



PA Keys to Professional
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Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program Frequently Asked Questions

*As part of the 2016-17 state budget, OCDEL, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Child Care Association (PACCA), will fund more than 1,000 T.E.A.C.H. scholarships for eligible professionals in DHS-certified Keystone STARS programs. For more information and how to apply, visit www.pacca.org.

What is Rising STARS Tuition Assistance?

This initiative's goal is to support early childhood practitioners by eliminating barriers to enrolling in higher education courses and degree programs. Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program will support eligible applicants enrolling in CDA or other college-credit bearing courses by:

- Covering 95% of the tuition cost of a class;
- Providing applicants with the tuition assistance prior to the beginning of the course(s);
- Providing annual support for credits up to \$6,000 (July 1st through June 30th); and
- Partnering with institutions of higher education to develop cohort classes, distance learning opportunities and additional discounts where possible.

Changes for Fiscal Year 2016-17 (July 1 – June 30), effective 7/1/16:

- Applicants are now able to enter multiple courses for one Semester into one application.
- Applicants are no longer required to submit copies of the Keystone STARS Certificate and PA State Certificate of Compliance with their supporting documentation.

Who is eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program?

Any staff person who is employed at a Keystone STARS designated early learning program including Head Start & PA Pre-K Counts, and has been working at a Keystone STARS early learning program at least twelve months, is eligible to apply for Rising STARS Tuition Assistance. Additional requirements include:

- Pennsylvania resident;
- Working at a Keystone STARS designated program (STAR 1-4);
- Working a minimum of twenty (20) hours weekly in a classroom setting or as the director, assistant director or education coordinator;
- Aides; Assistant Teachers; Teachers; Assistant Directors, Earning less than \$40,000 annually;
- Child Care Center Directors, Family or Group Child Care Home Owners/Operators; Head Start Education Managers, Coordinators, Site Supervisors, Earning less than \$50,000 annually;
- Agreeing to continue to work in a Keystone STARS facility for 2 months for every credit supported by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program (maximum commitment of 24 months); and
- Maintaining a 3.0 GPA for the classes taken or degree program in which the student is enrolled.

How do I apply for Rising STARS Tuition Assistance?

Apply online by logging in to the PA Keys portal at www.pakeys.org and click on "Tuition Asst and CDA Voucher Applications" on the left-hand side of the screen. All required documentation must be submitted as noted. Signatures on the Employer Attestations form must be signed in blue ink.

May I apply for both the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance and T.E.A.C.H. Programs in the same Fiscal Year (July 1- June 30)?

No, applicants are not eligible for both Programs in the same Fiscal Year (July 1 – June 30).

How do I apply for more than one course?

A separate application must be completed for each course the student is applying to take.

What is the deadline to apply?

Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program applications must be received four weeks prior to the beginning of class. Applicants are strongly encouraged to apply by submitting a completed application as soon as possible to avoid delays in processing.

What is the anticipated duration of the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program funding?

OCDEL anticipates the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program to be supported annually by both the Governor and the legislature.

Is it 95% of tuition only or could it also include required fees?

The Rising STARS Tuition Reimbursement Program covers the cost of tuition only. There is no reimbursement for fees and books.

Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program provides \$6,000 annually for credits, what is the program begin and end date?

The Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program operates in accordance with the state fiscal year, July 1st through June 30th annually. Any class which begins during that time will be considered part of that fiscal year regardless of when the class is completed. For example if the fiscal year is 2016-17 and a class begins June 15th, but concludes July 15th it will be counted as part of the 2016-17 program year.

If I apply for January 2016 and receive \$6,000 can I apply again after July 1, 2016 for another \$6,000?

Yes, the \$6,000 limit is per fiscal year is intended to support 95% of the credit cost of tuition, July 1 through June 30 annually.

How long can an applicant apply for Rising STARS Tuition Assistance?

An applicant may apply for funds annually until they have reached the level of professional qualifications that meets their needs and as long as funding is available.

