



PARTICIPANT GUIDE

State Fiscal Year 2024*

* Effective 7.1.2023. Policies are subject to change and may be updated during the fiscal year. Please visit the Quality First extranet's resources page to ensure you have the most up to date policy information.

Arizona's children thrive because of you. From snack time to nap time (and all the other moments in the day), you've made it your mission to look out for the youngest learners—creating a brighter tomorrow. Because learning starts from birth, First Things First funds Quality First to help early care and education providers improve and maintain the quality of their programs. Your participation shows that you are committed to improving the quality of your program to best serve the children in your care.

Purpose of the Participant Guide

This guide outlines the benefits, policies and procedures of Quality First. The purpose of the guide is to help you understand your role and the benefits you will receive as a participant.

How to use the guide

The guide is a tool for you to use as a new participant getting started in Quality First and as an existing participant that may need to find answers to questions about participation, including:

- Understanding what to expect as a participant;
- Understanding the quality improvement process including goal planning, assessment, and accessing financial incentives
- Learning about policies and procedures that you need to follow and understand throughout your participation
- Learning about other supports and resources available to you

Structure of the guide

Each section has information to support your understanding of the different parts of Quality First. You will notice Quality First policies are included throughout, in gray boxes. More information about the processes that go along with each policy immediately follows the policy box if needed. Ideas for success are included in each section.

What you need to know

The information contained in the Participant Guide is updated every year. As a Quality First participant, it is your responsibility to review and agree to the policies and procedures described in the guide each year. Policies are subject to change and may be updated during the year. To ensure you have the most updated information, visit the Quality First extranet's resources page for announcements and updates.

For assistance and support

If you have any questions related to the policies or procedures, ask your Quality First coordinator or contact the Quality First team at QualityFirstAZ.com or 602.771.5000.

To learn more, visit our website at QualityFirstAZ.com for information, answers to frequently asked questions and a blog full of tips and inspiration.

The following information includes the major updates for state fiscal year 2024 (July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024). Please refer to the remainder of the Participant Guide as well as ongoing communication from Quality First for important information and updates.



Highlights for State Fiscal Year 2024

Revision to Quality First

As an early care and education professional, you care for Arizona's youngest learners daily. That's why we're constantly looking for new ways to support you in providing the best possible care. We have made some changes in order to bring more individualized support to participants like you—no matter where you are in your quality improvement journey.

Throughout the guide, you will find information about what's new in Quality First. The following highlights some of the major changes.

Levels of Support (page 18)

One major focus of this revision is the introduction of three new levels of support. These levels of support provide each program a different level of assistance based on the needs of their program. You'll receive supports in a level based on the star rating your program achieved and your quality improvement needs. Learn about each level and their tailored offers of support.

Continuing Quality Opt-in Option for 3-star Participants (page 26)

Within the levels of support, some participants are eligible to opt-in to a different level than they are currently assigned. Participants earning a 3-star rating automatically receive supports in the Achieving Quality level of support. Participants with a 3-star rating that have existing internal quality supports such as coaching, health and safety support, etc., may request to opt-in to the Continuing Quality level of support. Learn about this option and the process to request to opt-in.

Quality First Coordinator (page 28)

New this fiscal year—Quality First Coordinators are joining your system of support. You will have access to another professional to support your successful participation. This new member of your support team provides orientation, help with paperwork, assistance finding resources and will work in collaboration with you and your QF Coach in support of your ongoing improvement efforts. Learn about this new role in Quality First.

New Grantee for Quality First Coaching & Incentives (page 30)

Southwest Human Development is the new grant partner for QF Coaching & Incentives. Find new contact information.

Child Care Health Consultation (page 34)

All participants will receive on-site health and safety support from a health expert. This enhanced support will help you strengthen and maintain the health and safety practices that help kids grow and thrive. Learn more about the services and supports you will receive from your CCHC.

Financial Incentives (page 39)

Participants will see changes to financial incentives to further target funding on quality improvement and staff recognition. Participants at the Pursuing Quality level of support will have access through their coach to more funding than before for quality improvement efforts. Participants at the Achieving Quality level of support will work with their coach to make quality improvement purchases. And participants at the Continuing Quality level of support have access to funding for staff recognition. Learn more about these changes, including policies and guidelines.



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What is First Things First?

From birth to age 5, children's brains develop faster than any other time in their lives and set the foundation for future learning. That's why Arizonans created First Things First—a voter-initiated, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to prepare young children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. Local regional councils, staffed by community volunteers, decide how funds are spent to support the healthy development and learning of Arizona's young children.

Strategic Plan

In 2022, First Things First published an updated Strategic Plan to guide priorities and investments for the next four years. Access to high-quality, culturally responsive early care and education was identified as the first of six desired outcomes. As First Things First's signature program, Quality First provides a system of support to help meet this goal.

To learn more about First Things First, our regional partnership councils, investments, latest news and more, visit our website at [FirstThingsFirst.org](https://www.FirstThingsFirst.org).

Vision

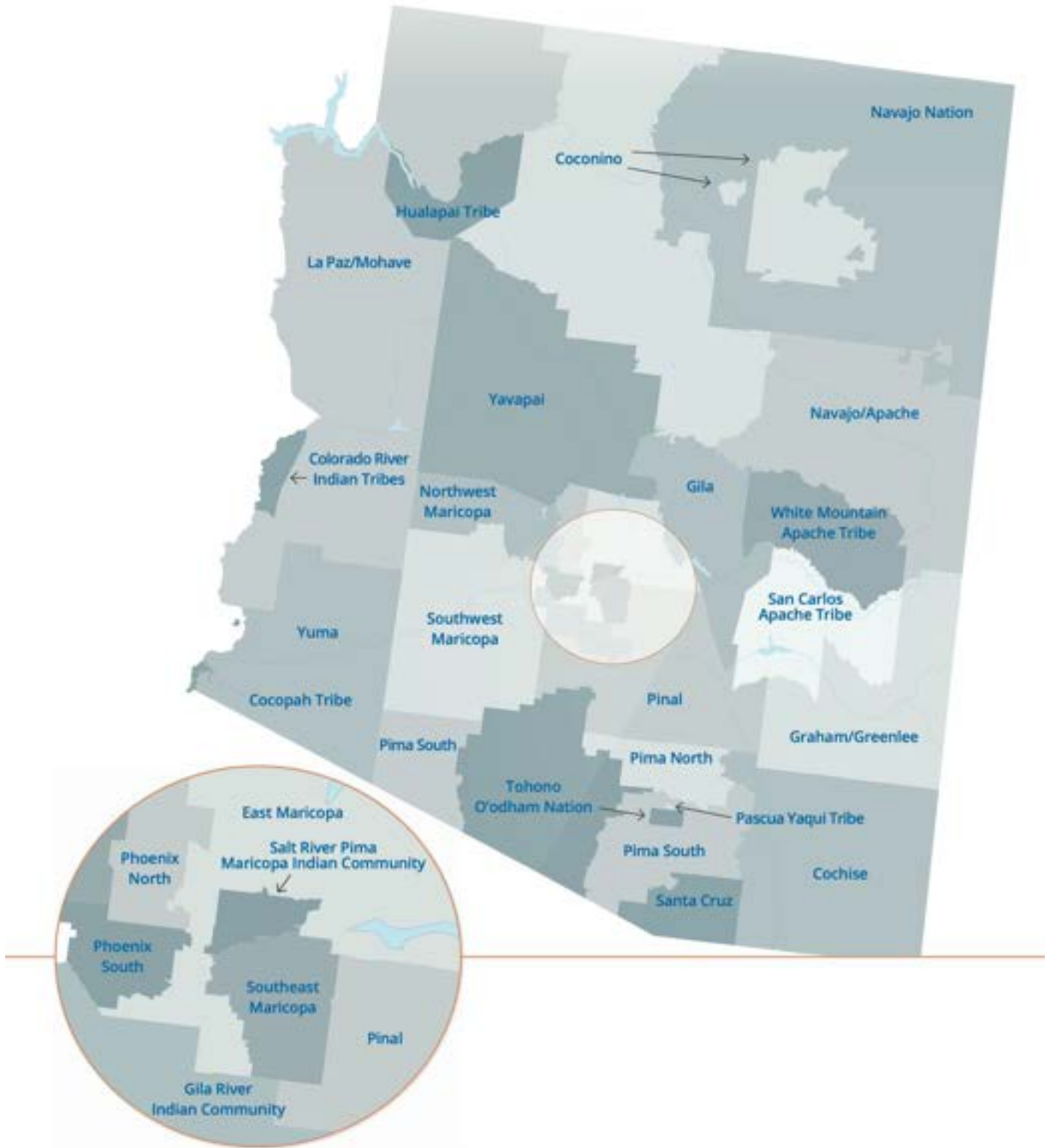
All Arizona's children are ready to succeed in school and in life.

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.



First Things First Regions



My Region _____

To find your First Things First region, visit FirstThingsFirst.org and select "find your region."



What is Quality First?

Quality First supports child care and preschool providers across Arizona to improve the quality of their early learning programs for children birth to age 5. The goal of this system of support is to help early learning programs help Arizona's children be ready to succeed in school and in life. This includes assessment to find strengths and opportunities, professional development to expand teaching skills, technical assistance and coaching. These supports help you create learning environments that nurture children's healthy development.

[WELCOME TO QUALITY FIRST](#)

New to Quality First? Take a few moments to watch a quick video introduction.



What Does a Quality Early Care and Education Program Look Like?

A high-quality child care or preschool setting has teachers and caregivers with expertise in working with children age 5 and younger, includes a learning environment that nurtures children's healthy development and prepares children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Quality child care and preschool settings build on basic health and safety practices to include:

- Health and safety practices that support children's healthy development
- Skilled teachers who know how to turn everyday experiences into learning moments
- Environments that spark children's curiosity with a variety of learning activities, books and hands-on materials
- Opportunities for active play and exploration throughout the day
- Interactions and conversations that build language, thinking and social skills

QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

This video describes a high-quality early learning setting and how this supports healthy brain development.



Component Overview



| RISING STAR | PROGRESSING STAR | QUALITY | QUALITY PLUS | HIGHEST QUALITY |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| ☆☆☆☆☆ Commitment to quality improvement | ☆☆☆☆☆ Approaching quality standards | ☆☆☆☆☆ Meets quality standards | ☆☆☆☆☆ Exceeds quality standards | ☆☆☆☆☆ Far exceeds quality standards |
| ERS Average Program Score 1.0 – 1.99 | ERS Average Program Score 2.0 – 2.99 | ERS Average Program Score 3.0 – 3.99 <i>No classroom score below 2.5</i> | ERS Average Program Score 4.0 – 4.99 <i>No classroom score below 3.0</i> | ERS Average Program Score 5.0 and above <i>No classroom score below 4.0</i> |
| CLASS Average Program Score N/A | CLASS Average Program Score N/A | CLASS Average Program Score ES CO IS 4.5 4.5 2.0 <i>No classroom score below</i> ES CO IS 4.25 4.25 2.0 | CLASS Average Program Score ES CO IS 5.0 5.0 2.5 <i>No classroom score below</i> ES CO IS 4.75 4.75 2.25 | CLASS Average Program Score ES CO IS 6.0 6.0 3.0 <i>No classroom score below</i> ES CO IS 5.0 5.0 2.75 |

ERS = Environment Rating Scales

- ECERS = Early Childhood Environment
- ITERS = Infant/Toddler Environment
- FCCERS = Family Child Care Environment

CLASS = Classroom Assessment Scoring System

- ES = Emotional Support (Pre-K), Emotional and Behavioral Support (Toddler), Responsive Caregiving (Infant)
- CO = Classroom Organization (Pre-K)
- IS = Instructional Support (Pre-K), Engaged Support for Learning (Toddler)

ERS is not administered for Head Start/Early Head Start or nationally accredited programs. If the program does not meet the CLASS threshold scores for a 3-star rating, the program receives a 2-star rating.

Last updated on April 26, 2023



SECTION ONE

Quality First Participant

The Role of the Quality First Participant

Thank you for being a part of the early childhood community in Arizona. As an early childhood educator, you are part of a very important profession. Quality First partners with you and your program in doing what you do best—providing quality early learning for the children in your care. As a Quality First participant, you are an important part of the partnership. You know your program best—your values, culture, vision, and goals. You will have a support team—experts in early childhood development, children’s health, and system resources, to support you. (Read more about your support team in Section Four.) With the help of your support team, you’re responsible for driving change within your program. This means you will lead improvement efforts and communicate goals with the staff, volunteers, and families of your program. With the support of your coordinator, you will be responsible for learning about and following Quality First policies and participation requirements. You will take the initiative to share important information with your support team, including changes at your program, new needs or areas you would like further support. This helps you to get the most out of your participation and make the biggest difference to the children in your care.

Leader of the Process:

As the leader of your quality improvement process, you will engage with a system of support to accomplish the goals you have for your program.

Program Expert:

As the program’s leader, you know your program best. Your system of support will partner with you to understand your program’s history, successes, challenges and goals for improvement. The goal of Quality First is to help you make improvements that align with your program’s philosophy and overall goals for success.

Director of Quality Improvement Efforts:

You will be the driver for change within your program. As your program’s leader, you will review your plans and progress regularly. When you have questions, review this guide and the resource documents. If you are unable to find the information you need, your coordinator or other technical assistance professionals can help.

“I think one of the misconceptions is that Quality First is going to be the answer or the solution to make their [program] successful. But it’s a partnership. What you all provide is only as good as what we apply.”

-Participant since 2018

HOW QUALITY FIRST WORKS

This clip reviews the benefits of Quality First and shows how these work for you.



PARTICIPANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

You will have the opportunity to ask questions about the information in the Participant Guide to ensure your understanding before signing. This allows for ongoing discussion about the expectations of participation. Additional forms are required to access Quality First financial incentives. (See Quality First Incentives Policy in Section Five of this guide.)

Participant Acknowledgement Policy: To confirm agreement with all Quality First requirements and responsibilities, enrolled participants must review and acknowledge the Participant Guide Acknowledgement and the Participant Commitment within the first 90 days of each fiscal year of participation. Both documents must be acknowledged in order to access incentive funds. Failure to comply with the commitments may result in a Targeted Support Plan and/or disenrollment.

PROGRAM DESIGNATION

At the beginning of your participation, you will complete a Program Designation form. To make changes to your program's designated individual(s), submit a new Program Designation form to the coordinator and update the contact information in the extranet.

Program Designation Policy: To support clear communication and participation in quality improvement, all Quality First participants must identify the key personnel who will be responsible for leading and coordinating quality improvement.

- Main Contact - Meets regularly with the Quality First support team and shares information with staff members.
- Primary Program Designee - Meets with the Quality First support team in the event that the Main Contact is not available.

Should you need to make changes to these designated individuals at any time, please contact your coordinator and complete a new Program Designation Form as soon as possible.

