamline the referral process, foster easier access to vital services and provide confirmation when social services are delivered.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #5

Professional Development for ECE Professionals

Desired System Outcomes

Well-prepared, highly skilled and appropriately compensated professionals

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Professional Development for ECE Professionals

- Registry and College Scholarships
- Professional Development of ECE Professionals
- Child Care Health Consultation
- Language, Communication and Literacy in Early Care and Education Settings
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
- Quality First Academy

Context:

FTF's investment in professional development of early care and education professionals reflects FTF's statutory charge to "provide training and support to early childhood development providers." The intent is to create a stronger, highly-skilled workforce. However, the breadth and scope of approaches in this area is wide and made even more complex by the diverse needs of the workforce.

There is a continual need for high-quality professional development along a continuum of opportunities that address both the pre-service and in-service professional/provider. Professional development needs are typically organized through formal coursework (in some cases leading to degrees or teaching certificates) and community-based offerings.

Workforce requirements for early care and education professionals are minimal in Arizona. Child care licensure only requires a teacher/caregiver to have a high school diploma or a GED. It is important to note that people enter the early childhood field from any number of pathways, but they all require continued education in order to support children in their learning and development.

The responsibility for early care and education professional development is distributed among state agencies. As the funder of the statewide AZ Early Childhood Workforce Registry, FTF plays a critical role in convening a statewide Professional Development Work Group (PDWG), bringing together agencies and key partners. This group seeks to ensure that professional development covers the continuum of needs and ensures a scope and sequence for developing a skilled workforce. Other government agencies offering and/or developing professional development include:

- Department of Economic Security: Both the Child Care Administration and the Arizona Early Intervention Program (AzEIP) contract with local agencies to provide targeted professional development for identified populations.
- Arizona Department of Education: This agency develops the commonly recognized state standards for infants/toddlers and children ages 3-5. The agency also develops Program Guidelines for High Quality and other training to support the implementation of the standards.
- Institutes of Higher Education: The three state universities, private colleges such as Grand Canyon University, community colleges and tribal colleges provide classes, certificates and degrees for early care and education professionals.

The professional development system must address a wide range of pedagogical needs. However, there is an opportunity to focus the work of FTF, especially as other agencies listed above already address a range of needs. Other agencies and partners can best provide “nuts and bolts” basic information that is required for state licensing. FTF can focus on helping professionals who directly care for young children to better apply newly-learned theories in their day-to-day teaching practices. Building on FTF’s current role in the statewide professional development workgroup, FTF has begun focusing more in the area of pedagogy and teaching practices. One approach is to move from one-time training events and content creation to offering training that encourages professionals to apply what they are learning.

Strategies such as the Child Care Health Consultation Strategy and the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Strategy help to provide continual support to professionals within their work environment and to build their skills in addressing the health and social emotional well-being of children in their care. There are significant barriers to the completion of formal coursework and degree attainment, and many professionals are not interested or may find higher education is inaccessible in their rural or tribal community. In addition, there is a lack of data tracking in this area to even assess how many College Scholarship recipients remain in the early care field. Considering all of these impediments, including low compensation levels, it makes sense for FTF to address retention in new ways.

Strategy Area Direction:

Professional development is one of FTF's most important strategic areas, and FTF will continue to focus on achieving effective implementation through programmatic, state and local partner approaches. FTF will focus on helping existing professionals to learn and apply best practices to improve child outcomes through a variety of theory-to-practice methodologies.

OBJECTIVES:

1. FTF will shift the FTF professional development approaches from basic information that is already covered by others to instead focus more in the area of pedagogy and teaching practices. This focus will include promoting behavioral change of early care professionals that then leads to lasting change that impacts the children in their care. For example, offering ongoing, sequential professional development in the science of reading rather than one-time conferences and stand-alone professional development sessions is a more effective approach. FTF will focus on non-duplicative professional development options that target these areas: evidence-based curriculum, child assessment, infant and toddler care, social-emotional development, language and literacy and business practices. In addition, target professional development options at infant/toddler providers and/or 1- and 2-Star Quality First providers.
2. FTF will continue to enhance and refine the Workforce Registry collaborating with system partner to increase effectiveness.
3. FTF will work with system partners to consider new approaches to workforce retention which have measurable outcomes and are non-duplicative.
4. FTF will target bachelor's level degrees within the College Scholarships Strategy to center directors and other instructional leads while continuing to support Child Development Associate (CDA) and associate degree attainment with all other levels of professionals.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #6

Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years

Desired System Outcomes

Public understanding and support

Prioritized Strategy Areas and Included FTF Strategies

Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years

- Community Outreach
- Community Awareness
- Media
- Parent Kit

Context:

FTF's work in building awareness aligns to its statutorily-permitted objective to increase public information about the importance of early childhood development and health. In addition, the work addresses the objective to offer information, support and education to parents and families and increase parents' access to information about early childhood programs funded by FTF. Based on these two audiences for awareness-building — parents/caregivers and the general public — building public awareness impacts individual behavior as well as the broader objective of building an effective early childhood system. For parents/caregivers, awareness is the first step to engaging in programs or behaviors that support their child's health and development. For the general public, information and awareness is the first step in taking positive action in support of young children. This could include a range of actions — from influencing their personal networks to actively encouraging community leaders to support services for young children.

