

# Vermont STARS



for brighter  
child care  
decisions

## Afterschool Child Care Programs

September 2025

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1 (800) 649-2642 Option 8

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## **Part 1: Introduction to STARS**

# Welcome to STARS!

By participating in STARS, you're recognizing the great work your program already does and showing a commitment to professionalism and quality child care. STARS provides a framework to support you as a reflective educator and leader.

This guide helps you through each step of the process, with tools and tips to make it simple. STARS is not about checking boxes. It's about meaningful improvements that benefit your program, your staff, and the children and families you serve. Whether you're just getting started or are deep into your journey, we're here to support you.

For information and to reach the STARS team visit the [STARS website](#).  
or contact [STARS@Vermont.gov](mailto:STARS@Vermont.gov) or call 1-800-649-2642, option 8.

## What is STARS?

STARS stands for **STep Ahead Recognition System**. STARS is Vermont's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS), administered by the Child Development Division (CDD).

STARS is a program for all Vermont early childhood and afterschool programs licensed and in good regulatory standing with CDD. It helps programs see their strengths and pinpoint ways to keep getting better.

### STARS helps programs:

- Reflect on current practices
- Celebrate strengths
- Identify areas for growth
- Make a plan to improve
- Collaborate as a team
- Demonstrate commitment to quality

# How STARS Works

STARS is flexible and designed to meet programs where they are.

Each level of STARS shows a strengthening commitment to quality. Each STARS level builds on the one before it. When your program meets the standards at one level, it helps you do even more to support children's health, happiness, and learning at the next level. At every level, your program not only meets the standards but also works on goals through a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan.

Don't worry if you don't understand some terms below — we'll define and explain each later in the guide.

- **Level 1:** All registered and licensed programs in Vermont that follow child care licensing regulations are automatically enrolled in STARS at **Level 1**.
- **Level 2:** Complete a **self study**, reflect on your program's strengths and areas to grow, and create a **Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plan**.
- **Level 3: Put your CQI Plan into action**, complete an unscored program assessment, and meet standards in three Elements of Quality.
- **Level 4: Meet higher standards and strengthen your practices** by continuing your CQI work and participate in a scored program assessment completed by SPARQS.
- **Level 5:** Demonstrate **the highest level of program quality** through external program assessment results and your deep, ongoing commitment to quality improvement.

You can apply directly for the level your program is ready for. Wherever your program starts, your commitment to growth makes a difference for children and families. STARS meets you where you are and grows with you over time.

Sharing your STARS level publicly shows families and your community that you're dedicated to providing high-quality afterschool and summer programming. It helps families make informed decisions when choosing a program. Programs also receive financial bonuses for moving up in STARS.

## Moving Up or Renewing STARS

This guide will help you identify the STARS level that is the best match for where your program is now, what you'll need to achieve that level, and the support available to help you reach it.

For each level, you will submit an application, evidence, and a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plan. You will earn a STARS Level certificate for a successful application. (If your application doesn't work out the first time, don't stress. We'll help you figure out the next steps and connect you with the support you need to move forward.)

Your **STARS Level certificate is valid for three years**. Each year, you'll check in with a short **annual update** to share your progress. If you're ready to move up to the next level in less than three years, you can.

## **Program Organization Changes and STARS Level Transfers**

If your program receives a new license number because of a move to a new location or because of a change in program type, such as changing from a registered home to a licensed family child care program, your STARS rating will be transferred to the new license number. If your program is sold to a new owner or organization, the STARS level under the previous owner will be transferred for 120 days. At the end of the 90-day period, the new program leader must submit a STARS portfolio reflecting those changes. If an organization expands and opens new programs under the same administration, each new program must apply individually to STARS. Each program must have its own CQI plan with evidence that is specific to the individual program.

## **Quality and Capacity Incentive Payments (QCIP)**

Each time your program's STARS application is processed and accepted by the STARS team, you will receive a STARS bonus through the state's Quality and Capacity Incentive Program (QCIP). These bonuses are calculated based on your program type, number of children enrolled, and STARS level. You can find more information about the STARS bonuses on the [QCIP website](#).

## **CDD STARS Team: Your Program Contact**

The [CDD STARS Team](#) is your go-to contact for questions about your STARS application, documentation, or current level—or if you need clarification on anything in this guide.

You can contact the STARS Team at [STARS@vermont.gov](mailto:STARS@vermont.gov) or 800-649-2642 (option 8).

The Child Development Division (CDD) works with afterschool providers, early childhood educators, families, and communities to expand access to high-quality, equitable services for young children in Vermont. Learn more at the [CDD website](#).

## **SPARQS: Your Support Hub**

[SPARQS](#) (**System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports**) is your go-to partner for coaching, tools, and hands-on support—whether you're in STARS already or just exploring your next steps.

Through SPARQS, you can access **free**:

- Quality coaching and support
- STARS program assessments
- Self-directed resources at [SharedServicesVT.org](https://www.sharedservicesvt.org)

SPARQS supports are free for all regulated programs, funded by CDD and administered by VTAEYC and Vermont Afterschool (VTA). Learn more at the [SPARQS](#) site.

## How to Use this Guide

This guide is here to help you along the way. Whether you're just getting started or aiming for five stars, this guide will help you stay on track and achieve your goals.

### Learn the Basics

Keep reading **Part 1: Introduction to STARS** to learn about the three Elements of Quality and six Knowledge Areas, giving you an overview of the standards for each STARS level. You will also learn about Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and collecting and sharing evidence that shows how your program meets level standards.

### Find Your Level Section

Go to **Part 2: Level Sections** and look for the section that matches your desired STARS level.

### Understand the Level Standards

At each level, you'll complete a program self-study, meet the Elements of Quality, and learn what evidence your program needs to provide.

### Follow the Instructions

Each level section outlines what's required, how to achieve the standard, and what evidence to share.

### Use the Supports

We're here for you! This guide includes our links to coaching, examples, templates, and tools. [SPARQS](#) quality support specialists and program assessors offer in-person resources. Afterschool programs request assessments through the SPARQS portal, but coaching requests should be emailed directly to Vermont Afterschool at [tricia@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:tricia@vermontafterschool.org).

Have questions about your application or STARS level? Contact the CDD STARS Team at [STARS@vermont.gov](mailto:STARS@vermont.gov) or 800-649-2642 (option 8).



## **Elements of Quality and Knowledge Areas**

# Elements of Quality

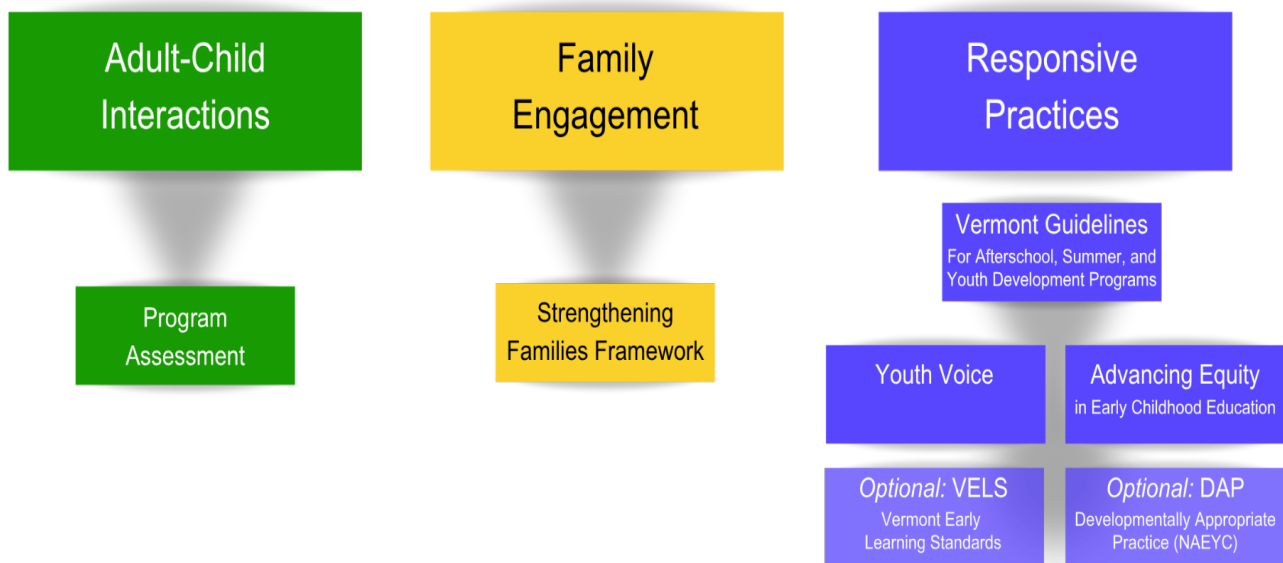
What does your program staff need to know to support families and provide the best outcomes for youth? STARS identified three categories for these need-to-knows and each one is an Element of Quality. These elements are the heart of STARS and reflect what matters most for youth, families, and the educators who care for them. Together, these elements support better outcomes for youth throughout their lives.

