

STARS Stands for Quality in Pennsylvania

Contributed by Susan M. Williams, Lehigh Valley Childcare

Today's infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are tomorrow's scientists, doctors, engineers, artists, and architects. We know that a great number of them will change our world. Hopefully, they will invent new technologies, cure diseases, explore our solar system, find peaceful solutions to global problems, and create renewable energies. That's why we must ensure that every child receives the highest quality early education and child care – because our future depends on the foundations built today.

One of the ways that Pennsylvania is working toward creating a strong future for children is by establishing and supporting a program called "Keystone STARS." Keystone STARS is a Pennsylvania state-initiated quality improvement plan that has made tremendous progress in helping early childhood programs improve their services. Centers move up the STAR continuum, beginning at the "Start with STARS" level and then working to achieve a STAR 1 through STAR 4 rating by reaching certain benchmarks, like increased literacy activities, professional development, and parental involvement.

According to a study conducted by the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University, Keystone STARS has been proven to improve the quality of child care across the state. In addition, the study found that child care centers participating in Keystone STARS have higher quality than the Pennsylvania average for child care centers and are showing higher quality now than at the inception of the STARS program.

Regardless of STAR level, participation in and of itself is an indicator of the importance a provider places on quality. Participation in the program is voluntary and there is no cost for a provider to enroll.

How Keystone STARS helps parents

As parents, one of the most difficult decisions we face is whom to trust to with our children. There are so many child care and early education providers to choose from that we just wish we had some help – advice from a friendly coach. Pennsylvania has stepped up to the plate!

Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS initiative establishes arduous quality standards for child care programs statewide; therefore, a center's STAR rating is a good indicator of quality. The program provides parents with a

tool to gauge the quality of early childhood programs (including before- and after-school programs) ranging from a STAR 1 to STAR 4 rating.

Parents can trust STARS. All participating providers are rigorously evaluated and inspected by their Regional Key (the local facilitators and evaluators of the Keystone STARS program) and the PA Department of Public Welfare. Areas of interest include the early learning environment, business management, staff education/professional development, and family/community partnerships. STARS are not awarded unless research-based benchmarks are met or surpassed by the provider.

How Keystone STARS helps your child

Put quite simply, as participating providers move up the STARS rating scale, they are improving the quality of services they provide to each child. Examples might include improving the learning environment, instituting a proven curriculum, or increasing professional development for teachers.

Keystone STARS provides many child care facilities (those with a certain percentage of low-income children) with financial assistance to help them continue to improve quality so they do not have to pass the cost on to families. Early learning providers have been able to use these funds to purchase new flooring, book shelves, cribs and mats, art supplies, classroom computers, playground equipment, and more.

The program also assures that children are receiving the highest quality early education and care by setting benchmarks for teacher training and continued education. In addition, the program rewards teachers for reaching educational goals (like obtaining an associate's or bachelor's degree in early childhood education).

How to find a STARS provider

If you are a parent looking for a quality early education or before- and after-school program for your child, you can visit <http://www.pakeys.org/stars/> to find a Keystone STARS provider near you. Susan M. Williams is the President / CEO of Lehigh Valley Child Care, Inc.-- the largest full-day, year-round early care and education provider in the region. All 21 LVCC locations participate in the Keystone STARS quality initiative. Visit www.lvchildcare.org for a complete listing of LVCC locations and STARS levels.

