

 FIRST THINGS FIRST

**State Fiscal Year 2028**

# **Multi-year Strategic Plan**





## Improving Outcomes for Arizona's Youngest Children

The first five years of a child's life have a powerful impact on their future as well as the future of the communities in our state. These early years are our best opportunity to build a solid foundation for success. As Arizona's only public funding source dedicated exclusively to early childhood, the Arizona Early Childhood Development

and Health Board, also known as First Things First (FTF), was established in 2006 to support the healthy development and early learning of children from birth to age 5. Over the last 20 years, programs and services funded through FTF have helped hundreds of thousands of young children enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

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#### **Vision**

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

#### **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.

### Values

- 1. Arizona's children, birth to age 5, and their families are our central focus.**  
We provide the best opportunities to prepare Arizona's children for success in school and life, while ensuring each child's well-being.
- 2. Equity-Focused:** to acknowledge, address and solve the unique challenges that some children and their families face.
- 3. Improve and Innovate:** we are continuously flexible, open, and able to do what is best for children and their families.
- 4. Accountable:** to demonstrate that our work truly improves the lives of children and their families.
- 5. Strong Stewards:** of public and private funds demonstrating transparency and sound financial management; and advocate for additional investments in early childhood development and health to address unmet needs.
- 6. Diversity and Inclusion:** our partners, regional council members, staff, and board are inclusive and reflect the diversity of our state and are essential to the equitable delivery of the mission. We treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- 7. Collaborate and Cooperate:** The success of our work depends on others and we maintain a diverse, inclusive and equitable culture of strong collaboration and cooperation both internally and externally.

This report summarizes the FTF State Fiscal Year 2028 multi-year strategic plan and its extensive 18-month development process. FTF is deeply grateful for the time, thoughtfulness and dedication of the many Arizonans who participated in this in-depth planning process. This includes the FTF state Board and Strategic Planning

Committee, FTF regional partnership council members, as well as state and regional partners representing Arizona's rural, urban and tribal communities. Your commitment and expertise have significantly contributed to the FTF Strategic Plan and our next level of statewide excellence.

# Why an Arizona High-Quality Early Childhood System Matters

About 90% of a child's brain growth happens before they start kindergarten, and the quality of a child's experiences in their **first five years** helps shape how their brain develops.

Children with positive, nurturing, stable relationships with parents and caregivers – including high-quality child care and preschool experiences – go on to do better in school and in life. Research shows they're more likely to read at or above grade-level, graduate from high school and are more prepared for college and career.

High-quality early childhood programs give children a solid start in life and a foundation upon which they can build. The individuals and organizations that support children's healthy development must work together in order to ensure all of Arizona's children have the opportunity to start school prepared to succeed.

## Historical Framework

In 2010, First Things First convened the first Early Childhood Task Force to establish a vision and design a model early childhood system that addressed not just early education, but all facets of young children's healthy development. The 2010 Task Force recognized that the model system must be one in which all of Arizona's early childhood partners — including families, early educators, health providers, state agencies, tribes, advocacy organizations, service delivery organizations, philanthropies, faith-based institutions, business representatives and others — play a role.

### **The vision developed by the 2010 Task Force was clear:**

All Arizona children by the time they are 5 years old have a solid foundation for success in school and in life because we have worked together to create a family-centered, comprehensive, collaborative and high-quality early childhood system that addresses the child's development, health and early education.

# Six Desired Outcomes

The model Arizona early childhood system, developed in 2010, identified six outcomes that remain relevant today. When the early childhood system is successful, everyone will benefit from living in communities where:

1. All children have access to high-quality, culturally-responsive early care and education that promotes their development.
2. All early childhood education and health professionals are well-prepared, highly-skilled and compensated based on their education and experience.
3. All children have access to high-quality preventive and continuous health care, including physical, mental, oral and nutritional health.
4. All families have the information, services and support they need to help their children achieve their fullest potential.
5. All Arizonans understand the importance of the early years and the impact of early childhood development, health and education on Arizona's quality of life. As a result, they substantially support — both politically and financially — a model system that delivers these benefits.
6. The early childhood system is high-quality, centered on children and families, coordinated, integrated and comprehensive.

These six system-level desired outcomes have since guided the collective work of building an effective early childhood system in Arizona.

