

# Keystone STARS

Keystone STARS (Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Supports) is a quality rating system that promotes quality improvement in early learning and development programs and school-age child care. A Keystone STARS designation informs parents that their children are in a safe, respectful environment in which they are learning new things every day to support their current and future successes in school and in life.

Since the inception of the Keystone STARS program in 2002, the Performance Standards have been the bedrock of the program. The standards are guided by the principle that quality early learning programs are the foundation for children's success, and investment in the early care and education of Pennsylvania's children is an investment in the future. Therefore, the Keystone STARS Performance Standards reflect research-based practices to improve outcomes for children. The standards are organized into four STAR levels that build upon each other in order to support continuous quality improvement. When a program meets the Performance Standards for a STAR level, they receive the mark of quality, a STAR designation. A Keystone STARS designation informs parents that their children are in a safe, respectful environment.

Early learning programs participating in Keystone STARS can earn a quality rating score from a STAR 1 to a STAR 4. At each level, programs must meet certain quality standards in four key areas: staff education, learning environment, leadership/management, and family/community partnerships. The higher the STAR level, the higher the quality standards.

A vital part of Pennsylvania's early learning system, Keystone STARS works with programs, such as Head Start, school-aged programs, and programs certified by the Department of Human Services.

High quality early learning programs will offer your child a stimulating, nurturing environment which should help prepare them for school and to reach his or her full potential. Quality environments provide a stimulating, loving atmosphere in which children will thrive. The Performance Standards for Keystone STARS quality-rated providers are guided by the principle that quality early learning programs are the foundation for children's success, and investment in the early care and education of Pennsylvania's children is an investment in the future

## KEYSTONE STARS

[HOME](#) | [KEYSTONE STARS](#)

Keystone STARS is Pennsylvania's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). A QRIS is a continuous quality improvement systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Keystone STARS is a program of Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).

## Our Guiding Principles

Keystone STARS is a responsive system to improve, support, and recognize the continuous quality improvement efforts of early learning programs in Pennsylvania. Our system is guided by three core principles:

- A whole child approach to education is essential to meeting the holistic and individual needs of each and every child and family.
- Knowledgeable and responsive early care and education professionals are essential to the development of children and the support of families.
- Building and sustaining ongoing positive relationships among children, families, early care and education professionals and community stakeholders is essential for the growth and development of every child.

We believe inclusion, diversity, equity and respect are foundational values embedded in these principles.

### **Keystone STARS has four primary goals:**

- To improve the quality of early care and education;
- To support early care and education providers in meeting their quality improvement goals;
- To recognize programs for continuous quality improvement and meeting higher quality standards; and
- To provide families a way to choose a quality early care and education program.

OCDEL's Keystone STARS Program supports all early care and education programs to improve program quality. We encourage programs to think about the Keystone STARS Performance Standards as a tool to support continuous quality improvement (CQI) that impacts services to the children and families in your care.

### **Keystone STARS – *Improving the quality through:***

Standards  
Training/Professional Development  
Assistance,  
Resources and  
Support

[NEW! 2022 Keystone STARS Performance Standards Recorded Webinar Available Now](#)

Interested in more information on Keystone STARS? Look no further:

- **Take the first steps to joining Keystone STARS.** Is your passion working with children? Have you thought about becoming certified? Take a look at the first steps to becoming a Keystone STARS provider!
- **Learn more about eligibility requirements.** All participating early care and education programs can receive technical assistance to support continuous quality improvement. Certified and compliant programs are welcomed to Keystone STARS by receiving STAR 1 designation.
- **Apply for financial aid with Rising STARS Tuition Assistance.** The Rising STARS initiative focuses on access to the highest quality services for hard to reach / hard to serve children and families by providing supports to providers as they move up the quality scale to STAR 3 and 4 levels.
- **Use Keystone STARS Outreach Tools in your program.** A home for Keystone STARS logos, newsletter templates, and more resources to communicate with families about your STARS program.
- **Find Keystone STARS Resources.** A page with resources for providers, including the resource documents for the 2022 Keystone STARS Performance Standards and the Keystone STARS Bonus Point Tip Sheets.

# Keystone STARS

## Information for Parents

### *What does Keystone STARS mean?*

Keystone STARS (Standards, Trainning/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources) provides families with a tool to gauge the quality of early learning programs. The STARS program supports early learning programs in the commitment to continuous quality improvement. Programs that participate in Keystone STARS care about providing quality early learning to your child. As programs move up the STARS ladder, they are providing even higher quality experiences, so your child benefits even more from the program. Early learning programs can earn STAR 1 to a STAR 4 level. At each level, programs have to meet certain research-based quality standards that measure four areas that make a difference in the quality of care your child receives:

1. Staff Education.
2. Learning Environment
3. Leadership Management.
4. Family and Community Partnerships.

As a program moves from STAR 1 to STAR 4, the requirements in these areas increase.

