

STEP AHEAD RECOGNITION SYSTEM (STARS) RULES

I. Purpose

- a. These rules establish the STep Ahead Recognition System (STARS), Vermont’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) for Center Based Child Care and Preschool programs, Family Child Care Homes, and Afterschool Child Care programs. The purpose of STARS is to:
 - i. be responsive to and reflect the unique culture and identity of quality practices in Vermont’s early childhood and afterschool programs;
 - ii. offer equitable opportunities for early childhood and afterschool programs and providers to engage in the improvement system;
 - iii. support early childhood and afterschool programs in fostering healthy development and preparing young children for future learning and life success;
 - iv. support family choice by allowing parents and caregivers to make informed decisions and choose the best possible care for their children based on a program’s philosophy, quality of an early childhood or afterschool program, and services provided by that program;
 - v. represent early childhood and afterschool programs’ strengths to families; and
 - vi. demonstrate early childhood and afterschool programs’ progress toward quality improvements.

II. Terms and Definitions

"Afterschool Child Care Program" or "ASP" means a program as defined in the Licensing Regulations for Afterschool Child Care Programs adopted by the Department for Children and Families (DCF) Child Development Division (CDD).

"Center Based Child Care and Preschool Program" or "CBCCPP" means a program as defined in the Licensing Regulations for Center Based Child Care and Preschool Programs adopted by CDD.

"Certified STARS assessor" means an individual who is certified by the authors of an assessment tool to determine the standards for certification and provide documentation of the certification.

"Child care" or "child care services" means developmentally appropriate care and supervision of a child under age 13 for fewer than 24 hours a day by a DCF/CDD regulated program.

“Content Area” means a defined domain of knowledge and skill in the field of early childhood and afterschool programs.

“Continuous Quality Improvement” or “CQI” means making steady, intentional changes to early childhood and afterschool program practices with the goal of improving overall program operation and practices to increase positive outcomes for children. Typically, the CQI process employs a steady stream of small changes.

“Curriculum” means goals for the knowledge and skills to be acquired by the children enrolled in an early childhood and afterschool program and the activities and experiences through which such knowledge and skills are achieved.

“Early childhood” means the period from birth to age eight.

“Early childhood and afterschool programs” means a CBCCPP, FCCH, ASP, and public school pre-kindergarten program.

“Family Child Care Home” or “FCCH” means a program as defined in the Licensing Regulations for Registered and Licensed Family Child Care Homes adopted by CDD.

“Parent” means a birth or adoptive parent, legal guardian, foster parent, or any other person having responsibility for, or legal custody of, a child.

“Program” means all activities related to the provision of services within early childhood and afterschool programs.

“Public school pre-kindergarten program” means a program as defined in the Licensing Regulations for Center Based Child Care and Preschool Programs adopted by CDD.

“Quality support staff” means individuals who provide assistance to early childhood and afterschool programs to develop and implement CQI plans.

“Quality Recognition Improvement System” or “QRIS” means a system designed to recognize child care program strengths, to support family choice, and to improve children’s experiences in child care.

“State-approved” means program, teacher and child assessments, and child screening tools approved by CDD and the Agency of Education (AOE) based on current knowledge and best practice, inclusivity, and accessibility.

III. STARS Framework

- a. STARS is a quality recognition and improvement system for early childhood and afterschool programs founded on evidence-based content areas defined by CDD.

- b. The system's structure is comprised of levels based on graduated achievement in defined content areas. Each level contains criteria that programs must meet in order to advance within the system.
- c. CDD shall publish information describing content areas and the criteria for each level.
- d. CDD shall publish guidance materials outlining the sources of evidence early childhood and afterschool programs may submit to support achievement of a certain level within a content area.
- e. CDD shall monitor evidence-based research and federal program standards and gather input from Vermont early childhood and afterschool programs to update content areas and criteria.

IV. STARS Certificates

STARS certificates are valid for three years from the date of issue and a brief annual update to the program's CQI plan will be required to maintain the program's standing within a level in years two and three of the application cycle.

