



**FIRST THINGS FIRST**

*Ready for School. Set for Life.*

**First Things First Strategic Direction  
Systems Approach Framework for Programmatic Priorities  
January 2014**

**Introduction**

First Things First's planning and work toward our mission of ensuring a child enters school healthy and ready to succeed typically occurs across three fiscal years at the same time. Currently, FY 2014 implementation of strategies and programs and accompanying data collection is in progress. The Board is also reviewing FY 2015 funding plan recommendations forwarded by regional partnership councils and subsequent grant applications and agreements will be completed in the next six months. Preparation for FY 2016 planning is also beginning with the review of strategy standards of practice, compliance and performance data, evaluation study results, and grantee and partner feedback.

**The Early Childhood Taskforce recommendations have guided First Things First's strategic direction**



Over the past four years, the work of the First Things First Board, regional councils and staff has been strategically guided by recommendations from the Arizona Early Childhood Taskforce, whose members were appointed in January 2010 by Board Chair, Steve Lynn. The Taskforce developed the vision for and elements of a comprehensive early childhood model system, and identified nine priority roles for First Things First,

with the explicit understanding that First Things First is only one of many key partners that have an important role in building and sustaining the early childhood system. The nine priority roles include:

1. Quality, access and affordability of regulated early care and education settings
2. Family support and services
3. Professional development system
4. Quality health care and coverage
5. Quality standards, curriculum and assessments
6. Nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention
7. Comprehensive, aligned and accountable system
8. Adequate and sustainable funding
9. Public awareness and support

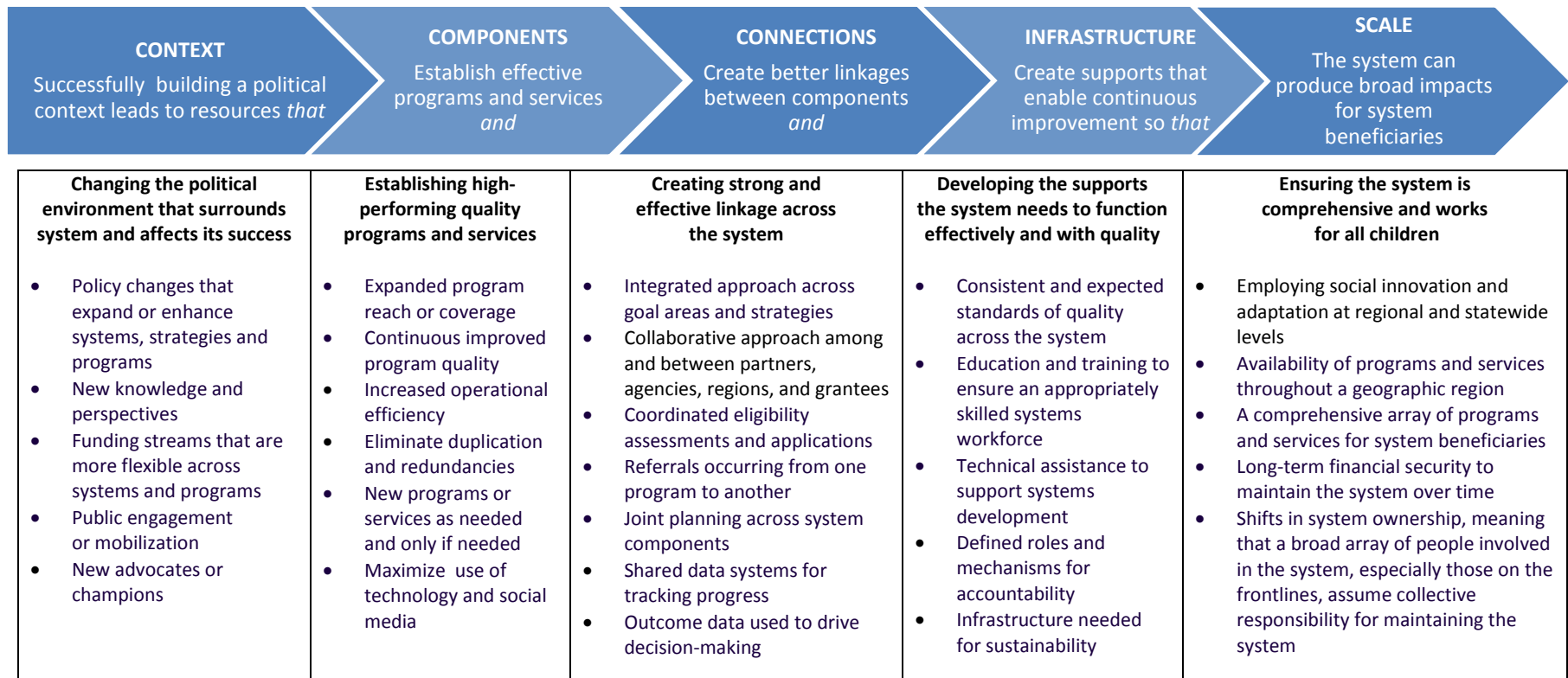
The first seven priority roles have a programmatic focus and were the basis of the 10 School Readiness Indicators recommended by the members of the Board's Policy and Program Committee, and the Committee's three Advisory Committees for Early Learning, Children's Health and Family Support and Literacy. The Board approved the 10 recommended indicators in August 2011. The School Readiness Indicators provide a comprehensive composite measure of system progress for young children and were chosen to reflect the effectiveness of funding strategies and collaborations built across communities to improve the lives of children in Arizona and improve their readiness for entering school and subsequently their life long success. They are intended to guide regional councils and the Board in making informed priority decisions. (See Attachment A).

