



UPDATE: Summary of December 17, 2015
Meeting of the Blue Ribbon Commission

In its third meeting on December 17, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care moved toward a definition of “quality” in child care and agreed to a work plan for 2016.

The discussion of quality began with presentations about the systems in place to assess and recognize quality in child care. Commissioners heard from state administrators and from child care providers about the STep Ahead Recognition System—commonly referred to as STARS—that now has participation from approximately 75 percent of Vermont’s regulated providers.

“Brain science informs our standards,” said Jan Walker, director of Workforce Development and Quality Enhancement for the Child Development Division of the Vermont Department for Children and Families. Walker described STARS as Vermont’s pioneering version of a program that is similar to quality programs that have been adopted in most U.S. states.

Commissioners heard from other speakers about parents’ experience with STARS and how the majority of both home-based and center-based providers have come to join the program—sometimes after initial skepticism.

“I was not always a fan of STARS,” said former home-based provider Brenda Schramm, who now helps mentor home-based providers as they make their way into the quality system. “Then I realized that what matters is whether you’re in or out of the system.”

Once Schramm started working her way up the STARS system, other providers noticed and asked how she did it. This led to informal mentoring—and eventually to a position as a formal mentor with Vermont Birth to Five, an organization that provides training and assistance to child care providers (and sister organization to Let’s Grow Kids). “Once a program has buy in about STARS and conveys the value of STARS to families, everyone is excited and the programs begin tackling more and more things that make for higher quality.”

Another part of quality measurement in Vermont—used along with or instead of STARS—is accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Sonja Raymond, director of the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VAEYC), described the close connections between STARS and NAEYC. Raymond noted that STARS is both a useful indicator of quality and provides a pathway for programs to work toward national accreditation.

“Parents are really becoming savvy about quality and are asking programs how many STARS they have,” Raymond said.

STARS administrator Tierney O’Meara, speaking as a parent herself, put it this way: “Parents value quality and want quality for our children. We want our children to have healthy social and emotional development.”

Following these presentations and a discussion of Act 166's requirements regarding STARS participation or national accreditation, BRC Chair Charlotte Ancel asked commissioners and other attendees to share their questions and views regarding how to define quality. Commissioners agreed that, for the sake of determining what it costs to provide quality child care, the definition of quality should be set at the highest levels.

Ancel summarized the commission's discussion and next steps this way: "We will have a small working group that will propose a definition of quality, using the existing metrics we have heard about today but not limited to those metrics."

Commissioners also agreed to a more detailed work schedule leading up to their report in November 2016, based on the following themes for monthly meetings:

- January: Quality/How much quality costs
- February/March: How much quality costs
- April/May: Defining "affordable"
- June/July: How to pay for quality child care/Innovative funding solutions
- August/September: Recommendations from consultant
- October/November: Review and present final report

The commission's plan also lays out committee work for each month—including hiring an administrator and research consultants, as well as planning for public forums tentatively slated for spring.

While the commission does not have state funding for its work, Ancel reported that the Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children (parent organization to Let's Grow Kids) has provided a grant to support the work of the commission, including hiring the administrator and consultants. Ancel noted that the commission is independent of the Permanent Fund, which has no representatives on the commission.

Additional information about this and other BRC meetings is available on the new official BRC page on the Building Bright Futures website: <http://buildingbrightfutures.org/blue-ribbon-commission/>

In addition to reporting on the progress of the BRC through e-mails and web updates, Let's Grow Kids is live-tweeting BRC meetings from @LetsGrowKids.