**The three Elements of Quality are Adult-Youth Interactions, Family Engagement, and Responsive Practices.**

Higher STARS levels have higher standards for how you apply what you know within each element of quality. **There are six Knowledge Areas** selected by STARS for their support of high-quality teaching and caregiving. STARS provides tools and resources to help assess and build your knowledge in these areas.

**Visual learners:** This guide color-codes the three different Elements of Quality, and the Knowledge Areas that support each element of quality.

**Figure 1: The Three Elements of Quality and Knowledge Areas**



This graphic shows how each knowledge area corresponds to each element of quality. To meet standards for Adult-Child Interactions, you'll need to become familiar with program assessments. Standards for Family Engagement require knowledge about the Strengthening Families Framework, and standards for Responsive Practices require

knowledge about Vermont early learning standards (VELS), developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and youth observation.

## Element of Quality: **Adult-Youth Interactions**

These are positive, caring relationships between adults and youth that support social, emotional, and intellectual growth. They're the foundation of the learning process and overall development of youth.

## Knowledge Area: **Program Assessment**

Learn about outside assessments and how they help programs improve. Adult-Youth Interactions are supported by **program assessment tools like the Program Quality Assessment (PQA)**. Most programs begin with the School-Age PQA, designed for children in grades K–6. Programs serving youth in grades 4–12 may use the Youth PQA (YPQA), while those ready to focus on social-emotional development may find the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) PQA a better fit. When you schedule your site visit with Vermont Afterschool, you'll work together to determine which assessment best supports your program.

**Resource:** [Program Quality Assessment](#)

### **What is Program Quality Assessment (PQA)?**

PQA is a nationally recognized tool developed by the Weikart Center to measure what matters most in youth programs: safe, supportive, and engaging experiences for youth and teens.

But PQA is more than a measurement tool. It provides clear, research-based descriptions of effective practices that foster strong relationships, skill-building opportunities, and youth engagement. These descriptions create a shared language for afterschool staff working to improve program quality. PQA was chosen because it works across diverse program models, ages, and settings. With PQA guiding continuous improvement, programs can focus on creating meaningful experiences that help youth thrive.

From: [Vermont Afterschool: Professionals & Program Resources](#)

## Element of Quality: **Family Engagement**

When families feel supported, youth are more likely to thrive. Programs work together with families to build strong, respectful partnerships. These connections celebrate each family's unique culture and experiences and help support every youth's development.

### Knowledge Area: **Strengthening Families Framework**

This Element of Quality is about how your program welcomes and engages families while promoting the five protective factors from the Strengthening Families Framework. The Strengthening Families Self-Assessment will show you how your program currently supports family engagement and offer ideas to strengthen those everyday practices.

- **Resource:** [Community--Based Program Self-Assessment](#)
- **Resource:** [Strengthening Families Action Plan Template](#)

#### **What are the five protective factors in the Strengthening Families Framework?**

**Parental resilience • Social connections • Knowledge of parenting and youth development • Concrete support in times of need • Social and emotional competence of youth**

The Strengthening Families framework is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance youth development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. At its heart, Strengthening Families is about changing how service providers interact with families to support them in building protective factors. *From:* [Strengthening Families](#).

## Element of Quality: **Responsive Practices**

Youth thrive in environments where differences are honored and they are seen, valued, and feel like they belong. Educators who use responsive practices intentionally adjust their approach to reflect each youth's age, background, language, identity, and learning needs. These practices create inclusive environments where differences are honored and all youth are seen, valued, and feel like they belong. The resources associated with each knowledge area help educators make thoughtful, informed choices that support each youth's growth.

### **Knowledge Area: Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Development Programs**

The Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Programs outline a shared vision for quality across out-of-school time settings, offering clear benchmarks to help programs support positive outcomes for youth.

**Resource:** [Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer and Youth Development](#)

### **Knowledge Area: Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)**

The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) highlight key areas of development and learning for youth in Vermont.

- **Resource:** [Vermont Early Learning Standards](#)

### **Knowledge Area: Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)**

Use teaching strategies that match youth's ages, needs, and personalities. Help each youth learn and grow in ways that are just right for them.

- **Resource:** [Developmentally Appropriate Practice \(DAP\) Position Statement | NAEYC](#)

## Knowledge Area: Youth Voice

Youth Voice gives young people a chance to share their experiences, helping providers support growth, set goals, and celebrate program strengths.

### Resources:

- [STARS Youth Survey for Afterschool Programs](#)
- [STARS Child Observation Guidance](#)
- [STARS Child Observation Template](#)

## Knowledge Area: Advancing Equity in Afterschool Programs

Create classrooms that are welcoming, respectful, and inclusive of all youth and families.

- **Resource:** [National Afterschool Association's Core Knowledge Skills & Competencies](#)

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## **Building Your Application**

## **Parts of Your STARS Application**

Your STARS application has two key parts:

### **Meeting Standards with Evidence**

For each level, you'll provide evidence that shows how your program meets the standards. This includes things like staff qualifications, use of assessments, and how you support youth development and learning. In many cases, meeting a standard—like conducting an assessment or observing youth—can also give you information that helps you set goals for improvement.

### **Your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan**

The second part of your application is your CQI Plan. This is where you'll identify goals to help your program grow, based on what you've learned through your self-assessment and day-to-day experience.

## Evidence

When you submit your application, you'll need to show how your program meets the STARS standards for your chosen level. The way to do that is **by sharing evidence of your program's work and progress.**

Your CQI Plan shows where your program is going, and how you're growing over time. **Evidence shows where your program is now.** That's why it's important to show not just that you meet STARS standards, but how your program puts those standards into practice.

## How to Use Evidence in Your STARS Application

**Evidence is real examples of the quality practices already happening in your program.** It gives a clear picture of how your team is meeting the STARS standards.

There are some specific evidence requirements for each STARS level. These standards cover things like assessments, professional development, and your CQI process. We will share these in each level section.

STARS recognizes that every program is unique. If your team has developed its own way of assessing youth growth and learning, you are encouraged to share it. **There is flexibility in how you show quality: what matters most is that your evidence clearly connects to the standard.**

Choose evidence that shows how your program meets each standard. You don't need to include every type of evidence listed in the STARS level section—just enough to clearly show your progress. One piece of evidence can be used for more than one standard. **If it is, be sure to upload it separately for each standard it supports.** Before you upload, double-check that any private details—like names or birth dates—are covered up. You can cover up private information by highlighting it in black, like this:  
Redacted Text

## Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

**Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)** is an ongoing practice that helps your program reflect, adapt, and improve—so you can better support youth, families, and staff over time.

Your **CQI Plan** is where your ideas take shape. It's a chance to think through your goals and the objectives and figure out how to get there.

## The CQI Process

At every STARS level, **you will do a self-study—a simple rubric-based reflection on strengths and growth areas—to see how your program meets that level’s standards for knowledge about the three Elements of Quality.** That will give you a sense of what you’re doing well and where your program has knowledge gaps. **You’ll set goals to build knowledge where your program has gaps.**

You’ll **set a goal for each Element of Quality, and objectives to help you reach your goals.** Then you’ll complete what’s called a PDSA Cycle as follows: plan how to achieve that objective; implement your plan; study whether your plan was effective; and decide whether to keep going, change your plan, or try something else. You’ll learn about the PDSA Cycle over the next few pages.

Each STARS certificate cycle is three years. You may need a few months, a year, or all three to achieve a new goal. You’ll also send annual updates to STARS, and you can use those to share how you’re progressing toward your goals, what you’ve learned, and any changes you’ve made.

## Your Application and Annual Update

Each STARS level section will take you through what you need to submit to apply for that level.

Every three years, or when you're applying for or renewing a STARS level certificate:

- You will submit your CQI Plan, a completed self-study, and evidence for how your program meets the standards through the [STARS Application Portal](#).

Every non-renewal year, you will submit your annual update by your application anniversary:

- You will submit your current CQI Plan and update through the [STARS Annual Update Portal / Annual Update Form](#)

## Goals and Objectives

In your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plan, you need to set clear goals and objectives that support your program's growth. These should be based on what you've learned from your self-study.

Your program needs to set at least one goal for each Element of Quality during every three-year STARS certificate cycle.