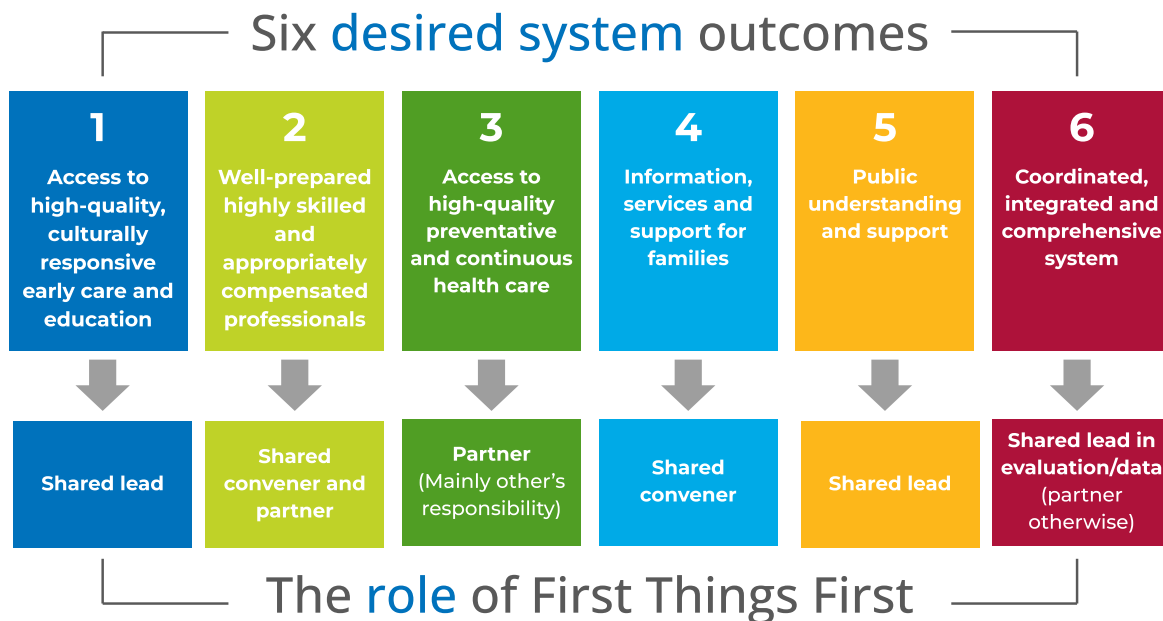
During FTF's comprehensive strategic planning process, these six desired outcomes were the organizing basis for an extensive review of FTF's past and current work.

# Setting priorities, focusing resources.

## Doing fewer things better together.

FTF is just one of many important partners in Arizona's early childhood system. With declining resources and the clear need to prioritize its work throughout the state, a review of FTF's role in each of the six desired outcomes with input from staff, regional council members and community partners confirmed that FTF has a shared lead role in just two of those areas:

1. Early care and education
2. Public understanding and support



**As this plan is finalized in 2026**, it is important to acknowledge the rapidly shifting external context and potential changes that may arise between now and when the implementation of the plan begins in State Fiscal Year 2028 (July 1, 2027).

Recognizing that federal or state government decisions over the next 18 months may impact the implementation of this Strategic Plan, the FTF Board has intentionally included as much flexibility as possible, while still providing guidance and direction as FTF regional partnership councils develop community-based funding plans for the next funding cycle. This will help to ensure alignment of regional funding plans with the FTF Strategic Plan.

# Refining Strategies Consistent with FTF Priorities

A continued fundamental direction for FTF is maintaining statewide priorities. This is essential to best ensure statewide sustainability of FTF's early childhood programs and services for Arizona's young children and their families.

About 94% of FTF annual revenue comes from tobacco taxes, which have been declining steadily since the agency's inception. FTF faces ongoing dramatic declines in tobacco tax revenues – annual revenues have decreased by nearly 47% – a decline of more than \$76 million – when

compared to the level of funding when FTF began operations. This Strategic Plan seeks to focus declining resources for maximum impact.

This Strategic Plan focuses on FTF's unique role in achieving outcomes that have a positive impact on Arizona's youngest children. One organization cannot do this alone, and FTF remains committed to collaborating with partners through collective impact to ensure the equitable and effective support of the well-being of young children.

## **FTF will maintain a priority focus on 6 strategy areas**

- Increasing the Quality of Early Care and Education Programs
- Increasing Access to Quality Care
- Providing Training, Professional Development and Support to Early Childhood Professionals / Providers
- Building Awareness of the Importance of the First Five Years
- Educating Families and Caregivers
- Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

To further ensure maximum impact, FTF will streamline individual strategies within these 6 areas where possible. The SWOT analysis completed during the planning process (see appendix - FTF SFY28 Strategic Planning Process) will help to identify where streamlining can be done effectively.

# Strategic Plan Alignment

The FTF Board has set SFY28 Strategic Plan Foundational Guidance. The guidance and priorities reflect the Board's desire to balance collective focus for **maximum impact**, while recognizing that individual regions may also have unique considerations.