The Commitment to Quality

Planning for change is an important part of the improvement process. Improving quality will take time, effort and adjustments. Some of this will include identifying goals and action steps, motivating others and creating an environment that supports trying new ways of doing things. Remember— it takes time to implement new strategies. Adjustments to the plan and steps might be part of the learning and change process. Your commitment through the ups and downs of this process is crucial.

Market your Program with Quality First

As a new participant, you will be provided with a marketing toolkit. This kit will help you promote your participation in Quality First. These items are sure to catch the eyes of visiting families and start conversations about quality early care and education. The marketing toolkit includes talking points and key messages to make it easy to have these conversations with families. They help you spread the word about the great things happening in your program.

The marketing toolkit includes the following items:



Display Board

- Post in your program where families can easily see
- Holds your certificate
- Holds brochures about quality early learning



Window Cling

- Post on your front window or door
- Announces your participation for visitors and families



Digital Tools

- Enhance your website
- Add a badge with the Quality First logo
- Share First Things First's content on social media



Communication Tools

- Share messages with your community and families
- Sample letter to families announces your participation
- Sample press releases announce participation and star rating achievement
- Talking points strengthen daily conversations

Your coordinator or coach will deliver the display board and window cling to you. For the digital and communication tools, go to the extranet's Quality First dashboard, in the Quality First resources section. Select "Quality First Marketing Toolkit."

Once your program has a publicly posted rating, you will be mailed a star rating certificate to post in the display board. You will receive an updated star rating certificate after each assessment cycle.

Strategies for Successful Participation

As the leader of your program and your quality improvement efforts, the following strategies will help you make the most of your Quality First participation:

Select a consistent individual(s) to lead your quality improvement efforts. Identify those in a leadership role that can make decisions about changes and communicate about the process.

Schedule time in your calendar to work with your staff on your quality improvement efforts. Keep as many scheduled visits as possible to further support momentum and progress. Your leadership makes a big difference in how staff contribute to the success of your goals.

Provide staff time outside of the classroom, so they can work with coaches and other technical assistance professionals. This allows them to focus on their goals.

Create an organizational system, such as a communication binder, that is easy to access by staff and technical assistance professionals. Include all Quality First contacts, forms, reports and resources you may want to share with staff.

Monitor your goals regularly. The Quality Improvement Plan serves as a map for your improvement process. Regular monitoring helps you keep track of your progress.

Arrange time in your calendar to review and update information about your program, staff and contact information in the extranet and Registry on a monthly basis.

Include Quality First in your program's new staff orientation. Visit <https://bit.ly/QFOrientation> for a series of short videos. Share information about your participation, Quality First policies and processes, and your goals with the staff and volunteers working in your program.

Work with your staff to align your policies, staff handbook and parent handbook with any new practices. Well-defined policies help sustain your quality improvements over time.

WELCOME TO QUALITY FIRST

Getting to Know You

STEP 1

You've been selected!

When your program is selected, you'll be notified via email and phone. Programs are selected throughout the year based on available funding.

STEP 2

Say hello to your coordinator.

Within 15 days of selection, your coordinator will contact you to explain next steps and schedule a visit.

STEP 3

Enrollment

To get things started, your coordinator will collect enrollment paperwork.

STEP 4

Orientation

Your coordinator will orient you to Quality First—the benefits, expectations and strategies for success. You'll get a chance to ask any and all questions you may have.

Your Quality Improvement Journey Begins

STEP 5

Your first assessment.

An assessor will call to schedule your first assessment. They will visit your program, observe, and take detailed notes about your program's daily practices.

STEP 6

Your assessment results are in.

You will receive written feedback and an initial star rating. Your coordinator or coach will meet with you to review your results and discuss how they are related to your vision for quality improvement. Your star rating will not be posted on the public website unless you earn a 3-, 4- or 5-star rating.

STEP 7

Time to set goals!

At this point, you will have a star rating that will determine your level of support. Participants at the Pursuing Quality (1- or 2-star) and Achieving Quality (3-star) levels will hear from a coach, who will help you set goals. Participants at the Continuing Quality (4- or 5-star) levels will hear from their coordinator, who will help you identify tools and resources for independent goal-setting.

SECTION TWO

Levels of Support

As an early childhood educator, you know that each child has their own unique learning needs. You meet each child where they are and provide the support to help them develop, grow and learn to their fullest potential. At Quality First, our goal is to support you, the early childhood educator, as you develop and grow your program to the highest possible quality. That means meeting you where you are and helping you reach your goals for quality improvement. That's why we have launched three levels of support. Each level provides a system of support that matches your needs on your quality improvement journey.



| PURSUING QUALITY | ACHIEVING QUALITY | CONTINUING QUALITY |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-Star Participants • 2-Star Participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-Star Participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4- and 5-Star Participants • All Head Start Participants • Participants with Existing Internal Quality Supports** |
| <p>HIGHEST LEVEL OF SUPPORT</p> | <p>MID-LEVEL SUPPORT</p> | <p>LOWEST LEVEL OF SUPPORT</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ COACHING (Quality Improvement Support) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ COACHING (Quality Improvement Support) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ COACHING (Quality Improvement Support) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CHILD CARE HEALTH CONSULTATION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CHILD CARE HEALTH CONSULTATION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CHILD CARE HEALTH CONSULTATION |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FINANCIAL INCENTIVE Program Funding* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FINANCIAL INCENTIVE Program Funding* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FINANCIAL INCENTIVE Staff Recognition |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ QUALITY FIRST COORDINATOR (Participation Support - New) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ QUALITY FIRST COORDINATOR (Participation Support - New) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ QUALITY FIRST COORDINATOR (Participation Support - New) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ASSESSMENT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ASSESSMENT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ASSESSMENT |
| <p>* Available up to 2 Assessment Cycles</p> | <p>* Available up to 2 Assessment Cycles</p> | <p>** Other enrolled participants with existing internal quality supports (e.g., coaching, health and safety support, etc.) that have achieved a 3-star or higher rating</p> |

Movement between levels (as star rating changes) is expected

If a program decreases their star rating, they will receive all supports **except** financial incentives at the level they move to.

Pursuing Quality

See page 20 for a list of support and services provided at this level.

Programs at this level are earlier in their quality improvement journey. They are working toward quality in their early learning settings. The goal of this level is to provide the highest amount of support to help programs make quality improvements.

Achieving Quality

See page 22 for a list of support and services provided at this level.

Programs at this level have achieved quality in their settings, but they still have room to grow. The goal of this level is to provide a mid-level of support to help participants keep advancing their quality practices.

Continuing Quality

See page 24 for a list of support and services provided at this level.

Programs at this level are focused on maintaining their high-quality practices. The goal of this level is to provide ongoing support to help programs sustain their quality.

Pursuing Quality

HIGHEST-LEVEL SUPPORT

Who Qualifies

- ▶ Quality First participants with a 1-star or 2-star rating

Your System of Support Includes:

- ▶ Coaching
- ▶ Coordination
- ▶ Child Care Health Consultation
- ▶ Financial Incentives
- ▶ Assessment

You will have access to a team of experts to support you along your quality journey. This team will learn about your program and work together to help you along the way.

Coaching

You will receive regular, on-site coaching visits to support your improvement efforts. Your coach will help you set goals and put plans in place to reach those goals.

| Program Size | Coaching Hours |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Home (1-10 children) | 48 hours annually <i>(at least 2 hours monthly*)</i> |
| Small center (1-50 children) | 48 hours annually <i>(at least 2 hours monthly*)</i> |
| Medium center (51-150 children) | 72 hours annually <i>(at least 3 hours monthly*)</i> |
| Large center (151+ children) | 72 hours annually <i>(at least 3 hours monthly*)</i> |

**To support continuous quality improvement, homes and small centers must participate in at least two hours of coaching monthly. Medium and large centers must participate in at least three hours of coaching monthly.*

Coordination

*** New Role in Quality First**

Your coordinator will help along the way as you participate.

They will assist you with:

- ✓ Orientation and onboarding to Quality First
- ✓ Extranet (QF computer system), paperwork, forms and general technical assistance to support participation in Quality First
- ✓ Help finding other resources for your program, staff, children and families



Pursuing Quality

HIGHEST-LEVEL SUPPORT



Child Care Health Consultation (CCHC)

You will receive ongoing support from a specially trained health professional. Your CCHC provides recommendations and technical assistance in areas like nutrition, physical activity, disease prevention and more.

- ✓ Health and Safety Assessment
- ✓ Health and Safety Action Plan
- ✓ 15 hours of consultation quarterly (or 5 hours per month)

Depending on your regional area and the population you serve, you may also have access to additional specialists in the areas of early childhood mental health and inclusion for children with special needs.

Financial Incentives

You will be able to make purchases for program quality improvements.

- ✓ Available to all program types and sizes
- ✓ Up to \$20,000 per year*
- ✓ Spent through support of the coach

**Up to two assessment cycles*

Assessment

Approximately every two years, you will receive your assessment and star rating. Assessment gives you a clear picture of your program—what is great and opportunities to do even better.

- ✓ On-site assessment
 - ▶ Environment Rating Scales (ERS)
 - ▶ Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
- ✓ Written feedback reports to help you set goals

Questions? Contact the Quality First Team at QualityFirst@FirstThingsFirst.org at 602.771.5000

Learn more at QualityFirstAZ.com



Achieving Quality

MID-LEVEL SUPPORT

Who Qualifies

- ▶ Quality First participants with a 3-star rating

Your System of Support Includes:

- ▶ Coaching
- ▶ Coordination
- ▶ Child Care Health Consultation
- ▶ Financial Incentives
- ▶ Assessment

You will have access to a team of experts to support you along your quality journey. This team will learn about your program and work together to help you along the way.

Coaching

You will receive regular, on-site coaching visits to support your improvement efforts. Your coach will help you set goals and put plans in place to reach those goals.

- ✓ 30 hours annually
- ✓ Available to all program types and sizes

Coordination

* *New Role in Quality First*

Your coordinator will help along the way as you participate. They will assist you with:

- ✓ Orientation and onboarding to Quality First
- ✓ Extranet (QF computer system), paperwork, forms and general technical assistance to support participation in Quality First
- ✓ Help finding other resources for your program, staff, children and families



Achieving Quality

MID-LEVEL SUPPORT

Child Care Health Consultation (CCHC)

You will receive ongoing support from a specially trained health professional. Your CCHC provides recommendations and technical assistance in areas like nutrition, physical activity, disease prevention and more.

- ✓ Health and Safety Assessment
- ✓ Health and Safety Action Plan
- ✓ 9 hours of consultation quarterly (or 3 hours per month)

Depending on your regional area and the population you serve, you may also have access to additional specialists in the areas of early childhood mental health and inclusion for children with special needs.

Financial Incentives

You will be able to make purchases for program quality improvements.

- ✓ Spent through support of the coach
- ✓ Based on program size and type

| Program Size | Incentive Amount - per year* |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| DES Family Home (1-4 children) | \$600 |
| DHS Group Home (5-10 children) | \$1,175 |
| Small center (1-50 children) | \$2,050 |
| Medium center (51-150 children) | \$2,950 |
| Large center (151+ children) | \$4,700 |

**Up to two assessment cycles*

Assessment

Approximately every two years, you will receive your assessment and star rating. Assessment gives you a clear picture of your program—what is great and opportunities to do even better.

- ✓ On-site assessment
 - ▶ Environment Rating Scales (ERS)
 - ▶ Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
- ✓ Written feedback reports to help you set goals

Questions? Contact the Quality First Team at QualityFirst@FirstThingsFirst.org or 602.771.5000

Learn more at QualityFirstAZ.com



Continuing Quality

ONGOING SUPPORT



Who Qualifies

- ▶ Quality First participants with a 4-star or 5-star rating
- ▶ Head Start participants
- ▶ Participants with existing internal quality supports that have achieved a 3-star or higher rating

Your System of Support Includes:

- ▶ Coaching
- ▶ Coordination
- ▶ Child Care Health Consultation
- ▶ Financial Incentives
- ▶ Assessment

You will have access to a team of experts to support you as you work to continue your quality practices.

Coaching & Coordination

Your coordinator will support your continued success. In addition to being your main person of contact, they will assist you with:

- ✓ Orientation and onboarding to Quality First,
- ✓ Extranet (QF computer system), paperwork, forms and general technical assistance to support participation in Quality First
- ✓ Help finding other resources for your program, staff, children and families

As you work to continue your quality practices, you can request additional help from a coach.

Child Care Health Consultation (CCHC)

You will receive ongoing support from a specially trained health professional. Your CCHC provides advice and technical assistance in areas like nutrition, physical activity, disease prevention and more.

- ✓ Health and Safety Assessment
- ✓ Health and Safety Action Plan
- ✓ 3 hours of consultation quarterly (or 1 hour per month)

Depending on your regional area and the population you serve, you may also have access to additional specialists in the areas of early childhood mental health and inclusion for children with special needs.

Continuing Quality

ONGOING SUPPORT



Financial Incentives

You will have access to funding for staff recognition.

- ✓ Available to all program types and sizes
- ✓ Focused on staff employed at the program
- ✓ Direct payment to program following star rating achievement (approximately every 2 years)
- ✓ Based on star rating

| Star Rating | Incentive amount per staff* |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 5-star | \$1,000 per staff |
| 4-star | \$500 per staff |

**The number of staff in the following roles are used to calculate total incentive amount: Director, Assistant Director, Teacher and Assistant Teacher.*

Opt-in Option for 3-star Programs

Some 3-star programs with existing internal supports will be eligible to opt-in to the Continuing Quality level. Programs that opt in to this level have access to funds to support quality improvements and will work with their coach or coordinator to make purchases in alignment with their Quality Improvement Plan.

| Program Size | Incentive Amount - per year* |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| DES Family Home (1-4 children) | \$600 |
| DHS Group Home (5-10 children) | \$1,175 |
| Small center (1-50 children) | \$2,050 |
| Medium center (51-150 children) | \$2,950 |
| Large center (151+ children) | \$4,700 |

**Up to two assessment cycles*

Assessment

Approximately every two years, you will receive your assessment and star rating. Assessment gives you a clear picture of your program—what is great and opportunities to do even better.

- ✓ On-site assessment
 - ▶ Environment Rating Scales (ERS)
 - ▶ Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
- ✓ Written feedback reports to help you set goals

Questions? Contact the Quality First Team at QualityFirst@FirstThingsFirst.org or 602.771.5000

Learn more at QualityFirstAZ.com



Opt-in Request Option for 3-star Programs

Participants with a 3-star rating may request to opt-in to the Continuing Quality level of support if they have existing internal supports. Internal supports include but are not limited to health and safety support and coaching. Requests to opt-in will be reviewed by First Things First and/or the coach agency, and a response provided within 21 days of the request. The participant's level of support will be reviewed quarterly and may be updated as a result, as determined by First Things First. Changes to a participant's level of support will result in changes to coaching and CCHC services immediately and changes to financial incentives the following fiscal year. Head Starts with a 3-star rating are automatically included in the Continuing Quality level and do not need to opt-in.

To begin the request process, visit the extranet's Quality First dashboard in the forms section under Quality First resources and select the Continuing Quality Opt-In Request form.

