

Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care

December 17, 2015

MINUTES

Location: 4th Floor Conference Room, Pavilion Building, Montpelier

10:15 - Meeting Called to Order, *Charlotte Ancel (Chair)*

Charlotte and Jess offered updates since the October meeting: Since the last meeting the Permanent Fund has been named the blind funder of the Blue Ribbon Commission. The Permanent Fund is one of the state's largest private philanthropic organizations. Over the last few years, the Permanent Fund has invested in the early childhood community, outreach programs, and have helped bring child care issues and gaps to the forefront. Prior to the genesis of the Blue Ribbon Commission, their board identified their highest priority as **access to high quality care**. They now have a 10-year plan (2015-2025) to spend down their resources to make it happen. Because of a tight budget year, there wasn't general fund money allocated to fund the Commission, and the Permanent Fund stepped up to fund the work - in order to provide the Commission resources to be staffed and engage with expert research contractors to help it accomplish its mission. The Permanent Fund will not have any authority over decision making processes related to the expenditure of the funds made available to the Blue Ribbon Commission, nor will it have any oversight authority over the findings or final recommendations of the Commission. The Permanent Fund was clear throughout the legislative process and discussion of the formation of the Blue Ribbon Commission that it strongly supports a statewide discussion on defining high-quality, affordable early care and learning for Vermont's children. The Permanent Fund believes that the Blue Ribbon Commission can play a crucial role in pulling relevant stakeholders together to lead the discussion, so the Permanent Fund has invested in helping the Commission dig into the difficult but important question of how do we afford quality care as a State?

10:30 - StARS Presentation

Jan Walker - *Director of Statewide Systems & Community, Child Development Division*

Jan presented to the Commission the following background information about Vermont's StARS program:

What is StARS: StARS (Step Ahead Recognition System) is Vermont's quality recognition system for child care, pre-school and after school programs. Nationally programs like this are known as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). Registered and licensed family child care homes, licensed early childhood centers, pre-schools, head start locations, after school and non-recurring care programs all can, and do, participate in the program currently.

StARS is informed by research and continues to be developed. The on-going research and development of the program explores what indicators are appropriate and helpful for children and families that will make a difference to child outcomes. Stars recognition at any level is a 3-year term once awarded to programs.

The StARS oversight committee meets monthly to identify how the program can be improved and where there are areas that deserve tweaking. Science in child development and brain science informs the both the Committee and the program.

How Vermont Compares Nationally: Vermont is not unique in having this rating system- this is a national trend and is reinforced by the Federal Government. Vermont's StARS program is fairly robust and considered incredibly mature compared to other states in the nation - as the program has been in place since 2004. There are still a few states in infancy, and still in the planning stages of developing a QRIS.

How Programs Apply: Each StARS application is customized to the program applying. Vermont's StARS builds upon already existing licensing standards - it does not replace it.

How Quality is Assessed:

The program identifies 5 areas known as "arenas of action". Applicants must qualify and meet a set of standards in each arena to be initially rated, and move up in the program. The arenas are:

- **Staff Qualification**
- **Families and Community**
- **Program Practices Arena**
- **Regulatory History Arena**
- **Administration Arena**

Brenda Schramm - *Former Family Child Care Provider - Vermont Birth-to-5 - Represents the Oversight Committee*

Brenda spoke to the importance of StARS, and gave some insight as to how the peer-community works as mentors for new applicants. Brenda identified StARS as being Important for providers because it allows individuals to get a sense of where their program fits in the spectrum, and allows them to identify how they can improve. Providers and peers help each other with applications, and have built a community around it. Brenda has helped nearly 100 people apply - both licensed centers, school programs. Brenda believes stars conveys a positive message to parents, and helps providers create a plan for the future.

Sonja Raymond – *Director of Licensed Early Childhood & Afterschool Program, VAEYC Representative*

Sonja offered the perspective to the group of someone who used StARS to leverage her into getting her program nationally accredited. Sonja started in child care fifteen years ago owning a Center, and complying, at first, with NAYCE accreditations. Sonja told the group that she used STARS as a lever to apply for accreditation. Sonja has also been a mentor for several years helping individuals and programs. As a program owner, she also told the group that parents are very savvy about the new systems, and parents ask questions about the rating of the programs they are putting their children into. The StARS rating system is valuable and is something that people really look for.

Tierney O'Meara - *Parent, StARS Coordinator/Administrator*

Tierney shared with the group her perspective from not only being a single parent with children in high quality care, but also a StARS coordinator. Tierney shared that parents value high quality, and parents want quality for their children. Parents look for programs that offer healthy settings, social and emotional development, enriching engaging activities, and a place where

parents can go to work and not have to worry about who is taking care of their children. StARS was an important resource for her, and she views the program as an extension of her family.

She identified StARS as a method to assess and communicate the level of quality for early child care and after school settings.

