



## **STATE OF VERMONT**

**Department for Children and Families  
Child Development Division  
NOB 1 North  
280 State Drive  
Waterbury, VT 05671-1040**

**1-800-649-2642 or 1-802-241-3110**

**<https://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd>**

# **STEP AHEAD RECOGNITION SYSTEM (STARS) STANDARDS**

**Effective Date: September 1, 2019**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<b>I Purpose</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>II Authority</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>III Terms and Definitions</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>IV STARS Framework</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>IV A STARS Arenas</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>IV B Five Levels of Quality and Required Points</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>IV C STARS Certificates</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>V Standards and Points</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>V A Teaching Staff Qualifications and Annual Professional Development Arena of Action</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>V B Families and Communities Arena of Action</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>V C Program Practices Arena of Action</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>V D Administration Arena of Action</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>V D 1 For Registered Homes</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>V D 2 For Licensed Programs</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>V D 3 For School-operated Pre-kindergarten Programs</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>VI Financial Incentive and Maintenance Payments</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>VI A Incentives for Initial Achievement or Advancement of Stars</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>VI B Incentives for Maintenance of Stars</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>VI C Enhanced STARS Rates for Children Eligible for Child Care Financial Assistance</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>VI D Limits on Incentive Payments and Enhanced Rates</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>VII Falsification of Information</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>VIII Grievances</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>IX Effective Date</b> .....	<b>9</b>

# **STEP AHEAD RECOGNITION SYSTEM (STARS) STANDARDS**

## **I Purpose**

The purpose of these rules is to establish the STep Ahead Recognition System (STARS). The specific purpose of this quality recognition system is to promote, reward and recognize child care and education programs that achieve higher quality standards. STARS is designed to be applicable to public and private programs regulated by DCF/CDD, including prekindergarten education programs in public schools.

## **II Authority**

Authority for this program is Act 132 of 2008, 33 V.S.A. § 3605, 16 V.S.A. § 829 and the federal Child Care Development Block Grant, 45 CFR Parts 98 and 99.

## **III Terms and Definitions**

- III A "After school" means services to kindergarten and elementary school age children. After school services take place in diverse settings, and before and after school, school vacations, and summer.
- III B "Arena" means a specific core area of program operations.
- III C "Average Daily Membership" (ADM) is defined in accordance with 16 V.S.A. § 4001(1).
- III D "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 provider.
- III E "Good regulatory standing" means a program holds full licensure under Vermont's child care program regulations that is not provisional or under suspension or an intent to revoke status.
- III F Individualized Professional Development Plan means a current personalized plan for increasing one's knowledge and improving skills in the field of child care and education. It includes assessing current knowledge and skills, with goals that identify specific areas of improvement, develop strategies, resources and a time line when the goal will be met.
- III G "Licensed program" is an early childhood and/or after school program that provides care and education services in accordance with 33 V.S.A. § 3502(d).
- III H "Part-day/part-year program" is a program that children attend for fewer than 26 hours per week and fewer than 42 weeks per year.
- III I "Professional development" means learning and support activities, designed in

accordance with adult learning principles that prepare and enhance individuals in their work with children and their families and lead to improvements in practitioner knowledge, skills, and practices.

- III J “Program staff” include the people who work for the early childhood, preschool or after school program and who are either counted in the staff-child ratios or serve a supervisory or administrative role.
- III K “Regulated provider” means a person or entity licensed or registered by the DCF/CDD to provide early care, education or school age care services.
- III L “School-operated” is a program for which the CDD license is applied for and maintained under the auspices of a public school, school district or supervisory union.
- III M “STARS” is the STep Ahead Recognition System, Vermont’s graduated system of quality recognition for child care, early education and after school programs.
- III N “Teaching staff” are those individuals responsible for planning, implementing, and/or evaluating the program’s curriculum and overall implementation.

#### **IV STARS Framework**

STARS is a graduated point system with five levels. Applicants determine the level of recognition their program has achieved according to the standards for each arena and submit evidence documenting their achievements on a regular basis.

##### **IV A STARS Arenas**

1. Teaching Staff Qualifications and Annual Professional Development,
2. Families and Community,
3. Program Practices, and
4. Administration.

Upon review and approval of the application materials, a certificate indicating the level of achievement and the date of achievement is awarded.

##### **IV B Five Levels of Quality and Required Points**

- One Star is achieved when the regulated program’s licensing status is in good regulatory standing
- Two Stars is achieved when the program obtains a total of one to four points.
- Three Stars is achieved when the program obtains a total of five to eight points.
- Four Stars is achieved when the program obtains a total of nine to eleven points including at least two points in the Program Practices Arena.
- Five Stars is achieved when the program obtains a total of twelve to fourteen points.

## **IV C STARS Certificates**

STARS certificates are valid for three years from the date of issue and a brief annual CDD/AOE approved report form must be submitted in which the program affirms maintenance of star level standards or formally reports changes. Documentation to reapply for STARS certification must be received at least 90 days prior to the expiration date of the valid certificate.

