



Best Practices in STARS Financial Award Spending

Background: Keystone STARS is an initiative of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) to improve, support, and recognize the continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts of Pennsylvania's early learning and school-age programs. Providing financial awards to facilities serving children who are vulnerable and at risk is one strategy implemented by OCDEL to promote CQI. This document is designed to assist you in creating written justifications of financial award usage and providing recommendations on making intentional decisions about award expenditures.

Award Justification: As a recipient of a STARS financial award, it is your responsibility to expend award funds in a manner that supports CQI and aligns the facility with research-based quality standards and criteria. A written justification of award expenditures will assist you in meeting this responsibility. Your justification should address the following concepts and be able to answer the following questions:

Rationale – *How was the use of this award intentionally planned?*

Your rationale describes the underlying reasons and thinking behind the decisions and choices you make. While it is not necessary to justify individual expenses, it is important to justify broad categories of award expenditures as they relate to the categories of equipment & supplies/materials, professional development, accreditation costs, staff bonuses, salary, and compensation, and other expenses.

Quality Standards – *Which quality standards justify the projected use of award funds?*

A quality standard is a research-based criterion that indicates an element of best practice within an early learning or school-age program. Using quality standards as a base for your decision making will assist you in guiding your program toward higher levels of quality and best practice. Examples of appropriate sources of quality standards may include, but are not limited to:

- Keystone STARS Performance Standards
 - <http://www.pakeys.org/docs.aspx>
- Environment Rating Scale (ERS)
 - <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers>
- Pennsylvania Learning Standards
 - <http://www.pakeys.org/profdev/EarlyLearningStandards.aspx>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
 - <http://www.naeyc.org/academy/standards>
- National After School Association (NAA)
 - <http://www.naaweb.org>
- National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)
 - <http://www.nafcc.org/accreditation/accredstandards.asp>
- Caring for Our Children (CFOC)
 - <http://nrc.uchsc.edu/CFOC>
- Head Start Performance Standards
 - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/legislation/index.html>

Outcomes – *How will quality be improved as a result of this award? How will this be evaluated?*

An outcome is the result, effect, or consequence that you expect from spending your STARS financial award. A well-defined outcome gives you a benchmark against which you can compare the actual changes/improvements made as a result of the STARS financial award. It is also important to develop outcomes that are easily measurable to assist you in monitoring your progress in working toward higher levels of quality and best practice over time.

Spending Plan – *How is the use of this award part of a long-term plan for improving quality?*

Keystone STARS is based on the concept of continuous quality improvement. The spending of your STARS financial award should be part of long-term plan that moves your program toward higher levels of quality. Before planning new grant expenditures, it is important to verify that these expenditures are helping the program meet long-term goals. Prior to applying for additional grant funds, determine if previous expenditures were successful in achieving desired outcomes. Use this site-specific information to assist you in planning grant usage that will maximize future quality improvements to the program.

Recommendations: The following recommendations were developed to provide guidance in purposefully planning the use of your STARS financial award. You are encouraged to seek additional guidance from STARS management, STARS Technical Assistance, Professional Development Instructors and Higher Education faculty, Health Consultants/Playground Assessors, colleagues and other appropriate sources.

Sources of Evidence – In order to determine the most appropriate and intentional spending of STARS Financial Award funds, it is essential to base your decision on concrete sources of evidence available to your facility. A source of evidence provides you with information about your program and how well it may be achieving quality. For example, a source of evidence could be your annual staff surveys. If staff surveys indicate a lack of adequate provisions for staff at break times, the director may choose to purchase adult sized tables and chairs to provide a space for lunch or planning. Sources of evidence are program specific and could include the following:

- Feedback from Designation Visit and ERS Assessment (including self-assessments)
- Child Assessment Data - for example Work Sampling
- Facility Professional Development Plan
- Program Assessment – including Family, Staff, and School-Age Surveys
- Financial Review
- Risk Management Assessment
- Site Safety Review
- Illness and Injury Tracking Review
- Technical Assistance Plans including Health Consultation/Playground Assessment
- Strategic or Business Plans and Program Monitoring
- Director, Staff and Parent goals for the facility based on compelling innovations in educational methods, emerging best practices in the field, and research.
- Additional sources such as the Program Administration Scale (PAS), ECERS-E, Staff Observations & Evaluations, Family Conference feedback, Strengthening Families Assessments, Accreditation resources and other sources as determined by the facility.

Buying Time – Finding the time to engage in continuous quality improvement efforts can be a challenge for many facilities. An effective use of STARS Financial Awards may be to “buy time” to enable the director to navigate quality standards/criteria and elicit ‘buy in’ from staff and Board, conduct classroom or teacher observations, conduct staff meetings, schedule family conferences and transition meetings, accommodate planning sessions with a child’s IEP/IFSP team, etc. Facilities can “buy time” through the hiring of substitutes/part-time employees or expanding the working hours of existing staff.

Environmental Rating Scales – Use the Environment Rating Scales found at <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers/> to guide you in selecting appropriate materials for your facility. There are multiple rating scales that apply to various age groups and program types. Be sure that you have the type and quantity of learning materials recommended for each age group/program type before purchasing supplementary materials. You can discover more information about model classrooms at http://www.pakeys.org/pre_k_classrooms.aspx in addition to early childhood equipment vendor websites with model classroom guides to help you develop appropriate and rich learning environments for children.