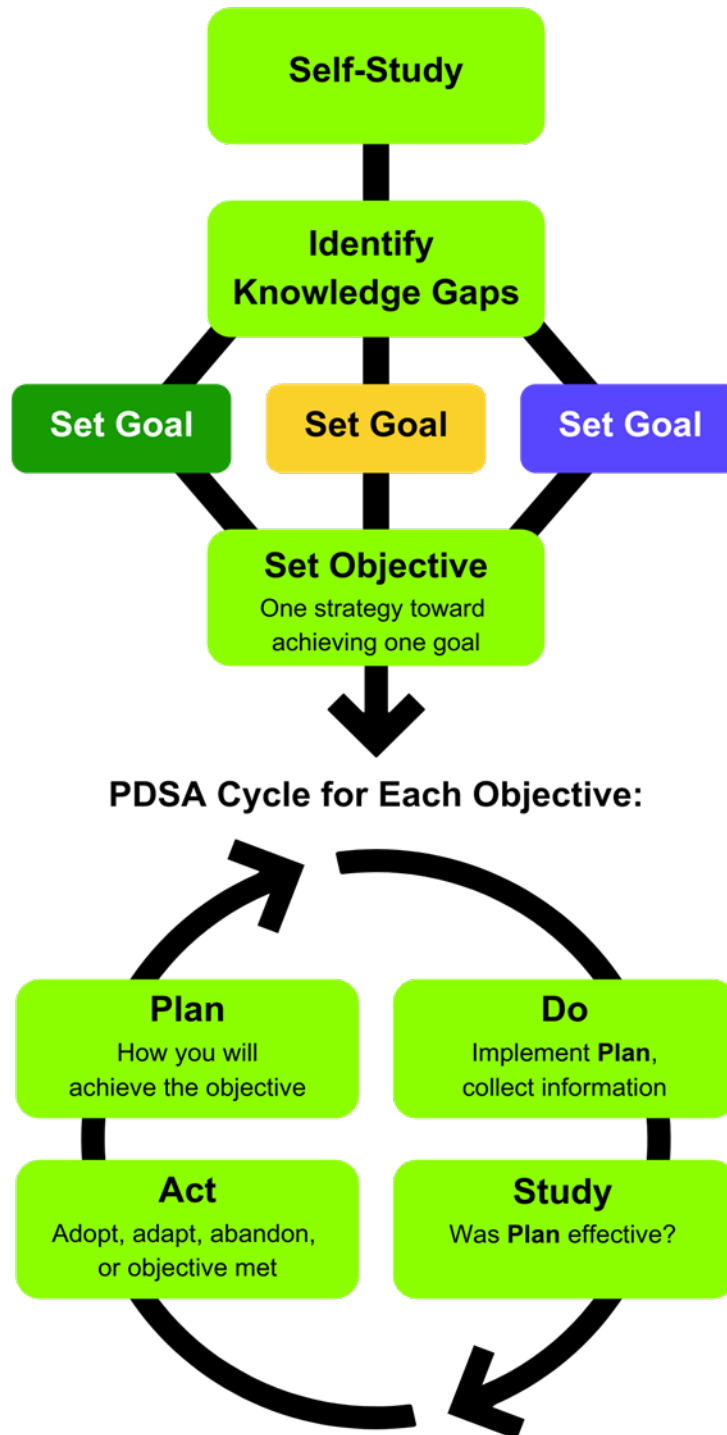
**Goals** describe the big-picture changes you want to make.

For example: "Increase engagement opportunities for families and caregivers in the program."

**Objectives** are the specific, measurable steps you will take to reach your goal.

For example: "Plan and host two family events per year."

Figure 2. Continuous Quality Improvement Workflow Diagram



This graphic shows Continuous Quality Improvement workflow: self-study, identify knowledge gaps, set a goal for each Element of Quality, set an objective for each goal, and complete a PDSA cycle for each objective.

# PDSA Cycle (Plan, Do, Study, Act)

Once you have your objective, you will start a PDSA Cycle (Plan, Do, Study, Act).

Note that this will take time. When you start your CQI Plan, you need to fill out only the Plan and Do parts of your PDSA Cycle for any new objective. Once you've had a chance to collect information about how your strategy is going, you can move on to Study and Act. You'll share this with STARS in your annual updates or your next renewal cycle application. The PDSA cycle is formatted for left-to-right reading here and in the CQI Plan Template.

**Table 1: Plan, Do, Study, Act Prompts**

<b>Plan</b>	<b>Do</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Who will be involved?</li> <li>● What are staff roles and tasks?</li> <li>● How will you prepare for your strategy?</li> <li>● What is the timeframe/due date?</li> <li>● How will you measure success?</li> <li>● Who will collect data to measure?</li> <li>● What evidence will show progress and success?</li> <li>● How will you gather that evidence?</li> <li>● Predict your expected outcome!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Implement your strategy</li> <li>● Collect data</li> <li>● Document problems and unexpected observations</li> </ul>
<b>Study</b>	<b>Act</b>
<p>Use the measurement identified in <b>Plan</b> and data collected from <b>Do</b> to reflect on the effectiveness of your strategy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What does the data tell you?</li> <li>● What did you learn?</li> <li>● Are you closer to meeting your objective and goal?</li> <li>● Did you identify ways to improve your strategy?</li> <li>● How does what you learned inform your next step?</li> </ul>	<p>Use the data you collected to decide what to do next:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adopt this strategy into your program</li> <li>● Adapt the strategy based on your data and other feedback</li> <li>● Abandon this strategy if it doesn't meet your objective and try something else</li> <li>● Objective met: move on!</li> </ul>

# Building Your CQI Plan

**Your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plan is your roadmap for reaching your goals.** Based on what you learned in your self-study, you will develop at least one goal for each Element of Quality, objectives for meeting each goal, and a clear PDSA cycle for each objective.

You'll use this template to build your plan: [STARS CQI Plan Template](#)

There is also a copy of the CQI Plan Template in the Appendix.

For examples, you can look at the sample plans at each STARS level. First, you will fill in your goals, like this:

**Table 2. STARS CQI Examples of Goals**

<b>Adult-Youth Interactions</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Responsive Practices</b>
<b>Goal 1.</b> Increase practices that offer youth opportunities to practice skill building as identified in the Supportive Environment domain of the PQA.	<b>Goal 1.</b> Regularly engage families as leaders who provide feedback to help shape the program.	<b>Goal 1.</b> Use youth voice to inform weekly lesson plans and activities

Next, you will fill in your objective for each goal—the specific strategy you will implement to move toward your goal—and outline your objective strategy in the Plan and Do sections of your PDSA blocks.

## SMARTIE

Every plan will look a little different, but strong plans include the same elements. You can make sure your CQI Plan includes these using the acronym SMARTIE.

**Table 3: SMARTIE Acronym and Description**

<b>SMARTIE Element</b>	<b>What It Means</b>
<b>Specific</b>	State exactly what you want to accomplish
<b>Measurable</b>	A clear definition of success
<b>Achievable</b>	Challenging, but realistic and reasonable
<b>Relevant</b>	Tied to program goals and outcomes
<b>Time-Bound</b>	Has a clear end date and checkpoints
<b>Inclusive</b>	Reflects youth culture, customs, rituals, and routines
<b>Equitable</b>	Keeps in mind fairness, justice, systemic inequities, and barriers

SMARTIE is useful as you check through your CQI Plan. For each goal and objective, you can ask yourself, “Is it **S**pecific? Is it **M**easurable?” — and so on. If you’re missing a part of your plan, using SMARTIE as a checklist will help you find it and remember to include it.

## Fill In the Blanks

One way to make sure your CQI Plan accurately shares your goals, objectives, and PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle is to fill in the blanks, Mad Libs-style. Remember, we'll share more details in each STARS Level section, but here are examples of a goal with the blanks, and then filled in on the next page, to help make the process more accessible.

In this first table, the goal is to Increase Supportive Environment practices, but the Objective and Plan part of the PDSA cycle are not yet filled in. Instead, you see Mad Libs-style suggestions for SMARTIE elements to help shape and strengthen your details:

**Table 4: PDSA Cycle Prompts**

<b>Goal:</b> Increase Supportive Environment practices	
<b>Objective:</b> (who will facilitate) will (specific and strategic action) for (who is involved) by (timeframe) to (desired outcome).	<b>Element of Quality:</b> Adult-Child Interactions
<b>Plan:</b> (name) will prepare (specific action) by (timeframe). We can demonstrate effectiveness by (measurement) via (form of evidence).	<b>Do:</b> (staff name) will manage data collection. We predict our (specific action from above) will result in (expected outcome).
<b>Study:</b>	<b>Act:</b>

Here's what that example plan could look like with the blanks filled in with SMARTIE elements:

**Table 5: Example PDSA Cycle**

<b>Goal:</b> Increase Supportive Environment practices	
<b>Objective:</b> Program staff will regularly ask 2-5 open-ended questions during activity time as a part of daily practice for youth in our program by January 1 to deepen adult-child relationships and create a sense of belonging.	<b>Element of Quality:</b> Adult-Child Interactions
<b>Plan:</b> Classroom staff will prepare a list of questions by November 1. We can demonstrate effectiveness by the number of questions asked daily via video observations of activities.	<b>Do:</b> Kerry will manage data collection. We predict our open-ended questions will result in more engagement.
<b>Study:</b>	<b>Act:</b>

Remember: when building your plan, you'll complete the **Plan** and **Do** sections first. The data and results you collect during the **Do** phase are what you'll use to complete the **Study** and **Act** sections. You can fill in those sections of your CQI Plan when you submit your annual update.

