

TO: VT House Health and Welfare Committee

FROM: Holly Morehouse, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool
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DATE: March 16, 2022

RE: STARS and Afterschool Programs

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Holly Morehouse, Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool. We are a statewide nonprofit dedicated to strengthening programs, building partnerships, and transforming communities so that all Vermont children and youth are active, engaged, connected, and heard.

Vermont's childcare licensing system and the STARS quality rating and improvement system are extremely important to afterschool programs and to our field. The federal definition around childcare includes children birth through age 12 and at Vermont Afterschool we focus in particular on the needs of children and families in that 5-12 year old school-age range. While a quality afterschool program by definition has to connect to and collaborate with the school day, because our systems need to support children and families for the full day and across the full calendar year, afterschool is not solely an education issue. It is a health and wellness issue; it is a safety and prevention issue; it is a mental health and social emotional learning issue; and it is most definitely a childcare issue.

Many of the working families who need childcare options for their children when they are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers also need quality options when their children are 5, 6, 8, or 10. During a typical school week there are 15-25 hours when kids are not in school and many parents and families need to be at work. This gap is even greater when you consider the ten weeks of summer, school vacation weeks, before school needs, teacher in-service days, and so on.

For perspective and to understand Vermont Afterschool's role with STARS, it is important to know that a significant percentage of afterschool programs serving school age children are licensed under CDD and participate in STARS. Over the years, Vermont Afterschool has played a key role in bringing new program quality assessment tools for school-age afterschool programs into this system. We have worked with both the Agency of Education and the Child Development Division to have both support the use of a national recognized tool called the PQA developed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. We hold the state contract with the Weikart Center to support the use and implementation of that tool. We have trained over 25 trainers in the state over the years to be able to deliver the staff development workshops that go along with that tool and quality improvement process. We have also held the responsibility of training, supporting, and maintaining external assessors and coaches to assist afterschool programs in using that tool. Finally, through our grant with CDD and in partnership with the STARS coordinators, we have staff available to answer questions about STARS and the quality assessment tools, to meet with afterschool program directors, lead staff through the self-assessment process, and to make site visits out to afterschool programs in order to help them work their way through the different levels of STARS.

Vermont Afterschool has also long held a seat on the STARS Oversight Committee. I participated for a number of years and currently Tricia Pawlik, the Program Quality Coordinator at Vermont Afterschool, sits on the committee. It seems like for about 10 years or so, that committee has been seeking to make updates and improvements to the STARS framework in order to keep up with learning in the field around best practices and quality rating systems in general. Tricia was chairing one of the subcommittees of the STARS Evolution Committee that was actively moving forward with implementing and communicating potential changes to the STARS framework up until about 2019-early 2020 when that work and those Evolution committees were put on hold. Through the last two years of COVID, we have been unclear about the state's plans to either move that work forward or move in a different direction.

We have three requests:

- (1) We would like to see a clear plan put in place to complete the evolution or revision process, including the continued involvement of the STARS Oversight Committee. As others have requested, we would like to see transparency and stakeholder involvement in that plan. Keeping the field and key partners informed is critical.
- (2) We would like to see a primary focus on Continuous Quality Improvement at the core of the revision process. The quality assessment tool that I mentioned earlier is a good example of how we can move away from measures that are about how many resources a program has or about checking off a series of boxes but rather focus instead on the point of practice when a staff member is interacting with a child and what is happening in that moment that supports positive child development.
- (3) Lastly, I would like to advocate strongly for continued and increased attention to afterschool specific quality issues and supports within our licensing and STARS systems. For example:
 - a. STARS assessors in the past have not been trained on the afterschool-specific assessment tools in the same way they have on the early childhood tools. Vermont Afterschool has continued to hold and find additional funding to support those pieces.
 - b. Programs that serve early childhood and school-age children are required to have only one license. One thing that we sometimes see when we visit programs is that a program that operates a 5-STAR early childhood program that is excellent for 2-3 year olds, may not have the same level of quality and best practices when it comes with serving 10-12 year olds. We would love to see more specification and differentiation as appropriate for these different age groups.
 - c. We would also like to request consideration for how this work around quality for school-age licensed afterschool programs aligns with and connects to the work currently being done by the Governor's Interagency Afterschool Task Force which has a quality subcommittee that AHS and AOE both serve on and that is looking at some of these same issues as well.