

TESTIMONY

Testimony To: House Human Services Committee
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Subject: QRIS language revision in Universal Prekindergarten Education Statute
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Proposed revision to Title 16. Regarding Prequalified Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) Programs

[16 V.S.A. § 829](#)

(c) Prequalification. Pursuant to rules jointly developed and overseen by the Secretaries of Education and of Human Services and adopted by the State Board pursuant to 3 V.S.A. chapter 25, the Agencies jointly may determine that a private or public provider of prekindergarten education is qualified for purposes of this section and include the provider in a publicly accessible database of prequalified providers. At a minimum, the rules shall define the process by which a provider applies for and maintains prequalification status, shall identify the minimum quality standards for prequalification, and shall include the following requirements:

(1) A program of prekindergarten education, whether provided by a school district or a private provider, shall have received:

(A) National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation; or

(B) ~~at least four stars in the Department for Children and Families' STARS system with a plan to get to at least two points in each of the five arenas;~~ be assessed at a quality level in Vermont's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) agreed up by the Secretaries of Education and of Human Services; or

(C) ~~three stars in the STARS system have a~~ has developed a plan, approved by the designees of the Commissioner for Children and Families and the Secretary of Education, to achieve the agreed upon quality level four or more stars with at least two points in each of the five arenas in no more than three years, ~~and the provider has met intermediate milestones.~~

STARS (Step Ahead Recognition System) Basics:

Vermont's Step Ahead Recognition System ([STARS](#)) is the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). A QRIS is a framework for recognizing, improving, and communicating the extent to which early care and education programs and providers demonstrate specified indicators of high-quality practice. A QRIS also provides a clear articulation of steps programs can take to progress from compliance with licensing regulations to attaining higher standards of quality ([STARS Standards](#)).



STARS was developed in 2003 and provides a quality framework for licensed and registered child care centers and preschools, family child care homes, and school-age programs. As of 2019, all regulated child care programs are automatically enrolled in STARS. It is important to note that providers must maintain good standing with [Child Care Licensing Regulations](#) to operate in Vermont. Child Care Licensing Regulations are rules that are minimum requirements established to protect the health and safety of Vermont's children in out-of-home care and ensure that children in child care programs in Vermont are provided with wholesome growth and educational experiences. Participation in STARS is to assess additional quality standards above and beyond regulations.

In 2014, STARS language was included in the passage of Act 166, Vermont's Universal PreK Law. Over the past eight years, STARS has undergone an extensive validation and evaluation study which identified gaps and strengths within the current system. STARS Evolution and Oversight committees, that included cross sector state and local stakeholders, met on a continuing basis to further expand the dialogue in order to promote continuous improvements that are valid and reliable within the STARS system. This is the first step to allow for STARS revision process to occur so that any anticipated requirements for UPK programs will be assessed at a quality level agreed upon by the Secretaries of Education and of Human Services as in proposed statute language.

Legislation Summary

Act 166 requires the establishment of a system by which the AOE and the AHS shall jointly administer, monitor and evaluate publicly funded PreK education programs to promote optimal outcomes for children and to collect data that will inform future decisions. The Agencies are required to report annually to the General Assembly in January. The Agencies have established and implemented the state's Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) Accountability and Continuous Improvement Monitoring System (ACIS). UPK ACIS monitors over 420 prequalified public and private PreK programs to ensure compliance with Act 166 requirements. An overview presentation of the UPK ACIS monitoring system was shared with legislators in January 2019. UPK ACIS monitoring includes review of public and private PreK program STARS status. To allow for future revisions of STARS Standards to be promulgated, the proposed statute language revision is highly recommended at this time. The Agencies will continue to collaborate to ensure that during STARS revision process current UPK programs may retain STARS status and any public or private programs seeking UPK approval may continue to apply through the joint agency prequalification process. It is important to note that over 90% of children benefitting from publicly funded PreK programs, were enrolled in a 4- or 5-STAR program.

It is imperative to have the [education statute](#) align with the Child Development Division's Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS) so that there are no unintended consequences as the program is revised. The way the statute is currently written greatly limits the Child Development Division's ability to make any alternations to the program without risking non-compliance or loss of status for UPK programs. That being said, this language change does not change STARS or any of the [STARS Standards](#) (Rules), it simply allows the ability to create a revision proposal and begin a formal promulgation process. Should the language not be

updated, UPK programs could risk losing their UPK status and funding associated. For the last decade, the Child Development Division has received feedback from the field requesting amendments and changes. In turn, the Child Development Division has offered technical assistance, and in recent years extensions on program assessments, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), as well as associated paperwork for providers that are unable to manage the administrative components of the program.

The proposed changes will support development of a system that allows providers the flexibility they need, the guardrails to align with best practices, and the technical assistance to support programs of any size. The Child Development Division's goal is to update the system so that programs have a system that reflects their needs and the State has a system that reflects best practice.

Resources

[Vermont STARS Validation and Evaluation Study 2015-2017 - Child Trends](#)

[ORIS Resource Guide | ORIS Resource Guide \(hhs.gov\)](#)

VELS

Vermont's Early Learning Standards, birth through Grade 3, represent common goals for development and learning during the early childhood years. VELS was approved by the State Board of Education in August 2015 to provide a roadmap of intentional teaching by describing, in detail, developmentally appropriate benchmarks across nine domain areas from birth through age 8. VELS inform how curriculum and instruction should be tailored to meet each and every child's development and growth through play-based routines and activities. VELS are aligned and incorporate Developmentally Appropriate Practices (NAEYC); Early Head Start and Head Start Performance Standards; and the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and Mathematics, the Next Generation Science Standards and the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS).

VELS is a requirement under Act 166