

STARS Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

CDD will update this FAQ page regularly in response to new program questions as the STARS revision rolls out. Please check back often. If you have questions that are not covered here, please share them via this online [STARS Revision Model Information and Training Feedback](#) survey.

What is STARS?

STARS stands for Vermont's SStep Ahead Recognition System.

STARS is Vermont's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) for the state's early childhood programs, including all licensed family child care homes, center based child care and preschool programs, and afterschool programs. The system's goal is for each participating program to strive every day to not only maintain but improve the quality of its program. STARS recognizes programs for hitting the marks to support better child outcomes.

What is the STARS Revision Project?

An evolution of Vermont's STARS began in 2016 with research and feedback from early childhood and afterschool programs, community-based partner organizations and other stakeholders. The revised STARS launched on July 1, 2023, to the following goals:

- Offer simpler, less burdensome participation for programs.
- Focus directly on research-proven methods for positive child outcomes.
- Incorporate continuous quality improvement.

What has changed in the proposed STARS model?

The new STARS model includes:

- A simplified online portfolio-based application
- A simplified system, making participation less burdensome
- Three elements of quality* in place of previous STARS Arenas
- A system of continuous quality improvement (CQI)
- Revised standards that focus on building proven strategies and practices for positive child outcomes

* Based on best practice as defined by research, STARS revision will measure program strategies and practices related to three elements of quality: Adult Child Interactions, Family & Youth Engagement and Responsive Practices. For each element, your program engages in assessments, and the implementation and refinement of strategies and practices to meet your improvement goals.

What do the revised STARS levels measure?

The five STARS levels continue to reflect your program quality. The new model sets program standards that meet the following benchmarks:

- **Level 1--Introductory**
Your program is at an introductory level in which it is in good standing with Vermont licensing regulations.
- **Level 2—Self-Study**
Your program develops and employs a timeline and strategies for self-study to gain experience with assessments, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and techniques for observation and documentation, and applies that knowledge to your CQI plan.
- **Level 3—Early Implementation**
Your program begins to implement improvements based on self-study and consultations with a state-approved assessor that improve adult-child interactions, engage youth voice, are responsive to youth' and families' cultural norms, implement responsive learning activities and meet goals for DAP. Your program routinely incorporates goals based on assessments into your CQI plan.
- **Level 4—Improved Implementation**
Your program receives external assessments of each classroom and scores at least in the mid range as defined by the assessment tool. Your program implements new improvement strategies based on assessment results that address adult-child interactions, engage youth voice, are responsive to youth' and families' cultural norms, and employ responsive learning activities. Your program meets its goals for DAP and learning standard strategies.
- **Level 5—Full Implementation**
Your program receives external assessments of each classroom and scores in the high range as defined by the assessment tool. Your program is fully implementing its assessed and revised practices and strategies by providing high level adult-child interaction strategies, engagement for youth and families, responsive learning activities or is a nationally accredited or Head Start program.

What will the revised STARS application process look like?

The revised STARS application process is significantly simplified. The application will be an online portfolio of improvement in the form of your program's CQI plan. The portfolio/CQI plan will be a living representation of your program's efforts to increase and maintain quality standards; it can be modified as the program reaches new levels. The portfolio will include evidence of program work including assessments and follows the CQI Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) process.

What is CQI?

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a deliberate process for improvement. The STARS process for program quality is ongoing. At each STARS level, your program engages in a process of CQI with a STARS CQI Plan that identifies opportunities to increase quality, research solutions, develop and

implement your improvement strategies, and test those strategies for effectiveness. In this way, your program progresses toward its quality goals continually in a steady stream of small changes. Your CQI plan also helps you make a habit of tracking practices and using information as part of everyday practice to improve outcomes.

How do I build a CQI Plan?

CQI Plan templates and examples are available in the [STARS Guidance Manual](#). Training videos for the STARS CQI Process and STARS levels standards are available on the [STARS](#) webpage. On this site you can also sign up for upcoming STARS information sessions and workgroup opportunities. Additional CQI support will begin rolling out from the **System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports (SPARQS)** in September 2023. Remember, programs are unique and serve children and families who are unique. Your program's CQI plan should be flexible and specific to your program while including components that meet the STARS standards.

What is SPARQS?

System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports (SPARQS) is a new CDD initiative to support Vermont's early childhood education and afterschool programs, facilitated by the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC) in partnership with Vermont Afterschool. SPARQS will provide consultation, coaching, mentoring, technical assistance, program quality assessment, and will guide programs' participation in the new STARS model--with continued support as programs work to reach their quality goals. In addition, SPARQS will also provide support and resources for the Vermont Early Childhood Networks.