SECTION THREE

Quality First Coaching & Coordination

As a Quality First participant, you'll be partnered with a coordinator and a coach who will be with you on your quality improvement journey. Your coach and coordinator will support you as you lead quality improvement efforts in your program.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND YOUR QUALITY SUPPORT TEAM

This video explains the role of the coach and how you can benefit from the support of a team.



THE PROCESS

This video features testimonials from Quality First participants about how participation made a difference for them.



The Role of the Quality First Coordinator

A Quality First coordinator is a central support for your program. Their role is to assist you in your participation—right from the beginning of your journey. The coordinator will be your first contact in Quality First, helping to orient you and help you understand your role as a participant. They will complete the enrollment process with you, requesting any required forms or documents and assisting you with any questions along the way. They will help identify other programs or professionals who may support your improvement efforts. They will also act as an ongoing resource for your program. With their support, you will be able to access additional services, tools or opportunities that could benefit the children and families you serve.

Coordinators have knowledge and experience in early childhood education, and knowledge of Arizona child care regulations, state standards, and community resources. They make it a priority to learn about your program, its needs and priorities.

The coordinator will focus on the following:

- Orientation and onboarding to Quality First
- Enrollment paperwork at the beginning of participation
- Extranet (QF computer system), ongoing paperwork and general technical assistance throughout participation
- Help finding other resources for your program, staff, children and families
- Ongoing communication to determine how your program is doing and what needs you may have

The Role of the Quality First Coach

Your Quality First coach is an early childhood expert who will be your partner on your improvement journey. They will support and encourage you, and help you identify a vision for changes in your program along your improvement journey.

Coaches have a wealth of knowledge and experience in the field of early childhood education. They are knowledgeable in:

- The quality improvement process
- All Quality First assessment tools
- Arizona's Early Learning Standards and Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines
- Quality early learning environments
- Curriculum
- Daily routines and transitions
- Instructional strategies
- Strategies for engaging families

The coach makes it a priority to respect your program, its practices and culture. Coaches have a wide range of tools and are equipped to meet your unique needs in support of your goals.

Your coach will focus on the following:

- Helping you review data about your program and set goals for improvement
- Partnering with you as you put goal plans into action
- Coaching as you and your staff try new things
- Meeting you and your staff in person through on-site, in person visits
- Addressing new needs for support that may arise along the way

Coach and coordinator assignments may change based on factors such as staffing changes, scheduling needs and to ensure the best fit.

Quality First Coach Visits

Depending on your level of support, you will have access to coaching services as follows:

Pursuing Quality

(Participants with a 1-star or 2-star rating)

Participants at this level receive the most coaching support, with regular, ongoing, monthly visits to support quality improvement. Visits may be scheduled according to your needs and priorities. Some months you may use more coaching hours, and some months you may use less. Meeting with your coach for the full annual hours and the required monthly minimum hours will support ongoing progress on goals and improvement efforts. Coaches will accommodate requests for more hours as possible, balancing the needs and requests of all participants on their caseloads.

| PROGRAM SIZE | COACHING HOURS |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Home (1-10 children) | 48 hours annually (with at least 2 hours monthly) |
| Small center (1-50 children) | 48 hours annually (with at least 2 hours monthly) |
| Medium center (51-150 children) | 72 hours annually (with at least 3 hours monthly) |
| Large center (151+ children) | 72 hours annually (with at least 3 hours monthly) |

Achieving Quality

(Participants with a 3-star rating)

Participants at this level receive a moderate amount of coaching support. Visits at this level may be scheduled according to your needs and priorities. Some months you may use more coaching, some months you may use less, and some months you may not need to meet with your coach. Participants at this level have 30 hours of coaching services per year, regardless of program size.

Continuing Quality

(Participants with a 4-star or 5-star rating, all Head Start participants, and 3-star participants with internal quality supports that have opted in to this level)

Programs at this level are focused on maintaining their high-quality practices. The goal of this level is to provide ongoing support to help programs sustain their quality. Participants at this level have access to coaching services upon request.

Quality First Coaching Visit Policy: To provide support for quality improvement efforts, regular visits with a Quality First Coach are required at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support. Your coach will work with you to create a schedule for visits. In the event you or another designated staff member is unable to meet for a planned visit, it is your responsibility to notify the coach in advance. Cancellation of coaching visits results in reduced coaching hours and may affect progress toward your goals. A pattern of repeated cancellations may result in a Targeted Support Plan and/or disenrollment.

Coaching visits may include but are not limited to meeting with the program director/administrators for planning and reviewing progress, observing and modeling in classrooms, providing feedback, opportunities for reflection and resource materials. With permission from the participant, coaches may use digital video recording(s) to highlight successes and to provide staff opportunities to reflect on their practice and interactions with children.

After each visit, the coach will create a summary of activities accomplished and any plans for upcoming visits. A copy of the summary will be provided to you. This information is also entered in the Quality First data system and shared with First Things First to track quality improvement activities.

Quality Improvement Planning

Quality Improvement Planning Policy: To document goals and action steps that promote high-quality early learning experiences for children, Quality Improvement Plans are required at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support.

Every journey requires a roadmap. Your Quality Improvement Plan is the map that details the action steps, supports and checkpoints you identify to work toward your vision. Quality Improvement Plans are goals created by using information from multiple sources. These sources include your firsthand knowledge of your program's practices, informal observation(s) from a coach or other technical assistance professional and information gathered using valid and reliable tools (through assessment).

If you are at the Pursuing Quality or Achieving Quality level of support, a Quality First coach and other technical assistance professionals will assist you in documenting these goals and your progress. The Quality Improvement Plan form will be used. This plan will be uploaded to your program profile in the Quality First extranet where progress will be noted monthly as action steps are completed.

If you are at the Continuing Quality level of support, a Quality First coordinator, coach or other technical assistance professionals may help you in documenting goals using the Quality Improvement Plan form, if desired. You may also choose to document goals independently, using the Quality Improvement Plan form or another system of documentation.

New Grant Partner for Coaching & Incentives

Southwest Human Development is the new grant partner for QF Coaching & Incentives beginning state fiscal year 2024. If you have questions about coaching, coordination, or incentives, please contact QFCoaching@SWHD.org.

Strategies for Successful Coaching & Coordinator Relationships

Working with a Quality First coach and coordinator requires a commitment to strong professional working partnerships. Here are some tips to make the most of these partnerships:

Introduce staff and volunteers to the coach and coordinator. This will help to establish a comfort level for coaching activities. Introduce the children to the coach as well to reduce any stranger anxieties.

Notify families that your program is participating in Quality First and that you will have visits from a coach. Families will appreciate knowing how these efforts can benefit their children.

Talk with the coach and coordinator about the type of communication that works best for you. If you prefer to meet at a certain time or would appreciate regular phone calls, emails or text messages between visits, let them know.

Plan ahead for visits with questions, needs or clarifications. This will save time during meetings so that you are ready to work on any activities you have planned.

Communicate with the coach about your preferences for support, your plans for change and how to involve staff. If you're unsure about how a strategy is working, or if you want to try something different, let your coach know. You and your coach can modify plans to meet your needs.

Make a plan to sustain the quality improvements you have made. Identify who will be in charge, how new practices will be included in staff training and what policies should be updated.

SECTION FOUR

Child Care Health Consultation and Specialized Assistance

During your participation, you will be eligible for additional specialized assistance to support the individual needs of your program. Availability of specialized assistance depends on your geographic region and your funding level.

You and the Quality First coach and coordinator have the opportunity to work with other technical assistance professionals who include Child Care Health Consultants, and may also include Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants, Inclusion Coaches, ADE Early Childhood Specialists, ADHS Licensing Surveyors, DES Certification Specialists and Registry and College Scholarship Outreach Coordinators.

[HOW QUALITY FIRST WORKS](#)

This video describes the system of supports provided through Quality First, and how the program works.



Joint collaboration activities may include:

- Joint visits with you, the Quality First coach or coordinator and other consultants/technical assistance professionals
- Collaboration on goal setting, identifying action steps and planning visits
- Feedback and input on your program's strengths and opportunities for growth
- Sharing of training resources and materials
- Joint trainings, communities of practice, professional learning communities and other events focused on quality improvement goals

Collaboration Meeting Policy: Collaboration meetings are a part of participation in Quality First to coordinate services efforts to meet a common goal. For participants at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support, collaboration meetings are required at least quarterly and will include the participant, the Quality First coach, CCHC and any additional technical assistance professional serving the program (such as Inclusion, support strategy and ADE). For participants at the Continuing Quality level of support, collaboration meetings are an option and may include the additional professionals serving the program, as applicable. Notes from the collaboration meeting will be shared with all participating members. Documentation of the meeting's occurrence will be added to the extranet activity log.

For participants at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support, your support team will work with you to schedule a collaboration meeting each quarter. For participants at the Continuing Quality level of support, you may contact your CCHC, Quality First coach or QF Coordinator if you have immediate needs or new priorities that you would like to discuss with the support team. Alternatively, the CCHC, Quality First coach or QF Coordinator may suggest a collaboration meeting to support your program. During the meeting, you will discuss your quality improvement plans and any immediate needs or priorities with the team. One member will keep notes of the discussion and decisions made and provide you with a copy.

Types of Specialized Assistance

Child Care Health Consultation

Child Care Health Consultation is provided to all Quality First participants

A Child Care Health Consultant (CCHC) is a specially trained health professional who provides recommendations and support to early care and education providers through education and the identification of site-specific health and safety needs. The CCHC provides support by delivering comprehensive technical assistance through:

- Assessing the current health and safety practices of your program in order to identify strengths and opportunities for growth
- Working alongside you to develop health and safety goals and identifying the steps needed to reach those goals
- Providing onsite guidance and consultation
- Staff training on health and safety evidence based best practices
- Assistance in the development of health and safety related policies and procedures
- Referrals to community resources
- Information to share with parents and children

Child Care Health Consultation Policy: Each Quality First participant will be assigned a Child Care Health Consultant (CCHC) once enrolled. Upon enrollment, participants will receive a visit from the CCHC to:

- Discuss CCHC service;
- Learn more about your program and its health and safety needs; and
- Schedule a time to begin your health and safety assessment process

Participants will receive a designated amount of CCHC consultation hours based on your Quality First level of support. During these hours, the CCHC will be working with you on completing your health and safety action plan and goals.

- Pursuing Quality will receive a total of 15 hours a quarter (three months) or 5 hours a month
- Achieving Quality will receive a total of 9 hours a quarter (three months) or 3 hours a month
- Continuing Quality will receive a total of 3 hours a quarter (three months) or 1 hour a month

You can seek more information on working with a CCHC by contacting the CCHC designated on your Quality First extranet home page.

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (Smart Support)

Funded by Regional Partnership Councils in the following First Things First regions: Cochise, East Maricopa, Graham/Greenlee, Navajo Nation, Navajo/Apache, Northwest Maricopa, Phoenix North, Phoenix South, Pima South, Pinal, San Carlos Apache, Southeast Maricopa, Southwest Maricopa, Yavapai and Yuma.

Through expansion funded by pandemic relief federal dollars, consultation will also be available to programs in any FTF region (statewide) from October 2021 through June 30, 2024. Consultation will be prioritized for regulated programs that serve:

- Children in Department of Child Safety (DCS) care
- Children receiving Department of Economic Security (DES) child care subsidy

Smart Support is an evidence-based strategy proven to support the social and emotional development of all children in care and help providers appropriately respond to children with behavioral challenges. In regions that offer this support, consultants are available to work directly with teachers to develop strategies to work most effectively with children in early learning settings.

Contact Smart Support at **1.866.330.5520**

An example of services that might be provided through Smart Support would be training for teachers on helping children to label emotions and creating helpful activities that assist children in learning how to deal with strong feelings.

Inclusion of Children with Special Needs (Inclusion Program)

Available in the following First Things First regions: Northwest Maricopa, Phoenix North, Phoenix South and Yuma.

Inclusion Coaching addresses the need for quality early care and education for young children with special needs ages birth to 5. Specific focus is on improving skills of child care staff and providing training and assistance to support quality inclusive settings. Contact Inclusion via the contact information below:

MARICOPA COUNTY REGIONS

602.633.8454 or email eci@swhd.org

YUMA REGION

928.248.5112

An example of how this specialized assistance could be provided would be to support children who may have difficulty communicating be successful in the classroom by using visual supports or other strategies. The Inclusion Program can also train staff on developmental screenings as well as provide professional development on a variety of topics related to children who have identified or suspected developmental delays.

Additional Supports for Arizona's Early Childhood Community

Empower

The Empower program, provided by the Arizona Department of Health Services, provides guidance toward effective health practices in the early care and education setting.

Empower Policy: To help children and families lead healthier lives, participation in Empower is required of all Quality First participants. Participants are required to enroll in Empower and have a written policy and implementation for each standard. Empower standards support program health and wellness including nutrition, breastfeeding, physical activity, screen time, tobacco, oral health, sun safety, social and emotional development and staff training.

Your child care health consultant may also provide training and support on Empower topics. To learn more about Empower, please visit <https://www.azdhs.gov/empower>.

Birth to Five Helpline

Available statewide to all participants

The **Birth to Five** Helpline links Quality First participants to experts who will provide telephone consultation around the specific question or concern regarding a child birth to five. The Helpline specialists can collaborate with Quality First participants as well as with the child's family. The Helpline specialist can also support the caller with community resources and referrals.

Reach the Birth to Five Helpline at **877.705.KIDS (5437)**

An example of how you could use the Helpline would be in the event a child is showing concerning behaviors and a teacher is looking for guidance in how to respond appropriately or to offer valuable resources to the family.

Arizona Department of Education (ADE)

Available statewide to all participants

ADE offers free training to all early childhood professionals (birth through third grade) throughout the state in a number of areas including, but not limited to, the Arizona Early Learning Standards (AZELS), the Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines (ITDG) and the Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth through Kindergarten (PGHQ). An ADE Early Childhood Specialist may also be available to provide additional training and support. Professional learning opportunities include online courses, webinars, live virtual and in-person training and can be found on the ECE Professional Learning website at <https://www.azed.gov/ece/professional-learning>. Registration is free with an ADEConnect account through the ADE Professional Learning & Development (APLD) system. It is highly recommended that participants register with the same email address as their AZ Early Childhood Workforce Registry account. For assistance with account setup, please visit the ADEConnect Help site. For early childhood support and site-specific trainings, please contact: Early Childhood Education at ECEInbox@azed.gov or Early Childhood Special Education at ECSEInbox@azed.gov.

Supporting all Children: Assistance to help you prevent expulsions

Young children grow and thrive within stable relationships with caring adults. Maintaining stability in children's early learning experiences supports their development and their long-term success in kindergarten and beyond. Unfortunately, preschoolers are three times more likely to be expelled than students in kindergarten through 12th grade.¹ This is often due to challenging behaviors that educators feel unequipped to handle. Nationwide, early childhood programs are developing policies to reduce and eliminate expulsion.

