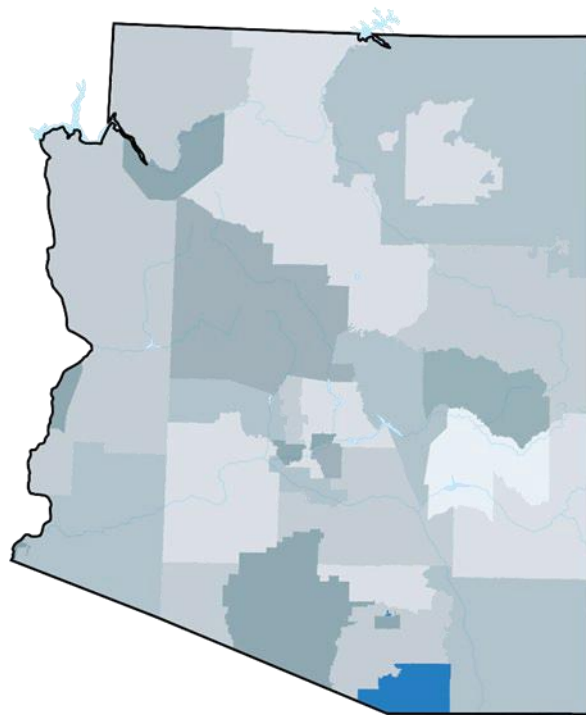




FIRST THINGS FIRST

Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council
Population birth through age 5: 3,757



State Fiscal Year 2026 Funding Plan

SFY 2024 – 2027 Strategic Plan Update

Presented to the First Things First Board
January 21, 2025

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Mission

First Things First is an essential leader and partner in creating a family-centered, equitable, high-quality early childhood system that supports the development, well-being, health and education of all Arizona’s children, birth to age 5.

Vision

All Arizona’s children are ready to succeed in school and in life.

Regional Partnership Councils

First Things First’s statewide Board and its 28 regional partnership councils share the responsibility of ensuring that early childhood funds are invested in strategies aimed at improving educational and health outcomes for young children. Regional partnership councils identify the unique needs of their communities and decide how to best support young children and families in their areas. Regional councils, comprised of local volunteers, provide vision and leadership, governance and oversight. They identify, implement and fund strategies and build collaborations aimed at helping young children across Arizona succeed in school and life.

Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council

Laura Monarque, chair, representative of the faith community

Erika Garcia Montaño, vice chair, at-large representative

Chris Ciruli, member of the business community

John Fanning, at-large representative

Melinda Gomez, at-large representative

William Kirkpatrick, representative of a philanthropic organization

Melisa Lunderville, child care provider

Cassandra Madril, early childhood educator

David Verdugo, public school administrator

Diana Yanez, parent of a child age 5 years or younger

open, health services provider

Francisco Padilla, regional director, First Things First

Christine Sbragia, administrative specialist, First Things First

Regional Allocation and Proposed Funding Plan Summary SFY24 – SFY27
Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council

Allocations and Funding Sources	2024	2025	2026	2027
FY Allocation	\$1,088,848	\$1,088,848	\$1,231,489	\$1,157,168
Population Based Allocation	\$721,996	\$721,996	\$652,584	\$721,996
Discretionary Allocation	\$366,852	\$366,852	\$578,905	\$435,172
Carry Forward From Previous Year	\$73,384	\$1,091	(\$82,252)	\$7,571
Total Regional Council Funds Available	\$1,162,232	\$1,089,939	\$1,149,237	\$1,164,739
Strategies	Approved Allotted	Approved Allotted	Proposed Allotted	Projected Allotted
Early Learning Systems Change	\$22,000	\$22,000	\$22,000	\$22,000
Quality First Academy	\$4,000	\$3,681	\$4,000	\$4,000
Quality First Coaching and Incentives	\$119,290	\$114,778	\$119,290	\$119,290
Quality First Scholarships	\$340,558	\$340,558	\$340,558	\$340,558
Child Care Health Consultation	\$27,200	\$32,031	\$27,200	\$27,200
Family Resource Centers	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
Home Visitation	\$150,000	\$150,000	\$150,000	\$150,000
Statewide Evaluation	\$48,052	\$48,052	\$48,052	\$48,052
Educational Promotion and Brand Awareness	\$9,932	\$9,932	\$9,932	\$9,932
Total	\$1,221,032	\$1,221,032	\$1,221,032	\$1,221,032
Total Unallotted/Unawarded/Unexpended:*	(\$58,800)	(\$131,093)	(\$71,795)	(\$56,293)