No single communications approach will achieve all awareness-building goals, therefore, FTF uses integrated approaches that complement and reinforce each other. This range of communications approaches ensure that diverse audiences are reached more effectively across multiple mediums in diverse communities, including remote rural areas where awareness opportunities may be limited, as well as heavily-populated areas where a crowded market increases the competition for attention.

FTF approaches within this Building Awareness area include:

- Community Outreach
- Community Awareness
- Paid Media
- Parent Kit
- Digital Content
- Social Media
- Earned Media
- Strategic Messaging and Branding
- Content Partnerships

FTF is one of the only Arizona-based organizations with the scale to implement awareness-building on the importance of the early years statewide. FTF is often relied upon by other organizations to provide focused messaging and marketing specifically on early childhood in the state.

Awareness-building is expansive, yet efficiency requires targeting audiences in order to make the best use of limited resources. For example, as the Parent Kit is considered under a new focus as an awareness-building approach, FTF has the opportunity to determine what elements are most effective with this target audience of parents of newborns. In addition, there is an opportunity to consider the balance of funding through statewide funds with regional funds and determine if improvements are needed in the funding structure of this area.

Strategy Area Direction:

Building awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health among parents/caregivers and the general public is an area where FTF plays a vital and unique role due to its organizational mission as well as the scale and reach of FTF's efforts.

FTF will continue using integrated, comprehensive approaches to reach multiple audiences statewide with a focus on employing social media and other innovative approaches to reach today's parents/caregivers.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Target specific audiences within the general public — especially those who work directly with families — in all awareness tactics where possible, e.g., targeting early childhood oral health messaging to dentists through social media.
2. Balance cohesive statewide messaging and strategy implementation with regional customization. For example, create concentrated messaging campaigns in which all areas of the state participate while also providing tools and resources for regions that have a particular awareness focus, such as an oral health messaging toolkit.

OTHER STRATEGY AREAS

STRATEGY AREA

Language and Literacy

(Note: This strategy area reviewed systems building efforts as well as programmatic strategies which are embedded within two other strategy areas: Educating Families and Caregivers and Professional Development for ECE Professionals. For strategic direction and objectives related to those programmatic strategies, please refer to the Educating Families and Caregivers section and Professional Development for ECE Professionals section. Strategic direction and objectives related to book distribution and systems building efforts are listed below and are not prioritized).

Context:

According to ExcelinEd (2016), lack of reading proficiency is both an education and an economic problem. Nationally, students who are not reading proficiently in third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school. To achieve third-grade reading success, children need to be on track from the time they start school. Research shows that children entering kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed in school rarely read proficiently by third grade. Intentional investments in language and literacy may also provide a unique opportunity for tribal communities. Language, culture, the home and community environment allow children to know who they are and form the basis for constructing knowledge.

Intentional attention and investment in language and literacy is a well-documented need in Arizona. In 2020, the Arizona Department of Education determined that based on a common assessment (Teaching Strategies Gold Formative Assessment) only 52.83% of the assessed students entering kindergarten reached literacy benchmark levels that met or exceeded expectations for their age group. Secondly, only 61.11% met or exceeded language benchmarks for their age group. Intentional language and literacy experiences in the birth to age 5 are essential to building reading skills. Gaps in literacy can begin as early as 18 months of age and, if not intentionally addressed, will compound over time and lead to an inability to reach reading benchmarks by third grade. In Arizona, only 46% of third graders passed the English Language Arts Assessment, the AzM2, in 2019.

In Arizona, various early literacy efforts occur through the work of local community non-profit organizations, Read On Arizona communities statewide, schools, family resource centers, municipalities, and philanthropic foundations. FTF serves as a collaborative partner in early literacy initiatives through systems building work at the regional and statewide levels.

While the programmatic strategies reviewed in this strategy area are actually embedded with two other strategy areas — Educating Families and Caregivers and Professional Development for ECE Professionals — this separate review within a stand-alone strategy area was intentional to highlight the importance of this work. To ensure the level of services move beyond awareness and impact behavior change, there are opportunities to use evidence-based or evidence-informed programs for family education. In addition, within professional development, there is an opportunity to increase training in the science of reading so that professionals can implement evidence-based, effective strategies.

Strategy Area Direction:

FTF has invested considerable human resources in developing an infrastructure around early literacy support - including playing a foundational role in the creation and implementation of Read On Arizona from both the statewide and local perspective. FTF will create a specific programmatic strategy in this area in order to ensure a defined intent with strategies to support it. FTF will pursue opportunities to improve on programmatic, systems building and state partner approaches.