SPARQS will be available to all regulated programs and is designed to be a flexible resource that can adjust to changing needs. Initially funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), SPARQS will be a long-term resource for Vermont programs.

What is the difference between SPARQS and BTAP?

Both SPARQS and the [Business Technical Assistance Program](#) (BTAP) are support initiatives for early childhood education and afterschool programs funded by CDD, but the supports they provide differ. BTAP provides business related support such as small business development and management training, technical assistance, and financial consulting. SPARQS provides coaching, mentoring and resources to build quality curriculum and professional development. For example, if you need help building a website or completing a grant application, contact [BTAP](#). If you would like to provide your staff with training on how to complete assessments or improve teaching practices, contact SPARQS.

How does my program maintain its STARS level?

The first thing to know about the new STARS model is that it's first year, July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024, is a pilot year where all programs will maintain their current STARS level. This pilot year can be used to get better acquainted with the new model and prepare to meet the new standards. We encourage programs to participate in training and engage in available support now and throughout the pilot year in order to prepare a STARS CQI Plan that meets or exceeds their current STARS level before their STARS certificate renewal date.

Has the STARS certificate cycle changed?

No. STARS certificates are still valid for three years.

Will programs be required to submit an annual report for non-renewal years?

No, but programs will need to submit an updated CQI plan in place of an annual report to maintain their STARS status during non-renewal years. The updated CQI plan will be due on your program's STARS certificate date.

What are the revised STARS standards?

A full description of the updated STARS standards can be found in the [STARS Guidance Manual](#). The standards all focus on proven factors to improve child outcomes.

What evidence will programs be asked to submit to support their CQI plan?

Suggested evidence for the STARS revision includes Quality Credential Accounts, completed assessment forms, written reflections, observations records, communication examples, survey results, learning activity plans, coaching reports, and examples of community of practice. Because each program's CQI plan will be unique, you may choose to include other evidence that best represents how your program assesses its goals. You can review evidence requirements by STARS level in the [STARS Guidance Manual](#).

What assessment tools will be used in the STARS revision?

Assessment tools will include Strengthening Families, Youth Program Quality Inventory, Youth Thrive, CLASS, TPTOS, ASQ & ASQ-SE.

How will the STARS revision affect STARS reimbursement rates?

STARS reimbursement rates are part of Act 76 (H.217) relating to child care and early childhood education recently approved by the Vermont legislature. Act 76 separates STARS from The Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) in order to ensure families a similar benefit from CCFAP no matter which program their child attends while supporting all programs in achieving high-

quality standards. CCFAP capped rates will adjust to a [simplified and higher rate schedule](#) that better reflects the cost of providing quality child care.

Higher STARS levels will be recognized in financial incentive or grant programs, including a new Quality and Capacity Incentive Program to roll out in July 2024.

Can my new program begin at STARS Level 3 so we can offer Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) right away?

Yes. Provisional STARS Level 3 designation is available to early childhood education and afterschool programs that have an application for licensure pending or are newly licensed (within the last 60 days) and are also applying for UPK Pre-Qualification. A STARS administrator determines program eligibility. For more information, contact STARS at STARS@vermont.gov or (800) 649-2642, option 8.

Do I have to apply for each STARS Level in order, or can my program skip ahead?

Programs do not need to apply for each STARS Level in order. They may skip levels as long as the program's STARS CQI Plan contains evidence that it has met the standards for the levels it is bypassing. For example, a program may apply for STARS Level 3 if their STARS CQI Plan demonstrates that it has met the standards set for the self-study process in STARS Level 2.

Is there still a streamlined STARS application for accredited and Head Start programs?

Yes. Programs that are NAEYC accredited or are Head Start programs for which Head Start is the administrator and licensee are automatically eligible for STARS Level 5. No CQI Plan is required for these programs and your STARS CQI Application need only submit your program's current NAEYC certificate or Head Start Monitoring Review Report for verification.

In addition, Head Start and Early Head Start partner programs automatically meet the standards for Adult-Child Interactions at STARS levels 4 and 5.

Programs that are fully implementing Early MTSS are eligible for STARS Level 5 in the Adult-Child Interactions and Responsive Practice elements of quality.

NAFCC accredited programs meet the following standards: Adult-Child Interactions, STARS Level 3; Family Engagement, STARS Level 2; and Responsive Practices, STARS Level 3.