Fiscal Year	2020	2024	2025	2026	2027
% to Board Priorities		96.06 %	96.06 %	96.06 %	96.06 %
% to Quality First**	13.58%	12.32 %	12.32 %	12.32 %	12.32 %
Fiscal Year	4 Year Average				
% to Board Priorities	96.06%				
% to Quality First**	12.32%				

* Per FTF State Board direction, allotments reflect the budgeting of projected spending, therefore in some years’ total allotments may exceed total means of financing. However, actual expenditures against the allotments are expected to be fully supported by revenues, and each year the region is anticipated to end with a carry forward balance which is reflected in the subsequent year’s carry forward balance.

**Includes Quality First Academy, Quality First Coaching and Incentives, Quality First Assessment and Child Care Health Consultation.

Justification for not meeting % to Quality First expectation: The SFY24-27 Quality First investments do not equal or exceed those of SFY20 as required by the Board because Quality First Star Ratings for some of the providers in the region have increased since SFY20. That increase in Star Ratings ultimately led to a decrease in the cost of Quality First in the region. The regional council continues to maintain the same level of Quality First slots as it did in SFY20.

SANTA CRUZ REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL

Please describe how the Regional Partnership Council's SFY24-27 Strategic Plan promotes equity and support of under-resourced and underserved children and their families.

The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council's State Fiscal Year 2024-2027 (SFY24 – 27) Strategic Plan promotes equity and support of under-resourced and underserved children and their families in various ways. This plan utilizes a multi-generational approach, which emphasizes high-quality choices for families and young children. The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Council is choosing to focus on family support, given the low level of educational attainment among parents in the region and the number of children living in poverty who are considered to be at risk. The regional council is keenly aware that a multi-pronged approach is necessary to serve families across the spectrum of needs. Families receiving home visitation services will be those who are harder to reach and considered to be more at risk or disenfranchised, such as families with limited English proficiency, single-parent homes and families with transportation challenges. Family resource center services will be targeted to families more universally. Families and caregivers receiving services through the family resource centers may feel a stronger sense of community and may be better equipped in seeking information, education and supports. Family resource centers will provide parent support and connection to resources for families that are locally available. Both of these strategies utilize a multi-generational approach so that entire families, including families that represent grandparents raising grandchildren and other family members raising young children, are benefiting from these services.

The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council also recognizes the importance and need for accessible, affordable, high-quality early childhood education. According to the 2022 Santa Cruz Regional Needs and Assets Report, while the cost of center-based care is lower in Santa Cruz than elsewhere, incomes are also lower. Families in Santa Cruz County pay about 10-13% of their income for child care in center-based programs, depending on the child's age. Child care is a substantial expense for families, especially for families with multiple young children needing care. That is more than the United States Health and Human Services recommended 10% of their annual incomes for child care. Single female parent homes, which account for 26% of all households in the region, have a lower median income, resulting in a higher proportion of their income being spent on child care (31-44%). The regional council currently supports Quality First Scholarships to help minimize inequities, but those only reach a small percentage of eligible children. Additionally, children birth to age 5 living in families with incomes below the poverty guidelines are eligible for Early Head Start and Head Start services; however, there are only two Early Head Start and four Head Start sites serving the entire region. For those families who do not meet the eligibility requirements of Head Start, there are only 46 registered child care providers approved to serve up to 997 children, which is not nearly enough to serve the 4,416 children birth to age 5. This means that there are 4.5 times as many children birth to age 5 compared to the number of available child care slots in the region, meaning the region meets the criteria of a "child care desert." While accessibility is an ongoing issue for the region, the regional council sees improving the quality of early care and education as the first step to reaching accessibility.