## Putting Your Plan into Action

Your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan should explain what steps your program will take to reach each goal and objective. It should also describe how you will check to see if those steps are working. The actions you choose should be based on best practices in afterschool programs and what you've learned through your own experience.

## Tracking Your Progress

Your program should have a simple plan to keep track of your CQI work: this means regularly collecting and reviewing information to see how things are going. The information you gather will show what's working, what needs to change, and how to move forward. You may already have tools or methods you use that can help with this, or you can contact STARS or your Vermont Afterschool SPARQS Quality Support Specialist to help.

## Your Application and Annual Update

Each STARS level section will take you through what you need to submit to apply for that level.

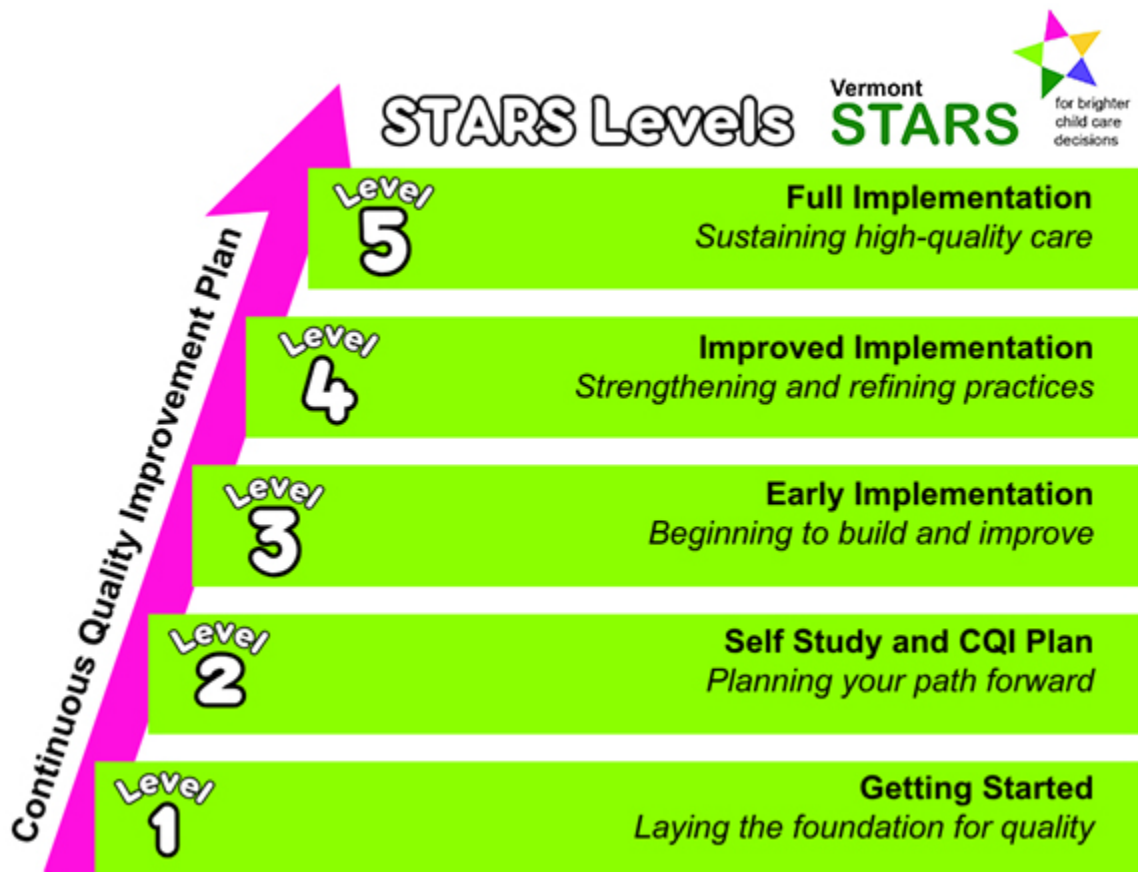
Every three years, or when you're applying for or renewing a STARS level certificate:

- You will submit your CQI Plan, a completed self-study, and evidence for how your program meets the standards through the [STARS Application Portal](#)

Every non-renewal year, you will submit your annual update by your application anniversary:

- You will submit your current CQI Plan and update through the [STARS Annual Update Portal / Annual Update Form](#)

Figure 3. STARS Levels Diagram



This graphic shows the five STARS levels, how the levels build from one to the next, and how a CQI Plan helps move a program through the levels. Each level standard is comprehensively addressed in each level section in Part 2.

## Ready to get started?

Find the desired STARS level for your program:

[Level 1](#): Page 32

[Level 2](#): Page 34

[Level 3](#): Page 47

[Level 4](#): Page 57

[Level 5](#): Page 67

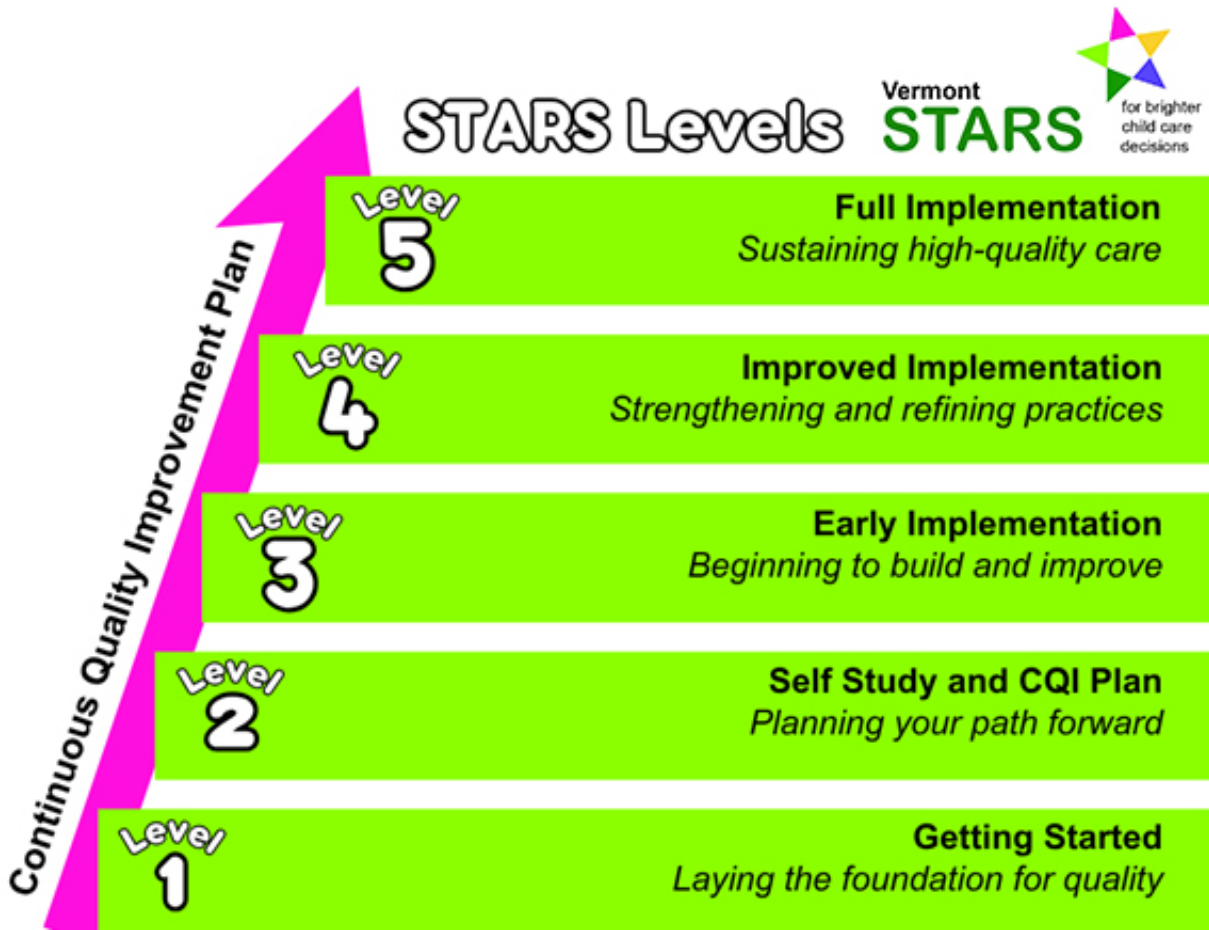
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## **Part 2: STARS Levels**

Figure 4. STARS Levels Diagram





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## **Level 1: Getting Started**

**What's in the Level 1 section:**

- **Level 1 Information**

Level  
**1**

## **STARS Level 1 Standards**

Level 1 is about laying the foundation for quality. Licensed programs in good regulatory standing automatically qualify for Level 1.

### **Level 1: Getting Started**

**All regulated programs in Vermont that follow child care licensing rules automatically qualify for Level 1.** At this level, programs are considered in good standing with the Vermont Child Care Licensing Regulations.

