Quality First

Early care and education providers and the families they serve all want the same thing for children—for them to arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed. Quality First, a signature program of First Things First, partners with child care and preschool providers across Arizona to improve the quality of early learning for kids from birth to age 5. Quality First has established a statewide standard of quality for early care and education programs and supports both in what they do best—helping prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond. This includes funding quality improvements such as training for teachers to expand skills and coaching to help programs provide high-quality learning environments. Over 1,000 licensed early care and education providers currently participate in Quality First. To learn more, visit QualityFirstAZ.com.

Quality First Redesign Field Test

First Things First is committed to supporting all early care and education programs in achieving quality. First Things First, with partners throughout Arizona, extensively reviewed the Quality First model to determine what changes would increase participation, improve coordination among partners and leverage funding to support participation of programs in achieving quality levels. This review identified the need to think differently about how Quality First was being implemented, develop components that would support a program’s readiness and identify supports based on a program’s needs.

Quality First was thus redesigned to integrate these principles. To ensure a collective approach in the redesign, First Things First worked together with state partners including The Arizona Head Start Association, The Department of Economic Security Child Care Administration (DES), the Arizona Department of Education, and the Department of Health Services Office of Child Care Licensing (DHS). As a result of the collaboration, the Quality First redesign model was developed.

The Quality First redesign field test will pilot the redesign model and include a research study. The test is limited to 80 early childhood programs statewide, which have been selected for participation based on program characteristics and geographical region.

Quality First Redesign Model

The Quality First redesign model outlines the steps a program will take as part of their quality improvement journey. These steps are participant driven, based on the program’s readiness for participation. A participant moves through the steps in a cycle (see Figure 1), engaging with the quality pathway, program quality review and program assessment and rating according to their readiness.

- **Information session** – This webinar is available online to all providers and allows programs to learn about the program, process and expectations of the redesign.
- **Program enrollment** – Once the owner and/or director have completed the information session, they submit basic licensing and program information in the online Quality First application. The application will determine whether the program is eligible to participate. Programs must be licensed and in good standing with their regulatory body (DES, DHS, tribal or military authority).
- **Core professional development series** – Following enrollment, participants complete a series of required online professional development modules to build their knowledge of state standards, regulatory standards and the Arizona Early Childhood Career and Professional Development Network.
• **Quality pathway** – The quality pathway is based on the *Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth through Kindergarten* ¹ which is a set of recommended practices for early care and education programs to use as they strive for excellence. The pathway is defined by a facilitation guide that supports a participating program through an independent review of the eight core areas of the program guidelines.

• **Program quality review** – Participating programs will evaluate their own quality practice using the best practices identified in the eight areas in the program guidelines.

• **Program assessment and rating** – Once a program has completed their self-evaluation through the program quality review, they will receive a formal assessment and star rating. Quality First assessments are completed by trained professionals who conduct classroom observations based on standardized assessment tools. Assessment reports provide written feedback to the participant about the program’s strengths and opportunities for improvement.

### Quality First Redesign Study

It is important to understand how these revised components work for early care and education providers in supporting them in achieving quality. Programs that participate in the Quality First redesign field test will also participate in a study of approximately two years, which is being conducted to understand the implementation of the Quality First redesign model. An independent research firm will gather information from participants who take part in the field test to identify successful strategies and challenges of the model. Participants of the field test will be asked to take part in research activities including focus groups, interviews and surveys in order to gain feedback. These activities will be planned and communicated in advance for scheduling purposes. The results will inform changes to Arizona’s quality Improvement and rating system.

### Things to Keep in Mind

The Quality First redesign model is different than the current Quality First model, which is still being implemented throughout the state. The technical assistance and incentives will not be the same as those received by current Quality First participants. Programs currently on the waitlist for Quality First will be removed from the waitlist upon enrolling in the Quality First redesign field test. For current Quality First participants, enrolling in the Redesign will not impact eligibility for First Things First child care scholarships.

The field test is limited to 80 early childhood programs statewide, which have been selected for participation based on program characteristics and geographical region. The program implementation will not be available in Spanish; however Spanish speaking assistance will be available.

### Benefits of Participation

First Things First recognizes the costs associated with providing quality care; which is why all participating programs will receive benefits to aid them in supporting their quality improvement efforts. All participants of the Quality First redesign field test will receive technical assistance and financial incentives to support quality improvements. Participants will control the level and intensity of the technical assistance they receive. Financial incentives will be available to support quality improvement and reward quality achievement.

### Next Steps

Once you indicate an interest in participating in the Quality First redesign field test, you will begin receiving communications from First Things First. By January, you will receive an invitation to participate in the on-line information session, which will help you understand the program, process and expectations. Upon completion of the information session, you will submit basic information in the online Quality First application to enroll.

*Still have questions? Contact the Quality First Team at (602) 771-5000 or [QualityFirst@FirstThingsFirst.org](mailto:QualityFirst@FirstThingsFirst.org). We welcome the chance to discuss this opportunity with you in more detail.*

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¹ To review the *Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth Through Kindergarten*, please visit: https://www.azed.gov/early-childhood/files/2011/10/program-guidelines-complete.pdf
Information about Quality First is provided to promote readiness to participate in a continuous quality improvement process.

A developmental framework that would shift the philosophy of the model from quality intervention to quality development, driven by participants themselves.

- Program readiness
- Participant driven quality improvement process
- Core professional development series
- Program assessment and rating
- Technical assistance available
- Program quality review
- Quality pathway
- Technical assistance available
- Information session
- Program enrollment
- Technical assistance available