

Best Practices in Keystone 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 childcare facilities serving children who are vulnerable and at risk is one strategy implemented by OCDEL to improve outcomes for children and promote CQI. This document is designed to assist programs in creating written justifications of financial award use and provides recommendations on making intentional decisions about award expenditures.

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

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

Rationale describes the underlying reasons and choices made in award spending. 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 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 basis for decision making will assist in guiding the 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/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_STARS
- Environment Rating Scale (ERS)
 - <http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/>
- Pennsylvania Learning Standards
 - http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Career_Standards
- Good, Better, Best: PA's CQI Guide to Best Practices - new document posted on the PA Key website
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
 - <http://www.naeyc.org/academy/primary/viewstandards>
- National After School Association (NAA)
 - <http://naaweb.org/>
- Caring for Our Children (CFOC)
 - <http://nrckids.org/CFOC3>
- Head Start Performance Standards
 - <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards>

Outcomes – *How will outcomes for children or quality of the program be improved as a result of this award?*

How will this be evaluated?

An outcome is the result, effect, or consequence that is expected from spending the STARS financial award. A well-defined outcome gives a benchmark against which to compare the actual changes/improvements made as a result of the STARS financial award. It is also important to develop outcomes that are measurable to assist in monitoring progress in working toward better child outcomes, 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 outcomes for the children and quality of the program?*

Keystone STARS is based on the concept of continuous quality improvement. Spending the STARS financial award should be part of long-term plan that moves the 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 grant funds, determine if previous expenditures were successful in achieving desired

outcomes. Use this site-specific information to assist in planning that will improve outcomes for children and maximize future quality improvements to the program.

Sources of Evidence – In order to determine the most appropriate and intentional spending of child care STARS Financial Award funds, it is essential to base decisions on concrete sources of evidence. A source of evidence provides information and insight about the program strengths and helps identify weaknesses. Sources of evidence serve as data to inform the decision making. For example, a source of evidence could be 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/Ounce
- 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
- Good, Better, Best: PA's CQI Guide to Best Practices
- 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.

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

Buying Time – Finding the time to engage in continuous quality improvement efforts can be a challenge. 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 hours of existing staff. Any positions supported through Keystone STARS grant funds are supplemental and must add to the quality of the program; Keystone STARS grant funds are not intended to supplant staff salaries and should not fund in full lead teacher, assistant director or director salaries.

Technology and Computer Access – Quality early care and education extends beyond the classroom and family partnerships to include sound business practices. It is recommended that facilities consider their technology (computers, printers, etc.) and internet access needs when making decisions about the use of STARS awards. At a minimum, the facility should have a functional computer with internet access (preferably high speed) and printing capabilities. Moving toward best practice, additional computer stations would be available for convenient teacher use to upload child level assessments and with center wide networking. The use of a child care management software solution can greatly enhance a program’s ability to manage data, meet reporting requirements and monitor fiscal status. A computer will assist in developing printed materials (including handbooks, letters, lesson plans, etc.), maintaining tuition and personnel records. Use of email has become increasingly important in connecting with families who more and more often use email as their primary communication method. Internet access will enable staff to use online resources such as email, E-newsletters such as BUILD, Keystone STARS information, the Professional Development registry, early education websites, and early childhood equipment vendors. Additionally, a location email address is a requirement for all providers. Make sure staff have adequate training and technical support to efficiently and effectively use equipment and applications.

Creating an Area of Study or Investigation – A director might review with his/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 leaning curriculum? How are we using technology and multi-media to enhance learning experiences? How can we use child outcomes reporting to inform our program? 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.

Environment Rating Scales (ERS) – Focus the selection of purchases process on supporting Developmentally Appropriate Practices for all enrolled children through teacher professional development and additional classroom materials; assuring that materials requests would support program practice improvement instead of just supplementing existing supplies.

By consulting an established Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan and using the support of a regional STARS Quality Coach or STARS Technical Assistance Consultant, programs can assure that their requests will result in improved practices that reflect those outlined in the ERS books. ERS books can be obtained by attending professional development events on the tools, as well as through <http://ersi.info/order.html>.

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. Sometimes camera or video equipment is purchased to document and share children’s learning with parents. Resources should be developmentally appropriate and aligned with Pennsylvania’s Learning Standards.