While still providing opportunities to help to build family libraries through book distribution, FTF will place an increased focus on evidence-based programs that promote behavior change for families and providers. These should be culturally-inclusive programs that are informed by the latest knowledge about the science of reading. In addition, a stand-alone strategy area will be created to increase focus within Educating Families and Caregivers.

OBJECTIVE:

1. Along with the programmatic strategies that are included within the areas of Educating Families and Caregivers and Professional Development for ECE Professionals, FTF will increase systems building efforts by collaborating with partners across the continuum from child care to K-3 and beyond, to coordinate efforts and leverage funding.

STRATEGY AREA

Oral Health

Included programmatic strategies: Oral Health Strategy

Context:

The intent of work in this area is to enhance the oral health status of children birth to age 5 who are not yet enrolled in kindergarten. The expected results are: 1) prevention of tooth decay (dental caries); 2) decrease in associated risks for pain and infections; 3) increase in children enrolled in a dental home.

About 16% of children ages 1-5 in Arizona have toothaches, bleeding gums or decayed teeth or cavities, compared to nearly 10% nationally. In 2018, Arizona young children had nearly twice the prevalence of decayed teeth or cavities compared to children nationally (National Children's Health Survey, 2018). Children with poor oral health are more likely than those with good oral health to experience oral pain, miss school and perform poorly in school (American Journal of Public Health, 2011).

Among state agencies, the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) plays the primary role in administering (through its contracted health plans) the provision of preventive and restorative oral health services to young children. The Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) also plays a role, monitoring the prevalence of oral health disease and implementing public health programs aimed at improving oral health outcomes generally. FTF's role focuses on preventive services for young children and pregnant women and improving the oral health system so that it can better meet the needs of young children and pregnant women. FTF has also played a role in augmenting awareness of the need to address the oral health needs of young children.

While in SFY21, 16 FTF regions funded an Oral Health programmatic strategy to conduct screenings and fluoride varnish applications, findings show that 64% of children who received FTF-funded oral health screenings and fluoride varnishes are covered by AHCCCS and were eligible to receive those services as part of their health benefits. In addition, while FTF's contracted providers can be reimbursed by AHCCCS when services are delivered to AHCCCS enrollees, reimbursement is costly for many of FTF's grantees to administer since it is administered through a third party (the Arizona Department of Health Services). Another challenge to programmatic implementation is that 79% of parents/caregivers do not authorize application of fluoride varnish. Most children served by FTF providers receive services in settings without a parent present (but with prior written consent). This makes it difficult to engage parents to build awareness of the importance of fluoride application.

Also, children who are screened by FTF providers often do not receive follow-up services due to difficulties in engaging families. The exception seems to be when screenings occur at a Federally Qualified Health Clinic, where staff can easily schedule follow up appointments for clients.

While there are challenges in programmatic implementation, there are many opportunities in systems building efforts. Some opportunities include: FTF can work with AHCCCS and its oral health plans to address awareness of the AHCCCS oral health benefit since less than half of children covered by AHCCCS use this benefit. FTF can work with system partners to advocate for enhanced coverage, outreach or covered benefits, as well as expand the types of professionals who can provide oral health services, such as fluoride varnish application. FTF can partner with others to create an oral health surveillance system, especially in the area of developing better understanding of access to oral health care in tribal communities where information on oral health needs is especially lacking. FTF can play an expanded role in providing technical assistance to dentists, pediatricians and Federally Qualified Health Centers and school-based health clinics (all of whom can bill for public health coverage when services are rendered to AHCCCS enrollees) in integrating the provision of oral health services for young children into their practices.

Strategy Area Direction:

FTF will place a greater emphasis on systems building rather than programmatic approaches to reduce duplication since a vast majority of young children in Arizona have oral health coverage, either through AHCCCS or a private provider.

FTF will emphasize more systems building approaches to improving oral health, targeting programmatic approaches only where need clearly exists.

OBJECTIVES:

1. FTF will focus on systems building efforts which can include a variety of approaches, for example:
 - a. Work with state partners to improve the collection and analysis of oral health data.
 - b. Partner to improve access to oral health care through teledentistry (being mindful of barriers that may exist in some communities) and efforts to expand oral health wellness.
 - c. Work with partners to seek policy changes that expand access to oral health coverage for pregnant women and in other areas that address access-to-care challenges.
 - d. Collaborate to build awareness of the need to address oral health for young children/ pregnant women and of the availability of AHCCCS coverage.
2. FTF will support pediatric and oral health providers to connect to families with young children and to build their capacity to serve young children.
3. FTF will focus on those lacking oral health coverage and focus on connecting families to a dental home in areas where need clearly exists for a programmatic approach.

