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**QualityFirstAZ.com – A Starting Place for Finding Quality Child Care & Preschool
Quality Early Learning Crucial for Success in Kindergarten and Beyond**

PHOENIX (August 20, 2013) – Families will now have more information and tools for finding quality child care and preschool through QualityFirstAZ.com.

The new website – launched by First Things First – gives families information about why quality is important in child care and preschool and what quality looks like. It also gives parents tools they can use to find a quality child care and preschool setting that meets their needs. This choice has never been more important.

“Children who have quality early education experiences are more prepared when they enter kindergarten, and do better in school,” said Dr. Pamela Powell, an Associate Professor of Literacy and Early Childhood at Northern Arizona University and Vice Chair of the First Things First Board. “Skills like motivation, self-control, focus, and self-esteem are rooted in early childhood and are learned from interactions with adults.”

Dr. Powell said many of those interactions happen in child care and preschool, so it is vital that those settings be quality environments that build on basic health and safety to include:

- teachers and caregivers who know how to work with infants, toddlers and preschoolers;
- positive, nurturing relationships that give young kids the individual attention they need;
- learning environments that encourage creativity and imaginative play;
- hands-on activities that stimulate and encourage positive brain connections in children; and,
- caregivers who provide regular feedback to parents on the development of their child.

All of these elements combined prepare children for kindergarten. Sadly, many Arizona children arrive at school unprepared for the rigorous expectations they will face.

Brenda Thomas – who currently teaches at the Porfirio H. Gonzales Young Achievers Preschool in Tolleson, but has also served as a kindergarten and elementary school teacher – said early experiences make a difference in whether children embrace learning or struggle in school.

“The one thing that matters, above all things – whether the child care is given in the home or whether it’s given in some other setting – is the quality that is given,” Thomas said, adding that parents, child care providers and preschools are the first leg in a child’s educational relay race.

“As we prepare to hand the baton on to the second leg – which is the kindergarten experience – we want to make sure that we have given (young children) the opportunity to understand they’re safe, they’re loved and they have the skills.”

First Things First CEO Sam Leyvas said Quality First is doing its part by partnering with child care and preschool providers and funding quality improvements that research proves help children thrive. Now, through QualityFirstAZ.com, Leyvas said the program also provides information to families to inform their decisions about child care and preschool, including a checklist of questions to ask providers and a listing of early care and education providers around the state that participate in Quality First.

Steve Hewitt, the father of two children under 4, said this is information many parents need.

“About a year and a half ago, my wife and I were looking for a quality child care center. It can be very confusing and almost even scary if you’re looking on the Internet, going to some tours,” Hewitt said. “You’re not quite sure what you’re looking for. Now parents can go (to QualityFirstAZ.com) and find what they’re looking for.”

Pat Berry, director of the Chandler-Gilbert YMCA Preschool where the launch event was held, said providers in all types of settings need to be focused on quality, as well.

“Every provider can improve the quality of their program if they take the time to learn more about what quality looks like and if they become more intentional and consistent about making the most of their interactions with young children,” Berry said. “I encourage all caregivers to visit the site and learn what they can do to get kids ready for success in kindergarten and beyond.”

Leyvas echoed Hewitt and Berry’s comments.

“It is our sincere hope that the information at QualityFirstAZ.com sparks conversations – between parents and providers and across communities statewide – about the importance of quality early learning and about the stake we all share in improving the quality of child care and preschool for our children,” Leyvas said. “Because everyone benefits when kids come to school healthy and ready to succeed!”

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About First Things First – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit aztf.gov.