## ***AT A KEYSTONE STARS PROGRAM YOU SHOULD FIND:***

- Department of Human Services Certificate of Compliance for child care centers and group homes or Centers of Registration for family care homes.
- A comfortable place where your child can explore and learn.
- Laughing, reading and talking which builds language skills.
- Teachers learning new ways to help your child thrive.
- A safe, healthy and exciting place.
- Music, art, science and play activities that increase school readiness.
- Your child feeling good about himself or herself.
- Families involved in the program and their child development.
- Teachers that listen to children and parents.
- Children having fun together and being respectful of each other.

## ***KEYSTONE STARS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS***

### **Why is Keystone STARS important to your child?**

Your child's Early Education is critical to his/her development and future success in school and life. Keystone STARS sets requirements for early childhood educators to promote the best learning environment and the safest setting possible for your child. Children who attend quality early learning programs:

- Come to Kindergarten ready to learn
- do better in school
- are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and get good jobs.

### **What are the requirements set by Keystone STARS?**

Star levels are based on quality standards in four key areas:

1. Staff education — early childhood teachers have the training and knowledge for working with young children.
2. Learning environment – the program has a variety of materials and activities for each age level that makes it possible for children to learn something new every day!
3. Leadership and management – a quality program has to have a sound business practice to ensure your child's safety and early learning.
4. Family and community partnerships - Parents and community members are encouraged to become a part of the child's learning.

### **How does Keystone STARS rate a program?**

Programs complete a self-study evaluation based on STARS standards to apply for a STAR level. Keystone STARS evaluators will then confirm their STAR level. Programs that are earning a STAR 3 or STAR 4 also receive an independent Environmental Rating Scale.

### **What is the difference between a STAR 1 and higher STAR ratings?**

A: Programs are rated using the four quality areas, but the requirements increase in each area for each STAR level. Please speak with your local Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) for details of STAR level requirements. [Contact your ELRC for more information about Keystone STARS.](#)[Opens In A New Window](#)

### **The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) certifies programs. Isn't that good enough?**

A certified center does meet Pennsylvania's minimum requirements for safety. However, certification does not address Early Education. A child's first years are crucial to their lifelong learning, and the quality of their learning experiences will affect their readiness for school. Keystone STARS programs combine these safety requirements with Early Education standards to give children a safe and educational environment.

### **Does it cost more to enroll my child in a Keystone STARS program?**

Providers enroll voluntarily in the Keystone STARS program and there are no charges for the provider to enroll. Costs to parents are set only by the provider themselves. Keystone STARS provides many child care providers with targeted financial assistance to help them continue to improve quality so they do not have to pass the cost on to families.

### **What will my child get out of being enrolled in a Keystone STARS program?**

Many things! Individual attention, daily learning activities, a safe, friendly, and respectful environment, feeling good about themselves, a well-educated staff, parent involvement, and more.

### **What do parents get out of enrolling their children in a Keystone STARS program?**

Knowing that your child is safe and respected, that your child is learning something new every day, and the security of knowing what to expect from your provider in certain situations. Most of all, giving your child the best opportunity to succeed today and in the future

Keystone STARS can help you understand the quality of a child care/ early learning program. For a young child, everything is a learning experience. The early learning program you choose, such as child care or Head Start, can affect how well your child does in kindergarten, school, and in life.

Children who attend a quality child care/early learning program

- come to kindergarten ready to learn;
- do better in school; and
- are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and get good jobs.

## **What is Keystone STARS?**

Keystone STARS rates child care programs from one to four STARS on things you care about. Programs may meet state regulations for safety, and offer a kid-friendly atmosphere with good teachers that partner with you to help your child learn. Child care and Head Start programs within Keystone STARS earn a STAR 1 to STAR 4 rating based on quality standards that measure:

- **Staff education:** Early childhood teachers have the training and knowledge for working with young children
  - **Classroom/Learning environment:** The program has a variety of materials and activities for each age level that makes it possible for children to learn something new every day!
  - **Including families and the community:** Families and community members are encouraged to become a part of the child's learning progress
  - **Leadership and management:** A quality program has to have sound business practices to ensure your child's safety and early learning
- As programs earn more STARS, they are providing higher quality early education for your child.

[Find STARS programs near you.](#) (Just look for the STAR level when you get your search results.)

Your local Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) can also help you find a Keystone STARS provider. [Find your ELRC.](#)

## What to expect at a Keystone STARS program

Department of Human Services Certificate of Compliance for child care centers or Certificate of Registration for family child care homes.

- A comfortable place where your child can explore and learn
  - Laughing, reading, and talking which builds language skills
  - Teachers who continue to learn new ways to help your child thrive
  - A safe, healthy, and exciting place
  - Music, art, science and play activities that increase school preparedness
  - Your child feeling good about himself or herself
  - Families involved in the program and their child's development
  - Teachers that listen to children and parents
  - Children having fun together and being respectful of each other
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