STRATEGY AREA

Identifying and Addressing Developmental Concerns

Included programmatic strategies: Developmental and Sensory Screening Strategy

Context:

From birth to age 5, children reach certain milestones in how they play, learn, speak, behave and move. While each child is unique and will develop at his or her own pace, developmental milestones give a general idea of what typical development looks like and what is reasonable to expect as a child grows. A child who consistently does not meet the guideposts of healthy development may have a developmental delay. Developmental delays can be a sign that a child needs additional support in order to meet developmental milestones, or a sign of a potential lifelong issue that could significantly impact a child's long-term learning and well-being (developmental disability). Surveillance of a child's healthy development — including regular, quality developmental screenings and referral for further assessment and follow-up services, as warranted — ensures that any potential learning and development issues are identified early enough for the child to get the maximum benefit of intervention services and supports. Early intervention treatments and therapies have the highest success rates when they are provided to children as early as possible in their development. And, children at risk for delays who are screened are more likely to receive early intervention services than unscreened peers. Without routine screening, only an estimated 30% of children with developmental issues are identified before they reach kindergarten.

The Arizona Early Intervention Program (AzEIP) — housed within the Department of Economic Security (DES) — is Arizona's statewide interagency system of services and supports for families of infants and toddlers, birth to age 3, with significant developmental disabilities or delays.

Responsibilities for implementing the AZEIP program are outlined within an Intergovernmental Agreement between these state agencies: DES, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), and the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (ASDB). Collectively, the agencies align to implement a collaborative, community-based, interagency child identification process to locate, evaluate, assess and identify all infants and toddlers who may be eligible for early intervention services.

In addition, health plans contracted with AHCCCS are required to complete periodic screening of children, and where applicable, refer children to AzEIP. AHCCCS has been working to increase developmental screenings among children who have Medicaid coverage.

AzEIP criteria for determining eligibility are very stringent. In fact, Arizona has one of the highest thresholds for a child birth to age 3 to be considered eligible for these services. A child is considered to be developmentally delayed when s/he has not reached 50% of the developmental milestones expected at her/his chronological age. Children with minimal to moderate concerns struggle to receive services due to the high AzEIP qualifications. In addition, AzEIP receives a high number of referrals of children with mild to moderate delays who will not qualify for services, but is legally bound to assess any child referred, which is not the optimal use of the agency's limited resources. Substantial system coordination is needed to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals, and resources are needed to address the needs of young children with mild to moderate delays not eligible for AzEIP services. FTF co-lead an Early Screening and Interventions Initiative (ESI) collaborative group which included state agencies (ADE, DES, AHCCCS, ADHS and DCS). After several years of work, this State Agency Team identified collaborative goals in areas including coordinated screening, system navigation, services and interventions implementation and professional development implementation.

Strategy Area Direction:

FTF will focus on systems building approaches for greater impact. This will build on the collaborative work that has been growing over the past years. This can also help to increase support for children with mild to moderate delays who do not qualify for AzEIP services, by increasing connections to other available services.

To reduce duplication, FTF will eliminate community-based screening, except in areas of proven need where no other options exist or where required by the program model (as in Home Visitation).

OBJECTIVES:

1. FTF will focus on systems building efforts which can include a variety of approaches, for example:
 - a. Work with AHCCCS/health plans to increase screening rates.
 - b. Help to coordinate screening partners, strengthen screening practices within pediatric settings, complement ChildFind practices in school districts, examine and address causes of duplication, improve training to minimize inappropriate referrals to AzEIP and ChildFind and develop mechanisms for identifying actions taken after a screening.
 - c. Work with system partners to examine the feasibility of expanding AzEIP qualifying criteria.
2. Collaborate with system partners to help build families' understanding of how to recognize developmental concerns and their understanding of resources for children with mild to moderate delays. Consider how family support services, such as family resource centers, can be supportive in this area.

STRATEGY AREA

Health Resource Coordination

Included programmatic strategies: Well Child Family Care Strategy, Care Coordination Strategy

Context:

The intent of this area is twofold. First, it works directly with families of young children who visit health care settings to connect them to health care services and other resources to meet the child and family's needs. Second, the intent is to provide families of young children with information on how best to support their child's development.

Since 94% of families nationally take their children to see a primary care provider annually, health care settings may also be an optimal place to connect families and young children to needed resources and to provide information on how best to meet their child's developmental needs. With the two FTF programmatic strategies in this area, pediatricians can provide "warm handoffs" to care coordinators or developmental specialists embedded in pediatric setting who have extensive knowledge of resources and services available in their communities and are able to match the needs of the child/family to available services and support.

Young children with complex medical needs may also need to have their complex health care needs coordinated. It is estimated through the National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs that 7.6% of children birth to age 5 in Arizona have special health care needs, and nearly one in three Arizona children with special health care needs have an unmet need for health care services (compared to one in four nationally). While some children with special health care needs are eligible for care coordination, that is not the case for all children with developmental delays. Public health insurance (AHCCCS, KidsCare) generally pays for care coordination for only those children who qualify for programs such as the Division of Developmental Disabilities or Children's Rehabilitative Services.