In October 2012, the board approved the Policy and Program Committee's recommended state level benchmarks for individual School Readiness Indicators for the year 2020. These benchmarks provide First Things First with aspirational, yet achievable targets and will be monitored over time in order to determine progress in reaching systemic improvements for children and families. Regional councils are now identifying regional level benchmarks for their priority indicators for the year 2020, and these recommendations will be forwarded to the Board in June 2014.

### **Systems Approach Framework for Priority Roles**

As the Early Childhood Task Force identified priority roles for First Things First in 2010, this is also the same year that First Things First funding was invested statewide through regional partnership councils and community grantees. Each year since then, increased capacity and continuous development among all partners has led to improvement and outcomes within Arizona's early childhood system. As strategic planning begins for FY 2016 and beyond, First Things First's focus is on achieving the 2020 benchmarks set for the School Readiness Indicators which will indicate a shift in system behaviors and progress in the priority roles and toward positive outcomes for children and families.

Toward this goal, the Advisory Committees of the Policy and Program Committee, regional councils, and First Things First staff have initiated planning discussions using a framework developed by the national BUILD Initiative to evaluate early childhood systems initiatives (Coffman 2007). The framework identifies five connected early childhood system levers: Context, Components, Connections, Infrastructure and Scale. The bullet points for each of the levers are adapted from Coffman’s work.



Adapted from: Coffman, Julia. 2007. *A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives*. BUILD Initiative.

This systems framework has been valuable in identifying assets and gaps, guiding discussion, and organizing recommendations across First Things First. At first glance, it is not so different from the approach that First Things First has used in the past; however, application of the framework has caused a shift in intentional, focused thinking and planning about how progress can be made in the priority roles as measured by the School Readiness Indicators. It is intended to impact execution of First Things First system work in the same way.

The Program and Policy Committee and Advisory Committees for Early Learning, Children’s Health and Family Support and Literacy have focused on seven powerful initiative areas listed below that align with the priority roles. We propose that the systems framework be used in these

initiative areas to inform strategic planning at state and regional levels beginning with FY 2016. As well, our system partners in state agencies, BUILD Arizona, and local community organizations are focused in many of these same areas and First Things First will continue collaborating and coordinating with them to identify the assets, gaps and levers to move forward.

1. Saturate families and communities with information, resources and supports, at the right time along the developmental continuum (including pre-natal), to benefit children. Families are their child's first and most important teacher across all domains of development and school readiness and they are most powerful when they are knowledgeable about how best to support their child's development and health.
2. Build families' capacity to support their child's physical, oral and mental health through a preventative approach.
3. Infuse early literacy throughout all system work, strategies and programs by integrating and leveraging the efforts and resources of Read On Arizona (First Things First is a founding partner) for families, educators, caregivers and decision makers.
4. Expand access to high quality early learning programs and study, refine and expand the Quality First Initiative to efficiently and effectively benefit families, children, and early childhood professionals.
5. Develop and connect components of a comprehensive assessment system that includes universal screening and referral resources, developmental progress assessment, early learning progress assessment and the Kindergarten Developmental Inventory at kindergarten entry.
6. Complete implementation and operation of the early childhood professional development system infrastructure, inclusive of compensation to match degree progression.
7. Collect, utilize and communicate outcome data results to inform transparent and accountable data-driven decisions.

The timeline for FY 2016 strategic planning includes:

January 2014:

- System approach framework presentation and discussion with Board members

February 2014:

- Begin discussions on framework and focused initiatives with regional staff and prepare communication to regional councils
- Begin discussions on improving effectiveness and efficiencies, as well as duplications and redundancies of strategies and programs; begin revisions on Standards of Practice

March 2014:

- Continue staff discussions related to systems approach and strategic planning
- Begin development of First Things First operational strategic plan for FY 2015-2016 (implementation strategies and tactics)

April 2014:

- Continue staff discussions related to systems approach and strategic planning
- Continue development of First Things First operational strategic plan for FY 2015-2016

June 2014:

- Finalize FTF Strategy Toolkit with revised strategy and program information and costs
- Finalize First Things First operational strategic plan for FY 2015-2016
- Preparation for FY 2016 funding planning and financing discussions

July 2014:

- Begin FY 2016 funding plan development

November 2014:

- FY 2016 funding plans completed

January 2015:

- Board approves FY 2016 funding plans and implementation begins