## Foundational Guidance #1

Maintaining statewide priorities for the work of FTF is essential to achieving greater impact. The Board appreciates the need to maintain flexibility for individual FTF regions to address unique local considerations, needs and opportunities. To balance statewide collective impact with local flexibility:

1. Regions shall fund strategy areas in accordance with FTF state Board funding priorities and their regional needs and assets reports, with each region allocating at least 80% of regional funding to the six prioritized strategy areas.
2. If there is no regional need within the Board-identified priority areas, or if a lack of capacity within the region prevents implementing services within the prioritized strategy areas, the region should present this information and context within its proposed funding plan.
3. If the region does not meet the recommended funding level for the Board-identified priorities, then the regional funding plan should include data from the regional needs and assets report, as well as information from the regional strategic planning process, that supports funding other local priorities.
4. When funding strategies outside the Board-identified priorities, if there are public system partners who hold primary responsibility in that area, the regional funding plan should describe how the region will engage those partners to increase system-wide accountability.
5. In recognition of FTF's commitment to equity and its prioritization of under-resourced and underserved children and their families, FTF regions shall include a description of how their funding plan promotes equity and support of under-resourced and underserved children and their families.



## Foundational Guidance #2

Through Quality First, FTF has created an effective and recognized quality improvement infrastructure and standard for early childhood education in Arizona. In recognition of the significant importance of Quality First and the need for FTF to continue its leadership role in this area:

1. The Board will pursue a systems-wide, statewide goal to achieve 70% participation of licensed and regulated child care programs in Quality First at some level, including Rating Only participation. (In SFY26, the total participation rate was about 54%). This will be a long-term goal and will necessarily include additional potential funding streams other than FTF.
2. To help achieve this scale, the Board is committed to offering FTF regions flexibility to maintain quality early education in the most cost-efficient manner.
3. The Board will continue requiring a “floor” for regional investment in Quality First. The floor will be the percentage of funding a region allotted to Quality First in SFY20. This floor was initially set in the SFY24-27 strategic plan, and, after reviewing each region’s allotment to Quality First over the last years, this continues to be a stable and appropriate set-point for investment.

## Foundational Guidance #3

Quality First Scholarships help more children access quality child care. To provide flexibility to FTF regions, regions will continue to have discretion on providing child care scholarships to new participants in Quality First. FTF regions can choose if vacated slots will or will not receive scholarships when refilled with a new participant. This would also be the case for newly created Quality First slots. Per existing Board policy, FTF regions can continue to target scholarships based on age bands and/or ZIP code. In addition, in regions with limited quality-rated programs, regions can continue to offer scholarships to programs with a 2-star rating.

## Foundational Guidance #4

With limited resources to implement direct services, systems building is an essential and continuing priority for FTF. Through system change efforts, FTF can ensure that its investments in programs, partnerships and policies reinforce one another to create lasting positive change. To maximize impact and efficiency, FTF systems change work should be aligned at both the regional and statewide levels so that strategies are coordinated, resources are leveraged and outcomes are collectively owned.

Statewide coordination is particularly important to ensure that systems efforts honor the sovereignty, cultural practices and governance structures of tribal partners, and are

responsive to the diverse contexts and priorities of Arizona's communities. At the same time, some regional and local systems do not always connect with statewide systems. The need to customize approaches, especially in tribal communities, is key.

FTF's role in systems change varies depending on the desired system outcome. As a statewide convener and connector, FTF can create conditions for partners to work together toward shared outcomes, using data and evidence to guide continuous learning and improvement. FTF connects local systems change efforts with broader policy, funding and practice infrastructures, ensuring that learned experience informs collective progress within regions and across the state. Through this approach, FTF advances systems building that is practical, measurable and sustainable, ensuring that limited resources achieve the greatest possible impact for Arizona's young children and families.

The complexity of systems change efforts makes it clear that systems change efforts should be developed collaboratively, with measurable outcomes identified and leveraging economies of scale where possible. In addition, FTF should also coordinate with external partners on systems change to avoid duplication and improve efficiencies.

# Systems Change for Improved Outcomes

FTF's greatest leverage for improving outcomes lies at the **systems level**. Partners recognize FTF's unique ability to bridge policy, funding and on-the-ground realities.

At FTF, the need to transform systems to better serve children requires that a systems change approach be applied to shift the conditions that hold the problems in place for Arizona's youngest children. Success depends on FTF's capacity to support and influence the policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics and mental models that shape how services are designed and delivered. For FTF, this involves strengthening the infrastructure of relationships, feedback loops and shared learning that enable local innovation to influence statewide impact, and statewide momentum to help advance local impact.

Systems change is not separate from measurable outcomes; it is what makes those outcomes sustainable. It allows FTF and its partners to better understand complexity, assess problems differently and apply resources in strategically sustainable ways.

## **At FTF, the aim of systems change work is to:**

- Improve the early childhood system's effectiveness and efficiency by improving system partner collaboration and coordination.
- Build the capacity to better serve young children.
- Address operational or policy barriers that impede access to or the provision of resources.
- Leverage resources to bring the early childhood system to scale.

FTF measures both the progress of systems change and uses a systems change approach to guide how progress is measured and understood.