As noted in the Identifying and Addressing Developmental Concerns section above, partners play an important role in health resource coordination and FTF's funded work should complement that work. This requires collaboration and a continued focus on systems building efforts.

Strategy Area Direction:

While FTF may continue to fund current programmatic strategies, systems building efforts can help to expand the limited scope of this area. For example, collaboration efforts can support more pediatricians and other pediatric care clinicians - including those working within community-based health clinics - in connecting families to community supports even if they lack dedicated care coordination staff.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Focus on systems building efforts. For example, identify and foster a common referral network that can help pediatric practices link families to resources. This may include support of the new AHCCCS statewide social determinants of health closed-loop referral system. This referral system, as noted in the Navigating Strategy area, is designed to connect health care and community service providers in order to streamline the referral process, to foster easier access to vital services and to provide confirmation when social services are delivered.
2. Partner with AHCCCS health plans to augment care coordination or developmental support occurring during well-child visits.
3. Increase coordination on screenings for developmental delays and Adverse Childhood Experiences and encourage greater partnership between FTF regions, AHCCCS, AHCCCS health plans and other community partners.

STRATEGY AREA

Nutrition and Physical Activity

Included programmatic strategies: Nutrition, Obesity and Physical Activity (NOPA) Strategy, Food Security Strategy

Context:

Childhood obesity can have serious implications for children's learning, health and overall well-being. Obesity is associated with delayed skill acquisition in children as young as 2 to 3 years old. While it is easy to see the link between eating too much, not exercising enough, and gaining weight, there is another factor that contributes to this growing problem: not eating enough – of the right kinds of food, that is. Some children who are overweight or obese are simply not getting the nutrition they need to grow up healthy.

There are a variety of state and tribal programs that support food security, nutrition education and promotion of physical activity for young children and their families. Among these are: WIC, SNAP (formerly food stamps); Head Start and Early Head Start programs; state and tribal programs addressing breastfeeding, nutrition and diabetes prevention; statewide food banks and pantries; the EMPOWER program (which relates to obesity prevention in child care facilities); the Child and Adult Care Food Program (which provides access to food for child care settings); and, free and reduced lunch programs in public schools.

The FTF NOPA Strategy provides evidence-based interactive health education to support children birth to age 5 and their families in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle. This strategy also provides evidence-based health education to early care and education professionals to increase knowledge and improve practices in early care and education settings that support healthy eating and daily physical movement in the classroom.

The FTF Food Security Strategy is a promising practice that provides food boxes or food backpacks to ensure that children birth to age 5 and their families, as well as pregnant women, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. In addition to this temporary food relief, the strategy provides information to families on sources for longer-term resources (such as WIC and SNAP) within the region.

In addition, six FTF regions have seen a variety of policy and access successes through a systems building approach to create an Early Childhood Nutrition network.

Strategy Area Direction:

FTF can be supportive in systems building efforts as other system partners are better positioned to lead on this strategy. FTF will gradually reduce the Nutrition, Obesity, Physical Activity programmatic strategy and focus on expanding approaches (including culturally-responsive models) that lead to behavior change as well as systems building at both the statewide and regional levels.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Focus on playing a convening and/or coordinating role in systems building with partners focused on obesity-prevention efforts (WIC, EMPOWER, schools, etc) at both the statewide and regional levels.
2. Work with partners to refine policy to address the nutrition and physical activity needs of young children.
3. Work with partners to help build awareness and help to encourage lasting behavior-change among parents/caregivers related to nutrition, obesity and physical activity.

STRATEGY AREA

Bridge from ECE to Kindergarten

Included programmatic strategies: Summer Transition to Kindergarten Strategy

Context:

Each year, nearly 90,000 children enter kindergarten across Arizona. In 2020, only 38% had a preschool experience compared to 48% nationally. Children with access to quality early education are more prepared for kindergarten and do better in school. They are less likely to need remediation or special education and tend to get along better with classmates. Children with few classroom-based experiences may find adjusting to the kindergarten setting more challenging than children who have attended early childhood education programs. Irrespective of where and how a child prepares for kindergarten, they will benefit from a specific and intentional plan to bridge into kindergarten.

Building a bridge between the birth to 5 years and school entry refers to multiple elements including sharing information about the child's knowledge and skills (Arizona Early Learning Standards), onboarding families into a new learning community, providing social-emotional support to the child and even items like school entry paperwork.

