FIRST THINGS FIRST

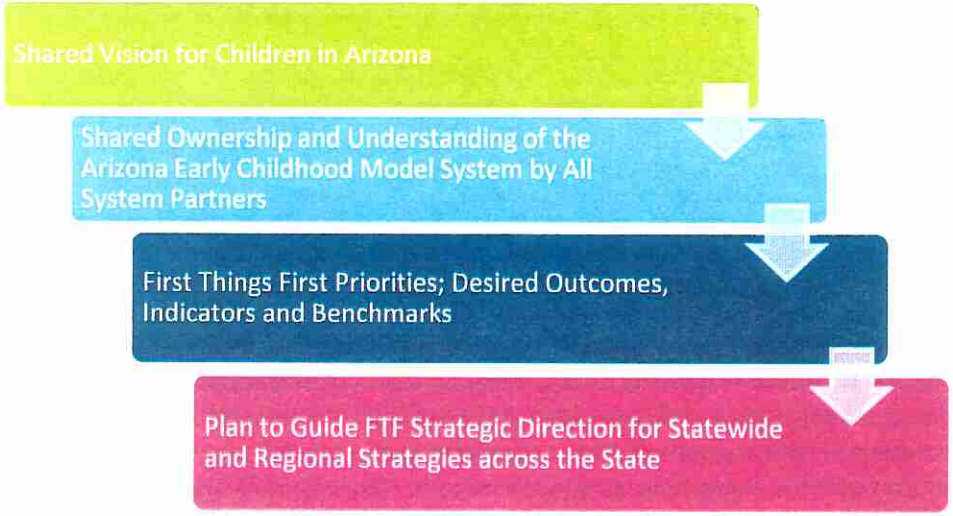
Review, Consideration and Possible Adoption of Arizona Early Childhood Taskforce System and Priority Recommendations September 27, 2010

Introduction

When the voters passed Proposition 203 in November 2006, the Arizona Early Childhood Development and Health Board (First Things First) was asked to lead the charge to ensure that all young children arrive in kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed. The First Things First Board knew this meant more than simply funding programs and services, but rather it would take all partners, across the state to establish and confirm a common vision for young children in Arizona and a cross-sector commitment to ensure that vision is realized. At the direction of the FTF Board, Chairman Lynn appointed 36 members to the Arizona Early Childhood Taskforce. Their charge was to establish a vision for the state's early childhood development and health system and identify the priority roles for FTF for implementation throughout the next three to five years. (Refer to Attachment 9 for a list of Task Force members.)

Throughout the past eight months, First Things First has engaged a broad cross-section of families, stakeholders, agency partners, tribes and community members, as well as members of the First Things First Board and Regional Councils, in the development of this system vision and FTF's strategic priorities.

The Task Force initially met in February 2010, and began their work by agreeing on a shared vision for all young children in our state, and then conceiving a model system that could be embraced by all of Arizona's early childhood partners, including families, early educators, health providers, state agencies, tribes, advocacy and service delivery organizations, philanthropic, faith-based and business representatives and other stakeholders. The Task Force developed the comprehensive model system so that it reflects the partners, elements and characteristics desired for the entire system, 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 system. (Attachment 9 includes a copy of the Early Childhood Model System.)



The Task Force began by developing the large comprehensive system picture, and then narrowed their focus to recommend priority roles for First Things First

The Task Force then identified 20 potential key roles for First Things First in the model system, and concluded their work in August 2010 by finalizing recommendations on eight priority roles for First Things First. The Task Force work and decisions were conducted in public open meetings, informed by partner and public input gathered through five on-line surveys conducted at regular intervals from February through July 2010.

In preparation for the Board discussion on the eight priorities recommended by the Task Force, First Things First also solicited comments at five Regional Forums, and through a Tribal Consultation requested by First Things First with tribal government leaders. Two joint planning sessions at the Early Childhood Summit provided opportunity for the entire First Things First organization to provide feedback on the priority recommendations and suggest how First Things First should move forward to implement the priorities. Specific information on the recommendations and related feedback are provided in the next section.

Some of First Things First's partners are concurrently engaged in systems work as well. Two philanthropic organizations, the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust and Helios Education Foundation, commissioned an assessment from the National Build Initiative to create a common knowledge base about our state's early childhood strengths and weaknesses, our progress so far on key aspects of the early childhood agenda, and to help guide future efforts at systemic change. A specific area of focus for the assessment included stakeholder perceptions of the capabilities of First Things First as a lead partner for early childhood systems building. The readiness assessment is acknowledged as a critical step in determining Arizona's ability to create a comprehensive early child policy framework and may help guide the foundations' future investments in this area. (Refer to Attachment 9 for a copy of the *Arizona Readiness Assessment Project* report.)

