



Testimony from LouAnn Beninati, Director of Program Viability, Let's Grow Kids

House Committee on Human Services, March 16, 2022

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you about STARS.

I am LouAnn Beninati, Director of Program Viability at LGK. I have been involved with the STARS system in VT in one way or another since its inception in 2004:

- As an ED of a program when Learning Partners was contracted by CDD to design the system in 2003 (STARS began in 2004)
- As the STARS Coordinator 2010-2014
 - Including working with Johana Vaczy, shepherding programs through the first revision in 2010, with minor changes
- As a member of the STARS oversight committee, representing LGK, 2014-current
- Participant in VTs ongoing evaluation process known as STARS Evolution
 - Including working with Child Trends through the evaluation funded by RTT ELC grant and with a report issued in 2018 and through the facilitation led by an organization called ANLAR to move the evaluation work forward,
 - To participation with stakeholder workgroups in various iterations.
- Participant in BUILD and other national Quality Improvement Systems leaders' sessions presenting current thinking on Quality Improvement Systems (not Quality Rating Systems, as they used to be called), in my work supporting program viability at LGK

In my knowledge there was never an intent for STARS to remain the same. Since its creation in 2003-4 it has changed minimally over the years. The changes in the field of ECE and best practices has outpaced the changes to the STARS system. For example, our regulations were revised, and these revisions raised the baseline for health and safety compliance, a baseline that previously existed as a 1 or 2 STAR level.

I commend CDD for planning and setting a clear timeline to complete a revision process that began over 10 years ago.

As we move ahead, we must consider:

- STARS was created with the intent of providing stakeholders (parents) a way to recognize quality in VT and a way to recognize programs for implementing best practices. For almost 20 years we have said that this is the case and this approach cannot be abandoned without a careful process.
- Honestly, in some ways STARS was also originally created as a workaround for a field that lacked standards, opportunities for preparation, and a lack of pathways for career development- it has served both as a program recognition system and as a personnel development program.
- We agree with CDD that the criteria and process for measuring quality needs to be updated to fit current research, equitable processes, and best practice.

- As Vt works toward investing in a well prepared and fairly compensated ECE workforce we have the opportunity to move to a system that provides the supports and technical assistance necessary for continuous quality improvement.
- Nationally there are states, for instance Michigan (Great Start to Quality) and Idaho (Steps to Quality), that are implementing new systems that focus on goal setting and continuous quality improvement and those initiatives are reportedly going well—we should learn from them and we should take advantage of the ECE experts we have right here in VT, including the current STARS coordinator. She knows more about the current system and current best practices than anyone else in the state. So far in this process she is an underutilized resource.

We also must ensure:

- Any changes to VT's approach to defining and recognizing quality early childhood education be communicated with exceptional clarity and recognize that while STARS may be pausing, quality early childhood education is essential to achieving the outcomes we want for VT's children.
- We review the 10 years of evaluation we have already done with stakeholders, Child Trends, ANLAR, and work groups.
- That we consider the information that national experts, other states and recent research offers.
- That we don't waste VT's investment in the training and certification for the team of valid and reliable assessors who currently administer the onsite child care learning environment assessments.

My hope is that:

- CDD will utilize the existing STARS oversight committee as they develop the new plan and rules, including the AOE/AHS process to develop oversight of UPK. The wisdom of the experienced members can help identify not only communication strategies to early childhood educators and program owners but other next steps.
- That if CDD is considering a "pause", as I have heard that they are considering, that they will consider a similar approach to what happened in March 2020—programs could stay at their current star rating, unless the program wants or needs to change status—then the program could move ahead with the process to increase their level. That will address CCFAP reimbursement and UPK issues that might arise.
- Consider utilizing the expertise and training of the current STARS staff (housed at CDD if that is the plan for the year)
- That our next quality system is a Continuous Improvement System based on current best practices with three areas of focus: child development and learning, child health and wellness, and the learning environment. We call this approach "the few and powerful."
- The future system is based on each program's Quality Improvement Plan and goals, and the system's primary purpose is to connect each regulated program to coaching, technical assistance, assessment and/or the pd system to support them in meeting their programmatic needs/goals so they can best serve the children enrolled in their programs. As this committee knows, the preparation of the early childhood educator in the program is one of the best indicators of the quality of a program, and they need to be supported in their role.

Currently, QRIS systems like VT's STARS are upside down—programs with more resources are more easily able to meet current criteria, which means that our current STARS system is skewed in a way that favors programs in more affluent areas of the state and could be penalizing programs in poorer regions as well as new and struggling programs that need more resources to improve and would benefit from more programmatic support.

Vermont has an opportunity to make a transition that sets up a future system of resources that allows all VT early childhood education and child care programs to offer and be recognized for their achievements in providing high quality early childhood education—and this would be a win for all of VT's young children—**but** if the transition to a new system is plagued by lack of information, confusing messages, doesn't include what the field knows to be best practices, and isn't meticulously planned and coordinated, you risk alienating VT's child care programs, a loss of more workforce (as some throw their hands up), and you lose the opportunity to create a meaningful and equitable system that could have long term positive impact.

Thank you.