As a Quality First participant, your program has access to resources to help you support all children's success and reduce or eliminate expulsion from your program. Consultation, training and technical assistance helps you and your staff feel more equipped to respond to challenging behaviors in support of all children's success. For support in preventing expulsions in your program, utilize the resources below:

Call a Specialist

- **Birth to Five Helpline**

Available statewide to families, caregivers and professionals

See page 36 for contact information

- **Expulsion Prevention Resource Consultants**

Available statewide to all DES certified child care centers and family child care homes

Reach out for support and resources at the first sign of challenging behaviors to promote early intervention to prevent suspensions and expulsions. Contact a Resource Consultant:

- By completing an Expulsion Support Request form at www.azccrr.com

Participate in Training and Technical Assistance

- **AZ Steps Expulsion Prevention Training and Technical Assistance**

*Available statewide to all DES certified child care centers and family child care homes**

Southwest Human Development provides caregivers with skills and strategies they need to respond effectively to these challenges through a series of training on expulsion prevention. This series offers opportunities to learn how understanding child development, attachment, trauma reaction and support of children's developing self-regulation skills can help reduce and prevent expulsion of children from ages birth to 12 years.

- Register online for training through the Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry at azregistry.org. After logging into your account, select "Find Training Event" and select "Name/Description" and type "Expulsion Prevention" in the search bar. Click save and select course.
- Technical assistance is available to provide practical tips and strategies to use in your caregiving environment. For more information regarding technical assistance, please contact 602.633.8730 or AZSTEPS@swhd.org.

¹ Gilliam, W.S. 2005. Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center. Available from http://www.ziglercenter.yale.edu/publications/National%20Prek%20Study_expulsion_tcm350-34774_tcm350-284-32.pdf.

Strategies to Benefit from Specialized Assistance

Here are some ideas to help you make the most of the specialized assistance available to you as a Quality First participant:

Do some research to find what types of specialized assistance services are available in your area. Visit [FirstThingsFirst.org](https://www.firstthingsfirst.org) and select “Find Your Region.” Your region page includes the regional council members, publications and helpful local resources.

Talk with your Quality First coach or coordinator to discuss your specific needs. Consider your goals and how specialized assistance can help you meet your goals.

Reach out to the staff you work with. What are their needs in providing the best care to the children they serve? What types of specialized assistance would support their teaching?

Request program supports that will assist you in your efforts. Coaches, coordinators and other technical assistance professionals are knowledgeable experts in their fields; however, you are the expert on your program. Let the support team know if there are areas where you would like assistance.

Communicate with families about the types of specialized assistance you are using in your program. Introduce families to your coach, coordinator and consultants who will be supporting your program as they may see them on a regular basis.

SECTION FIVE

Quality First Financial Incentives

Quality First provides financial support to all eligible enrolled participants. How you use your funding will depend on where you are in your quality improvement journey and your program's specific needs and goals.

Quality First Incentives

Quality First incentives are a type of financial support available to participants. Depending on your level of support, you will be able to use the funds in different ways to support your program's quality.

Quality First Incentives Policy: Financial incentives are available to eligible Quality First participants to support quality improvement and staff recognition. A participant's level of support and program type will determine the type and amount of funding available and how funds may be used. For new participants, financial incentives may not be accessed until after enrollment is completed, assessment is completed, an initial star rating is calculated and (if applicable) a Quality Improvement Plan is developed.

Each year, you will need to complete and submit the Incentive Management Agreement, Participant Guide Acknowledgement and Participant Commitment to gain access to Quality First financial incentives. To allow year-end processing and record keeping, Incentive Order Forms must be submitted by April 30.

There are times when financial incentives may not be accessible. This includes when a program is not in good standing with its regulatory agency, or when incentives are placed on hold due to a Targeted Support Plan.

Incentive funds are supplementary in nature, and cannot be used to cover overhead costs (rent, utilities, insurance, etc.).

Incentive funds may not be used for religious purposes or activities, such as faith-based curriculum, faith-based program accreditation, attendance at faith-based conferences, staff salaries for program time spent on religious instruction or worship, religious children's books or bonuses for staff whose predominant or sole purpose is religious. Incentive funds may be used for facility improvements to buildings or rooms used for religious purposes only if the improvements will not substantially benefit the religious uses of the building or room, as determined by Quality First. Participants will be required to repay any incentive funds determined to have been used for religious purposes or activities.

Incentives for Quality Improvement

FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH A 1-STAR, 2-STAR OR 3-STAR RATING

Making improvements in your program can be challenging due to the associated costs, which may become a barrier in the process toward providing high-quality care. Participants at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support have access to financial incentives to help overcome these challenges. These funds are accessed through the coaching agency.

Incentive amounts are budgeted annually per fiscal year (July 1–June 30). For state fiscal year 2024 (July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024) financial incentives are based on a participant’s level of support and star rating as of April 1, 2023.

PURSUING QUALITY

Participants at the Pursuing Quality level of support have access to up to \$20,000 per fiscal year. This includes all program types and sizes at this level. Incentives at this level are available up to two assessment cycles.

ACHIEVING QUALITY

Participants at the Achieving Quality level of support have access to the amounts listed in the chart below per fiscal year, based on program type and size. Incentives at this level are available up to two assessment cycles.

| PROGRAM SIZE | Incentive Amount per year |
|---|---------------------------|
| LARGE CENTER 150+ CHILDREN | \$4,700 |
| MEDIUM CENTER 51-150 CHILDREN | \$2,950 |
| SMALL CENTER 1-50 CHILDREN | \$2,050 |
| GROUP HOME 5-10 CHILDREN | \$1,175 |
| FAMILY HOME 1-4 CHILDREN | \$600 |

To access incentive funds, contact your coach. You will work with your coach to identify the improvements you would like to make as part of your Quality Improvement Plan. Your coach can provide insights to help you decide what investments to focus on as part of the improvement process.

3-STAR PROGRAMS THAT HAVE OPTED IN TO CONTINUING QUALITY

Some 3-star programs with existing internal supports (e.g. coaching, health and safety support, etc.) are eligible to request to opt-in to the Continuing Quality level of support. Programs that have opted into this level will have access to incentive funds to purchase materials, equipment, facility improvements, professional development and specialized services to support the participant’s quality improvements. Participants will work with their coach or coordinator to make purchases in alignment with their Quality Improvement Plan.

Movement Between Levels Policy: It is anticipated that programs at the Pursuing and Achieving Quality levels will move to the next level of support as they increase quality over time. Programs that move to the next level of support will receive financial incentives at the new level of support. Programs that receive financial incentives at the Pursuing Quality level or the Achieving Quality level respectively for two full assessment cycles will no longer receive financial incentives until they move to the next level of support. Programs that change in the level of support due to a decrease in star rating will not receive financial incentives until the programs increase their star rating and move back up to a higher level of support. If a program moves back up to a prior level, their past financial incentives received continue to count toward the two assessment cycle limits.

Quality Improvement Incentives Policy: Financial incentives are available to support quality improvement efforts for participants with a 1-star, 2-star or 3-star rating.

For participants with a 1-star, 2-star or 3-star rating, incentives may be used to purchase materials and supplies that will enhance the learning environment, to offset costs of facility improvements, consultation or specialized services and to support professional development opportunities for program staff. E-Verify documentation and/or Lawful Presence documentation must be completed and submitted (if applicable) for Quality First participation and to be eligible for incentives.

Participants will place orders with their coach to access incentive funds. To allow year-end processing and record keeping, Incentive Order Forms must be submitted by April 30.

Funds are accessed through the coach, according to your Quality Improvement Plan. Funds may be used to pay for the following types of expenses:

Materials and Equipment:

If your program has a specific need for additional learning materials, equipment or furnishings, incentive funds can be used to purchase these items.

Consultation and Specialized Services:

Incentive funds can be used for consultation and specialized services. Payment for these services will be provided through the coaching agency based on a quote from the vendor. An example might be to hire a trainer for specialized needs unique to your program.

Facility Improvements:

Examples of facility improvement projects might include projects like new shelving, cement slabs, fencing, painting or carpet installation using licensed contractors. For participants ordering through the coaching agency, you will work with the coach to complete a Facility Projects Liability release for approval of these types of projects. (The Facility Projects Liability Release is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources.) A check for payment will be made payable and mailed to the vendor delivering the service after it has been provided.

Professional Development:

Incentive funds may be set aside to provide professional development opportunities for staff including regional and national conferences, professional development materials to be kept in classrooms or onsite, online trainings or payment for professional membership in early childhood organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the Family Child Care Association (FCCA).

Incentives for Staff Recognition

FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH A 4-STAR OR 5-STAR RATING

Providing high-quality care and early learning takes intentional effort over time. It also takes hard work from staff each and every day. Quality First provides funding to help participants recognize staff for their efforts. Participants may use the funds in accordance with Quality First policies and their program policies to recognize staff for their efforts.

Quality First Staff Recognition Policy: Financial incentives are available to support staff recognition efforts at the Continuing Quality level. Funds are paid the fiscal year following the award or renewal of a 4-star or 5-star rating.

Participants will receive a direct payment to use for staff recognition. Funds for participants with a 4-star or 5-star rating are to be used to recognize and reward staff that support the early childhood program serving children birth to five. Staff recognition may include staff bonuses, gifts, gift cards, special events or professional development. Funds may also be used for purchases that improve the staff environments, such as improvements to staff areas, materials to enhance the staff space or adult-sized furnishings or equipment.

Participants subject to the policies of a tribe must defer to those tribal policies or approval processes, as applicable. Participants within tribes that do not allow an exchange of funds may access incentives through the coaching agency.

Participants must submit documentation as outlined in the Incentives Payout Expenditure Report Policy.

| PROGRAM SIZE | Incentive Amount per assessment cycle |
|---------------------|--|
| 4-star | \$500 per staff |
| 5-star | \$1,000 per staff |

To determine a participant's financial incentive payment for staff recognition, Quality First uses data in the participant's extranet profile as well as documentation completed during the assessment process. The number of staff is calculated based on the number of active staff* in the following roles: Director, Assistant Director, Teacher, and Assistant Teacher.

***For Participants Receiving an Incentive Payment in State Fiscal Year 2024**, the number of active staff is based on the number of active staff as identified above, prior to July 1, 2023.

***For Participants Receiving an Incentive Payment in State Fiscal Year 2025**, the number of active staff will be based on the number of active staff as identified above, as of the most recent assessment cycle completion date. Your program's extranet data and the staff verification completed on the day of assessment will be used.

Incentives Payout Expenditure Report Policy: To document all spending by participants receiving a direct payment, the Incentives Payout Expenditure Report is required. Participants must provide details about expenditures and maintain records of those expenditures. All incentive funds must be fully expended by June 14. The Incentives Payout Expenditure Report must be submitted to the coordinator by June 30.

A program will not receive an incentive payout until the Incentives Payout Expenditure Report for the previous fiscal year has been reviewed and approved.

To ensure incentive funds are used in accordance with Quality First policies, Quality First may complete an onsite review of your program's records, receipts and items purchased with incentive funds. If it is determined that funds were not used in accordance with Quality First's policies, future incentives may not be accessible, you may be required to repay funds and/or your participation may be terminated.

Please submit the Incentives Expenditure Report to the coordinator as soon as spending has been completed. If you have a regular meeting with an accountant or bookkeeper, this is a good time to review and complete this form. Timely submission of the Incentives Expenditure Report supports the review and approval process. Review and approval must be completed before future incentives are accessible.

Once you have signed the required forms as outlined in the Enrollment Policy and Quality First Incentives Policy, financial incentives will be available to your program. The Quality First coach or coordinator will assist you in accessing your incentives. Quality First incentive funds cannot be carried over from year to year if the full amount is unused.

INCENTIVES FAQs

Incentives for Quality Improvement

(Available to participants at the Pursuing Quality and Achieving Quality levels of support)

Q: Can I use incentives funds to pay for my center or home license?

A: No. Licensing fees are an overhead cost, and incentives cannot be used for overhead.

Q: What about appliances and other building needs?

A: Incentives can be used towards items that help keep the program running smoothly, such as a washer and dryer, refrigerator or an air conditioner. Remember that improvements made to the facility that cannot be relocated offsite may have additional requirements for approval, per the Incentives Management Agreement (IMA) that you sign.

Q: What about paying for monthly bills like rent or electricity?

A: No. Monthly bills for rent, electricity, insurance, etc. are overhead costs, and incentives cannot be used for overhead.

Q: Can incentive funds be used for a holiday party for the children?

A: Funds cannot be used to purchase any religious materials so you may not use incentives for a Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah or any other religious holiday celebration. Funds are intended to be used to make quality improvements that will benefit children over time. Investing in classroom materials, curriculum, facility improvements or equipment, rather than a one-time event, will benefit children's learning into the future.

Q: Can I use incentive funds for facility improvements?

A: Yes, but you must agree that FTF, the QF Coaching & Incentives grantee agency, and the coaching agency/coach will not be held liable if any materials or facility projects require additional maintenance beyond the amount of the incentive payment, or if any damage occurs to the purchased materials or facility project. Additionally, if the facility project does not pass any health and/or safety facility inspections and/or any other type of inspection, FTF, the QF Coaching & Incentives grantee agency, and the coaching agency/coach will not be held liable. Certain projects are subject to approval via the Statewide Review Team; please refer to the below FAQ, your IMA and/or coach for more information.

INCENTIVES FAQs

Incentives for Staff Recognition

(Available to participants at the Continuing Quality level of support)

Q: Can incentives be used for staff salaries?

A: Incentives at this level are intended to recognize staff. Payment of a staff member's regular salary is not generally considered staff recognition. Payment for additional time off or for paid time outside of the classroom may be considered appropriate uses of incentive funds if approved by the coach agency.

Q: Can incentives be used for staff bonuses?

A: Yes, Incentives at this level may be used to recognize staff via a payroll bonus or other financial recognition.

Additionally, the following applies:

- Bonuses or other forms of financial recognition must be listed on the Expenditure Report with the staff member name and amount.
- Incentives may not pay a bonus for a staff member whose main or sole purpose is religious.

Q: Can incentives be used for gifts, gift cards or special events to recognize staff?

A: Yes, incentives at Continuing Quality may be used to recognize staff via a payroll bonus or other financial recognition. Staff luncheons, retreats, celebrations or gift cards used to boost staff morale are allowed. Gift cards should be treated the same as payroll bonuses or other forms of financial recognition and listed on the Expenditure Report with the staff member name and amount.

Q: Can I use incentives to recognize staff through professional development conferences?

A: Yes, as long as the conference is not religious in nature.

Q: What happens if a conference is canceled, and the vendor does not offer refunds?

A: If the vendor does not provide refunds, those dollars would be considered spent as part of your incentives.

Q: What if I have a different idea of how to use my incentives to recognize staff (not listed in this guide)?

A: If you have an idea for a different way to recognize your staff, talk with your coordinator. They will let you know if this is an allowable expense, and help you consider any additional documentation needed.

