

IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Arizona

The 2006, Arizona created the Early Childhood Development and Health Board, known as First Things First (FTF), to oversee funds for early childhood development and health programs. The FTF Board allocates public funds to communities based on their birth to five population and the percentage of young children in poverty. Informed by local data, volunteer regional councils prioritize and recommend early childhood programs to fund. These public funds can be used for various early childhood programs, including increasing access to early learning. This is accomplished through Quality First (QF) Scholarships serving young children living at or below 200% FPL. This scan describes the policies for the 5,285 preschool children in center-based care in 2016-2017. There were an additional 161 preschool children who were served in regulated family child care homes; a total of 2,379 children under 3 served in center-based care; and an additional 167 children under 3 were served in regulated family child care homes.

Private child care, public schools, Head Start settings, tribally regulated programs, family child care homes, and faith-based programs are eligible to receive QF Scholarships as long as they participate in Quality First, the state’s Quality Improvement and Rating System (QIRS) and have met at least a three-star rating on the QIRS quality standards. QF Scholarship reimbursement rates vary by program type.

Essential Elements

Fifteen Essential Elements clustered in three categories—Enabling Environment, Support for Educators and Young Learners, and High-Quality Instruction—have been identified among exemplary pre-K programs (Minervino, 2014). Note that practice in the field may vary so as to be either better or worse than might be expected based on specific policy or guidance. Consistency or quality of practice across large-scale programs is more difficult to assess than policy.

Enabling Environment		Rigorous, Articulated Early Learning Policies								Strong Program Practices				
Political Will	Strong Leaders	BA + comp	Class size/ Ratio	Two Adults	Hours/ Dosage	EL Standards	Effective Curriculum	Special Ed	DLL support	HQ Teaching	PD	Child Assessments	Data Driven	Integrated System
–	○	–	–	●	–	●	○	○	–	–	●	○	○	○

Key: ● Fully Met ○ Partially Met – Not Met ND Not determined

Political will. Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey (R) was sworn in January 5, 2015, succeeding Gov. Jan Brewer, a fellow Republican who was barred by term limits from seeking re-election in 2014. Gov. Ducey has



supported some legislation that affects young children, recently signing HB 2449 (2018) which requires the state to provide higher payments to child care programs that meet quality standards.

Arizona began funding preschool programs in 1991; however, the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), a funding source from 1996 to 2010 was frozen in fiscal year 2010, due to budget constraints, and then revoked. In 2006, Arizona voters established a new dedicated funding source, using tobacco taxes and established the FTF Board to oversee those dollars. Over the years there have been elected officials who have tried to reallocate FTF funds for other programs.

Funding for FTF remained steady in 2016-2017 after allocations of early childhood funds to regional councils decreased in 2015-2016 due to a 24% drop in tobacco tax revenue between 2007 to 2015 (about \$40 million less per year) and a projection that tobacco revenues would continue to decrease. In response, the FTF Board determined that a budget reset was necessary to ensure consistent funding levels over the next nine to 15 years. As a result, regional spending on QF Scholarships decreased by 38% between 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, holding steady in 2016-2017. Despite this decrease, the scholarships remain the highest funded program at FTF (34% of total program spending). In 2014, Arizona was awarded a federal Preschool Development Grant award, providing funding for access to preschool for 2,307 children in 15 high-needs communities statewide in 2016-2017.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Early Childhood Education unit within the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) administers the Head Start State Collaboration grant and special education preschool, but not the QF Scholarships. FTF has the funding and administrative authority over them, and the state contracts with the local United Way affiliate for the implementation of the QF Scholarships. United Way provides administrative oversight and services related to scholarship reporting, monitoring, and payment through an agreement with FTF.

FTF has a nine-member board that sets the vision, determines priorities, and approves local funding plans and contracts for FTF. The FTF board, as defined in statute, includes both Democrats and Republicans, and rural and urban representatives. FTF is administered through Regional Partnership Councils, including 18 county-based Councils and 10 tribal Councils that span the entire state. The 18 geographically defined Councils are largely constructed along county lines, except for the major metropolitan areas of Phoenix and Tucson. Local Regional Partnership Councils determine the level of funding for QF Scholarships based on data and information specific to each region.

Education and compensation. Twenty-five percent of lead teachers in both public and nonpublic participants in QF Scholarships programs must have at least 12 college credit hours in early childhood or related fields, a certificate of completion in ECE or child development from a community college, or a CDA. For QF Scholarships, there is no salary parity or benefit parity requirement. However, there is a requirement in some Local Education Agencies for salary and benefit parity for pre-K teachers and assistant teachers. Salary and benefit parity between pre-K and K-3 is a requirement of the PDG grant.

Adult-child ratio and 2 adults in the classroom. Arizona has a maximum ratio of 1:13 for 3-year-olds with a maximum class size of 26; for 4-year-olds the maximums are a ratio of 1:15 and class size of 30.