V. System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports (SPARQ)

- a. Early childhood and afterschool programs will self-assess using state-approved assessment tools to develop a CQI plan.
- b. Early childhood and afterschool programs may access certified STARS assessors who will provide observations and feedback using state-approved assessment tools to confirm progress toward CQI plan goals.
- c. CDD shall ensure access to quality support staff who partner with early childhood and afterschool programs to facilitate progress toward the programs' goals.

VI. Financial Incentive Payments

a. Incentives for Initial Achievement or Advancement of Stars

When a program initially achieves a level or initially advances to a higher level, the DCF may provide a one-time financial incentive payment in an amount established at least annually by the DCF Commissioner or designee. Initial incentive payments are subject to availability of funds and may otherwise be limited by these standards or by law.

b. Quality Factor Payments to STARS Participating Programs

When a program achieves a level, the DCF may pay on behalf of an eligible child a quality factor amount above the CDD base payment. Such payments may be adjusted by the DCF Commissioner or designee at least annually to coincide with available funding

and may otherwise be limited by these standards or by law. Suspension, reduction or increase of these payments by the DCF Commissioner or designee shall not require modification of these rules through the rule-making process.

c. Limits on Incentive Payments and Enhanced Rates

- i. In the event that annual funds are insufficient to meet payment rates established at least annually by the DCF Commissioner or designee, the Commissioner or designee reserves the right to exercise discretion and limit or suspend award of one-time financial incentive payments and enhanced rates otherwise payable under this program.
- ii. The DCF Commissioner or designee shall make reasonable efforts to notify any pending and prospective applicants prior to limitation or suspension of incentive payments and/or enhanced rates due to the lack of funding.
- iii. Financial incentives awarded under this program are subject to re-payment if awarded in error or due to applicant fraud or misrepresentation. Financial incentives awarded under this program are subject to garnishment, recoupment, other attachment or legal remedy pursued by DCF, the State of Vermont, or as otherwise authorized by law.

VII. Falsification of Information

- a. An applicant or STARS participant who has interfered with, impeded, deterred, provided false information to or in any manner hindered the DCF or its agents in investigation or inspection of a regulated facility or program, or in the validation of a STARS application, shall not be eligible for participation in STARS for a period of at least three years.
- b. Concern about misrepresentation or false information made on a STARS application may be referred to the CDD or AOE for investigation.

VIII. Grievances

- a. STARS applicants or participants have the right to have the rejection of their application materials or other adverse decision related to STARS, such as the suspension or revocation of a STARS status in connection with enforcement of licensing rules, or these rules, reviewed by the STARS grievance committee.
- b. Requests for review must be in writing and received by the DCF Commissioner or designee within 30 days of the date of rejection or other adverse decision.
- c. If the grievant is a school-operated pre-kindergarten program, the Secretary of the Agency of Education (AOE) or designee shall join the DCF Commissioner or designee in deciding the appeal.

- d. The STARS grievance committee shall be appointed by the DCF Commissioner or designee (and AOE Secretary or designee, if the grievant is a school-operated pre-kindergarten program), consist of at least three members including one from the regulated provider community, and provide the DCF Commissioner or designee (and AOE Secretary or designee, if applicable) with a recommendation.
- e. The DCF Commissioner or designee (and AOE Secretary or designee, if applicable) shall make a final decision on the grievance and provide the grievant with a written decision.
- f. The grievant may appeal the final decision to the Human Services Board within thirty days of the date of the final decision.
- g. Financial incentives shall not be paid while an appeal is pending. If a successful final appeal results in a determination that a STARS participant is due a financial incentive, DCF will award payment in full within 60 days.

IX. Severability

If any part of these Rules is held invalid by a court of competent jurisdiction, the invalidity shall not be construed to render the remaining parts of the Rules invalid.

X. Effective Date

These rules shall become effective on July 1, 2023.