

Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS Quality Rating System in Child Care Settings December 2006

Executive Summary

Child care in Pennsylvania serves more than 300,000 children, and is the largest program helping to prepare Pennsylvania's young children for school. Recognizing the importance of quality early learning to a child's future success in school and in life, Pennsylvania commissioned a study in 2002 to evaluate the quality of early care and education in Pennsylvania and create a baseline for upcoming quality improvement initiatives. Results showed that there was a steady decline in quality in early care settings since the mid-1990's and that the quality in most child care settings was adequate at best. Also in 2002, Pennsylvania began a pilot of the Keystone STARS Quality Rating System to rate the quality of early care programs and to provide child care programs with targeted financial assistance, professional development, and other supports in order to improve quality. The primary purpose of this study is to determine if the Keystone STARS program is improving quality in participating child care programs and to determine if Keystone STARS is reversing the decline of quality in child care in Pennsylvania that was so evident in the late 1990's.

Data were collected from 356 child care centers, 81 group child day care homes, and 135 family child day care homes, for a total of 572 sites. Programs were assessed using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) for center-based programs or the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS) for home-based programs. The scales score a variety of items on a 1-7 rating with: 1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal, 5 = good, and 7 = excellent. These instruments are widely used in the early childhood field to determine the quality of early learning programs for research and program improvement (www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers/).

Results clearly indicate that Keystone STARS helps child care programs improve their overall quality. Further, Keystone STARS is reversing the negative trend in child care quality that was evident in the late 1990's. Today, child care programs are operating at a much higher quality level because of the Keystone STARS program. Results also reinforced the findings of the 2002 study that use of a defined curriculum and teachers with college degrees positively affect quality in early care and education programs.

Major Findings:

- **There is sufficient evidence to support the Keystone STARS Quality Rating System as a reliable indicator of quality.** Both centers and home-based child care practitioners with higher STAR ratings had consistently higher scores on the Environmental Rating Scales (ERS). Progression through the STARS system appears to be a reliable predictor of attaining higher quality at the sites.
- **Child care quality is improving.** Between 1996 (4.50) and 2002 (3.90), the average ERS scores dropped significantly, indicating a declining trend in quality. The average ERS scores for child care centers assessed in 2006 for sites not participating in STARS (3.94) indicate that the trend of declining quality in child care has been reversed.

- **Keystone STARS continues to improve quality in child care centers.** Child care centers participating in Keystone STARS in 2006 have higher quality than the Pennsylvania average for child care centers and are showing higher quality now than at the inception of the STARS program. Overall ERS scores range from 4.11 for child care centers at Start with STARS to 5.42 for STAR 4 programs.
- Child care centers at the STAR 3 and STAR 4 levels have significantly higher Overall ECERS scores than centers not enrolled in the Keystone STARS system or at the Start with STARS level.
- Child care centers at the STAR 4 level have consistently higher scores on all subscales of the ECERS than all other child care centers.
- **Programs with a defined curriculum have higher quality.** Child care centers with a defined curriculum scored significantly higher on the Overall ECERS score. Family child care practitioners with a defined curriculum also scored significantly higher on the Overall FDCRS score.
- **Teachers with college degrees provide higher quality early education and care.** Both child care centers and family child care homes, regardless of STAR level, had significantly higher scores on the ERS when the teacher had at least an Associate's Degree.
- Teachers with at least five years of experience had significantly higher ERS scores than those with less experience.
- Family child care practitioners with more than 20 years experience had higher scores on the FDCRS in all areas except Basic Care.
- Family child care practitioners who met at least minimum professional development requirements had significantly higher Overall FDCRS scores.

Keystone STARS is increasing access to quality early learning experiences for young children in the Commonwealth. Findings from this evaluation suggest that the quality improvements in part may be attributed to Keystone STARS' emphasis on staff education; staff participation in ongoing professional development; and use of a curriculum in addition to the program's general focus on helping practitioners support children's early learning and development. Keystone STARS is keeping Pennsylvania's Promise for Children by helping Pennsylvania's families and communities provide for, protect, nurture, and teach our young children.