We know that taking the next step can feel like a big lift — more work, more things to do. But here's the thing: You're likely already doing so much that aligns with STARS. This process isn't about adding more to your plate; it's about recognizing what you already do, giving you language that highlights your strengths, and providing tools to support your growth.

At Level 1, you are starting to ask yourself some important questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to go?
- What supports can help us get there?

STARS helps you answer these questions. Programs at Level 1 are invited to begin their journey toward higher levels of recognition. The first step is self-study; that brings us to Level 2.



## **Level 2: Self-Study and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)**

**What's in the Level 2 section:**

- **Level 2 Standards**
- **Self-Study Process**
- **Building Your CQI Plan**
- **Program Assessments**
  - **Required Evidence**
- **Application Checklist**
- **Helpful Resources**

## **Level 2: Self-Study and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)**

Reaching STARS Level 2 is a big step toward strengthening your program. At this stage, you'll complete a [self-study](#): reflect on what your program does well, think about what could be improved, and make a plan. This plan is your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan, and it's based on what you learn during self-study. Level 2 is about learning and preparing.

When you apply for Level 2, provide evidence to show what you already know, identify any knowledge gaps, and include a clear CQI Plan for how you want to close those gaps. You don't need to meet every standard yet, but you do need to make a CQI Plan showing how you'll meet the standards over time. That's what Level 2 is all about.

## Level 2 STARS Level 2 Standards

Programs show foundational knowledge and awareness in each area:

- For family child care programs, the standard is knowledge in 50% of areas.
- For center-based programs, staff in each classroom should have combined knowledge in all the required areas.
- For afterschool programs, the combined knowledge of all the staff in the program have knowledge in each of the required areas.

**Table 6: Level 2 Standards**

Element of Quality	Required Knowledge
<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PQA</li> </ul>
<b>Family Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors</li> </ul>
<b>Responsive Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Development Programs</li> <li>• Youth Voice</li> <li>• Advanced Equity in Early Childhood Education and optionally:</li> <li>• Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)</li> <li>• Optionally: Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)</li> </ul>

## Level 2 Standards

Programs must complete a self-study that shows what their staff knows within the six Knowledge Areas that impact youth most.

For **family child care home programs**, the standard is knowledge in 50% of the areas.

For **afterschool programs**, the combined knowledge of all the staff in the program have knowledge in all the required areas. Combined knowledge refers to the shared understanding that emerges when team members contribute their individual strengths. While no one person needs to know everything, together the team's knowledge should fully cover the required content areas

### Adult-Youth Interactions

The required knowledge of Program Quality Assessment (PQA), determined by program setting.

### Family Engagement

The required knowledge of Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors, determined by program setting.

### Responsive Practices

The required knowledge of Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS), Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Youth Voice, and Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education, determined by program setting.

## Self-Study Process

Here is a link to the form you'll use to guide your self-study. It's called the [Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas form](#).

There is also a blank **Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas** form in the Appendix at the end of this guide.

The self-study is a standard to meet at each level. No matter which STARS level you're working toward — 2, 3, 4, or 5 — this is where everyone begins. The self-study helps you reflect on your strengths and growth areas and sets the foundation for your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan. You'll revisit and build on this plan as you move through each level.

The self-study isn't a journal or narrative: it uses a simple rubric to help capture what your program is actually doing. It's a tool designed to support reflection, not extra paperwork.

**Key Knowledge Areas:** You'll begin by reviewing the six key topic areas selected by STARS for their support of high-quality teaching and caregiving. These should look familiar from the Elements of Quality section of this guide (page 9). Each one is color coded to match the element it supports.

**Meeting Knowledge Areas:** Then, you'll look at the experience people in your program already have in each topic area. These are strengths you can build on. Remember, this step looks different for Public Pre-K, home-based, and center-based programs. For **family child care homes**, meeting the standard means having knowledge in at least 50% of the required areas. For **afterschool programs**, staff in the program need to collectively cover all required areas.

**Identifying Gaps:** Next, you'll figure out where your program has knowledge gaps. These are the areas you'll address in your CQI Plan.

**Using Evidence:** Documentation of experience you already have — or how you will gain the needed experience — likely counts as evidence. You don't need to meet the standards now: you need a plan for how you will meet them.

**Building Your CQI Plan:** Use your self-study to identify where your staff need to build more knowledge and create a CQI Plan with goals and strategies to fill those knowledge gaps. If your program doesn't currently meet a knowledge requirement, that's OK. The goal is to show how you *will* meet it over time.

## Building Your CQI Plan

Your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan is your roadmap for moving forward. It helps you turn what you learned in your self-study into clear goals and objectives for your program.

For each Element of Quality, you'll set at least one goal, define an objective (your strategy for reaching that goal), and map out your steps using the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle. In Part 1 of this guide, you'll find a full explanation of the CQI Planning process, including examples, a planning grid, and a fill in the blanks version to help you get started.

You'll use this template to build your plan: [STARS CQI Plan Template](#).

First, you will fill in your goals. Here's an example of a Level 2 goal for the **Family Engagement** Element of Quality:

Table 7: Level 2 Goal Example

<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Responsive Practices</b>
<b>Goal 1.</b>	<b>Goal 1.</b> For the program to implement daily practices that support at least 3 Protective Factors.	<b>Goal 1.</b>

Next, you'll add an objective for each goal — a specific action you'll take — and use the Plan and Do parts of the PDSA cycle to describe your first steps.

One way to make sure your CQI Plan clearly shares your **goals, objectives, and PDSA cycle** is to fill in the blanks using the SMARTIE framework.

That means your goals and objectives should be:

**Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable.**

For an example of filling in the blanks, see [Building Your CQI Plan](#) in Part 1.

Your plan should also explain how you'll **track progress**. This could include collecting family feedback, reviewing observation notes, or having regular team check-ins. Use tools you already know and trust — what matters most is having a clear, consistent way to check in on how things are going and make adjustments along the way.

Here's an example to guide you, with a potential Study question added in:

**Table 8: Level 2 CQI Plan Example**

<b>Goal:</b> For the program to implement daily practices that support at least 3 Protective Factors.	
<b>Objective:</b> For program staff to have a basic understanding of Strengthening Families.	<b>Element of Quality:</b> Family Engagement
<b>Plan:</b> At least one teacher from each classroom will sign up and attend an Intro to Strengthening Families training with Northern Lights by September 30.	<b>Do:</b> After attending the training, the team member(s) that attended will meet with their fellow classroom teachers to share what they learned.
<b>Study:</b> (Is more training needed so that all classroom staff feel knowledgeable to implement Strengthening Families?)	<b>Act:</b>

**If you need help with your CQI Plan, reach out to your SPARQS Quality Support Specialist through their [Assessment Request Portal](#)—they're here to support your success.**

## Program Assessments

A program assessment is a structured way to understand how your program is doing and where it can grow. It typically includes classroom observations and tools that:

- Highlight your program's strengths
- Identify areas for improvement
- Track progress toward your goals

At Level 2, you'll start getting to know the tools that STARS uses to understand and support quality in afterschool programs. These tools may sound technical, but they're based on something familiar: strong relationships, responsive teaching, and creating environments where children and adults thrive.

This isn't about passing a test: it's about giving you and your team time to explore how to best support children in your daily work, and building confidence. At Level 3, programs are encouraged to complete their own PQA assessment, then Vermont Afterschool completes them at levels 4 and 5. At Level 3, you can start with having a staff member at your program complete an internal PQA observation to get used to the tool and being observed.

**Self-paced training:** Register for the free online course [Introduction to Continuous Quality Improvement \(CQI\)](#), offered by the Weikart Center.

**Vermont Afterschool support:** Check the [Vermont Afterschool website](#) for upcoming PQA trainings, or request to work with a coach for individualized training for your program.

## **Program Quality Assessment (PQA)**

The Program Quality Assessment (PQA) is the required tool used in STARS to measure the quality of licensed afterschool programs. Vermont Afterschool's team of trained assessors conducts these assessments through SPARQS (System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports).

The PQA helps programs reflect on their strengths, receive feedback, and plan for continuous quality improvement. Depending on the ages you serve, your program may be assessed with one of the following tools:

- **School-age PQA (K–6)**
- **Youth PQA (Grades 4–12)**
- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL) PQA (K–12)**

You'll start learning about PQA at Level 2 so you can prepare ahead of time and use what you learn to support your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan.

All registered early childhood education and afterschool programs can schedule STARS program assessments through the [SPARQS Portal](#).

## Level 2 Required Evidence

Use the checklist below to identify what you need to include with your Level 2 application. This section outlines the required evidence for each topic area in your self-study. **Adult-Child Interactions** and **Responsive Practice** are both covered by the evidence listed in the first section below.

Not sure what counts as evidence? Reach out to Tricia Pawlik at Vermont Afterschool: [tricia@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:tricia@vermontafterschool.org).