Recommended Priority Roles for First Things First

At the final meeting of the Task Force on August 11, 2010, the members reviewed the results of the final survey in which responders were asked through a variety of questions to select their priorities from the 20 potential roles identified by the Task Force. The survey generated a response rate over 25% response (n=299), and provided rich data for the Task Force's consideration. The *Early Childhood Task Force Survey Summary,* which lists the weighted survey responses, is found in Attachment 9.

In the discussion prior to determining the recommended priorities, the Task Force acknowledged and considered the following:

1. First Things First is an essential agency in Arizona's early childhood system but there are many other critical partners who also have important roles.

2. First Things First cannot feasibly devote sufficient time and resources at this time to carry out all the roles that are listed in the model system document if the expectation is to make a measurable difference.

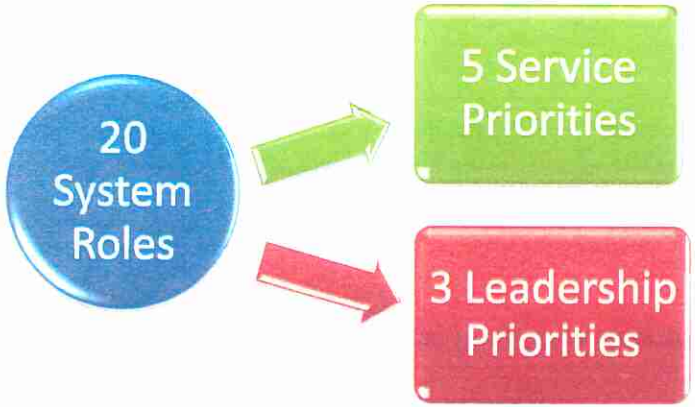
3. There are some roles that First Things First must take on, due to statutory requirements and resources that have already been committed.

4. There are some areas in which First Things First has already created momentum.

5. Some of the roles included in the model system document are of necessity linked—if you take on one, there may be another that must be done to achieve the desired results (e.g., quality and professional development).

6. Establishing priorities is challenging, as all of the 20 roles form a complete early childhood system when taken as a whole. The Task Force was assured that the intent of the prioritization work was to focus resources across the state. Regional Councils will still have the opportunity to address their unique needs and build on their existing assets. Furthermore, as progress is made and opportunities present, additional roles may be addressed.

The Task Force then recommended eight of the 20 roles as priorities for First Things First to focus on implementing across the state in the next three to five years.



The Task Force recommended a total of eight priorities in two distinct groups

The eight priorities were recommended in two distinct groups:

A. Five priorities are services which could be funded at both state and regional levels, and implemented sometime within the next one to three years. These are the roles for which the Task Force recommended First Things First establish measurable benchmarks and devote resources in order to achieve results for Arizona's young children and their families:

- **Quality, Access, and Affordability of Regulated Early Care and Education Settings** - Convene partners, provide leadership, and provide funding for increased availability of and access to high quality, regulated, culturally responsive, and affordable early care and education programs. As a result:
  - More regulated early care and education programs attain a rating of 3 stars or higher.
  - More families know about the importance of quality and of selecting early care and education programs that have attained a rating of 3 stars or higher.
  - More children are enrolled in early care and education programs that have attained a rating of 3 stars or higher.
  - There are more quality early care and education programs available to families across Arizona.
  - Quality early care and education programs are affordable for all families.

- **Supports and Services for Families** - Convene partners, provide leadership, provide funding, and advocate for development, enhancement, and sustainability of a variety of high quality, culturally responsive, and affordable services, supports, and community resources for young children and their families. As a result:
    - More families who want or need assistance have access to a continuum of services, supports, and resources in their communities across Arizona to increase their competence and confidence to ensure their children enter school healthy and ready to succeed.
    - More families have access to the knowledge, skills, and resources to assist their children with emergent literacy and language development.
    - Family services and supports that lead to effective parenting are delivered in accordance with standards of practice.
    - Family services and supports are planned, developed, funded, and delivered in a coordinated manner that best meets the needs and preferences of families and leverages available resources.
    - More families are involved in the development and provision of family services and supports.

- **Building Public Awareness and Support** - Convene partners, provide leadership, and provide funding for efforts to increase public awareness of and support for early childhood development, health, and early education among partners, public officials, policy makers, and the public. As a result:
    - The public is aware of the benefits of investing in early childhood development, health, and early education.
    - The public is committed to a unified early childhood policy agenda that benefits young children and their families.
    - There is a strong, growing, and mobilized pool of early childhood champions in all sectors.

- **Professional Development System** - Convene partners, provide leadership, and provide funding for the development and enhancement of an early childhood professional development system that addresses availability, accessibility, affordability, quality, and articulation. As a result:
    - There is comprehensive and well-articulated professional development system within Arizona.
    - More early care and education professionals have access to ongoing education and training to meet their professional development requirements and goals across Arizona.
    - More early care and education professionals across Arizona have degrees and/or credentials in early care and education.

