

**ELRC Announcement
#26-02**



Pennsylvania
**Office of Child Development
and Early Learning**

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

Issue Date: 07/01/2026

Effective Date: 07/01/2026

Expiration Date: N/A

Subject: Requirements for Programs Using an OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS Alternate Pathway

To: All Keystone STARS Providers using an OCDEL-Approved Alternate Pathway for STARS Designation; Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs); and The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) Early Learning Resource Center Program Representatives

From:

Shante' Brown

Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development & Early Learning

PURPOSE

To provide information on the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) Approved Alternate Pathways in Keystone STARS including requirements for such programs.

The following appendices are attached to this policy announcement:

- Appendix A: [OCDEL Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathways and Required Documentation for STARS Designation Applications and Renewals](#)
- Appendix B: [Tip Sheet for Providers Applying for a Designation Through an OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway in the PD Registry Designation System](#)

This policy announcement makes the following obsolete in its entirety effective immediately:

- *ELRC Announcement #22-08 Requirements for Programs Using an OCDEL-Approved Alternate Pathway to a Keystone STARS Designation in the Professional Development (PD) Registry*

BACKGROUND

Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), promotes quality in early childhood education programs for children and families across the commonwealth. OCDEL recognizes that there are state and national accrediting organizations that similarly serve to ensure early childhood education programs provide high quality and enriching programming to children and families. In order to give credence to these organizations and their accreditation standards of quality, OCDEL offers several approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathways. For a current list of the accreditations that serve as OCDEL-approved Alternate Pathways, click [here](#).

DISCUSSION

Programs that are accredited through an OCDEL-approved Alternate Pathway and wish to use this pathway for a Keystone STARS designation must apply for an initial Alternate Pathway designation in the Professional Development (PD) Registry system. Additionally, these programs are required to complete annual renewals of their Alternate Pathway designation in the Registry system. Failure to do so will result in the program dropping to a STAR 1.

Changes to the Requirements for OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway Programs

As part of ongoing feedback received and discussions with stakeholders, OCDEL is making several changes to the requirements for Alternate Pathway programs, effective July 1, 2026. The purpose of these changes is to streamline processes and reduce administrative burden for both Alternate Pathway programs and ELRCs by relying on existing oversight from accrediting bodies.

The following changes to requirements for Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs will be implemented with the release of this policy:

- **Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs will no longer be required to upload or complete a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan within the Professional Development (PD) Registry Designation system.** While no longer required by OCDEL, programs may continue to use the Registry system to document CQI Plans for their own record-keeping and quality improvement efforts.
- **Staff at Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs will no longer be required to complete the PD Registry course, *Overview of Keystone STARS*.** While no longer required by OCDEL, individual programs may continue to require staff to complete this training if they determine it is beneficial.
- **Staff at Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs will no longer be required to complete Professional Development (PD) Plans within the PD Registry Designation system.** While no longer required by OCDEL, program leadership may continue to require staff to develop and maintain PD Plans. Additionally, all individuals employed by Alternate Pathway programs will continue to have access to the PD Registry system for this purpose.

Although these changes become effective on July 1, 2026, Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs will transition to the new requirements at their next designation renewal in the PD Registry Designation System occurring on or after that date.

Addition of Cognia as an OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway

Beginning July 1, 2026, Cognia Early Learning Accreditation will be recognized as an approved STAR 4 Alternate Pathway.

All early childhood programs currently accredited by Cognia — including those already designated as STAR 4 through the Keystone STARS Performance Standards — must submit a new Alternate Pathway application in the PD Registry Designation System to transition to this designation type. Cognia-accredited programs can apply for an Alternate Pathway designation in the PD Registry Designation System anytime but should do so prior to their next designation renewal date.

Cognia-accredited programs that do not submit an Alternate Pathway application will be required to use the Keystone STARS Performance Standards when renewing their next full designation.

Programs that earn Cognia accreditation in the future will be required to apply for a STAR 4 designation through the Alternate Pathway process once their accreditation is awarded.

If you have questions or need support with the application process, please reach out to your Quality Coach or ELRC.