The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council also recognizes the value and need for local professional development opportunities for early childhood practitioners. According to qualitative data provided by early childhood practitioners in the region, there are not enough local professional development offerings available, which forces them to travel to Tucson or Phoenix. Further exacerbating the challenge is that the majority of professional development currently available is only offered in English, which is a challenge to many local practitioners who primarily speak Spanish. The regional council is addressing the inequitable access to professional development by building capacity through the Early Learning Systems Change Strategy. The intent is to provide culturally and linguistically responsive, local professional development opportunities as well as to begin a "grow your own" model to build the professional knowledge and capacity of early childhood professionals in the region. This approach will encourage local early childhood practitioners to become certified to offer high-quality professional development instead of needing to bring in someone from outside the region or accessing professional development outside of the region, which has been the current practice since local instructors do not currently exist.

SFY26 FUNDING PLAN UPDATE / CHANGE TABLE

SANTA CRUZ REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL

DESIRED OUTCOME: ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY, CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Strategy Areas and Funded Strategies

Quality First

- Quality First Academy (prioritized)
- Quality First Coaching and Incentives (prioritized)

Access to Quality Care

- Quality First Scholarships (prioritized)
- Early Learning Systems Change (prioritized)

Successes:

Quality First:

In State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY24), Quality First implemented a revision to the model resulting in service levels that are based on the needs of participating centers and homes, more targeted administration support, and additional hours for Child Care Health Consultation.

Together, First Things First and the Department of Economic Security developed and facilitated information sessions and resources for Quality First participants to discuss the end of the federal funds and what SFY25 would look like for their participation, whether continuing or not.

One regulated early care and education program funded through the federal pandemic relief funds was able to maintain its participation in SFY25 from an existing vacancy in the Santa Cruz Region and the efficiencies from the revisions.

In SFY25, the Santa Cruz Regional Council maintained support of four centers and four family child care homes participating in Quality First. The percentage of programs achieving and maintaining quality levels is at 88% for the region, which indicates success of implementation among both the grant partner and participating early care and education providers.

Quality First Scholarships:

First Things First increased the Quality First Scholarship reimbursement rate to the cost of quality in SFY25, informed by a study conducted in 2021. This increase supports a robust and stable network of child care providers and continues the reimbursement rate that providers were receiving through federal pandemic relief funding.

From a statewide perspective, coordinated planning with the Department of Economic Security allowed for 125 children statewide to be transitioned from Quality First Scholarships to Department of Economic Security Child Care Assistance in advance of the end of the federal funds.

Early Learning Systems Change:

This strategy continues to build upon capacity building work that previously occurred in the region by accomplishing two goals. First, this strategy continues to offer professional development opportunities for early

childhood practitioners within the region. Second, the strategy has built a “grow your own” system that will provide the opportunity for local early childhood practitioners to become the instructors and subject matter experts in curriculums and subjects that align with early childhood. In SFY25, the grant partner continues to provide local professional development opportunities to early care and education practitioners working in regulated child care settings in the Santa Cruz Region. The grant partner has increased their collaboration with other partners who have provided professional development workshops, including the Arizona Department of Education and Highscope Educational Research Foundation. Regarding the second component of the strategy of growing the professional capacity of local instructors, the “grow your own” instructor has completed curricula outlined in the Professional Development Education for Early Care and Education Professionals Standards of Practice. This includes certification in the Program for Infant Toddler Care curriculum as well as the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling curriculum. These curricula are especially important for Santa Cruz early childhood education professionals because they are designed to increase teacher skills, inform child development and strengthen relationships between child and teacher. This approach is culturally and linguistically responsive, which is critical in the Santa Cruz Region since the majority of ECE professionals speak English and Spanish and work with bilingual children and families. The “grow your own” instructor also continues to increase her capacity by applying newly learned curricula and offer high-quality professional development through a mentoring and shadowing process with a seasoned trainer. The expected outcome is that, in SFY26, the “grow your own” instructor will be able to confidently begin providing local professional development in English and Spanish to early care and education practitioners.