Q: What happens if my program does not spend all of our incentives?

A: Spending must occur within the designated timeframes. If it does not, you will no longer have access to your incentive's funds in the new fiscal year. Expenditure Reports must be submitted by June 30, 2024. The total purchases included on the Expenditure Report must equal or exceed the annual incentives award. If your Expenditure Report does not list items that equal the total amount of incentives you received or includes ineligible items that you and your coordinator cannot find a different eligible expense for, you must return any unspent funds to the coaching agency before spending for the next fiscal year is allowed.

Quality First Scholarships

Quality First Scholarships support children to attend 3-, 4- or 5-star Quality First participants. Families earning at or below 300% of Federal Poverty Level are eligible to apply for Quality First Scholarships.

Quality First Scholarships are funded directly by regional partnership councils (council) based on their priorities. Each council conducts a strategic planning process that includes reviewing the needs and assets of the community to determine their investment in Quality First Scholarships. If selected as a priority, the amount of funding will determine the number of Quality First Scholarships available to be allocated to Quality First participants who have achieved a 3-, 4- and 5-star rating as of April 1. Some regional partnership councils may approve funding for additional scholarships at the Progressing Star (2) level if a specific community need has been identified. Not all Quality First participants will receive an allocation of Quality First Scholarships.

The reimbursement rates and number of Quality First Scholarships allocated to a participant can be found in your program's extranet profile under the scholarships tab. For more information about allocations, please contact QFScholarships@FirstThingsFirst.org.

Participants receiving scholarships are required to maintain compliance with the Quality First Scholarships Policies and Procedures identified through the contract with Valley of the Sun United Way. Failure to comply with the policies and procedures may result in termination from both the Quality First Scholarships program and Quality First. For more information about Quality First Scholarships contracting, reporting and reimbursement, please contact gfscholarshipsreporting.org or contact the Valley of the Sun United Way Scholarships Team using the contact information noted below:

Valley of the Sun United Way - Scholarships Team

3200 E. Camelback Road, Suite 375

Phoenix, AZ 85018

Participant helpline: 602.240.6325


Parent helpline: 602.240.6324 or 866.973.0012

regionalscholarships@vsuw.org

Scholarships allocated to a program that includes religious instruction or worship as part of the program's activities will be transferable scholarships, meaning the family can choose to take their scholarship to another Quality First participant during the state fiscal year (July 1–June 30). Scholarships allocated to a program that does not include religious instruction or worship as part of the program's activities will remain with the program for the entire state fiscal year, subject to available funding and reallocation for non-use.

Quality First Scholarships are able to be transferred within multisite organizations that are located in the same region. This flexibility in allocation allows for the multisite organization to determine the distribution of scholarships to individual sites to maximize usage. To participate in this opportunity, identify your intent on your program's Quality First extranet profile under the scholarships tab. Click "yes" in the box that indicates, "I want to participate in multisite distribution" for each site in your organization that you would like to move scholarships between. You will receive a confirmation and instructions when you are able to start multisite distribution.

Extranet Quality First

QUALITY FIRST  Profile Summary Site ID : 1099

RATING
Not Yet Rated

QF Test Training Site 1, Test/Training Site

Address: 4000 N Central Ave
Phoenix, AZ 85012

Regional Partnership Council: Phoenix North Regional Partnership Council

Main Contact: Test Provider Contact 602-555-1232

Provider Type: Center
Provider Size: Small


[My Providers](#) [Print](#)

Current Users and Assignments

| Role | Name | Title | User ID | Phone | E-Mail |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------|--------------|--|
| Main Contact | Test Provider Contact | Test Provider | | 602-555-1232 | extranet@azdhl.gov |

Scholarships

Extranet Quality First

QUALITY FIRST  Scholarship Summary Site ID : 1099

RATING
Not Yet Rated

QF Test Training Site 1, Test/Training Site

Address: 4000 N Central Ave Phoenix, AZ 85012

Regional Partnership Council: Phoenix North Regional Partnership Council

Main Contact: Test Provider Contact 602-555-1232

Provider Type: Center
Provider Size: Small

[My Providers](#) [Save](#) [Cancel](#) [Print](#)

Fiscal Year: Fiscal Year 2023: July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023

I want to participate in multi-site distribution: Yes

Total number of scholarships available: 0.0

Age Requirements:
Of the 0 total number of scholarships available, 0.0 can be used for any child birth through age 5 (not in Kindergarten)

SECTION SIX

Quality First Assessment

Quality First assessment is a valuable support for your program in the improvement process. The purpose of receiving ongoing assessments is to offer objective and reliable measures of the everyday experiences of the children in your program. You will gain a clear picture of your program—what is great about it and the opportunities to do even better.

Quality First Assessment Policy: Quality First assessments are a required part of participation. Assessment is designed based on high-quality standards using valid and reliable tools and conducted by highly trained objective observers.

- All Quality First participants will receive an initial rating. This initial rating is not public unless the participant achieves a quality level (3, 4 or 5) rating.
- Following the initial assessment, all participants will receive regular assessments every two years to establish a public star rating.

Failure to participate in the assessment process may result in disenrollment.

The Role of the Quality First Assessor

Quality First assessors are experienced professionals in the field of early childhood and receive extensive training on the assessment tools to ensure they are measuring program practices accurately.

The assessment reports you receive provide important information for you to build upon your strengths and identify where you can do even better.

An assessor will visit your program to complete an assessment at the very beginning of your participation. This assessment provides a baseline of information that is the foundation for you to build upon. During the observation, the assessor will focus on keeping a professional stance at all times. You will see them moving around your classroom, viewing materials and writing notes in order to gather as much information as possible, according to the tool being used. While the assessor is in your program, they will not start or extend an interaction with a child. At the same time, they will never ignore a child's question, curiosity or request for attention.

Quality First assessors are dedicated to the same measures of confidentiality as coaches and other technical assistance providers. They will always show respect in a professional manner.

Although the assessor will be collecting information during the visit, no feedback will be provided at that time. The written assessment results will be available in the extranet once reports have been completed and approved.

Quality First Assessment Activities

The Quality First process begins with your initial assessment, which offers objective information to guide your quality improvement efforts. This initial rating is not public unless the participant achieves a quality level (3, 4 or 5) rating. If a quality level rating is achieved, the rating will be public and shared with DES for the purpose of qualifying for DES tiered reimbursement rates.

The following is a list of important things to know about your Quality First assessment:

- **Initial Phone Call** - An assessor will contact your program to schedule your initial assessment. It is your responsibility to contact the assessor within 72 hours of a phone call or email. Your initial assessment will be scheduled for a mutually agreed-upon date and time frame. In all the years that follow, the assessor will call two weeks before your cycle end date. You will be provided a three-week time frame in which the assessment will be conducted. The assessor can come any time within these three weeks other than specified blackout dates.
- **Information to Share with the Assessor** - When you are contacted by an assessor to schedule your initial assessment or set up your three-week assessment window, you should discuss any unique situations or specific educational philosophies that your program practices.

Topics you may want to discuss include but are not limited to:

- languages spoken in your program
- children or staff with special needs
- potential triggers to children who have experienced trauma
- programmatic philosophies or practices such as Montessori, Parent Cooperatives, Student Teaching or Primary Caregiving
- recent staffing changes

In some cases, children who have had traumatic experiences may become triggered by an unexpected visitor in their classroom. Certain parts of the assessor's appearance can be changed to reduce the potential for triggering a trauma response. This could include removing the name tag, removing the clipboard or wearing more casual clothing.

Programmatic philosophies or practices that you would like the assessment team to be aware of must be identified in your Parent/Family Handbook or in written policies/procedures that you share with families. The assessor may request to view this documentation.

- **Blackout Dates** - You will have an opportunity to inform the assessor of dates that would hinder an assessment visit. For instance, days your program is closed, planned field trips, special events such as picture day, scheduled emergency drills, scheduled Quality First support team visits (including coaches and other technical assistance professionals) and days when you will typically have low attendance or staff absences may all interfere with a proper assessment.
- **Extranet Data** - Before conducting the assessment, the assessor will review your information from the extranet to determine how many classrooms/groups of children to assess and which tools to use during the assessment based on the age groups you serve. The classrooms/groups identified on the first day of assessment will be used throughout the assessment process. Assessors will verify this information over the phone and also in person on the first day of assessment at your program.

- **Accreditation** - Head Start/Early Head Start and accredited programs will be assessed with the CLASS tools only. If the program does not meet the CLASS threshold scores for a 3-star rating, the program earns a 2-star rating.
- **Classrooms/Care Groups** - It is your responsibility to share information about your program's classroom and care group structure before beginning the assessment process. For programs in their initial assessment, the coordinator will assist you with entering this in the extranet. For all assessments that follow, you are responsible for ensuring individual classrooms/groups are noted. For assessment purposes, Quality First considers a unique roster of children assigned to a specific lead teacher or classroom space as an individual classroom/group. For example, a program may have a single lead teacher with an a.m. class roster and a p.m. class roster. Each of these roster groups is considered an individual classroom/group. To assist the assessor in identifying the number of assessments as well as age-appropriate tools for your program, it is important that you discuss with the assessor how many classroom/child groupings your program serves.
- **Staff Verification** - The assessor will ask you to verify the staff assigned to each classroom based on the current staff listed in the extranet. For programs in their initial assessment, the coordinator will assist you with entering this in the extranet. For all assessments that follow, you are responsible for ensuring staff names are included in your program's extranet profile. Please identify the regular teaching staff and their roles in each classroom or child care group. Please share any staffing changes such as new staff or substitute teachers. This information guides the assessor in determining whether or not a classroom is eligible for assessment. (For more information, see the Quality First Staffing Guide.)
- **Children with Special Needs** - Prior to assessing a classroom, the assessor will ask you if there are any enrolled children with an IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan), IEP (Individualized Education Plan), documented gifted needs and/or medically diagnosed conditions (i.e., asthma, diabetes, severe allergies) to determine if accommodations that are observed need to be taken into account. As this information is confidential, assessors will not need to view the individual children's plans.
- **Eligibility for Assessment in 5-Year-Old Classrooms** - In center-based programs, if a majority of children in a classroom (51 percent) had their 5th birthday after September 1 of the current school year, the classroom is included in the random draw for assessment with one exception. Random draws occurring in the month of July will not include classrooms where a majority of the children are 5 years old since those children will be starting kindergarten in a few weeks.
- **Random Draw** - If your program has more than one classroom or grouping of children, the assessor will ask you to conduct a random draw to determine which classrooms/groups to assess upon arrival. The assessor will ask that the random draw be witnessed by a member of your staff to ensure accuracy and also have a participant signature at the time.

Random Draw Selection for Teachers in Multiple Groupings

- To ensure a fair representation of practices program-wide, Assessors will remove a teacher and their additional groupings from the random draw after the teacher is randomly selected once. (For example: Teacher Susie teaches two groups of children, one on MWF and one on T TH and her MWF group is selected as part of the random draw. The T TH group would be removed from random draw. The total number of classrooms and age ranges would still be used to determine 1/3 of the open classrooms and the other teachers at that site would remain eligible for those additional observations.)

- **Assessor Objectivity** - Whenever possible, different assessors will conduct the observations for each set of assessment tools. This is to ensure objectivity for each observation.
- **Multiple Assessors** - More than one assessor may attend during an observation visit for the purpose of training, reliability testing and/or to accommodate the size of your program. You will be notified in advance if this applies to your program.
- **Summer Closures** - Quality First Assessment is automatically deferred until 20 business days after the start of the following school year for:
 - Participants operating on a nine-month, school-year calendar who become due for assessment on or after April 30 but before their summer closure begins, or
 - Participants who become due for assessment during their scheduled summer closure.

The assessment team uses the information from your program's extranet profile summary to determine your dates of operation.

- **Moving/Relocation During Assessment** - If your program moves to a new location in the middle of the assessment process, the assessment team will re-complete all of the assessments at the new location. Rescheduling of the assessments will be done on a case by case basis. If a program moves after the rating is final, the rating will apply until the next assessment cycle.

Quality First Assessment Tools

A variety of assessment tools are used to collect information about the average experience of the children in your program. Research shows that to accurately measure a program's quality, it is important to look at the environment and interactions. Quality First assessors will select the appropriate assessment tool(s) to be used in your program's assessment based on Quality First policies and procedures.

ENVIRONMENT RATING SCALES

(ERS; Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford and Debby Cryer) - measuring elements of a quality environment.

Environment Rating Scale (ERS) Assessment Policy: ERS Assessments will be conducted to assess early care and education environments. The ERS assessment will be conducted on-site for approximately three hours by a qualified assessor.

Head Start and nationally accredited participants undergo additional assessment as part of the accreditation/monitoring process. Because these processes include review of the early care and education environment, Quality First participants that are Head Start or nationally accredited will not have an ERS conducted (a list of National Accrediting Organizations is included in the Resources section at the end of this guide).

Establishing high-quality learning environments has been shown to positively support the development of young children and their early education. The ERS are observational tools used to assess the quality of the environment in early care settings. Observations using the ERS provide a brief snapshot of the classroom environment, as well as the children's experiences in that classroom. There are three versions of the ERS used by Quality First. Each is designed to assess a specific age group and early care setting.

1. Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-3rd Edition (children from 3 to 5 years of age) (ECERS)

This scale is designed to assess the quality of preschool environments located in center-based child care settings.

2. Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-3rd Edition (children from birth to 36 months of age) (ITERS)

This scale is designed to assess the quality of care environments serving infants and toddlers in center-based child care settings.

3. Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-3rd Edition (children from birth to 5 years of age) (FCCERS)

This scale is designed to assess the quality of the environment in family child care settings with mixed-age groups.

More information can be found at <http://ersi.info/>.

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT SCORING SYSTEM

(CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2005) - measuring quality interactions

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Policy: CLASS assessments will be conducted to assess adult-child interactions. Programs must achieve a level of 3.0 or higher on the ERS assessment with no individual classroom score below 2.5 to have a CLASS assessment conducted (Head Start and nationally accredited programs will begin with a CLASS assessment). A CLASS assessment will be conducted by a trained assessor who will observe the classroom in four back-to-back 20-minute observation cycles with a designated score time in between. Programs that operate four hours or less will have modified observation cycles. In these programs, the assessor will complete four back-to-back 15-minute observation cycles with designated score time in between.

Research shows that positive adult-child interactions in early care and education settings are a vital part of supporting children's learning and development. The CLASS is a system for observing and assessing the quality of interactions between teachers and students in infant, toddler and preschool classrooms. The CLASS measures social-emotional and instructional interactions in center and home-based programs. The CLASS looks at interactions that contribute to children's social skills and academic achievement.

Quality First uses the CLASS Pre-K, CLASS Toddler and CLASS Infant in the Rating Scale, each designed to assess a specific age group.

1. CLASS Pre-K

This scale is designed to assess the quality of interactions within preschool environments (children 3 to 5 years of age).

2. CLASS Toddler

This scale is designed to assess the quality of interactions within toddler environments (children 15 to 36 months of age).

