

Guide to Pennsylvania's Early Care & Learning System

Types of Early Care & Education Sites & Programs

Family Child Care Home: A child care facility located in a caregiver's home in which 4–6 children who are not related to the operator receive care. A family child care home must have a certificate of compliance ("license") from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) in order to legally operate.

Group Child Care Home: A child care facility in which 7–12 children of various ages or in which 7–15 children from 4th grade through 15 years of age who are not related to the operator receive child care. A group child care home must have a certificate of compliance ("license") from DHS in order to legally operate.

Child Care Center: A child care facility that serves more than 7 children not related to the operator. A child care center must have a certificate of compliance ("license") from DHS in order to legally operate.

Private Academic Schools: Formerly known as nursery schools, this type of preschool site provides education to children ages 3-5. Private academic schools are licensed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE).

School District Pre-Kindergarten: Some public school districts offer district-based preschool programs for at-risk children ages 3-4. Programming is determined locally.

Head Start/Early Head Start: Head Start is a federally funded program that provides comprehensive early care and education services to low-income families. Early Head Start serves pregnant women, and children at birth through age 3; while Head Start serves children ages 3–5.

Child Care Works: This program provides funding to eligible low-income families to cover childcare costs. Funds are provided by both the federal and state government.

PA Pre-K Counts: This state program provides funding for eligible at-risk children at least 3-4 years old to attend pre-kindergarten programs in schools, child care centers, and preschools. PA Pre-K Counts and Child Care Works funds can be accessed together to provide wrap around services for low-income families.

Licensing and Quality Standards

Licensing: In Pennsylvania, DHS is responsible for certifying family and group child care homes, as well as child care centers, while PDE is responsible for licensing and overseeing private academic schools and school district pre-kindergarten programs.

Early Learning Standards: Several agencies and partners in Pennsylvania came together to develop evidence-based Learning Standards for Early Childhood Education in 2004. The standards are regularly updated and are aligned with Pennsylvania's K-3 Learning Standards.

Keystone STARS: States across the country use Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to assess and communicate the level of quality in ECE and school-age child care programs. In Pennsylvania, that system is called Keystone STARS (Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Support). Designations range from STAR 1 through STAR 4. Keystone STARS supports sites in improving program quality.

Statewide Systems, Partnerships & Resources

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL): This state government office is a collaboration between DHS and PDE and focuses on improving Pennsylvania's early childhood education systems.

Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs): Overseen by OCDEL, ELRCs are local hubs for child care information and resources across Pennsylvania. Among other things, ELRCs oversee Child Care Works subsidies and employ quality coaches to help ECE sites improve their Keystone STARS ratings.

The Pennsylvania Key: Created in 2007 by OCDEL, The Pennsylvania Key is a statewide source of information for ECE professionals and a helpful hub for a variety of stakeholders seeking information about ECE systems in Pennsylvania.