Additional guidance is available online at: https://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Career_Standards

The following books, available through NAEYC at: <http://www.naeyc.org/publications> 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 **ISBN-13: 978-0935989724**

Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter **ISBN-13: 978-1929610297**

Early Learning Environments That Work by Rebecca Isbell and Betty Exelby **ISBN: 978 0 876592 56 4**

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. OCDEL has published an ELL Toolkit for Providers, located on the PA Key and Regional Key websites, and this valuable resource can help inform additional needs for cultural and linguistic competency.

Supporting Inclusive Practices: Often programs will purchase materials, adaptive equipment, additional staff time or professional development to support inclusion of children with disabilities, social-emotional needs 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.net> including this specific site: <http://www.pattan.net/category/Resources/PaTTAN%20Publications/Browse/Single/?id=4dc09560cd69f9ac7f4b000>.

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

Professional Development –

- Funding is available through T.E.A.C.H, the PA Keys Rising STARS Tuition Assistance program and the CDA Assessment Voucher to support the professional development of early learning and school-age practitioners. Access STARS financial award to support professional development to meet higher levels of education and Keystone STARS Performance Standards after exhausting other resources. STARS awards will not fund courses leading to degrees above the Master’s level. For all credit bearing courses at the Master’s level and below, the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program Guidelines will be followed. It must be verified that the student has either been found ineligible for the Rising STARS Tuition Assistance Program or has qualified but already exceeded the limits of that assistance.
- STARS financial awards can be used to attend early learning or school-age conferences and/or arrange for a PQAS instructor to provide specifically identified on-site professional development for staff.

Staff 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. Programs may also choose to use award funds to supplement staff benefits or promote employee retention or as a compliment to fill in the gaps not covered by the Education and Retention Awards. Make sure a compensation policy rewards what you want to encourage. An example of a misguided bonus system rewards employees for longevity, without regard to performance, level of continuing professional development or outcomes of 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. Any positions supported through Keystone STARS grant funds are supplemental and must add to the quality of the program; Keystone STARS grant funds are not intended to supplant staff salaries and should not fund in full any staff position.

Creating Communities of Support/Shared Services- Programs might consider pooling resources and collaborating to accomplish objectives difficult for smaller programs to fund individually. Examples include but not limited to: 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 (e.g. Strengthening Families opportunities including family educational activities, professional development events, share a bus rental etc.). It might be beneficial to network and discuss these ideas as a starting point to discover 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. Awards may be used to fund accreditation costs associated with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, and other accreditation types.

Health and Safety – Adequate provision for the health and safety needs of the children is essential to creating a high-quality learning environment. Programs are required to meet basic health and safety guidelines as outlined in the child care regulations appropriate to the facility type. Building on the basics, programs are encouraged to use STARS financial awards to support and implement best practices in health and safety. Programs have begun to use the Keystone STARS awards to purchase health consultation. Longitudinal evidence is mounting to demonstrate that child care health consultation is an effective means to improve early childhood environments and the health of children in those settings. Health consultation can improve provider knowledge; elicit behavior changes such as more effective hand washing; assist in recommending and implementing policy and environmental changes. Early learning environments are ideal settings to teach children about healthy behaviors that will help them lead healthier lives. For suggestions on how to choose a health consultant visit the Healthy Child Care PA portion of the ECELS website for the PDF pamphlet titled “How to Choose and Use a Child Care Health Consultant”. Website: <http://www.ecels-healthychildcarepa.org/professional-development-training/self-learning-modules/item/228-choose-and-use-a-child-care-health-consultant-self-learning-module>.

Another area of health consultation can include playground audits. Programs might want to review the status of their playground protective surface covering and use awards as part of implementing a long term solution. More information about this specific regulation can be found at <http://www.pabulletin.com/secure/data/vol39/39->

[19/840.html](#). Some programs are updating or enhancing their security and access systems to improve safety for children, families and staff.

Healthy & Green – The PA ECE Healthy & Green Initiative encourages early learning programs in Pennsylvania to go beyond what is required by regulation and to implement additional research-based, best practices to further assure the health and safety of Pennsylvania’s children. OCDEL has developed the companion [PA Reference Pages for Eco-Healthy Child Care](#) (found on the PA Key website) to assist programs in understanding what is required for each of the 16 Eco-Healthy Child Care® environmental health categories. These reference pages also offer a summary of the Caring for Our Children: National Health & Safety Performance Standards (3rd Edition) that relate to each environmental health category.

Providers may supplement continued growth of Healthy and Green efforts using grant awards. More information about the Healthy and Green Initiative is on the PA Key website at http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Healthy_Green

If there are questions about planning the use of STARS financial awards or allowable expenses, please contact your Regional Key.