## **Progress is demonstrated through evidence of alignment, contribution, and learning, such as:**

- Increased collaboration among agencies and communities.
- Shared use of data and continuous improvement cycles.
- Shifts in how partners think about and approach early childhood issues.
- Policies and practices that sustain effective models across the state.

These changes begin with relationships and lead to tangible results: more coordinated funding, better access for families, and greater efficiency and equity across Arizona's early childhood system. Through this approach, data is a tool for learning. Measurement extends beyond program outputs to assess how well the system itself learns and adapts through shared accountability, openness, and continuous improvement.

FTF's evolving systems work integrates evidence and relationship - the intentional use of evidence and reflection to drive measurable improvement, paired with the relational power of shared purpose. Together, these elements make systems change measurable, meaningful and lasting.

## Six Conditions of Systems Change

Systems change in the FTF context can occur at both the state and local (regional) level. Many systems change efforts utilize the Six Conditions of Systems Change framework.

The conditions include:

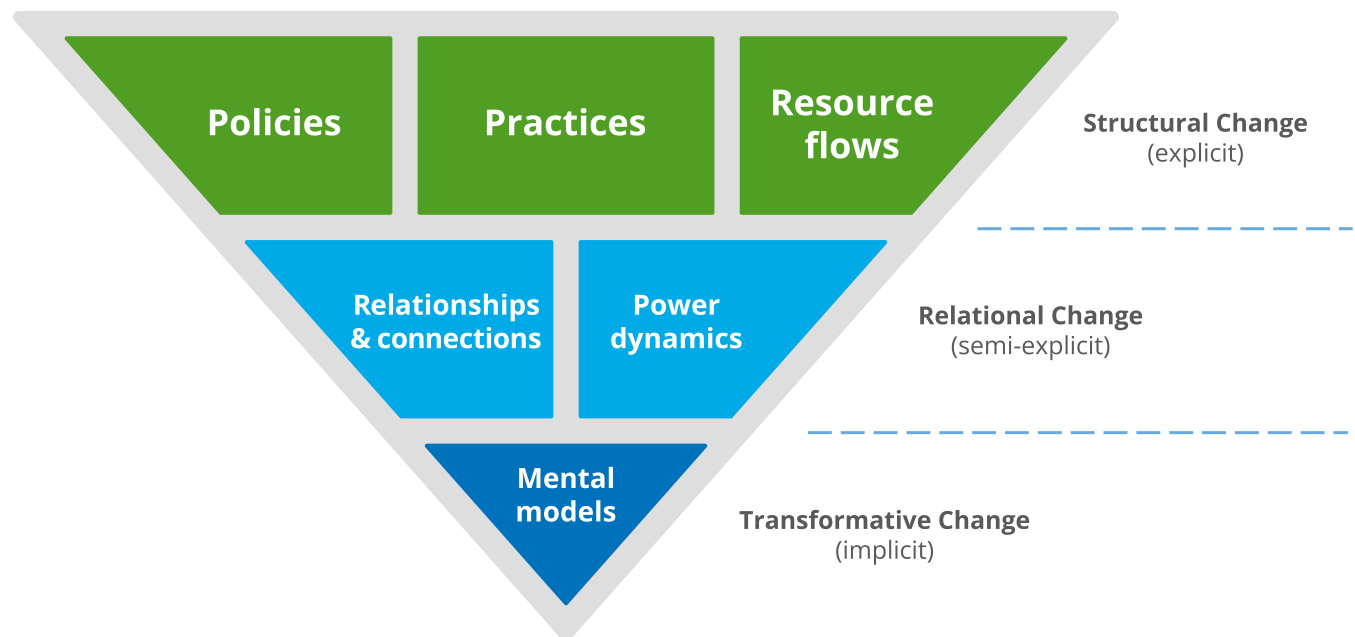


Image from The Water of Systems Change  
by John Kania, Mark Kramer, Peter Senge. June 2018

## Cross-Regional Collaboration

Collaboration is the process of working together to achieve a common purpose, and it is core to FTF's identity. From the intentionally diverse makeup of the Board, which includes representation from multiple Arizona state agencies, to the community voice reflected through regional partnership councils, to the emphasis on early childhood system building in the original initiative language. Even the term *partnership* in regional council names reflects this value. Over time, the organization has expanded its collaborative efforts, encouraging innovation and shared learning at every level.

With fewer resources, there is renewed focus on strengthening and expanding cross-regional collaboration. Both in the grant-making and contracting process, as well as in system and community-building efforts.

Several regions have already embraced this approach. In southeastern Arizona, five regional partnership councils—Pima North, Pima South, Santa Cruz, Pascua Yaqui Tribe and Tohono O'odham Nation—convene regularly to share knowledge, align efforts and guide future planning and implementation. For example, Pima North and Pima South have developed shared strategies and contracts. This is partly due to their geographic proximity, but also because they serve overlapping communities and stakeholders.