- **Access to Quality Health Care Coverage and Services** - Collaborate with partners to increase access to high quality health care services (including oral health and mental health) and affordable health care coverage for young children and their families. As a result:
    - More dentists across Arizona serve pediatric populations.
    - More children across Arizona have access to preventive oral health services.
    - More families are aware of children's health insurance and how to enroll their children.
    - More children across Arizona have access to services that benefit their emotional and behavioral (mental) health.

B. Three priorities are those in which the Task Force recommended that FTF take a leadership role. These priorities contribute to the early childhood system by focusing on program and process development at the state level:

1. **Early Childhood System Funding –** Secure, coordinate, and advocate for resources required to develop and sustain the early childhood system. [This does not mean that FTF would be the sole funder of the early childhood system, but would take an active role in helping to increase and coordinate available resources.] As a result:
    - Increased public and private funding is available to build and sustain the early childhood system.

2. **Early Care and Education System Development and Implementation** - Convene partners and provide leadership in the development and implementation of a comprehensive early care and education system that is aligned both across the spectrum of settings and with the full continuum of the educational system. As a result:
    - There is a clear plan for the early care and education system that describes the system, aligns programs and services across all types of settings and with the full continuum of the educational system (P-20), and defines roles and responsibilities of those involved in its implementation.
    - Agencies and organizations involved in early care and education have a common understanding of the system and share ownership in ensuring access to for all children to high quality, culturally responsive early care and education.
    - Funding for early care and education is identified and aligned to eliminate gaps and prevent unnecessary duplication.
    - Early care and education programs and services are identified and aligned.
    - Monitoring for system programs is aligned and coordinated among early care and education agencies and organizations.

3. **Quality Early Care and Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment** - Convene partners, provide leadership, and provide funding for the development and implementation of quality standards for early childhood care and education programs and related curricula and assessments. [This is integral to improving the quality of early care and education settings.] As a result:
    - Uniform quality standards have been identified and adopted for all early care and education programs in Arizona.
    - Curricula and assessments that are aligned with quality standards are in use in early care and education programs throughout Arizona.
    - There is an integrated data system for early care and education.

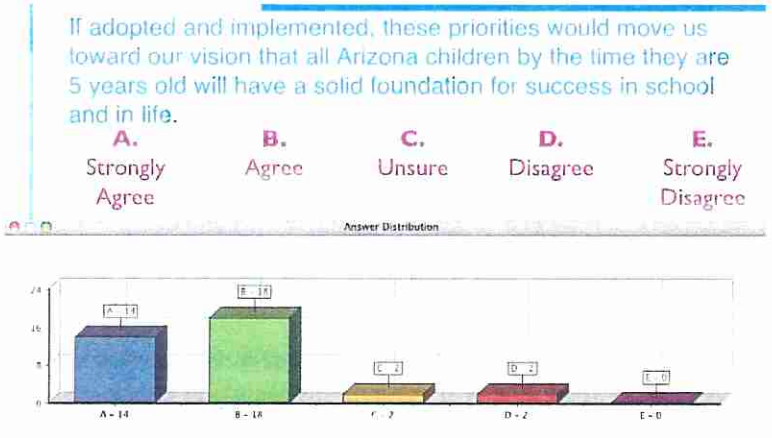
During the month of August 2010, First Things First obtained feedback on the Task Force recommendations from Regional Council members during regional forums across the state. Participants generally agreed that it would be beneficial to First Things First to consider implementing some priorities, and that the scope and reach of the priorities is important, as it is with all implemented strategies. Regional Council members also voiced their concern that local decision making may be adversely impacted if all they were able to implement were statewide priorities.

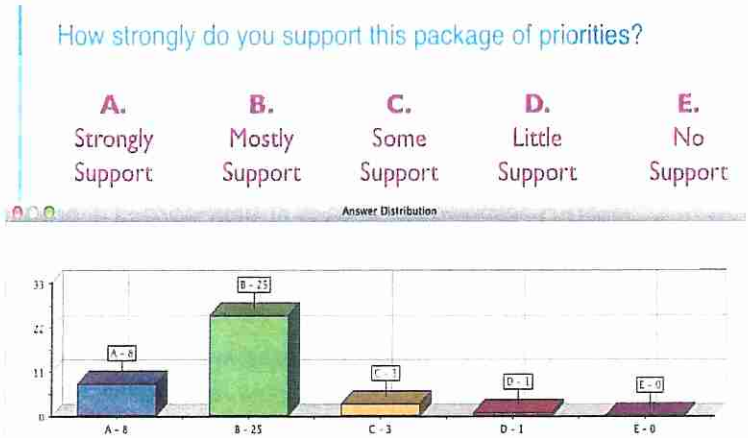
First Things First leadership had the opportunity to hear from several tribal government leaders during a Tribal Consultation on August 17. Board members Lynn and Saunders, as well as Executive Director Allvin heard several tribal leaders emphasize that all of the 20 roles identified by the Task Force were related, making it difficult to prioritize one over the other. This is something the Task Force acknowledged as well. However, there were four roles noted as priorities by all Tribes that participated in the consultation:

- Early Screening and Intervention
- Supports and Services for Families
- Early Childhood System Funding
- Information and Education for Families

On August 30th and 31st, the entire First Things First Community convened for two joint planning sessions. At which time Regional Council members and Board members reviewed the recommended priorities and provided input and comment. During the second day session, Regional Council and Board members divided into groups and through consensus provide their opinions about the recommended priorities.

When joint planning participants were asked if they agree that the list of eight Task Force recommended priorities would move First Things First toward our vision that all children have a solid foundation for success in school and in life, 76% of participants strongly agreed or agreed. When asked how strongly they supported the list of eight Task Force recommended priorities, 79% strongly supported or mostly supported the priorities.





Summaries of the Task Force Recommendations, Tribal Consultation, Regional Forums and Joint Planning Sessions are found in Attachment 9.

Two roles that were not recommended as priorities by the Task Force generated significant comment during the final Task Force meeting and during the joint planning sessions—Early Screening and Intervention, and Quality of Family, Friend and Neighbor Early Care and Education Settings. Early Screening and Intervention was also discussed by Tribal leaders at the consultation.

The conversations about Early Screening and Intervention included concerns that the existing system is not meeting current demand;, there hasn't been enough effort to develop a common definition of early screening and intervention and a subsequent implementation plan; and it is such an essential component to early childhood success, that not focusing on it will undermine our ability to achieve desired outcomes. Though there was not strong consensus to include it as a priority recommendation, it will require the leadership of First Things First, tribal, agency and philanthropic partners, and the early intervention community across Arizona to reach consensus on how best to proceed.

Those supporting the prioritization of Quality of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Early Care and Education Settings pointed out that about half of the children five and younger are in unregulated family, friend and neighbor care. This is typically the care that families with infants and toddlers choose. Also, the majority of Latino and Native American families use this care more predominantly in their communities. Other participants agreed this role was an important one, but because this care is not regulated, it is more difficult to measure progress toward making or sustaining quality improvements. Several Current regional strategies that target Family, Friend and Neighbor care also align with the Professional Development and Quality, Access and Affordability prioritized strategies. Though there was not strong consensus to include it as a priority recommendation, a statewide, comprehensive system must acknowledge and be accountable for high quality family, friend and neighbor settings.

Implementation of Priorities

Upon Board approval of recommended priorities, there are several immediate next steps:

- Staff will present a funding plan for statewide funding that takes the initial steps to align with priorities.
- A communications document will be created for broad statewide audiences that will articulate a common, statewide early childhood agenda.
- Under the direction of the Board's Program and Policy Committee, First Things First will convene three standing policy committees on health, family support and early learning. Among other items, these committees will begin to determine specific indicators and benchmarks for each priority area.
- First Things First will continue to work with all system stakeholders to develop a common policy agenda. This will include outreach with partnering tribal governments and state agencies.
- Regional Councils will begin developing their FY12 Funding Plans and Strategies. Regions will be asked to consider how their funding plans align with the five priority areas and if there are strategies outside those priority areas the rational for selecting those priorities.
- Proposed indicators and benchmarks will be presented for consideration and approval.

Presenting these recommendations is the first step in a phased-in process of continued convening, input, research and review. It is important to balance the pressing need to point to specific outcomes and to ensure that our core model of decision making is respected. The following is a proposed timeline for implementation:

FY 2011

- Indicators are developed and reviewed for possible approval prior to July 2011.

FY 2012

- Statewide Funding Plan aligns with Indicators
- Through a collaborative process, Board gives consideration to how regional funding plans align with indicators
- Baseline data collection on indicators begins
- Benchmarks are developed and reviewed for possible approval prior to July 2012

FY 2013

- FY 2014 state funding plan includes specific indicators and benchmarks
- FY 2014 regional funding plans includes specific indicators and benchmarks

FY 2014

- FY 2015 state funding plan includes specific indicators and benchmarks
- FY 2015 regional funding plans includes specific indicators and benchmarks
- Review of progress and implementation of continuous improvement process
- Reexamination of priorities and identification of indicators and benchmarks

Recommended Board Action

The First Things First staff recommends the Board take action to:

1. Endorse the Early Childhood Model System developed by the Arizona Early Childhood Task Force.
2. Adopt the Task Force recommended priorities.
3. Agree on timeline and strategies for implementation of priorities.

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