Arizona currently has no mandate for a common transition of all children into kindergarten. However, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) makes a quality kindergarten transition process available to support local communities in these efforts. ADE's website hosts guidance documents that reinforce that kindergarten transitions are a process, not a singular event. The most common transition plans are linked to the federal requirement that targets children who have been identified with disabilities and who qualify for special education services. In these cases, a planned, child-focused transition is a requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

FTF is engaged in a variety of funded and unfunded approaches to support development of the local bridge from early childhood education to elementary. These approaches include the implementation of a specific programmatic strategy as well as systems building efforts. There is no substitute for quality early learning experiences, but many communities lack access to options for families. The FTF Summer Transition to Kindergarten Strategy may be the only connection that some children have to schools in some communities but the outcomes are limited and they only offer limited exposure to the AZ Early Learning Standards. Therefore, FTF can focus on systems building efforts, especially with local school districts to improve consistent implementation of transition plans.

Strategy Area Direction:

Other system partners are better positioned to lead this work, but FTF can improve its systems building and state and local partner approaches. FTF will shift its work from a programmatic approach to a systems building approach.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Encourage partners, particularly school districts and Head Start programs, to support more evidence-informed or evidence-based transition programs that are inclusive of local child care programs. In addition, expand the use of the current Arizona Department of Education transition framework within local communities.
2. Identify and make available recommended evidence-informed or evidence-based transition program options, including potential virtual options that may be more accessible for families.

STRATEGY AREA

Child Welfare Prevention/Intervention

Included programmatic strategies: Court Team Strategy

Context:

Aligned with its mission and statutes, FTF's overall work is concentrated heavily in primary prevention to promote the healthy development of young children and strengthen their families to keep children from entering the child welfare system. FTF also invests in a variety of strategies that are especially crucial, and designed for, at-risk families, namely those who may be facing a variety of challenges that place them at greater risk for child abuse and neglect. Child abuse and neglect are two of the primary reasons that young children enter the child welfare system. Arizona has high rates of young children in out-of-home care (41% of Arizona's children in out-of-home care are birth to age 5).

Court Teams is the only strategy funded by FTF to support young children and families after they become involved in the child welfare system. The intent of FTF's Court Teams Strategy — which is modeled after Zero to Three's Safe Babies Court Team (SBCT) approach — is to increase awareness among practitioners who work with maltreated infants and toddlers about the negative impact of abuse and neglect on very young children and to change local systems to improve outcomes and

prevent future court involvement. The primary audience for this strategy are court personnel and other child welfare professionals. While the SBCT approach includes multiple core components, FTF's investment can only support a limited number of those components that fit within FTF statutory requirements.

The Arizona Department of Child Safety and Juvenile and Tribal Courts play critical roles in serving children involved in the child welfare system. Many agencies and groups in Arizona have dedicated funding to support children and families in the child welfare system. In addition, a variety of national and local organizations support young children involved in out-of-home care.

Strategy Area Direction:

As a partner in Arizona's prevention and early intervention system, FTF can have the greatest impact by focusing on its systems building efforts with state and local partners. There are other system partners with the statutory responsibility to serve young children and families involved with the child welfare system through programmatic approaches. FTF should serve in a supportive partner role versus a lead role in child welfare prevention/intervention.

OBJECTIVES:

1. In recognition that FTF's role only extends to a limited number of components of the Court Teams programmatic strategy, consider if a programmatic approach is appropriate or if other system partners should lead and fund that work.
2. FTF will focus on systems building and capacity-building as a more effective prevention approach. In doing this work, FTF will ensure that partners in tribal communities are engaged appropriately.

Appendix 1

Acknowledgements

FTF is deeply grateful for the time, thoughtfulness and dedication of the many Arizonans who participated in the in-depth planning process for the SFY24-27 Strategic Plan. This includes the FTF Board and Strategic Planning Committee, FTF regional council members representing Arizona's rural, urban and tribal communities, as well as state and regional partners. We are sincerely grateful for the many partners and collaborators who continually work in partnership to improve outcomes for our state's youngest learners.

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Hon. Kathy Hoffman, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Arizona Department of Education

Designee: Dr. Felicia Durden, Associate Superintendent

Michael Wisehart, Director, Arizona Department of Economic Security

Designee: Lela Wendell, Interim Assistant Director, DES Childcare Administration

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Jami Snyder, Director, Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System

Representative: Dr. Eric Tack, Deputy Assistant Director for Managed Care Clinical Compliance

Mike Faust, Director, Arizona Department of Child Safety

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** These members served on the Board's Strategic Planning Committee.*

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Appendix 2

First Things First Research and Evaluation Approach

Across Arizona, there are a wide variety of agencies and organizations dedicated to improving the health and school readiness of Arizona's youngest children, collectively known as Arizona's early childhood system. First Things First (FTF) was created in order to provide dedicated resources to expand and enhance – not replace – that system. As such, achieving improvements or outcomes at a population level is dependent upon partnerships. No single agency or partner can be individually held responsible for population level outcomes. All partners involved in the system should track – and be able to describe – their contributions to that shared success or collective impact.