Holders of STARS certificates shall permit on-site visits, announced or unannounced, by representatives of the department for children and families and the Agency of education during the three year interval between renewals.

An applicant who fails to obtain any STARS above STAR level 1 may re-apply after a period of 6 months.

## **V Standards and Points**

### **V A Teaching Staff Qualifications and Annual Professional Development Arena of Action**

Points in the Teaching Staff Qualifications and Annual Professional Development Arena shall be awarded in accordance with the following criteria:

#### 1 Point:

- All teaching staff members or the registrant have an updated Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) or a statement of annual professional development goals.
- The program or registrant completes the DCF/CDD and D~~A~~OE approved worksheet that assigns a numerical value to educational level, experience in the field and hours of participation in relevant professional development.
- The program's average score across all teaching staff, or the registrant's score, is between 0.31 and 1.3.

#### 2 Points:

- All teaching staff members or the registrant have an updated Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) or a statement of annual professional development goals.
- The program or registrant complete the worksheet described for 1 point.
- The program's average score across all teaching staff, or the registrant's score, is between 1.31 and 2.3.

### 3 Points:

- All teaching staff members or the registrant have an updated Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) or a statement of annual professional development goals.
- The program or registrant complete the worksheet described for 1 point.
- The program's average score across all teaching staff, or the registrant's score, is between 2.31 and 3.0.

## **V B Families and Communities Arena of Action**

In the Families and Community Arena, applicants achieve points as follows:

### 1 Point:

The program's practices and policies support and strengthen families by:

- Collecting annual family satisfaction surveys and using the results to inform program practices or, if applicable, having a school action plan that meets DAOE requirements and includes plans for improving the prekindergarten programs.
- Actively making resources and information available to families.
- Having a written philosophy about the relationship between families and the program.
- The program maintains connections with the professional community through participation in at least 4 professional networking activities each year.

### 2 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for one point (above) plus the program's practices and policies support and strengthen families by providing:

- Opportunities for families to meet with program staff and other parents through at least 2 social events and 1 group event annually designed to discuss specific content.
- Opportunities for families to be involved in the program throughout the year.
- A program that maintains connections with the community to support and advocate for children, families or the profession through participation in family service teams, community-based groups, and similar activities for a total of at least 24 hours per year. Part-day/part year programs may have a total of 12 hours a year.

### 3 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for two points (above) plus the program demonstrates its commitment to strong families, strong communities or a strong

profession through:

- Annually assessing the program’s family-strengthening practices using a CDD/AOE approved tool that addresses strategies including: facilitating social connections among parents, parent education, response to families in crisis, connecting families to services and opportunities, support for children’s social-emotional development and response to early signs of abuse and neglect.
- Creating a continuous improvement plan to implement and maintain practices related to strengthening families’ protective factors (e.g., parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development)

~ OR ~

- Providing leadership in the profession through engagement in a variety of local, statewide or national activities and initiatives (e.g., activism, advocacy, teaching, mentoring).
- Having a written leadership philosophy for the program that details how staff leadership activities impact on the profession and quality of early childhood or afterschool care and education.

### **V C Program Practices Arena of Action**

In the Program Practices Arena, applicants achieve points as follows:

#### 1 Point:

The program completes a self-evaluation using a DCF/CDD and AOE approved self-assessment tool and writes an improvement plan based upon self-assessment findings. Staff is involved in the self-assessment, is informed of the results and provides input into the written improvement plan.

#### 2 Points:

- The program completes a self-assessment and is evaluated using a DCF/CDD and AOE approved program assessment tool by an approved validator. Staff members provide input for and receive feedback on the assessment and the program submits a written improvement plan.
- Also, the program regularly uses observation and other forms of informal assessments to document children's strengths, needs, interests and growth. The program maintains records of this documentation and utilizes the results of this ongoing system of assessment to inform curriculum planning.

#### 3 Points:

- The program completes a self-assessment and is evaluated by an approved validator using a DCF/CDD and AOE approved program assessment tool, and the program

reaches a specified minimum score on the assessment. Staff members provide input during the evaluation process and receive feedback. The program submits a written improvement plan.

- Also, the program regularly uses observation and documents children's strengths, needs, interests and growth. The program maintains related records and utilizes the results of this ongoing system of assessment to inform curriculum planning.

#### 4 Points:

- The program completes a self-assessment and is evaluated by an approved validator using a DCF/CDD and AOE approved program assessment tool, the program has obtained a specified minimum score on the assessment, and staff members have provided input and receive feedback during the evaluation process. The program submits a written improvement plan and evidence that actions specified in previous improvement plans have been completed.
- Also, the program regularly uses observation and documents children's strengths, needs, interests and growth through the use of a DCF/CDD and AOE approved tool at least twice a year. The program maintains records of this documentation and uses the results from child assessments to inform curriculum planning.