Initial Steps for Programs Using an OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway

Programs who are or become accredited through an OCDEL-approved STARS Alternate Pathway and wish to use this pathway for designation **must** complete the following steps in the PD Registry Designation System:

- Claim their program's Organization Profile in the PD Registry. Click [here](#) for more information on claiming an organization profile.
- Refer to Appendix A: [OCDEL Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathways and Required Documentation for STARS Designation Applications and Renewals](#) and compile appropriate documentation to demonstrate active accreditation status.
- Using the *Staff Report* in the Registry Designation System, ensure that all staff information is correct including position titles and employment dates. Correct any inaccurate information and then verify the staff in the Registry. Click [here](#) for more information on verifying staff. (The *Staff Report* can be found on the program's *Organization Profile* tab.)
- Ensure that all current onsite leadership team members and teaching staff have completed their PD Registry Profile. A Registry Profile is considered complete when the Career Pathway Level is listed as "*applied*" or "*verified*" in the PD Registry and on the PD Registry Report, *Staff Report*. Click [here](#) for more information on this step.

Complete instructions on applying for an Alternate Pathway designation in the PD Registry System can be found on Appendix B: [Tip Sheet for Providers Applying for Keystone STARS Designation Through an OCDEL-Approved Alternate Pathway in the PD Registry Designation System](#)

Designation Requirements for OCDEL-Approved Keystone STAR Alternate Pathway Programs

Programs using an OCDEL-approved accreditation must apply for a Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway designation in the PD Registry system when they first become accredited and must renew their designation annually thereafter.

Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs are required to complete their annual designation renewal by the established renewal due date. If a renewal is not completed by the deadline, the program will be moved to a STAR 1 designation.

Reminders for OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway Programs

- **Self-Reporting Requirements:**
Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway programs must self-report any changes to their DHS certification status—including sanctions or refusals to renew—to their accrediting agency. Failure to report such changes may result in the program being ineligible to use a Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway in the future and may impact their current designation. Programs may also be subject to additional investigations and recoupment of funds, if applicable.
- **Accreditation Status Updates:**
Programs must notify their ELRC of any changes to their accreditation status, including the loss of accreditation. Failure to report such changes may result in the program being ineligible to use a Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathway in the future and may impact their current designation. Programs may also be subject to additional investigations and recoupment of funds, if applicable.

NEXT STEPS

1. Keystone STAR Programs Using an OCDEL-Approved Alternate Pathway:
 - a) Review the information contained in this document and in the attached Appendices and share with staff.
 - b) Follow all steps listed in this policy announcement.
 - c) Please direct any questions to your ELRC.
2. ELRCs
 - a) Review the information contained in this document and in the attached Appendices and share with staff.
 - b) Please direct any questions to your ELRC Program Representative.

Appendix A: OCDEL-Approved Keystone STARS-Alternate Pathways and Required Documentation for Designation Applications and Renewals

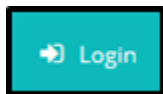
Name of OCDEL-Approved Accrediting Organization	STAR Level	Documentation Required to Be Uploaded During Annual Keystone STAR Designation and Annual Renewal
Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every 6 years)
American Montessori Society (AMS)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every August)
Association Montessori Internationale Recognition (AMI)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of AMI Recognition Certificate (issued annually) • Copy of Annual Letter from AMI (issued annually)
Cognia Early Learning Accreditation	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of Certificate of Early Learning Accreditation (issued every 6 years)
Council on Accreditation (COA) After School Program	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every 4 years)
National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every 5 years)
<i>Accreditation + Tier Only</i>		
National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every 3 years) • Copy of most recent Update Letter (issued every 18 months)
National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Accreditation Certificate (issued every 3 years) • Copy of most recent Update Letter (issued annually)
21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Approval Letter
Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Private Academic Nursery School License	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of most recent Annual Private Academic License issued through PDE

Appendix B: Tip Sheet for Providers Applying for a Keystone STARS Designation Through an OCDEL-Approved Alternate Pathway in the PD Registry Designation System

NOTE: To apply for the Keystone STARS Designation Alternate Pathway, you will need to have a registered organization within the PD Registry. To find a tip sheet on how to claim an unregistered organization, visit pakeys.org/pdregistry/resources.