What Are Stars Coordinators? The main job of a coordinator is to monitor how well programs meet key indicators (arenas), verify on going compliance for programs, manage data, help individuals get applications in and move up the process. Coordinators work with community partners, the Agency of Education, Let's Grow Kids, and other philanthropic partners as well. Coordinators attend national QRIS meetings, communicate about Vermont's program, and bring back from those meetings innovative ideas and knowledge of national trends.

After the presentations the Commissioners were able to ask questions. The following is a summary of the questions and answers:

Q: What are the barriers and challenges to participating?

A: There are personal barriers with individuals who don't want to participate and also financial barriers. Access to higher education is also a barrier - whether that be linked to financial hardship or time constraints. There are hurdles, but there are resources available. for example: there are no fees to apply to StARS, and there are financial incentives for individuals who reach the "next level".

Q: What is access like for more vulnerable families?

A: Financially, some families are eligible for subsidies, and as StARS rating improves there is a higher reimbursement from the subsidy. For some programs that may mean parents have a higher co-pay or no co-pay at all. The accessibility to programs varies by region - in some regions there are more options, other more rural regions have less. There is participation around the state in the STARS program.

Sonja Raymond – *Director of Licensed Early Childhood & Afterschool Program, VAEYC Representative*

Sonja introduced the national accreditation system and how it relates to Vermont's StARS program

The National Accreditation System is a research based standards and criteria program for childcare providers. There are rigorous expectations and all individuals participating must commit to excellence and continuous improvement. There are 10 standards, and a set or 417 criteria among those 10. A provider must meet 80% of the expectations in each of the 10 standards to achieve accreditation. Sonja noted that Vermont is the only state that reimburses 100% of accreditation application fees.

Melissa Riegel-Garret - *Pre-K Coordinator, Agency of Education*

Act 166 is Vermont's universal pre- k law, and it allows for 10 hours of care for all children. The law identifies quality both programmatic and teaching standards. The standards are important for Vermont, in that we do have the mixed delivery system - the standards are important because it

allows the state to monitor and make sure we have quality happening regardless of the type of delivery system. Currently there are 318 pre-qualified programs, 190 community-based (60%), and 128 public schools (40%).

Melissa offered her thoughts to the group about how to measure “high quality”: She indicated that quality and the quality of a program is directly linked to the benefit and salary package of the teachers. Teacher retention relies on competitive wages, and there are parts of the state that are plagued by turn over - Melissa also commented that the Agency of Education has been seeing inequity around transportation and access for children and families in different parts of the state.

12:00pm - Group Discussion about “high quality” and defining “high quality”

Charlotte Ancel posed the question to the group: What is quality? The following are the thoughts that were given by the Commissioners:

- Vermont currently has the quality infrastructure and standards - but the Commission is interested in knowing the **outcomes** of the 3, 4, and 5 star programs. How do the “stars” translate to child development and child preparation/kindergarten readiness?
- The Commission agreed that quality has to include opening up access to Vermonter - and in that there are two parallel tracks (quality and access). Part of the cost should be investing in the system and helping providers move up in “quality”
- It is an economic development driver to have quality programs in all regions. Communities and businesses have to be thinking about this when they are recruiting - and is there an innovative way for them to contribute to the cost?
- When defining quality, the group needs to consider ensuring socioeconomic diversity in programs
- The group briefly discussed the scale of Vermont’s programs and what the power of scale is. It is important, for example, that programs have access to mental health support on the front end creating healthy environments. We have an obligation to make mental health support available - yet it is hard to provide that in small settings, so one of the issues is scale. The turnover is concentrated in areas
- The group discussed defining “high quality” as five stars - and setting the bar as high as possible when creating a definition. Other members of the Commission and some members of public suggested setting the bar even higher and using national accreditation and head start standards.
- There is a common acceptance that five stars is an “indicator” of quality and is leverage to national accreditation. StARS is just one of those indicators. The one challenge that isn’t addressed in StARS is wages and benefits - it is a huge cost driver, and the high costs make it unaffordable to families.
- The group discussed how not to forget the affluent families - because there are families on waiting lists that don’t have access but can afford it. Which led to the discussion of capacity.
- A member of the public offered to the group a suggestion to include nutrition into the definition of “quality” and to consider things that may be costly, - but would help improve quality.
- The group discussed briefly shared services - and creating a way to look at the population distribution, and help create business models that work for the culture and population of the state and the region.

- The Commission decided to let an ad hoc sub-committee form that will meet to flesh out what the group discussed and put together a fluid definition of “high quality” that the group can use for purposes of research. The group will consider components of quality, and will help create a picture of quality that includes the components so that the group can cost-out everything. The Commission decided there needs to be a range in the definition and the cost-out - a per pupil cost and an actual program cost. The definition will insist on continual improvement - not static, but a definition that captures the notion of “striving”.

Action Items for the next meeting:

- Small working group - come up with and distill down a definition of quality before the January meeting.
 - Members: Laurel, Reeva, Paul Behrman
- RFP finalization and presentation.

12:30pm – Meeting Adjourned, **Charlotte Ancel (Chair)**