Must the facility have been a designated Keystone STARS facility for a year or more in order for staff at that facility to be eligible?

No. The applying student must have been employed at a Keystone STARS designated facility for at least a year, but there is not a minimum length of time required for Keystone STARS participation. Any facility with a current Keystone STARS designation is acceptable.

If someone works in a STARS facility and is the Pre-K Counts teacher, are they eligible for this tuition assistance program for college credits to move from a Level I to a Level II certification?

Any employee of a Keystone STARS designated facility who meets the stated residency, length of employment, and salary limit criteria is eligible to apply for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program.

How does Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program support School Age Child Care sites?

Staff members that work at facilities that serve school-age children only and are open a limited number of hours before and after school will be eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program if they work 15 hours per week rather than 20. Staff members that are employed at facilities that are open longer hours, but who work exclusively with school-age children, will also be eligible if they work 15 hours per week rather than 20. Eligible degrees/ programs for school-age child care staff will include Elementary Education, PreK-4; Elementary Education, 4-8; Recreation; Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) with a focus on elementary age children; and Youth Development Certificate delivered by an accredited Institution of Higher Education, as well as the Pennsylvania School-Age Child Care Certificate.

Is the GPA calculated only on coursework paid by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program, or all courses taken by the student?

The student's overall GPA, including all courses taken, must be 3.0 or higher.

What are the consequences for not maintaining a 3.0 GPA?

Students supported by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program must maintain an overall GPA of 3.0. After the initial application for Rising STARS Tuition Assistance, applicants must include a transcript with each future application. If a student's GPA falls below a 3.0, the student will be ineligible for funding until they can bring their GPA up to a 3.0 by taking classes funded through other sources. Students will not need to repay the funds received for a course which results in their GPA dropping below 3.0.

What types of college courses can I take?

Applicants may request Rising STARS Tuition Assistance for courses leading to a CDA, AA, BS/BA or MS/MA in Early Childhood Education, Child Development or a related degree. Coursework must:

- Provide at least one (1) college credit and be conducted by an accredited college/university located in Pennsylvania or a PHEAA-approved online institution and
 - o Be in a program for the CDA, PA Director Credential or PA School-Age Professional Credential OR
 - o Be a part of a program that leads to a degree in early childhood education or child development for early childhood education (ECE) practitioners* OR
 - o Be in a program that leads to an elementary education or recreation degree for school age practitioners.* OR
 - o Be taken for early childhood education certification or to increase one's PA Early Learning Keys to Quality Career Lattice level.

Does the field of Human Development and Family Studies fall under the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program guidelines?

Some Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) degrees are considered Early Childhood Education equivalents and are eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program. The list of equivalent degrees can be found on the PA Key website at http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Career_Requirements

Will the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program pay for all courses in a Master's degree?

Yes, effective July 1, 2014, Master's Degree programs in Early Childhood Education are eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program

Can Rising STARS Tuition Assistance pay for my required coursework to renew my Director's Credential?

Yes.

Are applicants required to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?

Individuals applying for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program will not be asked if they have completed a FAFSA.

Is other financial assistance deducted from the amount of funding I can receive from the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program?

Rising STARS Tuition Assistance can only be used for 95% of the cost of tuition. If you are receiving funds that cover the same portion of tuition, those sources must be identified and that amount will be deducted from the eligible Rising STARS Tuition Assistance amount. Effective July 1, 2014, federal Pell Grants do NOT need to be reported, as this aid can be used to cover costs other than tuition.

Is other aid an issue?

Other financial aid that covers the cost of tuition must be reported and will be deducted from the amount of tuition eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program. Effective July 1, 2014, federal Pell Grants do NOT need to be reported, as this aid can be used to cover costs other than tuition.

Will the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program pay for developmental courses?

Developmental courses, which prepare students for college-level coursework, are typically not part of a degree program and therefore are not eligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program.

My classes run for 7-8 weeks and the cost is \$1,800. Will this tuition be covered for the year?