Creating an Area of Study or Investigation – A director might review with her team the sources of evidence and an 'area of study' or a 'question to explore' for the coming year might emerge. How can our program 'strengthen families' more intentionally? How can our program improve our curriculum implementation to obtain better outcomes for the children? How could we make our outside time a deeper learning time for children? How can we incorporate the creative arts more appropriately into our learning curriculum? How are we using technology and multi-media to enhance learning experiences? These questions can lead to research, investigation and become embedded as part of the CQI plan for the program. This investigation and planning in turn can end up guiding the purchases of support materials for teachers, equipment and supplies, purchase of specific professional development to support the study, purchase of cameras or supplies to document the progress. Programs could also use resources to engage families in the investigation.

Learning Program - Use award funds to strengthen and enhance the facility's learning program. Consider purchasing curriculum guides and reference books, observation and assessment tools, and other resources that supplement the curriculum. Resources should be developmentally appropriate and aligned with Pennsylvania's Learning Standards.

Additional guidance is available online at:

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/cwp/view.asp?a=316&q=124386&early_childhoodNav=|10698|&early_childhoodNav=|6356|

The following books, available through NAEYC (<http://www.naeyc.org/pubs>) are valuable tools in creating developmentally appropriate learning environments.

The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8: Selecting Play Materials to Support Development by Martha B. Bronson

Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter

Early Learning Environments That Work by Rebecca Isbell and Betty Exelby

Supporting Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity: Many high quality programs assess how the program is meeting the needs of all families and representing diversity found in society. Awards can be used to insure that materials for parents are available in the home language of the parent, supports for the English language learner are available, and that staff have materials and professional development to support all families and children. Insuring there are sufficient and varied materials and equipment to reflect the families in the program and the diversity found in society including age, race, gender, socio-economic, ability, and language lays a foundation for maximizing culturally sensitive practices. There are many excellent books, resources and materials available to support program development in this area.

Supporting Inclusive Practices: Often programs will purchase materials, adaptive equipment, additional staff time or professional development to support inclusion of children with disabilities or challenging behaviors. This type of expenditure can certainly enhance the quality and enrich the program for all children and families. A good resource for information about inclusion can be found at the Pattan website <http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/default.aspx> including this specific site: <http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/files/EI/EI-ProviderGuide.pdf>

Durability and Cost Comparison – When selecting equipment and materials for your program, it is important to consider the quality and durability of the items you have selected. Equipment and materials should be designed for use in a group setting and able to hold up under daily use. It is recommended that you purchase quality items that have greater longevity than quantity items that need frequent replacement. Compare prices among early childhood equipment vendors to obtain the best prices to ensure a wise use of resources.

Professional Development - Funding is available through T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood PENNSYLVANIA and PA Keys to Professional Development Refund Voucher Program to support the professional development of early learning and school-age practitioners. Access your STARS financial award to support professional development to meet Career Lattice requirements and Keystone STARS Performance Standards after you have exhausted these resources. You may also use your STARS financial award to attend early learning or school-age conferences and/or arrange for a PQAS instructor to provide specifically identified on-site professional development for your staff.

Staff Bonuses, Salaries, and Compensation – Maintaining, supporting, and growing a highly qualified staff is an integral part of achieving high quality learning environments. Award funds may be used to increase staffing hours to cover paid breaks, planning time, classroom observations, child assessments, family conferences, and other staffing needs. You may also choose to use award funds to supplement staff benefits or provide staff bonuses for recognition and to promote employee retention. Make sure a bonus policy rewards what you want to encourage. A misguided bonus system rewards employees for longevity, without regard to performance, level of continuing professional development or outcomes for children. When using award funds in this category, it is important to have a well-developed personnel policy to guide the intentional spending of funds.

Creating Communities of Support- Programs might consider pooling resources together to accomplish objectives difficult for smaller programs to fund themselves. Examples include starting a substitute pool, bidding and sharing custodial/lawn/maintenance services, bulk purchasing together to obtain better pricing and negotiating power, sharing professional development events and expenses (less travel and enough participation to afford high quality experts), purchase expensive items that can be shared between centers such as an LCD projector or video camera, rent event facilities together for special events (move theaters for summer campers, a day at the amusement park for families, share a bus rental etc.). It might be beneficial to get together and discuss these ideas as a starting point for the many other ways pooling finances could improve programs for children and families.

Accreditation - Keystone STARS supports the continuous quality improvement of learning programs working toward accreditation. You may use your award funds toward accreditation costs associated with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National AfterSchool Association, National Association for Family Child Care, and other accreditation types.

Health and Safety – Adequate provision for the health and safety needs of the children in your care is essential to creating a high-quality learning environment. You are required to meet basic health and safety guidelines as outlined in the child care regulations appropriate to your facility type or other standards such as the Head Start Performance Standards. However, you are encouraged to use your STARS financial awards to support and implement best practices in health and safety. Areas of need can be identified through Health Consultation and/or general STARS TA.

Business Practices – Quality early care and education extends beyond the classroom and family partnerships to include sound business practices. It is highly recommended that your facility make use of appropriate technologies to support program quality. At a minimum, your facility should have a functional computer with internet access and printing capabilities. A computer will assist in developing printed materials (including handbooks, letters, lesson plans, etc.), maintaining tuition and personnel records, and communicating with families. You will also be able to access online resources such as Keystone STARS information, the Professional Development Calendar, early education websites, and early childhood equipment vendors.

If you have additional questions about planning the use of your STARS financial award or need assistance in determining your needs, please contact your Regional Key.