

Testimony on
Keystone Stars and Quality Early Learning Programs

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Good morning Representative Bishop, Representative Rubley, Committee members and staff. It is an honor to be here today and thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the Keystone STARS program and its positive impact on the quality early learning experiences for young children and how the program has improved the quality of after-care services. This work is important. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Ben Bernanke recently told a group of business leaders that:

“Although education and the acquisition of skills is a lifelong process, starting early in life is crucial. Recent research—some sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis in collaboration with the University of Minnesota—has documented the high returns that early childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment and in lower rates of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency.”

The cost of our program in Fiscal Year 06-07 was about \$300 per child. This is a modest, cost effective investment in the commonwealth’s children.

One of Governor Rendell’s top priorities is to provide children with opportunities for high quality early learning experiences that foster success in school and in life. An important step in achieving this goal was when the Department of Public Welfare created the Office of Child Development in September of 2004 and the subsequent step in December 2006 to house the office in both the Departments of Welfare and Education – renaming it the Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

The office supports an integrated approach to pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, early intervention, Head Start, early education and certified after school programs and initiatives. This office sponsors Keystone STARS, which is a quality improvement system in which all early learning programs and practitioners are encouraged and supported to improve program quality and the learning environment for young children. We focus on improving early childhood programs and supporting the improved education, professionalism and competence of the practitioners who teach our young children.

Keystone STARS and our approach to integrated services have led us to develop what we call “PA Early Learning Keys to Quality”, a program which provides a single point of contact for providers around program quality improvement and professional development opportunities. The commonwealth is divided into six regional resource centers, also known as Keys. There is also a centralized, statewide Key. The Keys focus on the development and coordination of local and regional resources, the promotion of quality programming, and positive outcomes for children.

Keystone STARS is a voluntary, quality improvement program, which is an important component of our multi-faceted early learning system. The acronym “STARS” stands for Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Support (STARS). The program provides resources to assist in improving quality, recognizes quality early learning and school age programs, establishes criteria for performance, provides financial incentives to programs so they can continue to improve and maintain quality standards, and uses a quality rating system from one to four stars for programs that meet the standards. The Keystone STARS standards are research - based quality indicators. Child care programs which are in full compliance with the certification regulations may voluntarily participate in the program. These regulations provide for health and safety standards and the foundation of a quality program. The Keystone STARS program includes early learning programs such as certified child care and after school programs, as well as Head Start. .

Keystone STARS links parents to a framework for identifying quality early learning and school age programs that will help their children succeed in school and in life. The STAR levels allow parents to easily identify a quality program, specifically in the areas of staff qualifications and professional development, learning environment, parent and community partnerships, and leadership and management practices. Continued strong stakeholder participation from parents, providers,

practitioners and community members remains critical to the success of the Keystone STARS.

Prior to the development of PA Early Learning Keys to Quality, resources were administered by many agencies through multiple programs, which fragmented the positive impact in the early learning system. Providers, practitioners, and parents had to contact more than one agency to obtain the information and services they needed. This multi-step process was not family or provider-friendly. Keystone STARS began in 2002 and the streamlining of the delivery of services was accomplished through the development of the Regional Keys. There are currently 14 states with approaches similar to our Keystone STARS model with 25 more exploring this successful method of improving early learning settings.

Pennsylvania is quickly becoming a model program for the nation with 62 percent of center-based programs participating as of July 31, 2007. Pennsylvania has the largest voluntary enrollment in the nation in our program. We know that other states are interested in implementing a similar program due to the frequent calls and requests for assistance we receive regarding the structure of Keystone STARS.

In order to obtain an objective review of the Keystone STARS program, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center of Keystone STARS completed an evaluation of the program in 2006. This study examined whether the Keystone STARS program is improving quality in participating child care programs. In addition, the study was to determine if Keystone STARS is reversing the decline of quality in child care in Pennsylvania that was evident in the late 1990's. Results indicate that Keystone STARS both improves overall quality in child care programs and is in fact reversing the negative trend. Keystone STARS is increasing access to quality early learning experiences for young children in Pennsylvania. Findings suggest that the quality improvements may be attributed to Keystone STARS'

emphasis on staff education, staff participation in ongoing professional development, and the use of a curriculum.

Together we can create quality early learning programs for our children. Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you have at this time.