Courses that provide at least one (1) college credit and are conducted by an accredited college/university located in Pennsylvania or a PHEAA-approved online institution can be covered by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program, regardless of the length of time the course runs or the tuition cost.

I am taking classes at a private college and tuition for one three-credit course is more than \$6,000. May I apply for 95% of the total tuition cost for a course?

Rising STARS Tuition Assistance covers 95% of the cost of a course, up to a maximum of \$6,000. No individual may receive more than \$6,000 in Tuition Assistance Program funding during a single fiscal year, regardless of the tuition cost of the particular college a student is attending. If 95% of tuition cost for a single course exceeds \$6,000, only \$6,000, not the full 95%, will be paid by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program.

How does this affect the Bridge Program?

The business leaders who are supporting the York County Bridge program are aware of the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program and all of its features. Any adjustments that are made to that program will be determined by the business leaders who have created that program.

When does the time start for counting the two-month requirement?

The two month commitment begins at the conclusion of the class for which Rising STARS Tuition Assistance was received.

Are recipients of Rising STARS Tuition Assistance required to stay at the facility where they worked when initially applying for the program?

No, it is the intent of this initiative to increase the quality of the Keystone STARS system. There are many circumstances where a Rising STARS Tuition Assistance recipient may choose to move to another facility or employer. The requirement is that for every credit supported by the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program, the applicant work in ANY Keystone STARS participating facility for 2 months

Are there circumstances when an applicant may not receive Rising STARS Tuition Assistance?

Yes:

- In the event of requests exceeding the amount of money allocated for this program, applications will be prioritized by the date of submission of a completed application;
- Applicants must meet all the eligibility criteria; and
- The Commonwealth reserves the right to implement additional criteria for approval and/or prioritization in the future.

What if a student fails to complete a course?

If a student withdraws from a course for any reason, they must notify the Keys to Quality system and repay the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program amount they received.

Are directors, program administrators, or colleges responsible for notifying the Keys to Quality system when an individual in their employment or college withdraws from a class?

No; this is the responsibility of the individual student.

Are directors and program administrators responsible for repaying the tuition amount if their staff members withdraw from classes midway through the semester?

No.

Are there other supports for students in the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program?

For students receiving Rising STARS Tuition Assistance for two or more concurrent classes in the same semester, their program director or administrator can apply for \$800 in additional support. These funds must be used in one or more of the following ways:

- Paid release time for a student applicant to attend class
- Paid release time for the student to complete classroom related activities such homework studying or field placement; or
- Cost of substitute coverage while the student is attending classes.

How do directors or program administrators access the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program supports?

Program director or administrator must complete an application for this supplemental support. The application for supplemental support funds is posted on the Financial Assistance page of the PA Key website. As part of the application the following information will be required:

- Documentation of the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program student's enrollment in two or more classes including the class days and times;
- Plan for paid release time; and
- Demonstrated need for classroom coverage.

Early learning programs in which students utilizing Rising STARS Tuition Assistance are required to take classes on their own time, or where classes are scheduled evenings or weekends and no program release time is needed, will not be eligible to submit for this supplemental support.

If a center has more than one student taking two or more classes, can they apply for the \$800 for each one?

Program administrators may apply for the \$800 for each student taking two or more classes concurrently as long as they are using the funds as listed above.

When will Directors receive the supplemental payments?

Payments to applicants taking classes will be prioritized for payment/reimbursement first. Applications for support funding will be processed and dispersed based on receipt of the request.

Are directors required to give a bonus after staff earned nine credits?

There is no requirement for a staff bonus or salary increase in the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program.

Can I still have my CDA Assessment Fee paid by the Voucher Program?

The Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program is replacing the College Tuition Reimbursement Voucher Program only. The CDA Assessment Fee Voucher Program will continue to operate as it has been and will pay the CDA Assessment fee directly to the Council for Professional Recognition for approved applicants. The Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program can be used for college-level CDA coursework.

How do I get answers to questions I may have that are not included in this document?

Please go to <https://pennsylvaniakey.zendesk.com> to submit a request or call 800-284-6031, option #4.