3. CLASS Infant

This scale is designed to assess the quality of interactions within infant environments (children from birth to 18 months of age).

The most appropriate assessment tool for each age range will be determined using classroom rosters of enrolled children. The CLASS assessment will not be conducted during the same visit as the ERS assessment. You will be contacted if a CLASS assessment is required. More information can be found at <https://www.teachstone.com/class/>.

The Day of an ERS Assessment

For your initial assessment, the assessor will call to schedule your program's assessment. In all the years that follow, you will receive a call confirming a three-week window in which your assessment will occur. For centers, the assessor will assess your classrooms/care groups based on the chart below. If you care for infant/toddlers and preschoolers, both ITERS and ECERS will be completed.

In each age group (Infant/Toddler or Preschool) your program serves, the assessor will determine the number of classrooms/care groups in that age group (based on classroom rosters) to be assessed based on the chart below. At least one third of the classrooms in each age group (Infant/Toddler and Preschool) will be assessed.

- 1-3 classrooms = 1 classroom assessment
- 4-6 classrooms = 2 classroom assessments
- 7-9 classrooms = 3 classroom assessments
- 10-12 classrooms = 4 classroom assessments
- 13+ classrooms = 1/3 of the number of classrooms

In center-based programs, if the majority of the children in a classroom/care group (51 percent) had their 5th birthday after September 1 of the current school year, the classroom/care group will be included in the random draw for assessment.

Family child care homes will have the areas assessed that are part of the child care program and used on the day of the observation by the children present.

When the assessor arrives, they will need to gather some initial information regarding the total number of children enrolled, the number of children in attendance that day, the number of children with special needs, children with allergies or dietary restrictions, the birthdates of the youngest and oldest child enrolled in the classroom selected, the outdoor space used by children and the staff assigned to each classroom/child care group.

If more than one classroom/care group is being assessed, the assessor will ask you to randomly draw which classroom will be assessed that day. Generally, each assessor will only assess one classroom per day. Adjustments to this practice may be needed due to program size, location, or other factors. In order to maintain the integrity of the assessment, the participants cannot choose which classrooms will be assessed.

The assessor will remain at your program for at least three hours when conducting the ERS assessment. They may stay longer if they need to gather information not collected during the first three hours. The assessor will not talk to the staff during the assessment. An assessor is unable to answer questions or provide information during the assessment. They will move around the classroom, collect data on materials, watch interactions and routines and write notes.

Once the observation is complete, the assessor will leave and begin scoring and report writing using the notes collected at your program. Once the report is complete, you will receive notice that the assessment is ready for review. You will review the results and move forward with improvement planning.

If you have questions or concerns about the assessment, please contact the Assessment Program Manager, Katie Romero, at 602.633.8652 or kromero@swhd.org. The assessor is not permitted to share any results or information about the assessment with the program, nor are they allowed to provide technical assistance.

If you employ staff, it is important to prepare them for the assessment. The coach or coordinator can support a meeting to discuss the assessment process with the teaching staff. It is important to inform them that an assessment will occur as part of your participation, and remind them that the assessment will help them see strengths and areas of improvement.

The Day of a CLASS Assessment

For your initial assessment, the assessor will call to schedule your program's assessment. In all years that follow, you will receive a three-week window for assessment. For centers, the assessor will assess one-third of your preschool classrooms/care groups (ages 3 to 5) using the Pre-K CLASS and one-third of your infant/toddler classrooms/care groups using the Infant (birth to 18 months) or Toddler CLASS (15 to 36 months). The assessor will use the assessment tool designed to best capture the age range in a classroom, based on the ages of the children included on the classroom rosters.

In each age group (Infant/Toddler or Preschool) your program serves, the assessor will determine the number of classrooms/care groups in that age group (based on classroom rosters) to be assessed based on the chart below.

- 1-3 classrooms = 1 classroom assessment
- 4-6 classrooms = 2 classroom assessments
- 7-9 classrooms = 3 classroom assessments
- 10-12 classrooms = 4 classroom assessments
- 13+ classrooms = 1/3 of the number of classrooms

For family child care homes, the assessor will look at the ages of the children birth to five to determine which CLASS tool is appropriate in the setting using the following guidelines:

- If the expected attendance at the family child care home on the day of the assessment is made up of children between the ages of 3 to 5, the Pre-K CLASS will be conducted.
- If the expected attendance at the family child care home is made up of children between the ages of 15 to 36 months, the Toddler CLASS will be conducted.
- If the expected attendance at the family child care home is made up of children between the ages of birth to 18 months, the Infant CLASS will be conducted.
- If the expected attendance on the day of the assessment includes multiple age ranges, the Toddler CLASS will be conducted.

When the assessor arrives, they will need to gather some initial information regarding the total number of children enrolled, the number of children expected that day, the age composition of the classroom, and the teaching staff assigned to each classroom/child care group.

CLASS assessments will be conducted in the same classrooms that were randomly selected for the ERS assessment.

Head Start/Early Head Start and nationally accredited programs begin their assessment process with CLASS. If more than one classroom is being assessed, the assessor will ask you to randomly draw which classroom will be assessed that day. Each assessor will only assess one classroom per day. In order to maintain the integrity of the assessment, participants cannot choose which classrooms will be assessed.

The assessor will remain at your program for approximately two to three hours for a CLASS assessment. The assessor will complete four CLASS cycles during the assessment. One cycle includes a 20-minute observation period immediately followed by a 10-minute coding period. The assessor will conduct another cycle if any of the four cycles are less than 20 minutes in length, making the observation incomplete. Programs that operate four hours or less will have modified observation cycles. In these programs, the assessor will complete four back-to-back 15-minute observation cycles with designated scoring time in between. At the end of the CLASS assessment, the assessor will ask the staff in the classroom if there are any children with an IEP/ISFP present in the classroom just assessed.

If you have questions or concerns about the assessment, please contact the Assessment Program Manager Katie Romero at 602.633.8652 or kromero@swhd.org. The assessor is not permitted to share any results or information about the assessment with the program, nor are they allowed to provide technical assistance.

If you employ staff, it is important to prepare them for the assessment. Your coordinator or coach can facilitate a meeting to discuss the assessment process with the teaching staff. It is important to inform them that an assessment will occur as part of your participation with Quality First.



Quality First Assessment Reports

You will not receive direct feedback from the assessor on the observations or any assessment data collected during the assessment visit. An assessment report will be available online through the Quality First extranet (Assessment Summary tab) and can be printed. Each tool that is used to conduct an assessment has a unique report with specific scores related to the indicators in each tool. You will find areas designated as strengths in your program as well as areas of opportunity for growth. The coordinator or coach can help you review the information contained in these reports and assist you in highlighting specific areas for goal setting.

In the event that you have a question about your report or if you find any information that seems inconsistent based on your program specifics, you have the opportunity to submit an Assessment Report Clarification Request form. A copy of this form is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources.

Assessment Report Clarification Policy: To clarify content contained in an assessment report, assessment clarification is offered. The Assessment Report Clarification Request must be submitted within 40 days of the assessment results being approved. A response will be provided within 14 days as possible. All Assessment Report Clarification Requests must be sent via Word document to allow for timely response. PDF or scanned documents may require extra time to process. If the clarification warrants a change in scores, this will be noted in the extranet and the assessment report will be update. Video or audio recordings or photographs will not be considered. The assessment process is conducted using live, on-site observations to capture the entire content of the learning environment and interactions.

Quality First Star Rating

Once all of the assessment reports have been completed and approved, you will have the opportunity to review this information on the Quality First extranet. Your program's assessment reports will remain confidential and are only available for review by you and the Quality First team.

- Your new Quality First star rating will be available for viewing on your extranet page two business days after you receive the email notification that your assessment reports are available for viewing.
- You will find your current assessment cycle end date on your program's extranet profile page.
- Your program will receive ongoing assessments on a regular basis. Following your initial rating, your program will be contacted for assessment every 24 to 26 months.

Public Rating Policy: All participants will receive an initial rating. This initial rating is not public unless the participant achieves a quality level (3, 4 or 5) rating or submits the Request for Public Rating form. If a quality level rating is achieved, the rating will be publicly posted and shared with DES for the purpose of qualifying for DES tiered reimbursement rates.

Following the initial assessment, all participants will receive subsequent regular assessments to establish a public star rating. Regardless of star rating level, these subsequent ratings will be publicly posted and shared with DES for the purpose of qualifying for tiered reimbursement rates.

ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICIES

Early Assessment Policy: Participants may request to have an assessment conducted prior to the regular cycle. The request will be reviewed to determine if this option is available, and you will be notified by the assessment team whether or not your request is approved. A response will be provided within five business days as possible. An early assessment may not be conducted if the assessment cycle is less than 20 months, and participants with a 1-star or 2-star rating may not be approved two assessment cycles in a row.

Assessment Deferment Policy: Participants may request to have an assessment deferred due to unforeseen circumstances. A Summer Deferment request may be submitted when a program has major programming, administrative or staff changes during Summer operation. School-year-only programs do not need to submit a Request for Summer Deferment. All Requests for Assessment Deferment must be submitted to the Assessment Program Manager. Deferment requests will be reviewed to determine eligibility, and notification will be sent by email to the participant whether or not the request is approved. Deferment requests are not guaranteed and will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Newly selected programs in the initial assessment cycle may not request deferment.

Informal Assessment Policy: Informal assessments are offered to provide feedback in the form of a narrative report through the Quality First Assessment team outside of the standard assessment cycle. An informal assessment includes a classroom observation using a CLASS or ERS tool, based on request. Informal assessment is offered based on the schedule and availability of the assessment team and is not guaranteed. The formal Quality First assessment process cannot be delayed or deferred due to a delay in informal assessment. Following the observation, a written summary will be emailed to your program including feedback about strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Copies of the Request for Public Rating, Request for Early Assessment, Assessment Deferment Request, Summer Deferment Request, and Informal Assessment Request forms are available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources.

Strategies to Help Prepare for a Successful Assessment

In order to make the most of your Quality First participation and to help prepare your program for successful assessments, here are some ideas:

Review the assessment tools. A coach or coordinator is available to help you understand how your program's practices will be observed. View online trainings to become oriented to the tools. Visit <https://www.azregistry.org/>, select "find training event" and search "Overview of the Environment Rating Scales" or "Overview of Classroom Assessment Scoring System".

Talk with staff about what to expect—how the assessor will be in the classroom, how long the assessor will be there, what they will be observing and how to maintain a natural environment for the children.


Share information about the assessment tools, potentially through staff meetings before the observation. Providing a copy of the assessment tool to your teachers helps build an understanding of what will be looked at during the assessment process.

Consider the unique needs of your program in planning for your assessment. The assessor will ask about your program's specifics, such as language of instruction or a unique population served. Be sure to share this information with the assessor.

Communicate children's special needs. Although assessors will not need to look at the individual plans for children with special needs or special health care conditions, it is helpful to let them know so that they can focus on the environment in terms of the child's needs.

Update your program information to make sure it's current in the extranet and registry and that all class rosters are accurate. Gathering all the birthdates of the children in each child care group is helpful in planning ahead.

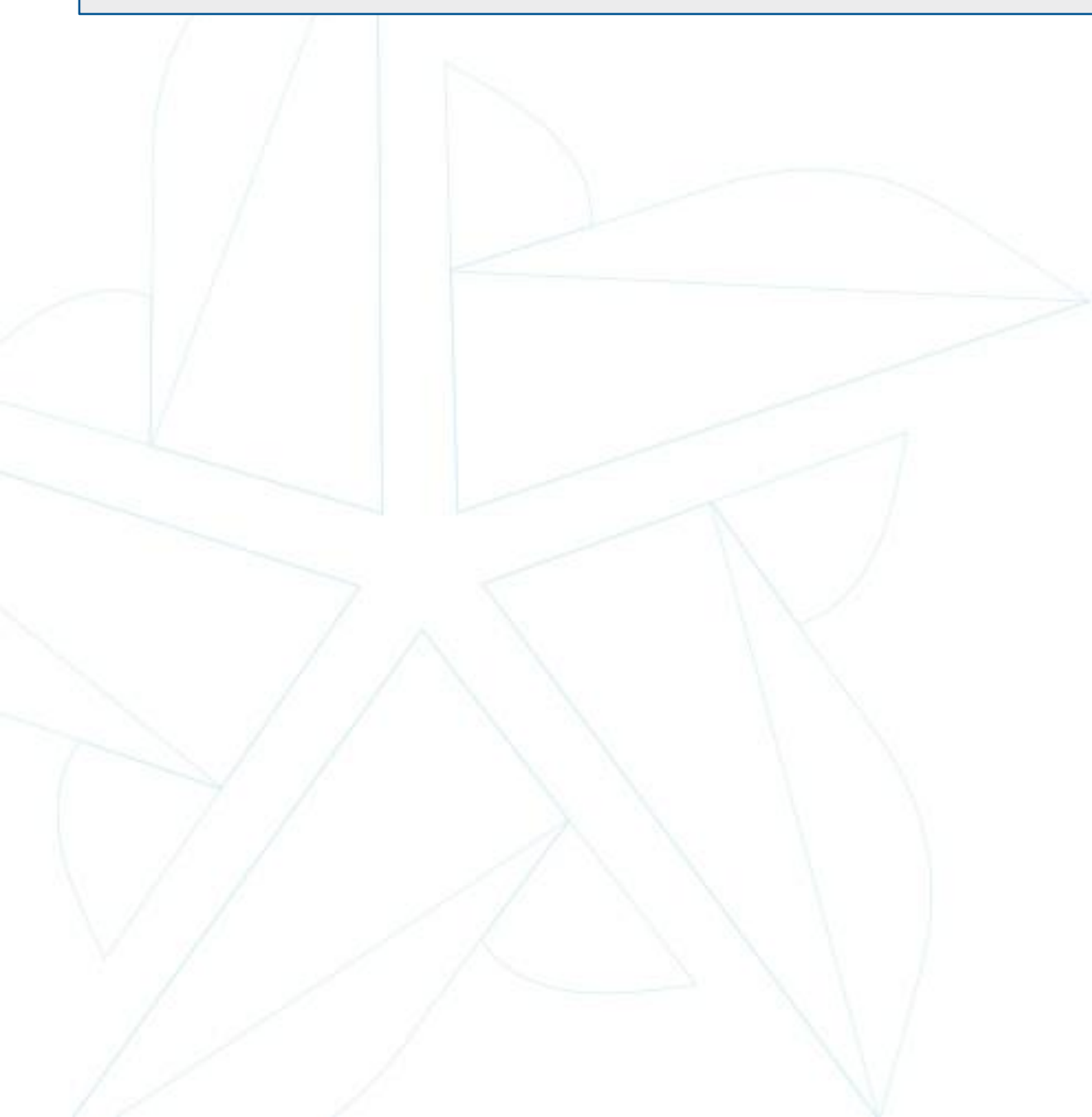
Talk to children about the role of the assessor to help them feel comfortable with the assessor's presence. You have the option of introducing the assessor to the children when they are ready to observe.