### Adult-Child Interactions and Responsive Practice

- **Family child care program:** Completed Level 2 Self-Study showing knowledge, or plan to gain knowledge, in **at least three of the following areas**:
  - Program Assessment (PQA)
  - Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)
  - Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)
  - Youth Voice
  - Advancing Equity (DEI)
- **Afterschool program:** Completed Level 2 Self-Study showing knowledge, or plan to gain knowledge, in **all of the following areas** (can be in combination across afterschool program team):
  - Program Assessment (PQA)
  - Vermont Afterschool Guidelines
  - Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)
  - Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)
  - Youth Voice
  - Advancing Equity (DEI)

### Family Engagement

- One completed Strengthening Families Self-Assessment (scanned and uploaded as PDF)

## Before You Submit Your Application

Once your CQI Plan and evidence is ready:

- Make sure all required documents are attached
- Ensure your CQI Plan clearly connects to the Level 2 standards (You'll need to meet the Level 2 requirements before moving to a higher level — and we'll help you get there.)

The STARS Team will notify you by email once your application is received. You'll get a response within 12 weeks.

**Tip:** We recommend saving a copy of your CQI Plan and other documents — they won't be returned after submission.

## Helpful Resources

- **Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas**  
Download the [Level 2 self-study tool](#) to reflect on your team’s knowledge in key quality areas. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **CQI Plan Template**  
Use [this CQI Plan template](#) to build your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **Sample CQI Plan**  
See a [completed CQI Plan example](#) to help guide your own planning.
- **Afterschool Evidence Examples**  
View [examples of evidence](#) that afterschool programs can use to demonstrate quality.
- **STARS Application Portal**  
Submit your application, CQI Plan, and required evidence through the [STARS application portal](#).



## **Level 3: Early Implementation**

**What's in the Level 3 section:**

- **Level 3 Standards**
- **Building Your CQI Plan**
- **Program Assessments**
  - **Required Evidence**
- **Application Checklist**
- **Helpful Resources**

## Level 3: Early Implementation

At Level 3, your program takes a big step by putting your CQI Plan into action. As with all STARS levels 2–5, this begins with reflecting on your plan—first developed during your Level 2 Self-Study—and using your updates to guide your work.

This is where planning becomes real change: you'll try out new ideas, build on what you learned in Level 2, and check in often to see what's working and what needs to be adjusted.

By now, your program has explored external assessments such as PQA and how you connect with children and families. Staff should have a strong understanding of Responsive Practices, including:

- **Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer and Youth Development programs:** [The Guidelines Resource](#)
  - **Vermont's Early Learning Standards (VELS):** [VELS Resource](#)
  - **NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP):** [DAP Resource](#)
  - **Youth Voice:** [Youth Voice Resource](#)
- Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education:** [NAEYC Advancing Equity in ECE Resource](#)

Now, it's time to use what you know to make real improvements.

# Level 3 STARS Level 3 Standards

Programs begin applying what they know in practice and setting goals for growth.

**Table 9: Level 3 Standards**

Element of Quality	Standards
<p><b>Adult-Child Interactions</b></p>	<p>Vermont Afterschool Program Visit Feedback shows program is currently working on Program Quality Assessment (PQA) domains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe Environment or</li> <li>• Supportive Environment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family Engagement</b></p>	<p>The team has internally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and</li> <li>• Identified goals to increase family engagement based on the assessment. Include these in your CQI Plan</li> </ul>
<p><b>Responsive Practices</b></p>	<p>Lesson plans incorporate information from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Voice</li> <li>• Considers the needs &amp; interests of each youth</li> </ul>

## **Level 3 Standards**

Programs begin applying what they know in practice and setting goals for growth:

### **Adult-Child Interactions**

A Program Quality Assessment (PQA) has been completed.

### **Family Engagement**

The team has internally completed the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and identified goals to increase family engagement based on the assessment.

### **Responsive Practices**

Program uses the STARS Youth Survey for Afterschool Programs or engages youth in another way of gathering youth voice and feedback. Lesson plans incorporate information from youth voice and assessment tools to consider individual needs and levels of learning.

## Building Your CQI Plan

At Level 3, your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan moves from planning to action.

For each Element of Quality, you'll set at least one goal, define an objective (your strategy for reaching that goal), and map out your steps using the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle. In Part 1 of this guide, you'll find a full explanation of the CQI planning process, including examples, a planning grid, and a fill in the blanks version to help you get started.

You'll use this template to build your plan: [STARS CQI Plan Template](#).

First, you will fill in your goals. Here's an example of a Level 3 goal for the **Family Engagement** Element of Quality:

**Table 10: Level 3 Goal Example**

<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Responsive Practices</b>
<b>Goal 1.</b>	<b>Goal 1.</b> To increase the number of daily practices that support the Parental Resilience protective factor.	<b>Goal 1.</b>

Next, you'll add an objective for each goal — a specific action you'll take — and use the Plan and Do parts of the PDSA cycle to describe your first steps.

One way to make sure your CQI Plan clearly shares your **goals, objectives, and PDSA cycle** is to fill in the blanks using the SMARTIE framework.

That means your goals and objectives should be:

**Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable.**

For an example of filling in the blanks, see [Building Your CQI Plan](#) in Part 1.

Your plan should also explain how you'll **track progress**. This could include collecting family feedback, reviewing observation notes, or having regular team check-ins. Use tools you already know and trust — what matters most is having a clear, consistent way to check in on how things are going and adjust along the way.

Here's an example to guide you, with a potential study question added in:

**Table 11: Level 3 CQI Plan Example**

<b>Goal:</b> To increase the number of daily actions that support the Parental Resilience protective factor.	
<b>Objective:</b> For all families to feel welcome	<b>Element of Quality:</b> Family and Youth Engagement
<b>Plan:</b> Program staff will greet each primary family member by name during drop-off or pick-up at least once each week. The program director will create a sheet for each staff member with the youth's name and their two primary family members that pick up/drop off.	<b>Do:</b> Program staff will memorize at least one youth's family member name each day so that they can greet them by name, building up to knowing all family members for the group of youth they work with, within 3 months from now (January).
<b>Study:</b> After 6 months, reflect on "Are we accomplishing what we wanted?" "What have we noticed as a difference in how families are engaging?"	<b>Act:</b>

If you need help with your CQI Plan, reach out to Tricia Pawlik at Vermont Afterschool: [tricia@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:tricia@vermontafterschool.org)

## Program Assessments

At Level 3, your program also gets support from an outside observer. A STARS-approved consultant from SPARQS will visit your program and complete an external PQA observation, using the version that fits your program type and the ages of the youth you serve. **While not formally scored, the PQA observation shows which areas of the PQA your program is currently addressing.**

You'll request the observation through the SPARQS portal at [SPARQS portal](#), and once it's done, you'll receive a Program Visit Feedback Report. Your unscored observation will give helpful insights you can use to keep growing.

### Level 3 Assessment Requirements

VTA Program Visit Feedback shows program is currently meeting all levels and is currently working on Program Quality Assessment (PQA) domains:

Safe Environment, or

Supportive Environment

You'll request the observation through the [SPARQS portal](#), and once it's done, you'll receive a program visit feedback report.

## Level 3 Required Evidence

### Adult-Youth Interactions

- **Afterschool program:** Completed Level 2 self-study showing knowledge, or plan to gain knowledge, in **all of the following areas** (can be in combination across the classroom team):
  - Program Assessment (PQA)
  - Vermont Afterschool Guidelines
  - Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)
  - Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)
  - Youth Voice
  - Advancing Equity (DEI)

### Family Engagement

- Two pieces of documentation demonstrating how families are encouraged to engage in the program

### Responsive Practice

- Youth Voice Survey for Afterschool Programs
- Activity/Lesson Plan

Your program conducts child observations and uses what is observed to inform lesson planning. Planning will:

- Include info from child observations
- Consider the needs of each and every child

## Before You Submit Your Application

Once your CQI Plan is complete and your evidence is ready:

- Make sure all required evidence documents are completed and ready to attach (For guidance, see the [Evidence Examples for Afterschool Programs](#))
- Complete the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment
- Ensure your evidence clearly connects to the standards for your desired STARS level, and that your CQI Plan shows progress beyond those standards
- Be sure to include the Level 2 Self-Study section
- Review your answers to any application questions
- We recommend saving a copy of your CQI Plan and other documents — they won't be returned after submission.

The STARS Team will notify you by email once your application is received. You'll get a response within 12 weeks.

## Helpful Resources

- **Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas**  
Download the [Level 2 self-study tool](#) to reflect on your team’s knowledge in key quality areas. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **CQI Plan Template**  
Use [this CQI Plan template](#) to build your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **Sample CQI Plan**  
See a [completed CQI Plan example](#) to help guide your own planning.
- **Afterschool Evidence Examples**  
View [examples of evidence](#) that afterschool programs can use to demonstrate quality.
- **STARS Application Portal**  
Submit your application, CQI Plan, and required evidence through the [STARS application portal](#).