How to Apply for Keystone Stars Designations Through an Alternate Pathway

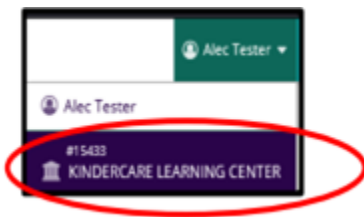
1. Go to papdregistry.org.
2. Click **Login** in the top right corner.



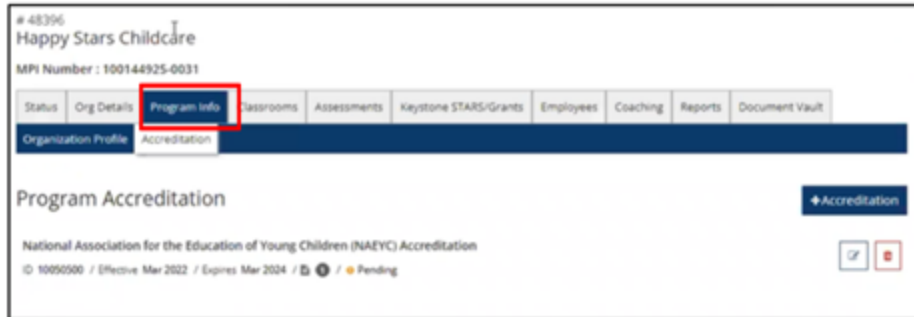
3. Enter your email address and password, then click Login.



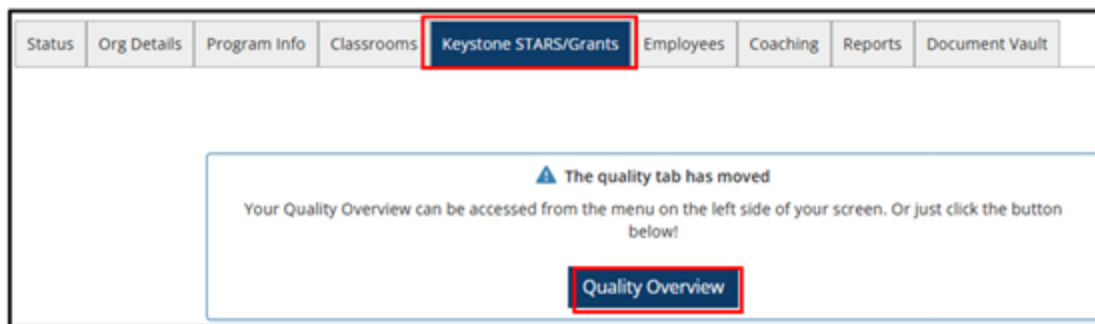
4. As the Director/Owner, click on the name of your organization from the top right-hand corner drop-down menu.



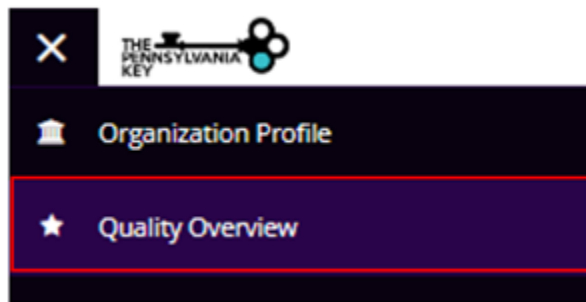
5. Before applying for designation, visit the Program Info tab in your organization's profile to upload your accreditation. Please see the full tip sheet on how to upload or edit your accreditation at pakeys.org/submit-accreditation-for-keystone-stars-alternative-pathways-designation.



6. Within your organization's profile, select **Keystone STARS/Grants** tab and click **Quality Overview** underneath.



NOTE: You may also access the Quality Dashboard from the left-hand menu by selecting Quality Overview shown below.