FTF tracks its contributions to Arizona's early childhood system through a comprehensive research and evaluation approach that has been a critical component of FTF since its inception. FTF strives for complete transparency and holds itself, and its collaborations with partners, accountable for achieving the intended outcomes of FTF funded programs. In January 2012, the FTF Board created the FTF Early Childhood Research and Evaluation National Advisory Panel (Panel) to provide recommendations to the FTF Board for developing a comprehensive statewide and regional research and evaluation framework. Currently, the Panel is composed of nine nationally recognized experts in early childhood research, evaluation, and programs, two FTF regional council members with research experience representing geographically-based and tribal regions, and one former FTF Board member with research experience. Panel members' expertise includes evaluation design and methodology; Native American early education; placed-based, systems-level evaluation; school readiness, including cognitive development, executive functioning and literacy and language development; state prekindergarten evaluation; special needs and early intervention; health and a unique Arizona-specific perspective.

FTF's approach to research and evaluation is informed by and implemented in alignment with the Panel's recommendations. The Panel meets approximately biennially to review the soundness and utility of evaluation and research activities and provides feedback on planned activities based on alignment with Panel recommendations and best practices in research and evaluation. Over the past nine years, the Panel worked with FTF to understand the key areas where substantial resources were being invested; where programs or strategies offered a robust level of scale across the state; as well as where research evidence indicates areas of potential, positive impacts on children. The Panel recommended specific areas for study and an overall approach that begins by first closely examining strategy and fidelity in program implementation, considering best practices, and understanding relations between implementation and child, family, community, and system outcomes. Once these elements of implementation are understood and findings have

been obtained related to the associations between FTF programs and their intended outcomes (i.e., outcomes prescribed in a strategy's theory of change), an examination of FTF impacts and their corresponding contribution to children's school readiness can begin (in strategies where there is sufficient scale). For example, the Panel recommended a series of studies related to Quality First that began with validation of the rating scale, followed by examination of the fidelity of implementation and contribution of individual components to overall quality improvement. Lastly, the Panel recommended using the findings from those studies to inform continuous quality improvement and designing a final study that would examine how child outcomes vary according to Quality First Star levels.