## Level 4: Improved Implementation

### What's in the Level 4 section:

- **Level 4 Standards**
- **Building Your CQI Plan**
- **Program Assessments**
  - **Required Evidence**
- **Application Checklist**
- **Helpful Resources**

## **Level 4: Improved Implementation**

**At Level 4, your program moves forward with deeper focus and higher standards.**

As with all STARS levels 2–5, you begin by reflecting on your CQI Plan—originally created during your Level 2 Self-Study—and create an updated plan to guide continued growth. You’re building on the work you’ve already done: strengthening your plan, refining your strategies, and meeting more advanced expectations across the Elements of Quality.

At this level, your program receives an external assessment and focuses more intentionally on what’s working. You’ll deepen family partnerships, elevate youth voice and youth feedback, and use tools like the Strengthening Families survey to understand your impact.

# Level 4 STARS Level 4 Standards

Programs demonstrate intentional, responsive practices aligned with children’s developmental needs.

**Table 13: Level 4 Standards**

Element of Quality	Standards
<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<p>Vermont Afterschool Program Visit Feedback shows program is currently working on Program Quality Assessment (PQA) domains:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interactive Environment or Engaging.. Environment</b></p>
<b>Family Engagement</b>	<p>The program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implements at least three Strengthening Families Protective Factors</li> </ul>
<b>Responsive Practices</b>	<p>The following are used to guide lesson planning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Voice</li> <li>• Considers the needs &amp; interests of each youth</li> <li>• Be developmentally appropriate</li> <li>• Align with Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Development Programs or VELs</li> </ul>

## **Level 4 Standards**

Programs demonstrate intentional, responsive practices aligned with children's developmental needs:

### **Adult-Child Interactions**

Program meets PQA standards (see STARS Level 4 Standards graphic or continue reading this section).

### **Family Engagement**

Program implements at least three Strengthening Families Protective Factors.

### **Responsive Practices**

Lesson plans reflect how the program uses child observations to guide lesson planning:

- Include information from child observation and input
- Consider the needs and interests of each and every child
- Be developmentally appropriate
- Align with the Vermont Afterschool Guidelines

## Building Your CQI Plan

At Level 4, your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan builds on earlier work as you meet higher standards and take part in a unscored program assessment.

For each Element of Quality, you'll set at least one goal, define an objective (your strategy for reaching that goal), and map out your steps using the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle. In Part 1 of this guide, you'll find a full explanation of the CQI planning process, including examples, a planning grid, and a fill in the blanks version to help you get started.

You'll use this template to build your plan: [STARS CQI Plan Template](#).

First, you will fill in your goals. Here's an example of a Level 4 goal for the **Family Engagement** Element of Quality.

**Table 13: Level 4 Goal Example**

<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Responsive Practices</b>
<b>Goal 1.</b>	<b>Goal 1.</b> To engage families as leaders who help guide the program's decisions and operations.	<b>Goal 1.</b>

Next, you'll add an objective for each goal — a specific action you'll take — and use the Plan and Do parts of the PDSA cycle to describe your first steps.

One way to make sure your CQI Plan clearly shares your **goals, objectives, and PDSA cycle** is to fill in the blanks using the SMARTIE framework.

That means your goals and objectives should be:

**Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable.**

For an example of filling in the blanks, see [Building Your CQI Plan](#) in Part 1.

Your plan should also explain how you'll **track progress**. This could include collecting family feedback, reviewing observation notes, or having regular team check-ins. Use tools you already know and trust — what matters most is having a clear, consistent way to check in on how things are going and make adjustments along the way.

Here's an example to guide you, with a potential Study question added in:

**Table 14: Level 4 CQI Plan Example**

<p><b>Goal:</b> To engage families as leaders who help guide the program's decisions and operations.</p>	
<p><b>Objective:</b> The program will create at least two ways for families to engage as leaders of the program.</p>	<p><b>Element of Quality:</b> Family and Youth Engagement</p>
<p><b>Plan:</b> The program director will create a survey to share with families that will include various open-ended questions and multiple questions to ask families how they would like to share their voice. Survey will include questions like "Please select which of the following ways you feel most comfortable providing ideas you have about the program... in surveys, on a parent board, etc"</p>	<p><b>Do:</b> Send an electronic survey out to families by November 1 and have paper copies available at the front door. Ask families to complete survey by November 6.</p>
<p><b>Study:</b> (What did parents say in the survey? Did they have any new ideas we didn't think of?)</p>	<p><b>Act:</b></p>

If you need help with your CQI Plan, reach out to Tricia Pawlik at Vermont Afterschool: [tricia@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:tricia@vermontafterschool.org)

## Program Assessments

**At Level 4**, a STARS-approved SPARQS assessor will visit your program to complete an external PQA observation that aligns with your program type and the ages you serve.

You'll request the observation through the [SPARQS portal](#), and once it's done, you'll receive a program visit feedback report. Your unscored observation will give helpful insights you can use to keep growing.

### Level 4 Assessment Requirements

VTA program visit feedback shows program is currently meeting all levels and is currently working on Program Quality Assessment (PQA) domains:

- Interactive Environment, or
- Engaging Environment

## Level 4 Required Evidence

### Adult-Child Interactions

- Program visit feedback report meeting Level 4 standard

### Family Engagement

- Choose three Protective Factors and provide one piece of evidence for each protective factor:
  - Parental Resilience
  - Social Connections
  - Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
  - Concrete support in Times of Need
  - Knowledge of Social Emotional Development

### Responsive Practices

- A youth voice of feedback example
- A detailed lesson plan that:
  - Includes info from youth feedback
  - Considers the needs of each and every youth
  - Aligns with Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Development Programs
  - Uses Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

## Before You Submit Your Application

Once your CQI Plan is complete and your evidence is ready:

- Make sure all required evidence documents are completed and ready to attach  
(For guidance, see the [Evidence Examples for Afterschool Programs](#))
- Ensure your evidence clearly connects to the standards for your desired STARS level, and that your CQI Plan shows progress beyond those standards
- Be sure to include the Level 2 Self-Study section
- Review your answers to any application questions
- We recommend saving a copy of your CQI Plan and other documents — they won't be returned after submission.

The STARS Team will notify you by email once your application is received. You'll get a response within 12 weeks.

## Helpful Resources

- **Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas**  
Download the [Level 2 self-study tool](#) to reflect on your team’s knowledge in key quality areas. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **CQI Plan Template**  
Use [this CQI Plan template](#) to build your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan. There is a copy of this form in the Appendix.
- **Sample CQI Plan**  
See a [completed CQI Plan example](#) to help guide your own planning.
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- **STARS Application Portal**  
Submit your application, CQI Plan, and required evidence through the [STARS application portal](#).



## Level 5: Full Implementation

### What's in the Level 5 section:

- **Level 5 Standards**
- **Building Your CQI Plan**
- **Program Assessments**
  - **Required Evidence**
- **Application Checklist**
- **Helpful Resources**

## **Level 5: Full Implementation**

**At Level 5, your program reaches the highest STARS quality standards.**

As with all STARS levels 2–5, this begins with reflecting on your CQI Plan — originally developed during your Level 2 Self-Study — and using your most recent updates to guide your progress. You’re building on everything from previous levels: refining best practices, deepening your CQI process, and continuing to strengthen what’s working well.

Programs at this level demonstrate meaningful and consistent focus on at least three Strengthening Families Protective Factors, and the continuation of using youth voice and feedback to guide lesson plans.

You’ll also complete an unscored external assessment and earn a top-tier rating that reflects your program’s commitment to quality.

Surveys, observations, and child documentation help you understand your impact and keep growing in ways that matter.

# Level 5 STARS Level 5 Standards

Programs sustain best practices and offer leadership opportunities for families and staff.

**Table 15: Level 4 Standards**

Element of Quality	Standards
<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<p>Vermont Afterschool Program Visit Feedback shows program is currently meeting all levels and is actively using practices to maintain in all Program Quality Assessment (PQA) domains:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interactive Environment, and Engaging Environment</b></p>
<b>Family Engagement</b>	<p>The program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implements at least three Strengthening Families Protective Factors</li> <li>• Offers opportunities for families to participate in program leadership</li> </ul>
<b>Responsive Practices</b>	<p>The following are used to guide lesson planning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Voice</li> <li>• Considers the needs &amp; interests of each youth</li> <li>• Be developmentally appropriate</li> <li>• Align with Vermont Guidelines for Afterschool, Summer, and Youth Development Programs or VELs</li> <li>• Considers the needs &amp; interests of each youth</li> <li>• Be responsive to the child’s family culture, race and ethnicity, gender identify, and language</li> </ul>

## **Level 5 Standards**

Programs sustain best practices and offer leadership opportunities for families and staff:

### **Adult-Child Interactions**

Program meets PQA scoring requirements (see STARS Level 5 Standards graphic or continue reading this section).

### **Family Engagement**

Program implements at least three Strengthening Families Protective Factors and offers opportunities for families to participate in program leadership.

