Vermont STARS Validation Study
Key Findings

Vermont's STep Ahead Recognition System (STARS) is the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). 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. Vermont STARS awards points of recognition for program practices in five arenas of quality: Regulatory History; Staff Qualifications and Professional Development; Families and Community; Program Practices; and Administration.

As a recipient of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), Vermont is committed to evaluating STARS as part of an ongoing process of continuous quality improvement. Child Trends, in partnership with the state of Vermont, conducted validation and evaluation studies of STARS from 2015-2017. The **validation study** measures the extent to which quality ratings assigned in STARS are meaningful and accurate. The **evaluation study** gathers feedback about how well the rating system is working for providers and other key stakeholders. **This brief summarizes findings from the validation study.**

Highlights

The purpose of the validation study was to measure the **extent to which the design of Vermont STARS quality framework supports a valid assessment of program quality.**

- **STARS quality components align with many other state QRIS, with a few noted differences related to health and safety, teacher-child interactions, continuous quality improvement, and cultural and linguistic diversity.**

- **Quality practices are not consistent across rating levels, as programs can choose the arenas in which they want to obtain points for a STARS rating.** All programs, but particularly one star and two stars programs, tend to earn all the points available in the Regulatory History and Administration arenas and earn less or no points in the other three arenas (Staff Qualifications and Professional Development, Families and Community, and Program Practices).

- **The rating process used to designate a STARS rating aligns with some but not all recommended best practices.** For example, some of the quality arenas, particularly the Families and Community and Program Practices arenas, rely predominantly on self-reported information, which may lead to some inaccuracies when assigning program ratings.

- **Based on the sample of providers who participated in this study, there was inconsistent evidence to support the extent to which the Vermont STARS rating structure differentiates higher and lower quality programs.** While there were statistically significant differences found on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) and the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R) between higher and lower-rated programs, statistically significant differences were not identified between rating levels on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R).[1]

---

[1] The Environment Rating Scale is commonly used in QRIS to rate or validate the quality of early childhood classrooms. The scale is structured for different care settings including infant-toddler classrooms (measured

Recommendations

Incorporate specified best practices in the STARS rating review process.

Improve self-reported indicators. Too many self-reported submission requirements may skew the STARS system's ability to accurately assess program quality. To strengthen these requirements Vermont can develop rubrics for indicators for which written summaries or self-reported documentation is the best or only way to verify the activity. Vermont can also revise submission requirements for indicators that rely primarily on self-reported documentation, to the extent possible, to require more direct documentation.

Develop manuals for program verifiers. Vermont should also develop an internal rating review manual for program verifiers that articulates the rating review process from start (i.e., what to do when a program is ready for a rating review) to finish (i.e., how is the program notified about its rating). This process will help ensure the reliability across independent reviewers and can help identify potential challenges that verifiers may commonly encounter.

Designate a lead STARS assessor. While the training and reliability process for STARS assessors aligns with best practices, Vermont might consider designating one individual as the lead observer or "anchor," especially if the state is considering incorporating new tools such as the ECERS-3 into the rating system. In addition, Vermont should consider reinforcing the ITERS-R and FCCERS-R training the STARS assessors received, with tool developers providing additional ongoing training.

Enhance the design of STARS with revised quality components and point requirements.

Consider revising the quality components. STARS was well aligned with many other QRIS in the quality components included in the system. However, STARS could be enhanced by revising the existing quality components and exploring the potential for new quality components related to health and safety, teacher-child interactions, continuous quality improvement, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Consider revising requirements for points within quality arenas. Currently, most programs are achieving most of the possible points available in the Regulatory History and Administration arenas. As a result, these quality arenas are not functioning well to differentiate programs along a continuum of quality. One possibility is to embed these requirements in the entry levels of the STARS system. Also consider that without a requirement that programs obtain at least a minimum level of points in each quality arena, there can be a degree of variance in the quality practices across STARS levels. For example, it may be possible to obtain three stars without obtaining any points in the Program Practices arena.

Assess the strengths and potential challenges of the STARS structure.

The independent assessment of observational quality in STARS programs suggests the STARS system may be working for infant/toddler classrooms and family child care homes, but may not be working as well for center-based preschool programs/classrooms. This validation study provides valuable data to Vermont to inform future conversations about the strengths of STARS, which can continue to serve as a foundation of the system, and possible areas for continued quality improvement.

---

by the ITERS-R), preschool classrooms (measured by ECERS-R), and family-based child care (measured by FCCERS-R).

Methodology and Data

Child Trends conducted four research activities as part of the validation study.

- **Quality Arena and Indicator Crosswalk.** Compared the concepts of quality included in STARS to other QRIS to identify aspects of quality not included in STARS and the implications for STARS;

- **Distribution of Points Awarded.** Used administrative data to analyze the distribution of the STARS points (which are associated with a set of quality practices that programs demonstrate) and the capacity of the current rating structure to produce accurate ratings;

- **STARS Verification Process.** Examined the reliability of the STARS verification and rating process to determine the degree to which the rating process is fair; and

- **STARS Rating Structure.** Analyzed program quality using the Environment Rating Scale to determine the extent to which the STARS ratings are accurate and meaningful.