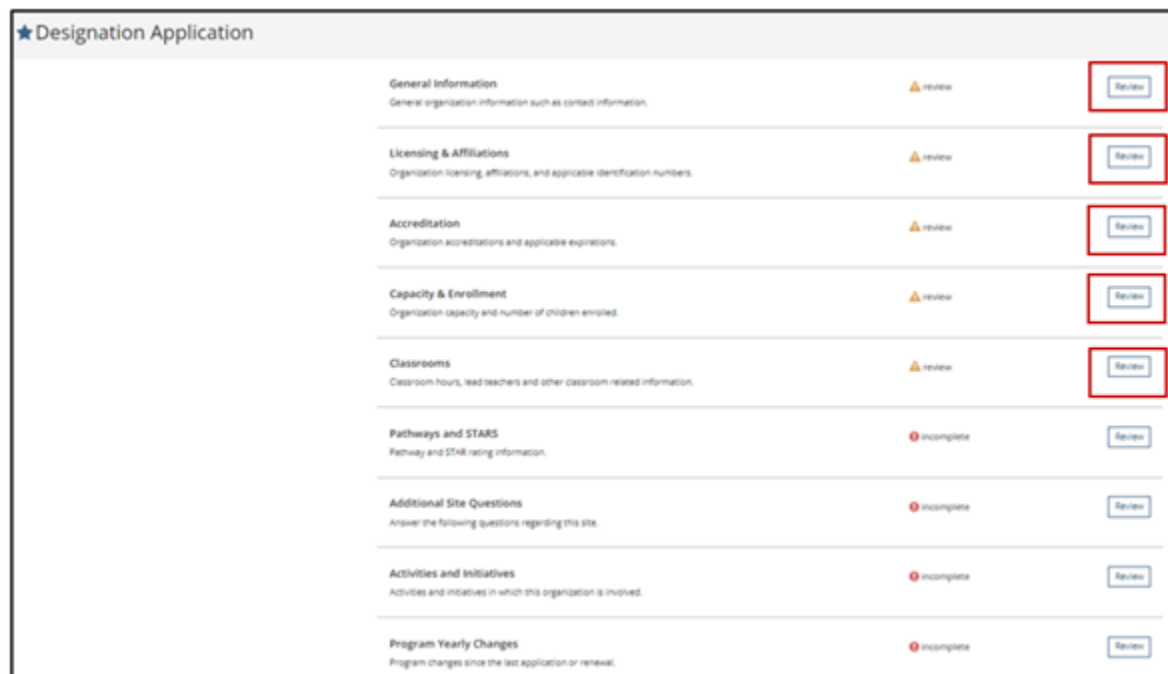
7. Click **Applications**.



8. Click on **Apply** on the section noted as Keystone STARS or Annual Renewal, whichever will apply to your program at the time.



9. Click on Review for each section marked as review and confirm that information is correct.



10. Click the Review button for Pathways and STARS.



11. Click the appropriate selection when applying for a STARS designation. You will then choose Yes, you are seeking designation through an Alternate Pathway. This will populate any accreditation you have uploaded in your Program Info tab. Select the accreditation you are choosing as your Alternate Pathway. **Failure to check yes to the Alternate Pathway question and to choose an accrediting agency will result in the application needed to be returned to the provider.**

Pathways and STARS

Why are you applying for a STARS Designation?

To Move In: My program has not had a STARS Designation within the last 30 calendar days.
 To Move Up: My program is seeking a STARS Designation higher than our current designation.
 To Maintain: My Program is seeking a new STARS Designation equal to our current designation.
 To Move Down: My program is seeking a STARS Designation lower than our current designation.

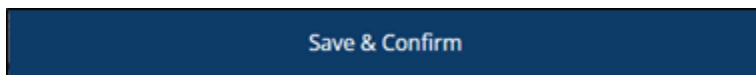
Are you seeking designation for your program through an OCDEL Approved Alternate Pathway?

Yes
 Please indicate the Alternate Pathway

NAEYC - National Association for Education of Young Children (STAR 4)
 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation
 125657854 / ✓Verified / 📅Effective 08/01/2021 / 📅Expires 08/01/2024
 📄LGBTQIA+ Affinity Group Flyer 2022.pdf
 📄Uploaded 08/30/2022 / 👤By Alex Johnson / 📄Size 143.49 KB

No

12. Once the required selections are made, select **Save & Confirm** at the bottom of the screen.

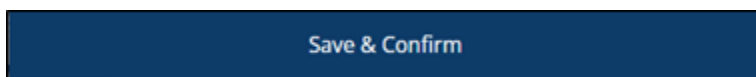


13. Click the **Review Button** for on Additional Site Questions.

Additional Site Questions 🚫 incomplete Review

Answer the following questions regarding this site.