Framework to Understand Research and Evaluation Approach to Measuring Outcomes

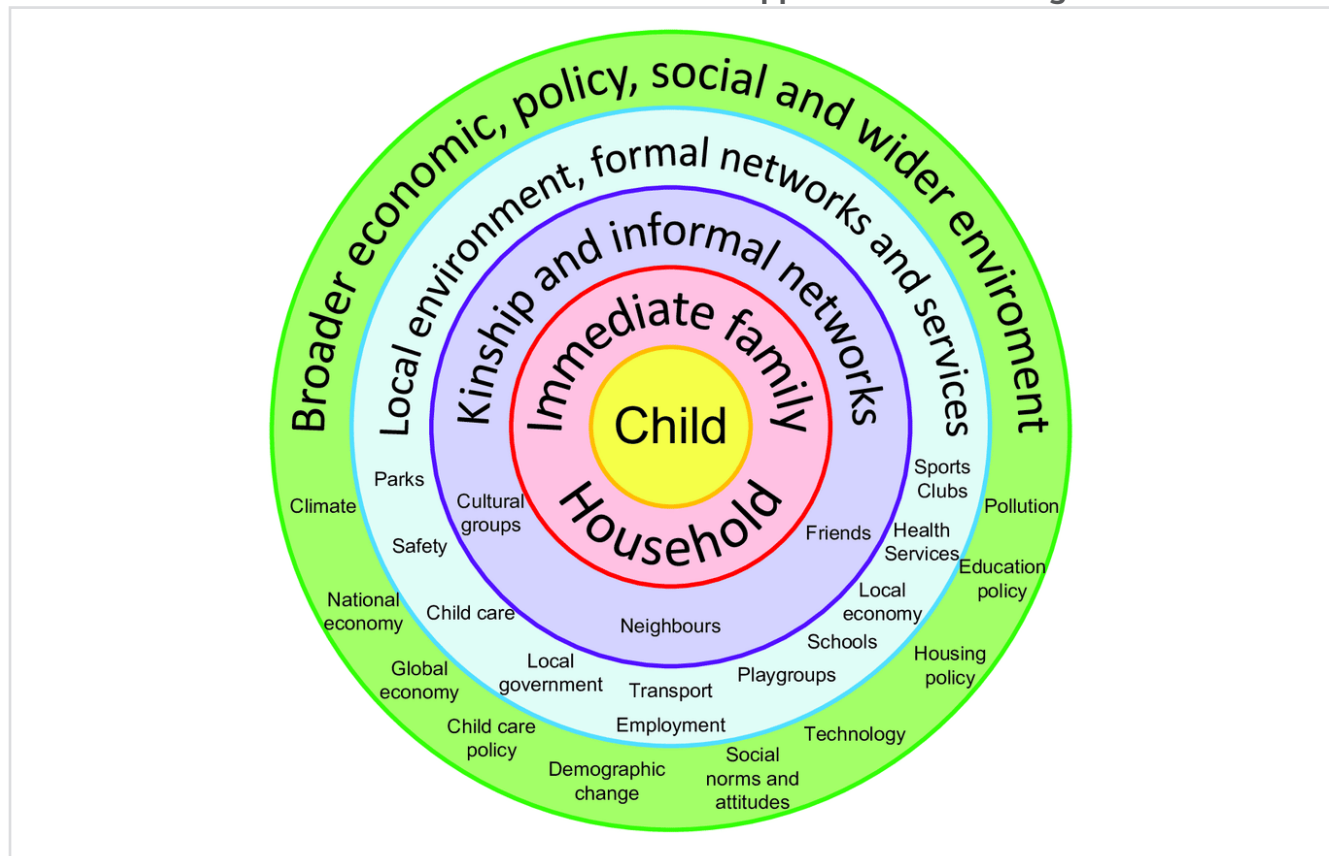


Diagram by Joel Gibbs based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979).

FTF's approach to research and evaluation is rooted in an understanding that children learn and develop in a complex context of family, school, and community (see graphic above). Therefore, child development is supported by quality early education, strong families, healthy adults, and robust communities. Because no single strategy can directly address young children's optimal health and school readiness, FTF funds and supports an array of strategies in Arizona communities. These strategies address a broad range of areas that impact young children, such as professional

development for early childhood educators, increasing and improving developmental and sensory screening activities, promoting children’s cognitive and language development by supporting parents as children’s first teachers and improving the quality of early education programs.

The FTF governance model is designed to be responsive to the needs of young children and their families at the community level. Each of the 28 FTF regional partnership councils study data within their regional Needs and Assets report and other community-level information and recommends how funds can best be used to address local needs. Given the diversity of Arizona communities, the resources available to meet the needs of young children also vary widely across regions. Regional funding plans reflect this reality, which is why some strategies are implemented more widely than others. For example, Quality First and Home Visitation strategies are implemented in 26 and 20 regions, respectively. By contrast, Food Security and Inclusion of Children with Special Needs strategies are implemented in only two and four regions, respectively.

FTF’s focus on responsiveness to local needs through regional funding plans limits the ability to achieve or assess statewide impact in most strategies (except those funded to sufficient scale statewide). Therefore, any assessment of the impact of FTF investments needs to focus on strategy outcomes and local impact.

Research and Evaluation Activities and State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2024-2027 Strategic Plan

As part of FTF’s commitment to continuous quality improvement, a key refinement in FTF’s evaluation work is that the intended outcomes to be measured for each strategy are informed by strategy-specific theories of change. For the strategic plan beginning in SFY24, the focus is to have a comprehensive data collection effort that meets the needs of FTF (Board, Regions, and FTF teams) and its grant partners. FTF’s Research and Evaluation efforts will remain focused on ensuring that data to inform contract compliance, implementation monitoring, and strategy specific outcomes continue to be collected. These data will also help to assess if elements of the strategy-specific theory of change - such as reaching the intended audience and delivering expected benefits to participants – are being realized as intended.

Towards this goal, the data requirements that FTF will expect of grant partners will be specific to a strategy and will fall in one or more of the following categories:

1. Output data that also serves as outcome data
2. Unique aggregate outcome data that will be tailored based on regions’ individualized approaches
3. Standardized aggregate outcome data for strategies that are implemented in a standardized way across regions

4. Objective external research and evaluation studies at the regional or statewide level to inform strategy outcomes; this is in addition to collecting grantee implementation data or participant-level information
5. Participant-level data collection via data system

Currently, FTF strategies are being assigned to one or more of these categories based on the level of outcomes expected as identified by the theory of change, historical funding level, strategy evidence level, and the number of regions funding them.

Additionally, FTF will design and conduct strategy-specific studies, needs and assets assessments, and population level surveys/studies to inform FTF and system partners of the needs of young children and their families in Arizona, and the professionals who support them. Together these data will help to describe FTF's impact as well as FTF's contribution to system level outcomes.

Dissemination and Utilization of Data Findings

Data collected through implementation efforts, the needs and assets process, and evaluation studies will be disseminated through quarterly reports, strategy-specific outcome briefs, the data center, annual reports, and study-specific reports. Additionally, webinars will be conducted, as needed, to provide opportunity for regional council members and FTF Board members to learn more about the key strategy outcomes, ask questions and provide input. Data findings will be utilized by regional councils and the state Board to inform data-driven decision-making and monitoring. They will also inform continuous improvement of FTF-funded programs. Moreover, data findings will support communication of FTF impact via public awareness efforts, statutory annual reports and needs and assets reports, and regional impact reports. Results will also be made available for community use through FTF briefs and the FTF data center. Finally, findings will be shared with system partners for coordinated use to inform system level coordination and collaboration.