Challenges:

Quality First:

Federal pandemic relief funding to support a statewide expansion of Quality First ended before the start of SFY25. In the Santa Cruz Region, 10 programs were funded through the federal pandemic relief funds. Nine of these programs transitioned to the Quality First waitlist starting July 1, 2024. 9 programs that transitioned to the Quality First waitlist starting July 1, 2024. All programs moved to the waitlist that have a rating that will expire in SFY25 will have the opportunity to be reassessed to continue to maintain a current star rating.

Quality First Scholarships:

Reimbursing Quality First Scholarships at the 2021 cost of quality has resulted in fewer scholarships in SFY25 (approximately half the number) for the same amount of funding from the previous year. In the Santa Cruz Region, that meant going from 47 Quality First Scholarships in SFY25 to 24 Quality First Scholarships in SFY26. In planning for SFY26, regional partnership councils had to consider the regional impact the reduction had and make decisions to ensure that additional reductions in funding do not disrupt the system in significant ways. The FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council made the decision to maintain previous year’s funding so as to not further disrupt the system moving forward.

First Things First and the Department of Economic Security will continue to work towards ways to support access to quality early learning to ensure efficient use of funds to serve as many children as possible.

DESIRED OUTCOME: INFORMATION, SERVICES AND SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Strategy Areas and Funded Strategies

Educating Families and Caregivers

- Home Visitation (prioritized)

Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

- Family Resource Centers (prioritized)

Successes:

The Santa Cruz Regional Council continues to support a two-pronged approach (implementing the FTF Home Visitation and Family Resource Center Strategies) to best serve families across the spectrum of needs.

Home Visitation:

The home visitation grant partner continues to successfully implement the strategy and is heavily focused on building strong relationships with the families they serve. In SFY24, retention rate of families was over 90%, meaning that families enrolled in the program stay with the program for at least two years. Furthermore, 12 families graduated from the program during SFY24. Those 12 families had each been enrolled in the program for five years, demonstrating the importance of home visitors building trusted relationships with the families that they serve. It is truly remarkable to graduate over 20% of enrolled families who began the program nearly five years ago, especially given the fact that families typically stay in the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program for about 13.85 months.

Family Resource Centers:

The family resource centers (FRCs) approach includes 14 unique curricula for parents, caregivers and children. In SFY24, the grant partner served 8,140 parents (duplicated count) and conducted 705 parenting activities. Furthermore, retention rates were 84.4% for SFY24, up from 74.4% the previous fiscal year. That means that families continue to return to the FRCs to participate in more parenting activities. Additionally, the grant partner is a leader in the state with the Family Resource Center Network. The Program Director for the FRCs in the Santa Cruz Region was chosen to be the incoming Chair of the Family Resource Center Network for SFY26, which is a reflection of the impactful work being done by the FRCs in Santa Cruz. It is also another opportunity for the work of the FRCs to be showcased and successful approaches shared with other FRCs in the state.

Challenges:

Home Visitation:

The home visitation grant partner struggled to maintain full staffing during SFY24. The program director and a parent educator resigned during SFY24, putting additional burden on the grantee to find a new program leadership while also continuing to serve the families that were part of the former parent educator's caseload. The challenge was resolved before the beginning of SFY25 and no families under that caseload left the program during the transition period.