Another example is in northwestern Arizona, where the Colorado River Indian Tribes, Hualapai and La Paz/Mohave regional partnership councils have been working together for several years. These regions have convened consistently to align strategies and implement a joint systems-building strategy.

These examples represent only a portion of the ongoing cross-regional coordination and collaboration efforts taking place across Arizona. There is growing recognition that, through more frequent and innovative collaboration, regions can achieve greater efficiency, stronger alignment and broader impact.

As FTF moves toward the future, the Board strongly encourages regional partnership councils and FTF staff to continue exploring collaborative approaches that expand access to high-quality early childhood programs and services. Strengthening these conditions is central to FTF's mission to help “all Arizona children succeed in school and in life.”

# FTF Strategic Priorities

## Strategic Priority #1

### Increasing the Quality of Early Care and Education Programs

From a programmatic and systems perspective, FTF has built significant and effective infrastructure to support quality improvement in early childhood education. Through its statewide leadership and partnerships, FTF strengthens the systems that ensure quality standards, professional development and continuous improvement. FTF will continue its leadership role in advancing the quality of early childhood education.

#### Objectives

1. Continue to refine and enhance Quality First for long-term sustainability, including by expanding Rating Only enrollment for regional investment. In addition, transition 4- and 5-star programs after two cycles to Rating Only. Exceptions may be made in tribal communities where there are limited child care programs. Consider differentiated cost model by program type. Refine and revise incentives and assessment including increasing the assessment interval to three years from two years for 4- and 5-star-rated programs.
2. Continue to improve efficiency, including establishing a system-wide virtual technical assistance help desk for providers with support specific to tribal needs. Other identified efficiencies include integrating supports such as Quality First Academy via existing strategies.
3. Focus systems building efforts on these areas:
  - a. Work with partners to expand funding to support quality improvement for early care and education, including Rating Only and “buy-in” opportunities
  - b. Continue to identify areas of collaboration to maximize resources and impact.
  - c. Continue to focus on communicating to families, early childhood education providers, and policymakers the importance of quality, how to find quality and what quality looks like.

## Strategic Priority #2

### Increasing Access to Quality Care

Increasing children’s access to quality early learning is highly important for FTF, with the recognition that state and federally funded early learning opportunities serve just a fraction, about 10%, of children birth to age 5. Increasing the availability and affordability of early care and learning requires coordinated systems change efforts to address structural barriers that prevent more children from benefiting from quality early learning. Through its partnerships and statewide leadership, FTF works to align funding, policy, and practice so that high-quality early learning becomes accessible to more families across Arizona.

## Objectives

1. As systems change efforts continue to be prioritized to address access to quality care, consider reductions in QF scholarship investments without impacting FTF's commitment to Arizona's Child Care Development Fund match.
2. Continue to work with partners to ensure families receive the best match for assistance, including Board consideration of requiring Quality First providers to be contracted with DES for child care assistance.
3. Continue support for Family Friend and Neighbor (FFN) providers based on their needs. The Family Friend and Neighbor Care strategy will continue to support kith and kin providers/ unregulated home care providers. In addition, caregivers interested in accessing child development information and resources can access those supports integrated within other FTF strategies (ie. Parenting Education, Family Resource Center).
4. Maintain and refine Transition to Kindergarten Strategy to focus on areas where the availability of child care is limited or there is a significant gap.
5. Focus systems building efforts on these areas:
  - a. Improve system-wide support for buy-in options for Quality First scholarships, which allow businesses, community partners or others to fund scholarships. Consider statewide efforts that could support those regions which have limited opportunities for potential buy-in partners.
  - b. Focus on sustainability of child care programs rather than start-up, with exceptions in communities where child care is scarce.
  - c. Continue public policy efforts to advance quality early learning availability and accessibility.

## Strategic Priority #3

### **Providing Training, Professional Development and Support to Early Childhood Professionals/Providers**

Professional development is one of FTF's most important strategic areas, and FTF will continue to focus on achieving effective implementation through programmatic, state and local partner approaches.

## Objectives

1. Limit FTF professional development support to those that can be evaluated to show change in practice and integrate with statewide virtual technical assistance hubs.
2. Continue to refine and maintain college scholarships.
3. Continue Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation while also leveraging other state agency funding (i.e. ADHS and DES) to expand access while aiming to address systemic barriers related to capacity.
4. Shift from a programmatic approach to a policy approach in the area of Inclusion of Children with Special Needs, while recognizing that partnering with other responsible parties is key to ensure teachers have adequate support.

5. System building efforts include:
- a. Continue to leverage the cross-agency Professional Development Advisory Committee to gain input on system refinements such as registry customizations and professional development network website revisions.
  - b. Pursue collective partner funding of the registry to ensure virtual classes, monitoring, quality assurance and data system customizations.
  - c. Take a lead role in evaluation of professional development outcomes for the system, using the registry, in partnership and with commitment from partners.
  - d. Leverage high school career & technical education and federally funded Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to create workforce pipeline efforts.
  - e. Work with state partners to leverage available funding streams, and identify new funding streams, to support workforce needs.

