



**Ready for School. Set for Life.**

**Early Learning Programs and the Alignment with Kindergarten through Third Grade**

Arizona has made a significant investment in improving educational outcomes for young children. The First Things First initiative uses dedicated tobacco tax revenue to provide every child in Arizona a strong foundation so they enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed. Now more than ever, K-12 educators recognize the importance of early learning in a child's first five years of life, and agree that high quality early learning programs that provide children with the foundational skills and knowledge they need to be successful learners are an essential investment and should be part of their school community. Early learning programs funded through First Things First are aligned with early elementary grades as part of the birth through third grade educational continuum as a result of: 1) high quality programming which includes use of early learning standards (and when completed, development guidelines for infants and toddlers), 2) development and retention of great teachers, and 3) expansion strategies to increase access for children and families to great programs in neighborhoods and school communities.

**Quality Early Care and Education Programs** – Quality First is a First Things First Signature Initiative that supports improved and sustained quality in early care and education settings. Program settings receive initial program quality assessments, assignment of coaches to work with program leaders to develop a plan for and facilitate improvement, and financial incentives which support the quality improvement plan. The program assessment focuses on two areas for quality enhancement: the early learning environment that supports cognitive, social/emotional and healthy child development, and adult-child interactions. The Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) instrument for preschool classrooms is used to measure quality in preschool environments. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is used to measure the quality of adult and child interactions. The first quality ratings of early care and education settings is planned to begin in July 2011 and will use the ECERS-R, and the CLASS, as well as a point scale that measures staff qualifications, administrative practices, and use of additional educational supports, including appropriate use of assessment and data, to establish a quality rating. Working agreements exist with the Arizona Department of Education, Early Childhood Education Section, and with the State Head Start Collaboration Office to ensure strong alignment of expectations across all state systems while supporting quality in all early education settings.

**Early Learning Standards and Developmental Guidelines** - The Arizona Early Learning Standards developed by the Arizona Department of Education provide a framework for the appropriate planning of quality curriculum for all children three to five years of age. The standards are aligned with the Arizona K-12 Academic Standards as well as the Head Start Child Outcomes and cover a broad range of skill development that provides effective school readiness for children from diverse backgrounds and with diverse abilities. Recently, Arizona's State Board of Education voted to adopt the national Common Core Standards for K-12 in English language arts and math. Upon review of these national standards for kindergarten, it is clear that the Arizona Early Learning Standards for language and literacy and mathematics strongly align with Common Core Standards as well.

The standards are intended for use by all those who work with young children in any early care and education settings across urban, rural and tribal communities. First Things First integrates the dissemination and utilization of these standards throughout early education settings. Quality First requires evidence of use of the early learning standards as an indicator of high quality and Quality First

coaches assure that early care and education participants are supported to appropriately reflect the standards in all early education curricula.

First Things First is collaborating with the Arizona Department of Education to jointly convene a task force to develop Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines that will make a strong contribution to early care and education programs across the state. These guidelines differ from general developmental milestones in that they are intended to be used by early childhood professionals working with infants and toddlers, much like the Arizona Early Learning Standards are used by professionals working with children ages three to five. Those who care for infants and toddlers will use these Guidelines as part of a curricular framework and to design environments and plan activities that best support very young children's learning and development.

**Great Teachers and Leaders** – Raising the quality of preschool teachers through Quality First is addressed through two strategies: T.E.A.C.H. Arizona (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) and Professional REWARD\$. TEACH is a comprehensive scholarship program designed to increase the educational levels and skills of the early care and education workforce. T.E.A.C.H. Arizona provides individuals who work in early care and education settings with access to college coursework leading to a national Child Development Associates (CDA) Certificate, or a Certificate of Completion or an Associate degree in early childhood education. Components of T.E.A.C.H. Arizona include education scholarships with support for tuition and books, a travel stipend and paid release time.

T.E.A.C.H. Arizona also supports an equitably paid and stable early childhood workforce by providing a financial incentive in the form of a bonus or raise upon completion of college coursework. The financial incentive components support quality and continuity of teachers and caregivers by asking that participants continue working at their current program for a specified time period as a condition of receiving the scholarship and financial incentives.

Professional REWARD\$ is a financial incentive program that acknowledges and rewards progressive education, educational attainment and commitment to continuous employment at early education settings. As a result of Professional REWARD\$, Arizona expects the following impacts and changes:

- The early education workforce retention rates will improve with the result that children in early education receive higher quality care and education, with less staff turnover, from a more highly qualified professional workforce
- The skills of the workforce will improve when higher compensation acknowledges educational attainment
- Early childhood professionals will continue to attain higher levels of education as wage enhancements are provided

**Early Learning Program Expansion** – First Things First currently funds and works with education and community partners to provide more access to high quality programs in school communities and neighborhoods. Strategies include expansion of public school preschools that collaborate with other community-based private preschools and Head Start programs; expansion of programs that focus on serving infants and toddlers and children with special needs; and providing professional development and other supports for early care and learning programs provided by family, friend or neighbors.

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