Family Resource Centers:

The family resource centers (FRCs) grant partner continues to encounter a unique challenge that it has had for the past several years. That challenge is that they have a very high demand for classes from parents and caregivers. In response, staff has worked to ensure that all interested parents have access to FRC services. Additionally, the FRCs hold multiple orientation sessions for new families, which helps support their transition into the program and provides initial training on child development and parenting. These sessions also offer technical assistance for navigating the online registration system. Furthermore, each FRC provides drop-in activities that do not require registration. These sessions are scheduled on the calendar and follow an approach supported by the Triple P curriculum, ensuring that parents receive consistent and high-quality support.

DESIRED OUTCOME: WELL-PREPARED, HIGHLY SKILLED AND APPROPRIATELY COMPENSATED PROFESSIONALS

Strategy Areas and Funded Strategies

Professional Development for ECE Professionals

- Child Care Health Consultation (prioritized)

Successes:

Child Care Health Consultation (CCHC) is a part of the Quality First package of services for child care providers who participate in Quality First. The revisions to Quality First include an expansion of CCHC support, including supporting child care providers on Arizona state licensing compliance, completing health and safety checklists and reviewing health policies.

Challenges:

Beginning in SFY24, the FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council targeted CCHC supports for programs participating in Quality First. Previously, the FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council funded 32 non-Quality First CCHC slots in addition to supporting all Quality First enrolled programs in the region. Several home-based child care providers not enrolled in Quality First who are no longer receiving CCHC support have expressed their disappointment about no longer having CCHC services available.

Although CCHC services to non-Quality First providers is no longer offered, there still is opportunity to receive professional development through the Early Learning Systems Change grant partner. The regional director and the Early Learning Systems Change grant partner outreach to child care providers to ensure that they are aware that they can obtain professional development locally through the Early Learning Systems Change grant partner. In this way, they still have an avenue for support and feel connected to their child care provider peers. In SFY25, the primary target audience for professional development opportunities provided by the Early Learning Systems Change grant partner are child care providers who are no longer receiving CCHC supports.

DESIRED OUTCOME: PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT.

Strategy Areas and Funded Strategies

Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years

- Educational Promotion and Brand Awareness (prioritized)

Successes:

The regional council continues to host its annual First Things First Celebrates the Young Child Community Event every February. In SFY25, the regional council will host its 12th annual event in partnership with community and education stakeholders. The intent of the event is to provide elements of early education development activities, family education and health activities while providing a fun, safe event for parents and families with children birth to 5. With First Things First viewed as a leader in early childhood education within the region, the goal of this event is to expand partnerships, increase community awareness and the importance of early childhood education in the region. In previous years, exhibitors have been received positively by the community and continue to be eager to partner with First Things First. This event is the highlight of a larger, region-wide community priority of recognizing the importance of young children that is known as Early Childhood Awareness Month in Santa Cruz County.

Local events include official proclamations from the City of Nogales Mayor and Council and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors as well as events during the month aimed to highlight and increase awareness of the importance of early childhood education. Those events include a daylong professional development session specifically geared towards early childhood professionals, reading and book distribution at all preschools in the region by community leaders, a community ceremony to celebrate early childhood professionals, billboards around the region and ads in the local newspaper recognizing several early childhood champions.

Changes:

In SFY25, the FTF Santa Cruz Regional Partnership Council will celebrate Early Childhood Awareness Month in April as opposed to February. This shift is being made so that the month-long awareness campaign aligns with the nationally celebrated Week of the Young Child, which will take place in April 2025. This change will allow the region to include more partners from southern Arizona who participate in various Week of the Young Child festivities.

DESIRED OUTCOME: COORDINATED, INTEGRATED, AND COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

Strategy Areas and Funded Strategies

Evaluation

- Statewide Evaluation (non-prioritized)

Successes:

Statewide Evaluation:

2024 Regional Needs and Asset Reports were delivered in June 2024 and approved by the Board in August 2024.