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Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning
Bureau of Policy and Professional Development

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Subject: Keystone STARS Performance Standards and Program Manual

To: All Licensed Child Care Facilities and other Early Childhood Programs Participating in Keystone STARS; Early Learning Resource Centers; and OCDEL Early Learning Resource Center Program Representatives

From: Tracey Campanini 
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PURPOSE

The purpose of this announcement is to inform all Licensed Child Care Facilities and other Early Childhood Programs Participating in Keystone STARS, Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs), and OCDEL ELRC Program Representatives of the clarified and updated Keystone STARS Performance Standards, Program Manual, and corresponding resource documents.

Attached to this announcement are the following documents:

- NEW: 1) Keystone STARS Performance Standards effective August 1, 2020
- NEW: 2) Keystone STARS Program Manual effective August 1, 2020
- NEW: 3) Crosswalk of 2020 Keystone STARS Performance Standards to Previous Version
- UPDATED: 4) Resources to Support Achievement of Quality Standards
- UPDATED: 5) Suggestions for Evidence and Documentation
- UPDATED: 6) Facility Staff Qualifications Grid (PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 7) Professional Development Tracking Grid for STAR 3 & 4 Programs: Teaching Staff (PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 8) Professional Development Tracking Grid for STAR 3 & 4 Programs: Non-instructional Staff (PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 9) Child Records – Confidential Records Sign Off (For ELRC Use, PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 10) Staff Records – Confidential Records Sign Off (For ELRC Use, PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 11) Leadership and Management – Confidential Records Sign Off (For ELRC Use, PDF Writeable)

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- UPDATED: 12) Continuous Quality Improvement Plan Instructions and Template #1 (PDF Writeable)
- UPDATED: 13) Continuous Quality Improvement Plan Template #2 (PDF Writeable)

This announcement becomes effective August 1, 2020 and will replace in its entirety:

- ELS-KS-18 #02 Keystone STARS Performance Standards and Program Manual and accompanying documents

BACKGROUND

On July 1, 2018 the most recent version of the Keystone STARS Performance Standards and Program Manual were released. Since that time, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has worked with a variety of stakeholder groups to review the Keystone STARS quality indicators. The groups included school age child care, family child care, quality coaches, and STARS Think Tank members. The feedback received was used to guide the clarifications and edits made to the Keystone STARS Performance Standards.

DISCUSSION

As a result of ongoing feedback received related to the Keystone STARS Performance Standards, clarifications and changes are being made to:

- Improve the readability of the STARS quality indicators through additional bullet points and wording changes
- Further clarify the intent behind the STARS quality indicators by including additional information to certain indicators
- Provide greater detail as to how quality indicators can be applied to specific provider types such as school age child care, group child care homes, and family child care homes
- Provide thoughtful questions for self-assessment by providers and to guide discussions between programs and their quality coach
- Further clarify the role of PD Plans in a program's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan (SQ 3.4.1)
- Provide clear definitions of commonly used terms through the addition of a Glossary of Terms
- Retract previously defined timelines for implementing higher staff qualifications by removing the previous Appendix A

In addition, to support OCDEL's priority to understand Pennsylvania's ECE workforce, changes were made to:

- Further define Professional Development (PD) Registry participation requirements (SQ 2.2)
- Integrate the PA Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathway into the staff qualifications quality indicator (SQ 3.4.2)

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- Provide Pennsylvania Early Childhood Education (PA ECE) Career Pathway for easy reference within the Performance Standards

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, OCDEL is temporarily changing the Keystone STARS requirement for Program Quality Assessment (PQA), found in the Early Childhood Education Program indicator EC 3.4.5, for all STAR 3 and 4 programs for FY 20/21. Previously Keystone STARS quality indicator EC 3.4.5, required all programs seeking to move to a STAR 3 or 4 or renew their STAR 3 or 4 designation to have an external PQA using either Environment Rating Scales (ERS) or CLASS and meet the minimum threshold scores for each STAR level.

The authors of the ERS advised against using the ERS tool for high stakes decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic as programs navigate the safe return to serving families. OCDEL agrees with the position statement based on the significant changes necessary to implement Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidance for Child Care that Remain Open. Programs will **not** be required to have an external ERS or CLASS assessment in order to move up to or maintain a STAR 3 or 4 designation during 2020-21. Suspending the Keystone STARS standard requiring ERS and CLASS high-stakes assessment for programs seeking to renew their current STAR 3 or 4 designation or move to a STAR 3 or 4 at this critical time will allow programs to focus on maintaining or reopening operations safely. Additionally, the PQA team, ELRC staff and others, will be responsive to the emergent health and safety support needs of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs.

As a result of current and ongoing conditions of COVID-19, the following temporary changes have been made to the role Program Quality Assessment (PQA) has in the Keystone STARS Performance Standards for the 2020-21 program Year*:

- Integrate a program's Facility COVID-19 Health and Safety Plan into CQI activities (EC 2.1 and EC 3.4.5)
- Transition from the use of a formal external PQA to an internal Assessment process that will guide programs in their CQI activities (EC 3.4.5)
- Provide programs the opportunity to consult with a Program Quality Assessor at the completion of their internal assessment process (EC 3.4.6)
- Replace "self-assessment" with the term "internal assessment"
- Remove PQA minimum threshold scores for STAR 3 and 4 programs