#### 5 Points:

- The program holds a current DCF/CDD and AOE approved accreditation or other approved standard, has a written improvement plan based upon the findings of an annual self-assessment, and submits evidence that actions specified in previous improvement plans have been completed.
- Also, the program regularly uses observation and documents children's strengths, needs, interests and growth through use of a DCF/CDD and AOE approved tool at least twice a year. The program maintains records of this documentation and uses the results from the child assessment to inform curriculum planning.

### **V D Administration Arena of Action**

In the Administration Arena of Action, applicants achieve points as follows:

#### **V D 1 For Registered Homes:**

##### 1 Point:

The program has a contract or other written agreement with parent signature and written policies for exclusions due to child illness, payment for services and daily routines for children.

##### 2 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for one point (above) plus the program has

established a fee structure. The program has clear policies for the registrant's vacation, sick, holiday and professional days. At least one person in the program is a member of a professional organization relevant to early childhood or after school professionals.

3 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for two points (above) plus has a parent handbook written specifically for this program. The handbook includes the registrant's program philosophy and guidance philosophy. The program operates a financially sound business that conforms to federal standards for small businesses. The program carries liability insurance.

**V D 2 For Licensed Programs:**

1 Point:

The program has an employee handbook detailing how professional development is supported and how Individual Professional Development Plans are incorporated into staff supervision. Staff members have opportunities to refine their skills through a system of regular feedback and guidance. Also, the program's employee handbook details policies on hiring and firing, benefits, advancement, grievance, sexual harassment and reporting on child abuse or neglect.

2 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for one point (above) plus staff working five or more hours per shift have paid breaks within the scheduled work day. Staff members responsible for planning curriculum are given at least one hour per week of paid planning time. Also, all program staff receive at least two of the following benefits: paid vacation, sick, personal or professional days.

3 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for two points (above) plus staff members are provided with written policies addressing a salary system that recognizes professional achievement. The median adjusted pay for all employees is at least 85% of Vermont's livable wage for a "single person without employer paid health benefits".

**V D 3 For School-operated Pre-kindergarten Programs:**

1 Point:

The teaching staff has a contract that includes terms of employment, access to benefits, and a salary scale. The staff supervision process is described and fully implemented. Staff is provided with information on policies related to sexual harassment.

2 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for one point (above) plus provides staff a description of their rights and grievance procedures.

3 Points:

The program adheres to all standards for two points (above) plus has an articulated and fully implemented process for staff supervision and professional development.

**VI Financial Incentive and Maintenance Payments**

**VI A Incentives for Initial Achievement or Advancement of Stars**

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

**VI B Incentives for Maintenance of Stars**

When a program successfully maintains a star or stars level over time, the DCF may provide a financial maintenance incentive payment in an amount established at least annually by the DCF Commissioner. Maintenance incentive payments shall be subject to availability of funds and may otherwise be limited by these standards or by law. The Commissioner shall define annually the term “successive years” for purposes of maintenance incentive payments.

**VI C Quality Factor Payments to STARS Participating Programs**

When a program achieves a star 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 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 shall not require modification of these regulations through the rule-making process.

**VI D Limits on Incentive Payments and Enhanced Rates**

In the event that annual funds are insufficient to meet payment rates established at least annually by the DCF Commissioner, the Commissioner reserves the right to exercise discretion and limit or suspend award of one time financial incentive payments, maintenance incentive payments and enhanced rates otherwise payable under this program. If limitation or suspension of payments is necessary due to lack of funds, maintenance payments shall be limited or suspended before one time incentive payments.

The DCF Commissioner 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.

Financial incentives, including enhanced rates, 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**

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.

Concern about misrepresentation or false information made on a STARS application may be referred to the CDD or AOE for investigation.

## **VIII Grievances**

Applicants or program participants have the right to appeal rejection of their application materials or other adverse decision related to the STARS program, such as the suspension or revocation of a STARS certificate in connection with enforcement of licensing regulations, subsidy regulations or these standards.

Appeals must be in writing and received by the DCF Commissioner within 30 days of the date of rejection or other adverse decision. If the appeal is from a school-operated pre-kindergarten program, the Commissioner of the Department of Education shall join the Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families in deciding the appeal.

The applicant or grievant shall have the opportunity to present the appeal to a STARS grievance committee. The committee shall be appointed by the Commissioner(s), consist of at least three members including one from the regulated provider community, and provide the Commissioner(s) with a recommendation. The Commissioner(s) shall make a final decision on the grievance and provide the grievant with a written decision. The grievant may appeal the final decision of the Commissioner(s) to the Human Services Board within thirty days of the date of the final decision.

Financial incentives shall not be paid while an appeal is pending. If a successful final appeal results in a determination that a STARS program participant is due a financial incentive or maintenance payment, DCF will award payment in full within 60 days.

## **IX Effective Date**

These rules shall become effective on September 1, 2019.