### **Responsive Practices**

Lesson plans reflect how the program uses youth voice to guide lesson planning:

- Include information from child observation and input
- Consider the needs and interests of each and every child
- Be developmentally appropriate
- Align with the Vermont Afterschool Guidelines

## Building Your CQI Plan

**At Level 5, your Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan reflects your program’s deep, ongoing commitment to quality.**

You’re not just meeting standards: you’re demonstrating the highest level of quality through thoughtful, sustained improvements and strong program assessment results. At this stage, your CQI work focuses on refining what’s working, sustaining meaningful changes, and ensuring your strategies continue to support children, families, and staff in powerful, lasting ways.

For each Element of Quality, you’ll set at least one goal, define an objective (your strategy for reaching that goal), and map out your steps using the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle. In Part 1 of this guide, you’ll find a full explanation of the CQI planning process, including examples, a planning grid, and a fill in the blanks version to help you get started.

**You’ll use this template to build your plan: [STARS CQI Plan Template](#).**

First, you will fill in your goals. Here’s an example of a Level 5 goal for the **Family Engagement** Element of Quality.

**Table 16: Level 5 Goal Example**

<b>Adult-Child Interactions</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Responsive Practices</b>
<b>Goal 1.</b>	<b>Goal 1.</b> Continue to integrate at least 3 Strengthening Families Protective Factors and engage families as leaders within the program.	<b>Goal 1.</b>

Next, you’ll add an objective for each goal — a specific action you’ll take — and use the Plan and Do parts of the PDSA cycle to describe your first steps.

One way to make sure your CQI Plan clearly shares your **goals, objectives, and PDSA cycle** is to fill in the blanks using the SMARTIE framework.

That means your goals and objectives should be:

**Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable.**

For an example of filling in the blanks, see [Building Your CQI Plan](#) in Part 1.

Your plan should also explain how you'll **track progress**. This could include collecting family feedback, reviewing observation notes, or having regular team check-ins. Use tools you already know and trust — what matters most is having a clear, consistent way to check in on how things are going and make adjustments along the way.

Here's an example to guide you, with a potential study question added in:

**Table 17: Level 5 CQI Plan Example**

<p><b>Goal:</b> Continue to integrate at least 3 Strengthening Families Protective Factors and engage families as leaders within the program.</p>	
<p><b>Objective:</b> Integrate Strengthening Families into our Human Resources procedures so that when we hire and train new staff, they understand how Strengthening Families is part of our program's culture and what the expectation is.</p>	<p><b>Element of Quality:</b> Family and Youth Engagement</p>
<p><b>Plan:</b> Create a Strengthening Families Committee that includes the director, at least one teacher, and an administrative staff so to look at how we can add Strengthening Families to our hiring process, including in job descriptions, the staff handbook, and onboarding process.</p>	<p><b>Do:</b> Identify the team to help do this and have the first meeting by June 7.</p>
<p><b>Study:</b> After hiring our next new staff, evaluate how it went. Are there other ways to include Strengthening Families into HR? Anything that was missed? What went well?</p>	<p><b>Act:</b></p>

If you need help with your CQI Plan, reach out to Tricia Pawlik at Vermont Afterschool: [tricia@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:tricia@vermontafterschool.org)

## Program Assessments

**At Level 5**, a STARS-approved SPARQS assessor will visit your program to complete an external PQA observation that aligns with your program type and the ages you serve.

You'll request the observation through the SPARQS portal at [SPARQS portal](#), and once it's done, you'll receive a Program Visit Feedback Report. Your unscored observation will give helpful insights you can use to keep growing.

### Level 5 Assessment Requirements

VTA Program Visit Feedback shows program is currently meeting all levels and is actively using practices to maintain levels:

- Safe Environment, and
- Supportive Environment, and
- Interactive Environment, and
- Engaging Environment

## Level 5 Required Evidence

### Adult-Child Interactions

- PQA report meeting Level 5 standard (see Assessment Requirements below)

### Family Engagement

- Choose three Protective Factors and provide one piece of documentation for each:
  - Parental Resilience
  - Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
  - Concrete Support in Times of Need
  - Knowledge of Social Emotional Development
  - Social Connections
- Share one example of how your program invites families or youth to help shape decisions or lead activities.

### Responsive Practices

- A child observation or youth voice example
- A lesson plan that:
  - Aligns with Vermont Afterschool Guidelines
  - Includes DAP
  - Meets the needs of each and every youth
- Show how what you learned from the observation or youth feedback helped shape your lesson plan.
- One example showing how your program considers family culture and/or advances equity in early childhood

## Before You Submit Your Application

Once your CQI Plan is complete and your evidence is ready:

- Make sure all required evidence documents are completed and ready to attach  
*(For guidance, see the [Evidence Examples for Afterschool Programs](#))*
- Complete the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment
- Ensure your evidence clearly connects to the standards for your desired STARS level, and that your CQI Plan shows progress beyond those standards
- Be sure to include the Level 2 Self-Study section
- Review your answers to any application questions
- Save a copy of your CQI Plan and all supporting documents for your records  
*(Once submitted, STARS may not be able to retrieve or return documents)*

The STARS Team will notify you by email once your application is received. You'll get a response within 12 weeks.

## Helpful Resources

- **Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas**  
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## STARS Glossary

This glossary includes terms you may see in the STARS Guide or in the forms, resources, tools, and other materials linked from the STARS Guide. These definitions explain how the term is commonly used in Vermont’s early childhood education system and may not always be the same as dictionary definitions.

**Bright Futures Information System (BFIS):** An online system used by Vermont’s Child Development Division to share information with early childhood educators and families. It helps manage child care licensing, staff qualifications, training, and payments like child care financial assistance.

**BFIS Quality Credential Account:** If you work in a licensed child care program, you’ll use this account to keep track of your professional records. This includes:

- Job experience
- Completed education and degrees
- Classes you’re currently taking

- Certificates and credentials
- Your professional development plan (IPDP)
- Training and workshops
- Copies of your transcripts, resume, and licenses

**Center Based Child Care and Preschool Program (CBCCPP):** A Child Development Division-licensed child care program and facility that offers safe, nurturing, and age-appropriate care and learning for children outside their homes, for less than 24 hours a day. Each license is tied to one specific location.

**Cultural responsiveness:** Understanding your own cultural identity and being open to learning about the cultures of others. In early childhood, this means respecting and valuing each child’s and family’s traditions, beliefs, and ways of communicating. It also means building strong, supportive relationships by listening, learning, and making sure everyone feels welcome, understood, and included. Culturally responsive caregivers help bridge differences so children, families, and staff can connect and grow together.

**Curriculum:** A plan for what children will learn and how they will learn it. It includes learning goals, activities, materials, and instructions for teachers to follow.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP):** Teaching methods based on NAEYC’s guidelines for how young children grow and learn. These practices match children’s age, abilities, and individual needs. They also respect each child’s culture and background, and help children reach goals that are challenging but possible.

**Developmental Screening:** A way to check if a child is reaching important milestones, like walking or talking, at the right time.

**Equitable and responsive practice:** Treating all children and families fairly and with respect. It involves understanding their unique experiences, removing barriers that may prevent participation, and helping every child succeed.

**Family Child Care Provider (FCCP):** A CDD-approved person who runs a licensed child care program from their home. They are responsible for following all child care rules, creating or approving the curriculum, and supervising any staff.

**Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP or “Ip-Dip”):** A unique plan that helps early childhood educators grow in their careers. It includes identifying what you already know, setting learning goals, and creating steps and timelines to reach those goals.

**Northern Lights at CCV (or Northern Lights):** The hub of the professional

development system for early childhood educators in Vermont. Northern Lights offers trainings, career advising, and friendly support to assist with your professional development goals.

**Pre-K Partner program:** A privately-owned program approved to offer Universal Pre-Kindergarten education under Vermont’s Act 166 law.

**Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS):** A system that helps child care and programs improve and show their quality. STARS is Vermont’s QRIS. It supports families in choosing programs and helps children get ready for school and life.

**School Age Child:** Any child who is at least 5 years old and is either in kindergarten or has completed it.

**Self-assessment:** The process by which staff or programs look at their own work—like how they interact with children or families — to see what they’re doing well and what they can improve.

**State-approved:** Any resource or tool (like a program assessment) has been officially accepted by Vermont’s Child Development Division for meeting certain standards.

**Written Reflection:** A short written piece in which you explain what you know about a topic and how you use that knowledge in your work.

# Acknowledgements

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These contributions include feedback, ideas, insights, original documents and graphics, and use-testing. Their enthusiastic participation is critical to this guide's accessibility and readability, and to keeping it grounded in everyday practice.

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- At Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC):  
SPARQS team members **Victoria Ward, Jessica Williams, Abby Fish**
- At Vermont Afterschool: **Tricia Pawlik, Dacia Ostlund, Kathleen Bray**

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Revised with appreciation for Vermont's early childhood and afterschool providers for their commitment to continuous quality improvement in support of children and families.

September 2025

Vermont  
**STARS**



for brighter  
child care  
decisions

## **Appendix: Blank STARS Forms**

**Level 2 Self-Study of STARS Knowledge Areas  
Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan Template**