14. Answer all questions regarding the site, when finished click **Save & Confirm** at the bottom of the screen.



15. Click the **Review** button for Activities and Initiatives.

Activities and Initiatives 🚫 incomplete Review

Activities and initiatives in which this organization is involved.

16. Check all applicable options regarding the activities and initiatives at the site, when finished click Save & Confirm at the bottom of the screen.

Keystone STARS Application

Activities and Initiatives

This site is involved in the following activities and initiatives: (check all that apply)

- Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC)
- Child Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Participant
- Multi-Site (Chain or Franchise)
- Mind in the Making
- Use of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS)
- Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (TEACH) and Tuition Assistance Program (TAP)
- Use of After School Quality (ASQ)
- Keystone Kids Go
- PA Eco Healthy Child Care
- None at this time

Save & Confirm

17. Click the **Review** button for Program Yearly Changes.

Program Yearly Changes incomplete Review

Program changes since the last application or renewal.

18. Answer all questions regarding any changes withing the past year, when finished click **Save & Confirm** at the bottom of the screen.

Save & Confirm


19. Once all application review options have been completed, they will display as confirmed on the screen and the application will be ready for submission.

20. To Submit the Application, click on the **Submit Application** button at the bottom of the screen.

★ Designation Application Close

All portions of the application must be reviewed and confirmed in order to submit.

General Information General organization information such as contact information.	✔ confirmed	Review
Licensing & Affiliations Organization licensing, affiliations, and applicable identification numbers.	✔ confirmed	Review
Accreditation Organization accreditations and applicable expirations.	✔ confirmed	Review
Capacity & Enrollment Organization capacity and number of children enrolled.	✔ confirmed	Review
Classrooms Classroom hours, lead teachers and other classroom related information.	✔ confirmed	Review
Pathways and STARS Pathway and STAR rating information.	✔ confirmed	Review
Additional Site Questions Answer the following questions regarding this site.	✔ confirmed	Review
Activities and Initiatives Activities and initiatives in which this organization is involved.	✔ confirmed	Review
Program Yearly Changes Program changes since the last application or renewal.	✔ confirmed	Review


Submit Application

21. Once you have reviewed the terms and conditions, select **I Agree** and click **Continue**.

★ Designation Application

All portions of the application must be reviewed and confirmed in order to submit.

Terms and Conditions

Attestation for All Keystone STARS Providers:

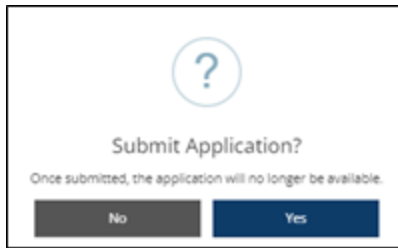
Instructions: In order to receive your STAR Designation Certificate, please read and complete the following attestation. The person who signs this document is the individual legally authorized to represent the child care provider. By completing and signing this form, you attest that you have reviewed and accept the terms of the Keystone STARS Status, Review, Suspension and Removal Process.

- I agree to abide by the Keystone STARS Performance Standards for the current STAR Designation and I understand the status of my Program's STAR Designation may be reviewed, reduced, suspended, or removed if I am not meeting the Keystone STARS Performance Standards and/or other conditions listed in the attached STAR Status Review, Reduction, Suspension and Removal Process.
- I understand that the ELRIC reserves the right to review my Program's STARS status and share information with the DHS Regional Certification Office or Department of Education.
- I understand that my Program's STAR Designation may be suspended or removed if DHS initiates an Injunction, Emergency Removal, or issues a Provisional Certificate of Compliance. (for programs with DHS Certificate of Compliance)

I agree to the attestation for All Keystone STARS Providers

Continue

22. Be sure you are ready to submit the application and click **Yes**.



23. You will then receive confirmation that your application has been successfully submitted. Click **OK** to complete the application process.