## Strategic Priority #4

# Building Awareness of the Importance of the Early Years

Building awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health is an area where FTF plays a vital and unique role due to its organizational mission as well as the scale and reach of FTF's efforts. FTF's awareness-building efforts target two key audiences: parents/caregivers and the general public. For parents, awareness is the first step toward engaging in programs that support child development. For the public, awareness prompts positive action for young children.

### Objectives

- 1. Continue to expand the audience outside of the early childhood system with clear asks for this audience.
- 2. Prioritize strategic messaging and branding to maintain a strong, unified brand and to align materials across departments.
- 3. Build credibility as the go-to source for early childhood topics by creating quality, educational content and branded materials across all media platforms to reinforce FTF's mission with a focus on Quality First and quality child care awareness among families and providers.
- 4. Refine community engagement strategy to strengthen relationships with priority audiences (e.g., business, K-12), map regional opportunities and identify key stakeholders to enhance outreach and collaboration.
- 5. Maintain and refine Educational Promotion & Brand Awareness Strategy to focus exclusively on community sponsorships that engage expanded audience groups and partners outside of the early childhood system. Collateral materials can support these efforts, while book orders are transitioned to be part of programmatic strategies.



6. All regions should prioritize paid media efforts to support brand awareness.
7. Parent information and resources should continuously evolve to meet parents' changing needs and how they access information, including consideration of digital inequities in some communities.
8. Prioritize collaboration with state agencies through content partnerships to leverage overlapping initiatives and audience goals, which will help to provide comprehensive resources to parents in an integrated way.

## Strategic Priority #5

### Educating Families and Caregivers

As a primary public funder of parenting education and home visitation programs in the state, FTF has an important role to play in educating families and caregivers.

#### Objectives

1. Maintain and refine Parenting Education and Home Visitation strategies to better meet the diverse needs of Arizona families, including healthy development.
2. Continue support for Family Friend and Neighbor providers based on their needs (e.g., pathway to regulation, quality environments, or support through other strategies such as Family Resource Center, FRC).
3. Continue infusing language and literacy within existing FTF strategies to focus on supporting families to incorporate language and literacy into daily routines and interactions with their children, as the use of language and adult-child interactions is the best way to support brain development.
4. Continue the Language, Literacy and Culture in Tribal Communities Strategy and find ways to partner with federal or other tribal governments on this work.
5. Integrate book distribution into existing Family Support strategies, as applicable, to focus on educating families and professionals on children's language and literacy development via existing FTF strategies. Shift to unfunded systems work to collaborate on book distribution.
6. Focus systems building efforts on these areas:
  - a. Continue working with state partners (e.g. Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), Department of Child Services) to align home visiting funding and contracting to create a streamlined system of home visiting.
  - b. Collaborate with system partners to create a family support professional development system and explore how FTF can support, but not supplant, existing networks.
  - c. Work with state partners to leverage available funding streams, and identify new funding streams, to support additional needed services.

## Strategic Priority #6

# Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

Helping families to navigate the various systems of care and support for their young children and connecting them to resources and services continues to be a priority role for FTF. To help families get the right service at the right time, FTF should continue coordination and collaboration efforts with other system partners to leverage funding, reduce duplication and remove service barriers.

### Objectives

1. Revise and update strategies to increase effectiveness, including expanding Family Resource Center services to support Family Friend and Neighbor care providers.
2. Streamline strategies, including limiting the Family Support Coordination Strategy to tribal communities and to communities with limited resources and partner with other organizations to fund navigation of services. In addition, in the area of Home Visitation Coordinated Referral, shift from programmatic funding to a systems building approach so as to transition from a sole funder/lead role to a collaborative partner role.
3. Improve coordination and efficiency, including partnering with community agencies to co-lead and co-fund any resource guide efforts and ensure consistent messaging. Additionally, shift solely to digital platforms, allowing for dynamic, up-to-date information/resources and cost savings. In communities with digital inequity, ensure alternatives for families to access information/resources.
4. Systems building efforts include:
  - a. Institute time-limited support for local or statewide coalitions and assist in establishing self-governance, strategic planning and sustainability.
  - b. Leverage statewide Family Resource Center Pathway effort to collaborate with other state and community partners to co-lead and share financial responsibilities and pivot away from the sole funder status in the area of Family Resource Centers.
  - c. Continue to partner with libraries statewide to strengthen their role as community hubs for children and families supporting early language and literacy and access to resources/referrals.
  - d. Expand collaboration to reduce duplication of services and resource development and to build lasting, structural improvements that evolve to meet changing needs.