**Changes to temporarily suspend the requirement for an external PQA (ERS or CLASS Assessment) in the 2020-21 Keystone STARS Performance Standards are related to best practices in the mitigation of the spread of COVID-19. In future renewal cycles beginning after June 30, 2021, programs may be required to have an external program assessment and meet threshold scores to continue designation at STAR 3 or STAR 4. OCDEL will issue an announcement and revised STAR Standards when any expectations regarding the designation process changes which will align with new program years.*

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Implementation of 2020 Keystone STARS Performance Standards:

- The updated Keystone STARS Performance Standards become effective August 1, 2020.
- Programs who began submitting evidence to their Quality Coach to renew their current STAR level or move up in STAR levels using the 2018 Keystone STARS Performance Standards prior to August 1, 2020 can complete the designation using either the 2018 Performance Standards or the 2020 Performance Standards. If they choose to complete their designation using the 2018 Performance Standards, they must complete the process by October 15, 2020. After that time, **all programs who began the process prior to August 1** will be required to use the 2020 Performance Standards for designation purposes.
- STARS programs who have valid ERS or CLASS PQA scores that will not expire before June 30, 2021 can use these scores to meet the requirement at EC 3.4.5 when renewing their STAR 3 or 4 Keystone STARS Designation or when attempting to move up to a STAR 3 or 4 providing they have a touch point with their Quality Coach and member of the PQA Assessment Team. During this touchpoint, the program, Quality Coach and PQA Team member will discuss any changes due to COVID-19 that the program may have experienced since the PQA visit.
- STAR 3 and 4 programs who have expired PQA scores or PQA scores that will expire before June 30, 2021 will be required to complete the new internal assessment process outlined in the new EC 3.4.5 regardless of whether or not their Keystone STAR designation is expiring during the FY 20/21 year. Programs who are currently on PA PACT (the communication platform used by ELRCs and PQA staff) for a monitoring PQA visit will be reviewed and contacted regarding next steps in completing the expectations of EC 3.4.5.
- STAR 1 or STAR 2 programs who were attempting to move up to a STAR 3 or 4 using the 2018 Keystone STARS Performance Standards and do not have current PQA scores will be required to complete the internal assessment process outlined in the new EC 3.4.5. Any such programs who are currently on PA PACT (the communication platform used by ELRCs and PQA staff) for a movement PQA visit will be reviewed and contacted regarding next steps in completing the expectations of EC 3.4.5.
- Any programs who were due for a targeted PQA reassessment after March 1, 2020 will not be required to have a formal external assessment completed. These programs will need to complete the internal assessment process outlined in the new EC 3.4.5 by October 15, 2020.

The Role of Virtual Designations in FY 20-21

Due to unprecedented circumstances that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to the Keystone STARS designation process will be necessary during FY 20-21. The use of virtual designation processes will be an option for programs who are renewing their current designation or attempting to move up in STAR levels.

More information on virtual designations will be released soon from OCDEL and each ELRC

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region. Due to the differences in the COVID-19 conditions across the commonwealth, each ELRC region will be implementing virtual designation strategies that best meet the needs of providers in their region.

Designations completed during the FY 20-21 via virtual processes will be evaluated at their next annual renewal to determine if onsite components of a designation visit should take place at that time.

Continuous Quality Improvement in Keystone STARS

Keystone STARS is designed to help early childhood education programs develop and implement a CQI plan that will guide the program. At STAR 2 and above, programs are required to develop a CQI Plan that includes long and short term goals, goals beyond minimum requirements under the program's COVID-19 Health and Safety Plan, annual updates, and is informed by internal assessments and ongoing needs of staff (EC 2.1) At STAR 3 and STAR 4, a culture of ongoing CQI ensures that programs routinely evaluate their strengths and needed areas of improvement through the use of internal assessments, surveys of families and staff, and other formative tools. Specifically, STAR 3 and 4 programs should use the following to inform their CQI plans:

- Program staff's professional development plans (SQ 3.4.1)
- Program's internal assessment process which must include goals and action steps for ongoing improvements to health and safety practices (EC 3.4.5)
- Additional internal assessments using different program observation instrument and consultation with a Program Quality Assessor (EC 3.4.6)
- Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework or other similarly focused evidence-based tool internal assessment (FC 3.4.6)
- Program Administration Scale (PAS) or Business Administration Scale (BAS) internal assessment (LM 3.4.9)

A program's CQI Plan should serve as a roadmap in goal setting based on an analysis of the program's strengths and areas in which improvement is needed in order to improve the experiences of children and families. The CQI Plan should be reflective in nature and, as such, should be updated to include progress made in meeting previous goals as well as the addition of new goals that further pushes the pendulum to higher quality practices. CQI Plans are by their very nature dynamic and will change over time.

The 2020 Keystone STARS Performance Standards require that all STAR 2, 3, and 4 programs submit a copy of their updated annual CQI Plan to their Quality Coach as part of their annual renewal. Annual updates should include a review of the previous CQI Plan and:

- Summarize progress made toward achievement of both short-term and long-term goals
- Identify new goals and action steps based on reflective activities and other internal assessment activities
- Discuss any goals no longer deemed necessary

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- Indicate individuals responsible for achieving goals

OCDEL thanks you for your continued commitment to quality child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. OCDEL's focus is and will continue to be supporting early childhood programs across the commonwealth.

NEXT STEPS

1. Child care programs
 - a. Review the 2020 Keystone STARS Performance Standards and Program Manual with staff.
 - b. Please direct any questions to your ELRC.
2. ELRC
 - a. Review and share with appropriate staff.
 - b. Please direct any questions to your program representative.