Prepare your families in advance by letting them know an assessor will be visiting your program. This supports their understanding of your commitment to improvement.

Plan your time so you are available in case the assessor needs additional information.

Ask the assessor if you are unsure about any part of the process before, during or after the assessment. You can also ask your coach or coordinator if you need assistance.



SECTION SEVEN

Quality First Professional Development

As an early childhood educator, you value lifelong learning and continued growth. As a Quality First participant, you have access to a wealth of professional development opportunities. As you learn, you will develop new skills based on the most recent research to benefit your program, staff and the children you serve.

Arizona Early Childhood Career and Professional Development Network

The Network serves as a resource to build Arizona's early education workforce and promote the early childhood professional development system. The Network includes a workforce Registry which is a web-based system that enables early childhood professionals and those interested in an early education career to find and register for professional development opportunities, as well as keep a record of their experience, education, professional development and credentials in a central location. Additional information that connects early childhood practitioners and others interested in the field with resources to advance their careers can be found on the Network website at azearlychildhood.org.

The network includes the following components:

A professional development [website](#) includes information about professional development and training opportunities, career and higher education resources, and other information to assist early childhood professionals in keeping their skills and knowledge up to date.

The [Arizona Career Lattice](#) is a tool that early childhood professionals can use for individualized professional assessment, setting professional development goals and documenting progress in their career development.

The [Arizona Workforce Knowledge and Competencies](#) is a uniform set of expectations that identify the basic knowledge, skills and abilities needed for early childhood professionals including child care and preschool staff, early intervention providers and mental health, physical health and social services/child welfare professionals. The Competencies support implementation of quality services for young children and their families.

A [Job Bank](#) for early childhood jobs submitted from employers seeking employees as well as open positions pulled from Indeed.com.

[First Things First College Scholarships](#) are for the early childhood workforce working directly with or on behalf of young children birth to age 5 to provide tuition, books and college/course fees at colleges and universities and/or the fees associated with obtaining a Child Development Associate Credential.

A web-based [Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry](#) helps to collect and store information about the early childhood workforce. Information such as college credits, work history, workshops completed and site training logs will be stored making it easier for early childhood professionals to keep track of their professional development.

Registry Policy: To document early childhood workforce professional development, education and experience, Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry membership is required of all staff working with children in Quality First participating programs.

- The following staff are required to have a Registry account: Family Child Care Providers and Family Child Care staff that work with young children, Center Directors, Assistant Directors, Teachers and Assistant Teachers.
- Program directors will also need to request administrative access to view and manage their early education program and staffing information. Step-by-step instructions for requesting administrative access, submitting education documentation and more are outlined on the website at <https://azearlychildhood.org/about/using-the-registry/>.

Strategies for Successfully Using Professional Development

In order to make the most of professional development, here are some suggestions:

Connect with a Community Outreach Coordinator that can help you and your staff use the [Network and Registry](#).

Access professional development opportunities through the Registry. It is never too late to learn new things!

Provide opportunities for staff members to share with colleagues what they learned after attending professional development events or completing college coursework. This will create common learning opportunities for all and skill growth for the person sharing the information.

Create an environment that encourages and supports staff in putting new knowledge into practice.

Consider the vision, philosophy and values of your program when making professional development plans. For instance, if “risk-taking” for children is a part of your program philosophy, send your staff to training on how to create safe play spaces that support these behaviors.

Identify a mentor or on-site coach role in your program for a staff member who has specialized knowledge or skills so that others can receive ongoing guidance from within your own team.

Review your program's Registry information regularly to ensure your program and staff information is up to date. The reports provide information about your staff's professional development and education and are accepted by ADHS Licensing and DES Child Care Certification specialists. Review reports regularly to identify strengths and gaps in core knowledge areas (CKAs) in each staff's records. This helps you create professional development plans to meet these needs.

Ensure your program's entire classroom and administrative staff become members of the Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry. Make enrollment part of your new hire onboarding process, and show new staff how to use the Registry to access professional development. They will have access to professional development, possible college scholarship opportunities and a place to document their education and professional development.

SECTION EIGHT

Administrative Practices

This section offers guidance on policies and standards to support your participation in Quality First. This section is divided into three subsections based on the type of policy. The first section includes policies most commonly referenced (including policies on participation eligibility, enrollment, funding and more). The second section includes policies to help overcome challenges (including policies on ethical conduct, confidentiality, reporting and more). The third section includes policies to address participant concerns (including clarification, concern resolution and appeals).

Policies Most Commonly Referenced

(Participation Eligibility, Enrollment, Funding and more)

PARTICIPATION ELIGIBILITY

Early care and education providers that care for children ages five and under and are regulated by a monitoring agency are eligible for Quality First participation. Participants are required to remain in good standing with their regulatory body while enrolled in Quality First. Regulatory bodies in Arizona include the Arizona Department of Health Services Bureau of Child Care Licensing (ADHS BCCL), the Arizona Department of Economic Security Child Care Administration (DES CCA), and tribal or military oversight entities.

Early care and education providers must offer in-person care for children a minimum of 12 hours a week to be eligible for Quality First. Additional hours of operation may be required to be eligible for child care scholarships.

PARTICIPANT ENROLLMENT

Participant Enrollment Policy: Enrollment begins after the Enrollment Agreement is signed by the participant, and all required documentation is submitted. Programs must be in good standing with their regulatory agency (ADHS, DES, military or tribal authority) in order to be enrolled. Child Care Health Consultation may not begin until after a program is officially enrolled. Financial incentives may not be accessed until after enrollment is completed, assessment is completed, an initial star rating and level of support are assigned and (if applicable) a Quality Improvement Plan is developed.

E-VERIFY AND LAWFUL PRESENCE

E-Verify and Lawful Presence Policy: To determine eligibility for financial incentives, First Things First is required to collect documentation related to E-Verify Participation and Lawful Presence to ensure compliance with federal and state laws.

A participant that is an “employer” as specially defined in A.R.S. § 23-211 must provide proof to First Things First that the participant is registered with and participating in E-Verify. An E-Verify form will be provided to you by your coach. All participants must complete and return the form, but only “employers” must provide proof of registration with and participation in E-Verify.

When a participant’s child care program is owned in the name of an individual or a sole proprietorship, the owner must complete the Statement of Lawful Presence & Eligibility to Receive Public Benefits form and submit certain documentation establishing lawful presence and eligibility. First Things First will email you a link to the form if you need to comply with this requirement.

EXTRANET (DATA SOURCE)

The extranet is the computer system used in Quality First. It is where you can find all of your Quality First information in one place and track your improvement data over time. This information is extremely helpful in keeping up to date on staffing trends, enrollment changes and your movement in scores across time. The extranet is also used to determine financial incentives, potential child care scholarship allocations, and assessment scheduling, so the accuracy of this information is critical.

Extranet Update Policy: To ensure accurate and up-to-date information, the Quality First extranet must be updated monthly by the participant. All Quality First participants are responsible for updating information in the areas of program information, classroom enrollment, identification of children with special needs, and staffing information. Contact information in the extranet will be used for all communication.

You will receive an invitation to the extranet with your own personal login and password. If you have challenges logging in or navigating, help is available at extranet@FirstThingsFirst.org. See the Extranet User Guide for more detailed information. (A copy of the Extranet User Guide is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, under Quality First Resources.)

LICENSE CAPACITY VERIFICATION (LCV)

License Capacity Verification Policy: To determine financial incentives and other quality improvement benefits, the participant's license capacity is verified. All participants are responsible for confirming or updating the total license capacity and capacity for children ages birth to 5 each year. The License Capacity Verification Form (LCV) is due no later than March 15 each year. Failure to provide this data may result in future incentives not being accessible. Information about license changes, such as a new license number and/or expiration date, must be submitted within two weeks of the previous license expiring.

The verification process typically takes place between February and March every year. This data is used to determine your financial incentives for the following fiscal year, so accuracy is critical.

In the event an LCV form is not submitted or an incorrect LCV form is not corrected and resubmitted by the **March 15** deadline, the following information will be used to determine both the total license capacity and the birth to age 5 capacity:

ADHS Licensed Participants

- Total licensed capacity will be based on the capacity noted in the ADHS system on March 1.
- Birth to five capacity will be based on your reported current fiscal year's birth to five capacity. *

*If the current year's reported birth to five capacity exceeds the March 1 capacity noted in the ADHS system, the ADHS March 1 license capacity will be used.

DES Licensed Participants – DES capacity (four children) or the current fiscal year's reported capacity, whichever is lower.

Tribal Participants – Current fiscal year's reported birth to age 5 capacity.

PROMOTING YOUR COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

Quality is an extremely important factor for families choosing a child care setting. Participation in Quality First is a clear sign to families that you are committed to improving the quality of your program to best serve the children in your care.

Promoting Your Commitment to Quality Policy: To identify active participation and the current star rating, participants must display their current star rating certificate in a location easily visible to families. Participants will receive a new certificate each time the program's star rating is updated. The current star rating and certificate are valid until the program is reassessed and a rating is updated.

STATE STANDARDS

The Arizona Department of Education offers tools to support you in your efforts to make high-quality opportunities available to all students. The following tools are available free of charge and are excellent sources of information. Trainings are now available online. Please visit the Arizona Department of Education website, <https://www.azed.gov/ece/professional-learning>, for more information.

Arizona's Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines

Arizona's Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines are part of a continuum of early learning guidelines that provide a framework for understanding and communicating a common set of developmentally appropriate expectations for young children, presented within a context of shared responsibility and accountability for helping young children meet these expectations. Specifically, these guidelines describe expectations about what infants and toddlers should know and do across multiple domains of development during specific age ranges, as well as what adults can do to support children's optimal learning and development. (Click on the link below to access these Guidelines.)

[https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/media/Arizonas Infant Toddler Developmental Guidelines_ 2nd Edition.pdf](https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/media/Arizonas%20Infant%20Toddler%20Developmental%20Guidelines%202nd%20Edition.pdf)

Arizona Early Learning Standards

The Arizona Early Learning Standards have been developed to provide a framework for the planning of quality learning experiences for all children three to five years of age. The standards cover a broad range of skill development and provide a useful instructional foundation for children from diverse backgrounds and with diverse abilities. The standards are intended for use by all those who work with young children in any early care and education setting in urban, rural and tribal communities. (Click on the link below to access these Standards.)

[https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2023/04/Arizona Early Learning Standards 4th Edition.pdf](https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2023/04/Arizona%20Early%20Learning%20Standards%204th%20Edition.pdf)

Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth Through Kindergarten

The Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth through Kindergarten does not contain a list of requirements, but rather a set of recommended practices for programs to use as they strive for excellence in the care and education of young children throughout Arizona. This document is intended to provide guidance by delineating quality and providing a set of indicators that concretely describe what a program will look like when providing high quality early care and education for children birth through age six. (Click on the link below to access these Guidelines.)

<https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=5879561caadebe0c98a80509>

OWNERSHIP CHANGE

Ownership Change Policy: To ensure accurate information about participant location and ownership, ownership changes must be communicated to the Quality First coordinator. Participants are required to notify Quality First of changes in licensing and/or ownership immediately and a new enrollment agreement must be signed by the new owner to ensure understanding of the Quality First guidelines and responsibilities. E-Verify and Lawful Presence documentation will be re-gathered for the new owner.

All programs must remain in good standing and work with their regulatory agency to ensure that the proper paperwork has been filed and approved. Any change in information, including the issuance of a new license or modifications to program size or licensed capacity, must be communicated to the Quality First coordinator.

RELOCATION/MOVING

If your program may be moving to a new location, discuss this move with Quality First to determine whether your participation will be able to transfer. Communicate any program or structure changes that may be occurring as part of the relocation. Depending on regional priorities, your program may be able to maintain participation, your eligibility for Quality First Scholarships and other specialized services may change, or you may need to reapply for participation at the new location.

EXTERNAL FUNDING

External Funding Policy: External partners may provide funding to support Quality First participation in addition to the programs supported by regional funding plans. Externally funded participants have a finite period of funding determined at the time of enrollment. External funders pay for Quality First participation through a contract detailing the funding period, the terms of participation and the participating early childhood program(s). The external funder may choose to extend the funding period according to the terms of the contract. Early childhood programs who have participated through external funding are eligible to participate through regional funding after their external funding period is complete. Interested programs must reapply at QualityFirstAZ.com.

REGIONAL FUNDING

Regional Funding Policy: Each regional council creates an annual regional funding plan. As part of developing their funding plans, regional councils decide the amount of funding to allocate for Quality First participation for the coming fiscal year. Some regions may choose to prioritize selecting programs in high-need areas. The schedule for selecting new programs, although set annually, may change throughout the year based on the number of applicants and changes in regional funding. First Things First reserves the right to alter or eliminate benefits at any time in whole or in part for any reason, including available funding, the availability of third-party service partners, the cost of services, the effectiveness of the benefits or changes in funding priorities.

For more information on regional councils and to find your local region, please visit:

<http://www.FirstThingsFirst.org/regions/find-your-region>. Early childhood education providers are encouraged to attend their local regional council meetings and become active participants in the process.

TEMPORARY CLOSURE

Temporary Closure Policy*: In the event of a short-term program closure or not serving children birth to age 5 on-site, temporary closure status may be requested to place a hold on Quality First services without disenrolling. A participant may request to have temporary closure status for up to 45 days; if the participant does not resume services after 45 days, disenrollment may result.

*This policy applies to enrolled participants only. Newly selected participants must be open, serving children up to age 5 on-site and ready to receive services at the time of selection.

Some examples of a temporary program closure include:

- Facility/property damage due to events such as natural disasters, fire, or flooding
- Health epidemic/personal medical conditions
- Lack of enrollment of children birth to age 5

In the event your program has an unexpected closure, you must complete a Request for Temporary Closure Form and submit it to your coordinator. Requests for temporary closure will be reviewed by Quality First. The coordinator will notify you whether or not the request is approved. Quality First Scholarships and financial incentives are not available while a program is in temporary closure status. If your program does not resume services after 45 calendar days, your ongoing enrollment will be reconsidered, taking into account any extenuating circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

REDISTRIBUTION OF MATERIALS

If your program closes, it is recommended that all materials purchased with your financial incentives be redistributed to other providers serving children in your region. The Quality First coordinator will provide assistance to you. If you will be disenrolling from Quality First but continuing to serve children, you may retain the materials purchased with your financial incentives to support your work with children.

PARTICIPANT DISENROLLMENT

Participant Disenrollment Policy: To end Quality First participation and related services, a disenrollment process must be completed. Upon disenrollment you are no longer eligible to receive any financial incentives, including any unexpended financial incentives remaining for the fiscal year.

- Programs may voluntarily disenroll by submitting a disenrollment form to the coach or coordinator.
- Involuntary disenrollment will be at the discretion of First Things First based on compliance with program requirements or in the event your program is funded by external sources and that funding ends.
- Programs disenrolling due to a business closure are advised to redistribute all materials purchased with financial incentives to other providers serving children in the region.
- Programs disenrolling from Quality First but continuing to serve children may keep the materials purchased with financial incentives to support their continued work with children.