## Key Objectives for additional, non-prioritized strategy areas

Given the reality of declining revenues and limited resources, FTF must focus its efforts more strategically. This means concentrating on the areas where we can have the greatest impact and scaling back in others (refer to Foundational Guidance #1). As a result, some strategies that were previously part of our broader plan are now considered non-prioritized strategies. In some cases, this work may be integrated into other strategy areas or systems change efforts may instead become the focus. While these areas remain important to early childhood development and health, we simply do not have the capacity to pursue them fully at this time. This shift allows us to direct our energy and resources where they are most needed and effective and ensure sustainable programming moving forward.

### Oral Health

1. Continue to provide oral health screenings for children birth to age 5 with an emphasis on children with high need for these services and expectant mothers.
2. Partner with pediatricians and other health care providers to educate them on oral health screenings, fluoride varnish and oral health anticipatory guidance and how to incorporate it as part of well-child and prenatal visits.
3. The systems effort could include expanding medical and dental integration with Federally Qualified Health Centers and other settings. In addition, work with partners such as Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) and DHS to ensure families can access dental homes/oral health services.

### Nutrition, Physical Activity & Food Security

1. Shift from a stand-alone programmatic strategy to integrate into existing strategies.
2. Work with partners to increase awareness of nutrition programs available to families and child care providers. In addition, consider a focus on child care centers/homes (Quality First) as a possible referral pathway. Continue work with system partners, e.g. Women, Infants and Children program, Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, DHS.

### Identifying & Addressing Developmental Concerns

1. Work with partners to identify ways to build awareness for families about developmental milestones, while destigmatizing screening and referral, and encouraging child screening at their medical home.
2. Work with system partners, tribal program partners and other national screening sources to optimize services, identify gaps and build capacity.

3. Work toward statewide access to the online Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) to increase access to screening for all families.
4. Partner with Arizona Early Intervention Program and other partners to create a system-level plan to share screening results and streamline the process of referral for families and young children to improve service navigation.
5. Convene partners to create a statewide pathway for children who need support but don't qualify for services through Part B or Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
6. Shift Families with Children with Developmental Concerns Strategy to be an additional component of the Home Visitation Strategy, rather than a stand-alone approach.

## Health Resource Coordination

1. Focus strictly on low-income areas, especially rural communities with scarce resources.
2. Integrate health resource coordination support into existing Family Support and Early Learning strategies.
3. Continue to fund work in other strategies that provide support for families with complex medical needs, behavioral needs, developmental concerns and social needs.
4. Explore partnering with Federally Qualified Health Centers and implementing programmatic efforts in infrastructures that families are already accessing (e.g. medical centers).
5. Partner with AHCCCS to eliminate duplication of screening efforts and leverage the work of navigators within AHCCCS health plans to improve referral/navigation.
6. Partner with systems to provide education on tribal health care.
7. Partner with American Academy of Pediatrics - Arizona Chapter (and other associations, coalitions) to expand care coordination.
8. It is understood in the scientific and public health communities that the circumstances in which people live and work affect health. These circumstances are known as social determinants of health (SDOH). Explore opportunities for the coordination of assessing and addressing medical and social determinants of health coordination in alternative settings outside the medical home, such as mobile clinics, schools, family resource centers, etc. and/or a care coordinator providing services in locations where families gather.

## Child Welfare

1. Shift from funded efforts to instead focus on prevention strategies and systems coordination and systems-building efforts with state and local partners. Work with partners to review Arizona's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families distribution and expenditure patterns compared to national trends.
2. Shift from a funded systems building approach to unfunded systems building in a supportive partner role versus a lead role to support families already involved in the child welfare system. Unfunded systems work means systems work that is done through staff time or other methods besides through a funded approach. This further move to a supportive partner role continues the transition that occurred in SFY2024 when the programmatic strategy in this area was discontinued.

# Appendix

## FTF SFY28 Strategic Planning Process

### Strategic Planning purpose



In June 2024, the FTF state Board began work on a statewide strategic plan to set the direction for the organization's work beginning in State Fiscal Year 2028. This plan will follow the [SFY2024-2027 strategic plan](#) which will end on June 30, 2027. The Board set a goal for completion of January 2026, to allow FTF regional partnership councils a full year of planning for the new SFY28 funding plan cycle, which begins July 1, 2027.

The Board created a Strategic Planning committee of the Board to lead the strategic planning process.

Committee members include: Steve Peru (chair), Marcia Klipsch, Hon. Richard Weiss and Dr. Darlene Melk. In addition, the Board contracted with Kelley Murphy of KMM Policy Solutions for consultation on the strategic planning process.

The planning process began with a discovery/research phase. This first phase included the update of FTF strategy area assessment reports by cross-divisional teams of FTF staff members. The reports included a SWOT analysis and reviewed the progress of FTF's programmatic strategies as well as funded and unfunded systems-building efforts. The reports also included an external scan of partner's responsibilities, efforts and authority.