Learning time. QF Scholarship classrooms are required to operate a minimum of three hours per day; three days per week. The state preschool program can be blended with other funding (i.e. Head Start,

CCDF Subsidy) to support a full-day or extended-day, or to increase the number of slots within a program to serve children who are on a wait list and unable to be served with the program's current funding.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Arizona Early Learning Standards (Standards) were revised in 2013, are comprehensive, and align with the Head Start Outcomes and Arizona Kindergarten Standards. All programs participating in the state preschool program receive on-site coaching that can support the implementation of the Standards. In addition, ADE offers both an introduction and in-depth training on each of the sections of the Standards. All teachers and administrators at QF Scholarship sites must complete the introduction to the Standards training.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Programs that receive QF Scholarships are assessed every 24 - 27 months on their curriculum alignment with the Standards. Arizona does not have an approved or recommended curriculum list; but does offer TA on curriculum implementation. Programs are required to establish a written policy that defines a process for sharing the curriculum with the families.

Support for students with special needs. In some of the regions, Inclusion of Children with Special Needs Coaching is available to support teachers in implementing inclusive practices. Additionally, all programs participating in QF Scholarships are assessed every 24 - 27 months on their lesson plans. Classrooms who have children enrolled with special needs are required to include modifications and/or individualization for children with special needs within their lesson plans. In 2016-2017, 123 children with identified special needs participated in QF Scholarships (2% of the program's population).

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Arizona is not able to report the number of DLLs who access QF Scholarships. Prop 203 (passed in 2000) requires that all public school classes be taught in English with the exception of students who are classified as "English Learners" who are educated through temporary sheltered English Immersion programs (some exceptions apply). The preschool programs participating in QF Scholarships encompass the entire mixed service delivery system of child care; therefore, those operating in public schools must comply with the law, other programs outside the public school system are not required to adhere. The Family Application for QF Scholarships is available in English and Spanish.

High quality teaching. ECERS and CLASS assessments are used to assess the QF Scholarship programs, yet scores were not available for review. However, all programs must achieve a minimum aggregate score on both assessments to participate in QF Scholarships. A three-star rating (the minimum QIRS level allowed to receive a QF Scholarship) required an average ECERS score of 3.99 and a CLASS instruction score of 2.0 in 2017.

Professional development. All programs eligible to accept QF Scholarships are assigned a QF coach based on the program's initial assessment. The coach reviews the assessments and develops an improvement plan. Coaches visit each program on a regular basis, from four to six hours per month. The coaching can be used to support teachers, assistant teachers, and administrators. While the coaching is required, the audience receiving the coaching is not dictated by the state. In addition, FTF funds scholarships and training opportunities. Both lead and assistant teachers are required to annually complete 18 clock hours of professional development.

Child Assessments. No specific child assessment tools are required nor are they required to be aligned with the ELDS. However, the tools used by a program must be used continually throughout the year and include the domains of social development, emotional development, cognitive development, and physical development. In addition, the evidence required for the assessment must include a variety of methods such as anecdotal record, photograph, family input, and work samples. The state expects that child assessments are used by the teaching staff to understand the developmental progress of children, identify modifications to curriculum implementation to support children, and identify where children might need additional support.

Data-driven decision-making. All programs participating in QF Scholarships must participate in Quality First, Arizona's Quality Improvement and Rating System. Each program receives a program assessment every 24 to 27 months using the ERS (ITERS, ECERS, FCCERS) and the CLASS (Toddler, Pre-K) in one-third of the total number of classrooms at the site; and the Quality First Points Scale that includes reviewing curriculum, child assessment, ratios and group sizes, staff qualifications, staff turnover, and policies for kindergarten transition and screening/referral. The assessments are used to determine if the program is eligible to participate in the state-funded preschool program and to support the program in improving or maintaining quality.

Phase I of the Quality First Validation study conducted by ChildTrends (2017) reviewed the theoretical framework, the data system, and the validity of the QIRS rating scale. Phase II, starting in January 2018 will include review of the components (coaching, assessment, quality improvement plan, financial incentives, etc.). Phase III will include evaluating child outcomes.

Integrated System. Programs that receive QF Scholarships are required to participate in the state's QRIS which evaluates the degree to which the ELDS have been integrated in the curriculum and align with child assessments. PD opportunities are aligned with assessment data collected during the QRIS monitoring. The Arizona School Readiness Framework establishes common language around school readiness; develops a clear outline of the readiness framework; determines the roles of standards, effective instruction, and curriculum; and identifies meaningful, well-aligned assessment of readiness to facilitate individualization of instruction. The Assessment Continuum Guide for Pre-K through Third Grade in Arizona (2016) aligns screening measures, environmental assessments, teacher-child interaction assessments, formative assessments, and Kindergarten entry assessments.