Policies to Help Overcome Challenges

(Ethical Conduct, Confidentiality, Reporting and more)

CODE OF ETHICAL CONDUCT (NAEYC)

The Code of Ethical Conduct provides guidance for the early childhood professional in working with families and young children. This Code can help in making ethical decisions and in developing sound policy for your program. As a participant, you agree to use the principles and ideals of the Code of Ethical Conduct in your work with children, families, colleagues, and the community. The Code of Ethical Conduct can be found online at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/ethical-conduct>.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality Policy: All Quality First partners (coaches, assessors, child care health consultants, supervisors and other technical assistance professionals) are expected to maintain confidentiality about their work with the assigned participant. Program records, staff information, individual ERS and CLASS scores and quality improvement efforts are not made public, nor are they shared with individuals outside of First Things First, its contracted parties, and state agency partners, except as required by law and state regulatory agencies.

If you feel your confidentiality has not been maintained, please discuss this with the technical assistance professional or their supervisor to address the issue.

CRITICAL INCIDENT REPORTING

Critical Incident Report Policy: For the purpose of documenting critical incidents, the Critical Incident Report is required for all Quality First technical assistance professionals. This policy applies to incidents that cause concern, including when a technical assistance professional witnesses an emergency, serious health or safety violations, or reasonably believes that abuse, neglect or child endangerment has occurred.

In the event of a critical incident, the coach or technical assistance professional will notify the on-site administrator or supervisor that a report will be made. If applicable, the appropriate authorities will be contacted (i.e. Department of Child Safety, ADHS, DES, or tribal authority) and a Critical Incident Report will be completed. A copy of the completed Critical Incident Report will be provided to you upon request.

MANDATED REPORTING

As an early childhood provider, you are a designated mandated reporter by law (as outlined in A.R.S. § 13-3620). Mandated reporters are individuals who are obligated by law to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. In general, any person who has responsibility for the care or treatment of a child is a mandated reporter. Under Quality First policy, Quality First technical assistance professionals, including coaches, assessors and child care health consultants, are required to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect as well. Mandated reporter laws are designed to catch child abuse in its early stages so that children are protected from physical or emotional trauma. If you reasonably believe a child in your program is a victim of abuse or neglect, you are required to report this information to the Department of Child Safety or your local law enforcement authority, though a tribal social services agency may be contacted instead for a child who is a tribal member and who lives on a reservation. If you have an incidence of child abuse in your program, it is your responsibility to contact local law enforcement and your regulatory agency to make a report.

REGULATORY STATUS

Regulatory Status Policy: To ensure all participants are in good standing with their regulatory agency, regulatory status is reviewed monthly. All participants are required to maintain regulatory status and remain in good standing to ensure compliance with state regulatory standards (ADHS, DES and/or tribal or military authority). If a program experiences an event that causes it to be placed in enforcement action with ADHS or on probation or suspension with DES, the program will not have access to financial incentives or receive reimbursement for Quality First Scholarships during that time. While the program is not in good standing, its star rating will not be publicly visible on the extranet or Quality First website.

After FTF is notified by the regulatory agency that the program is back in good standing, access to incentives and reimbursement for all Quality First Scholarships will be restored. Due to reporting timeframes between FTF and state regulatory agencies, there may be a delay in the time a program's regulatory status is updated by the regulatory agency and when FTF is notified.

If a program is noted as not in good standing with its regulatory body for over 60 calendar days or if there is more than one incident in a 12-month period, participation may be terminated or a Targeted Support Plan may be started.

Your program's regulatory status will be monitored on a monthly basis. If your program has been noted as not in good standing, you will receive notification from your coach, CCHC or coordinator and the scholarships team (if applicable).

It is important for you to maintain open communication with the coach and other technical assistance professionals to help in supporting your compliance with state standards. Your licensing compliance officer or certification specialists are also available to support you in the process of creating a plan of improvement for your success.

STAR RATING MASKING

Star Rating Masking Policy: In order to provide accurate information about quality levels of participating programs, First Things First may temporarily mask a participating program's rating from the extranet and QualityFirstAZ.com. Star ratings may be temporarily masked due to the following reasons:

- A participant is not in good standing with their regulatory agency
- A critical incident has occurred at the program and is under investigation by law enforcement or a state agency
- A participant is contesting their star rating through the Complaint or Appeals process
- After the rating was finalized and posted, a participant is granted a reassessment

In these instances, the star rating will only be masked until the situation has been rectified.

In limited situations, a star rating may be masked for other reasons as First Things First deems appropriate. During the masking, the rating will show as "Rating Unavailable" on the public website.

TARGETED SUPPORT PROCESS

Targeted Support Process Policy: A Targeted Support Plan may be opened to provide support to overcome barriers to participation and quality improvement. A Targeted Support Plan identifies barriers toward quality improvement and actions to overcome barriers and sustain quality practices. At the end of the 90-day Targeted Support Plan timeframe, you and the technical assistance team will review the plan. This review will identify next steps and whether or not you will continue with Quality First. If you are not able to complete the steps of the Targeted Support Plan, you may be disenrolled.

As a Quality First participant, you are the leader in the improvement process, working with your support team. Your work with the team assists you in following the policies and procedures noted in this Participant Guide. If you experience barriers to compliance with these standards, your coach and/or support team will work with you to develop a Targeted Support Plan. A Targeted Support Plan may be opened if your program has challenges as noted below:

Participation Agreement - As a participant, you agree to play an active role in the quality improvement process. This is outlined in the Participant Role and Responsibilities Agreement. A Targeted Support Plan may be opened if you have challenges meeting the expectations in the agreement.

Regulatory Status - If your program is noted as not in good standing with its regulatory body for over 60 days or if there is more than one incident in a 12-month period, participation may be terminated or a Targeted Support Plan may be opened.

During the Targeted Support Plan, financial incentives spending is limited to purchases needed to support the focus of the plan.

Policies to Address Participant Concerns

(Clarification, Concern Resolution and Appeals)

CLARIFICATION AND CONCERN RESOLUTION

The process for clarification, concern resolution, and appeal is outlined on pages 76–78. If you have questions about your assessment results and/or star rating, review your assessment reports with your coach, using the ERS tools, All About books and CLASS manuals to answer questions. If questions remain, you may initiate the clarification process by submitting an Assessment Report Clarification Request. The Request for Assessment Report Clarification form is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources.

If you have other concerns related to your Quality First experience, begin by speaking directly with the Coach or CCHC working with your program. If your concerns persist after speaking with the Coach or CCHC, contact a supervisor or program manager for support. Program contact information is available in the Quality First Resource Directory available on the Extranet under Quality First Resources.

INFORMAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Informal Dispute Resolution Policy: Informal Dispute Resolution is available to resolve concerns related to a participant's experience. If informal methods of resolving the issue have not successfully addressed the participant's concerns, a Quality First Complaint Form may be submitted to the Quality First Director at First Things First.

The Complaint form is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources. In the Complaint form, you will provide a description of your concern and any attempts made to resolve the issue as well as recommendations of possible solutions.

A representative of the First Things First Quality First team will contact you to determine next steps to address your concern either over the phone or by scheduling a meeting with all involved parties, ideally within 14 calendar days of receiving the Complaint. After the meeting, First Things First will make a decision and notify you within 14 days.

This informal dispute resolution process does not apply in the case of an enrollment termination.

APPEALS

Appeals Policy: A participant may only submit a Request for Appeal within 60 days of being notified of a star rating or enrollment termination. The Request for Appeal must be submitted in writing to the Quality First Director at First Things First using the Request for Appeal form. Once received, the Quality First Director and the Senior Director for Early Learning, the Chief Program Officer (CPO), and/or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will review the Request for Appeal and provide a written response, which includes a scheduled meeting date, to you within 14 days of the receipt of the request. A copy of the Request for Appeal form is available in the extranet on the Quality First Dashboard, in the Forms section under Quality First Resources.

The Appeals Process only applies when a participant appeals a star rating or an enrollment termination. A participant must go through the Assessment Report Clarification Process before appealing a star rating. If you would like to discuss any other specific challenge that you are having, the Clarification and Concern Resolution process is the appropriate route.

All Quality First services and benefits will end upon enrollment termination with the exception of already awarded college scholarships. If First Things First re-enrolls the participant in Quality First as a result of the Appeals Process, the participant may be eligible to receive financial benefits withheld during the period of termination.

While an appeal about a star rating is being considered, the participant's star rating will be masked from public view on the Quality First website.

If you are unsatisfied with the result of your Request for Appeal, you may request a formal hearing conducted by an Administrative Law Judge with the Office of Administrative Hearings. First Things First will notify you in writing when the opportunity to request a formal hearing is available. After receipt of that notice, you will have 30 days to file a request for a hearing in writing. Refer to "Administrative Hearing" in the charts on pages 76–77 under "Clarification, Concern Resolution and Appeals Process" for more details.

CLARIFICATION, CONCERN RESOLUTION AND APPEALS PROCESS

If you have questions or concerns about your participation in Quality First, options are available to you to have these concerns addressed. The processes for clarification, concern resolution, and appeal are outlined in the charts that follow.

If you have questions or concerns about

Your Assessment Results or Star Rating

Step 1: CLARIFICATION

If you have questions about your assessment results and/or star rating, review your assessment reports with your coach, using the ERS tools, All About books, and CLASS manuals to answer questions.

If questions remain, you may submit a Quality First Assessment Report Clarification Request. The Request must be submitted within 40 days of the assessment results being approved. A written response will be provided to you within 14 days of receipt of the Request, as possible. (See Assessment Report Clarification Policy on page 57.)

If concerns persist after completing the assessment clarification process, you may proceed to Step 2, Request for Appeal.

If you are unsatisfied with the results of Step 1, you may move to Step 2

Step 2: REQUEST FOR APPEAL

The Request for Appeal must be submitted within 60 days of being notified of the star rating.

Once your Request for Appeal is received, a representative of the Quality First team will contact you to offer the option of an Informal Dispute Resolution meeting or an Appeal meeting, within 14 days of the receipt of the request.

If you participate in an Informal Dispute Resolution meeting as a first step in response to your Appeal, and you are unsatisfied with the result, you may proceed with an Appeal meeting. You will be contacted by First Things First to proceed.

To proceed with an Appeal meeting, the Quality First Director, the Senior Director for Early Learning, the Chief Program Officer (CPO), and/or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will review the Request for Appeal and provide a written response, which includes a scheduled meeting date. The Quality First Director, Senior Director for Early Learning, Chief Program Officer, and/or the CEO will meet with you and provide a decision on the Request for Appeal. (See Appeals Policy on page 75.)

If you are unsatisfied with the results of Step 2, you may move to Step 3

Step 3: ADMINISTRATIVE HEARING

If you are unsatisfied with the result of your Request for Appeal, you may request a formal hearing conducted by an Administrative Law Judge with the Office of Administrative Hearings.

First Things First will notify you in writing when the opportunity to request a formal hearing is available. After receipt of that notice, you will have 30 days to file a request for a hearing in writing. The request must include the name and address of the program seeking the hearing, the decision being appealed and a concise statement of the reasons for the appeal. The request must be provided to First Things First's main office in care of the General Counsel.

Once a recommendation decision is made by the Office of Administrative Hearings, the First Things First Board will review the decision and take action to accept, reject or modify the recommendation. First Things First will notify you of the final Board decision in writing.

If you are

Appealing Termination from Quality First

Step 1:

REQUEST FOR APPEAL

You may submit a Request for Appeal of your termination from Quality First. The Request for Appeal must be submitted within 60 days of being notified of the termination.

Once received, the Quality First Director, the Senior Director for Early Learning, the Chief Program Officer (CPO), and/or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will review the Request for Appeal and provide a written response, which includes a scheduled meeting date, to you within 14 days of the receipt of the request. The Quality First Director, Senior Director for Early Learning, Chief Program Officer, and/or the CEO will meet with you and provide a decision on the Request for Appeal.

If you are unsatisfied with the results of Step 1, you may move to Step 2

Step 2:

ADMINISTRATIVE HEARING

If you are unsatisfied with the result of your Request for Appeal, you may request a formal hearing conducted by an Administrative Law Judge with the Office of Administrative Hearings.

First Things First will notify you in writing when the opportunity to request a formal hearing is available. After receipt of that notice, you will have 30 days to file a request for a hearing in writing. The request must include the name and address of the program seeking the hearing, the decision being appealed and a concise statement of the reasons for the appeal. The request must be provided to First Things First's main office in care of the General Counsel.

Once a recommendation decision is made by the Office of Administrative Hearings, the First Things First Board will review the decision and take action to accept, reject or modify the recommendation. First Things First will notify you of the final Board decision in writing.

If you have other

Concerns about Your Quality First Experience

Step 1: DISCUSSION

If you have concerns about your Quality First experience, begin by speaking directly with the Coach or CCHC working with your program.

If your concerns persist after speaking with the Coach or CCHC, contact a supervisor or program manager for support. Program contact information is available in the Quality First Resource Directory available on the Quality First Extranet under Resources.

If concerns persist after discussing the issue with a program contact, you may proceed to Step 2, Informal Dispute Resolution.

**If you are unsatisfied with the results of Step 1,
you may move to Step 2**

Step 2: INFORMAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION

You may submit a Quality First Complaint form to the Quality First Director at First Things First. In the Complaint form, you will provide a description of your concern and any attempts made to resolve the issue as well as recommendations of possible solutions.

A representative of the First Things First Quality First team will contact you to determine next steps to address your concern either over the phone or by scheduling a meeting with all involved parties, ideally within 14 calendar days of receiving the Complaint. After the meeting, First Things First will make a decision and notify you within 14 days. (See Informal Dispute Resolution Policy on page 74.)

Participant Guide Resources

| Contact Page | | | | |
|--|------|--------|-------------------|-------|
| CONTACT | NAME | AGENCY | PHONE NUMBER | EMAIL |
| Quality First Coach | | | | |
| Quality First Coordinator | | | | |
| Child Care Health Consultant (CCHC) | | | | |
| Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant | | | | |
| Inclusion Coach | | | | |
| AZ Early Childhood Workforce Registry Outreach Coordinator | | | | |
| ADE Early Childhood Program Specialist | | | | |
| ADHS Licensing Compliance Officer or DES Surveyor | | | | |
| Other | | | | |
| Extranet User Name | | | Extranet Password | |

National Accrediting Organizations

Transcripts must be received from an accredited institution. “Accredited” means approved by the:

New England Association of Schools and Colleges,
Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools,
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools,
Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges,
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, or
Western Association of Colleges and Schools

National Early Childhood Education Accrediting Organizations

Association Montessori International (AMI)
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
The National Early Childhood Program Accreditation Commission (NECPA)
Association for Christian Schools International
American Montessori Society (AMS)
National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education (NAC)
National Family Child Care Accreditation (NAFCC)
Cognia

*Head Start programs also follow the same assessment process as an accredited program.