During this initial phase, the Committee also reviewed the Arizona Early Childhood Fiscal Map and financial projections for FTF. The Board is currently considering budget cuts beginning in SFY28 with this new plan because of continued significant declines in revenue.

The Committee set broad strategic planning goals and considered the role of FTF as a leader, convener or partner in the 6 desired system outcomes of Arizona's model early childhood system.

Some of the guiding themes that the Committee set included:

- Expend funding fully, responsibly and with accountability
- Focus on strategies with an evidence base
- Advocate for increased early childhood funding
- Recognize the diversity of ways systems change can work in all communities
- Reduce duplication, streamline services
- Support innovation
- Consider impacts of the regulatory landscape
- Lead the nation instead of lagging behind
- Create/reaffirm measurable goals for QF participation and availability of high-quality ECE
- Increase awareness of the importance of early childhood with all communities, including businesses

The Board closely engaged regional councils throughout the strategic planning process. Initial input was received from regional council and staff through key stakeholder interviews and surveys. A series of feedback sessions with council members was held, including an in-depth Summit session in February 2025.

In addition, input was sought from grant partners, constituents and tribal leaders at a tribal consultation in May 2025. Family input was gained through a statewide survey and focus groups.

# First Things First's Guiding Framework

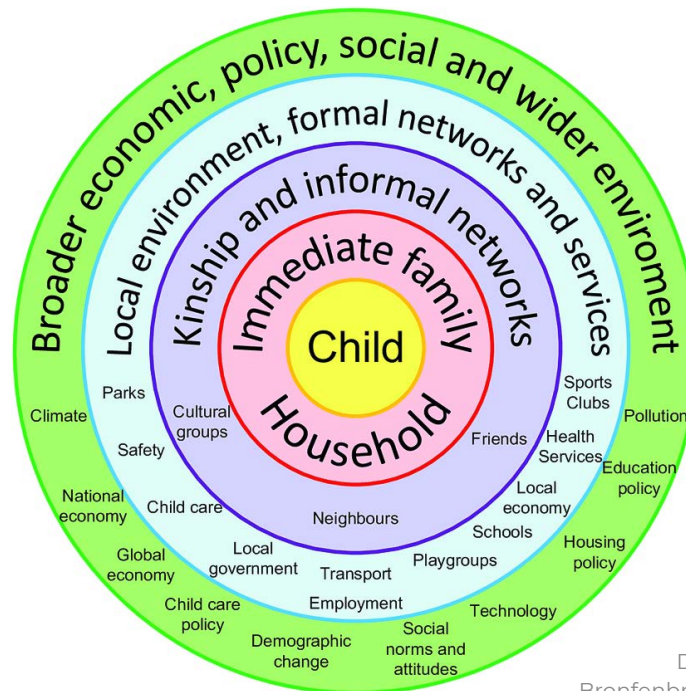


Diagram by Joel Gibbs based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979)

FTF's work is rooted in an understanding that children learn and develop in a complex context of family, school and community (see graphic above). A child's healthy development is shaped and influenced by their interactions with their environment. As shown in the Bronfenbrenner's model, a series of interconnected micro and macro environments/systems directly or indirectly impact the child's development. It ranges from their immediate surroundings (e.g., their families), informal and formal networks (e.g., friends, neighbors, community-based and health care professionals, school/quality early education professionals) to broad societal systems (e.g., local and national policies, culture of communities).

As no single strategy can directly address young children's optimal health, development and school readiness, FTF funds and supports an array of programmatic and systems work

strategies across Arizona communities, focusing on the different environments that impact a child's development.

Specifically, referencing the six desired system outcomes, FTF's programmatic strategies and system efforts in the areas of Early Learning, Children's Health, and Family Support and Literacy are designed to target families, caregivers, early childhood education professionals, community-based and health care professionals and/or policymakers as they are key individuals who directly or indirectly influence a child's development. Additionally, as part of executing FTF's vision and mission, we work collaboratively with other state and system partners, including tribal partners, as we recognize that furthering Arizona's Early Childhood System for our young children, their families, and early childhood professionals is a collective effort.



# Strategic Plan

## Mission

Building a family-centered, equitable, and high-quality early childhood system that supports the development, well-being, health and education of all Arizona's children, birth to age 5

## Statewide Goal

70% of child care programs participate in Quality First

## Vision

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

Children with the greatest needs are prioritized

Young children and families are at the center of our work

Values

Strong stewards of public funds

Innovate and continuously improve

## 6 Prioritized Strategy Areas

Navigating and Connecting Families to Resources

Increasing Access to Quality Care

Building Awareness of the Importance of the First Five Years

Providing Training, Professional Development and Support to Early Childhood Professionals and Providers

Educating Families and Caregivers

Increasing the Quality of Early Care and Education Programs

## First Things First's Strategic Focus

Focus resources for greater collective impact and be a leader in systems efforts to improve outcomes for young children.



## FIRST THINGS FIRST

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.

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