

Early Care and Education in Vermont

Julia Coffey, BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES



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Many Vermont families face challenges in trying to access affordable, high-quality child care.

Vermont is generally considered a good place for children. It is admired for its environmentally conscious culture and its good public education. It measures well on an important predictor of income stability, since two-parent households account for more than half of households where there are children under age 18. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Kids Count 2014* ranked Vermont second in the nation for overall child well-being.¹

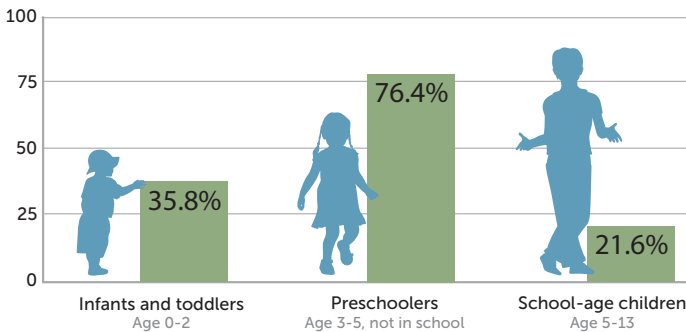
Where Children Spend Their Day

Nevertheless, a key ingredient for a thoroughly child-friendly environment—high-quality child care—is out of reach for many Vermont families that need it. The demand for child care is high, given that many Vermont parents work outside the home, more than 70 percent of children are under 6, and almost 80 percent are between 6 and 17.²

The cost can stretch budgets. In 2014, the child-care cost for a two-parent working family with two children was \$20,280. Two-parent working families with incomes between \$47,700 (200 percent of the poverty level) and \$82,047 (the state median income) must direct a high share of their earnings—28 percent to 40 percent—to child care.³ Some families simply cannot afford it.

Although enrollment and attendance data are not available across all settings in Vermont, December 2014 estimates suggest that two groups of children are not adequately served—the infant and toddler group and the school-age group. (See “Estimated Enrollment in Regulated Nonschool Care and Education.”)

Estimated Enrollment in Regulated Nonschool Care and Education



Source: Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families, Agency of Human Services, State of Vermont.

Only 36 percent of infants and toddlers and 22 percent of school-age children are enrolled in regulated care and education settings (such as Early Head Start programs, Head Start, public prekindergarten, private licensed centers, and registered homes). Families are often forced to turn to lower-quality options.

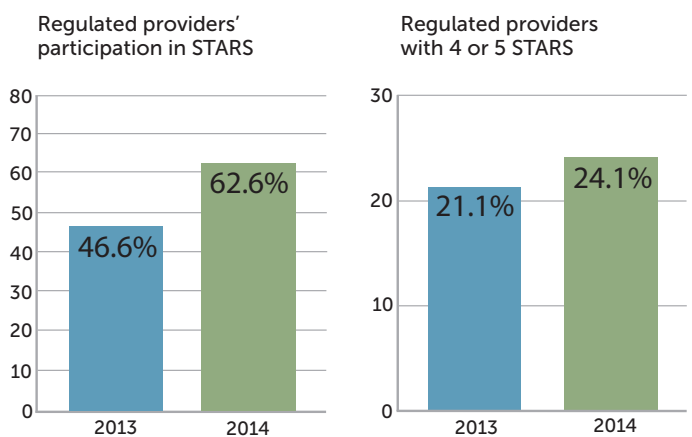
The effects of program quality are felt beyond the child and the family. The quality of early-learning experiences also affects later social expenditures, the achievement gap, and the availability of a well-educated workforce and citizenry. Indeed, high-quality early-childhood programs have been shown to be the most cost-effective way to ensure the healthy development of children in poverty, offering the greatest returns to society.⁴

Fortunately, there are two heartening trends in early-learning experiences in Vermont: the increasing participation in the quality-

assurance program STARS (STep Ahead Recognition System) and the passage of Act 166. (See “Vermont’s Participation in STARS.”) Both initiatives are jointly administered by the Vermont Agency of Human Services, the Department for Children and Families, and the Agency of Education.⁵

STARS is a system for recognizing and improving quality. Child-care and education programs may apply for recognition in areas such as regulatory compliance, staff qualifications and training, program practices (includes the environment and overall support of children’s learning and development), and administration. Act 166 requires that programs receiving public education funding for preschool-age children must be nationally accredited and have four or five stars—or have a plan in place to achieve them.

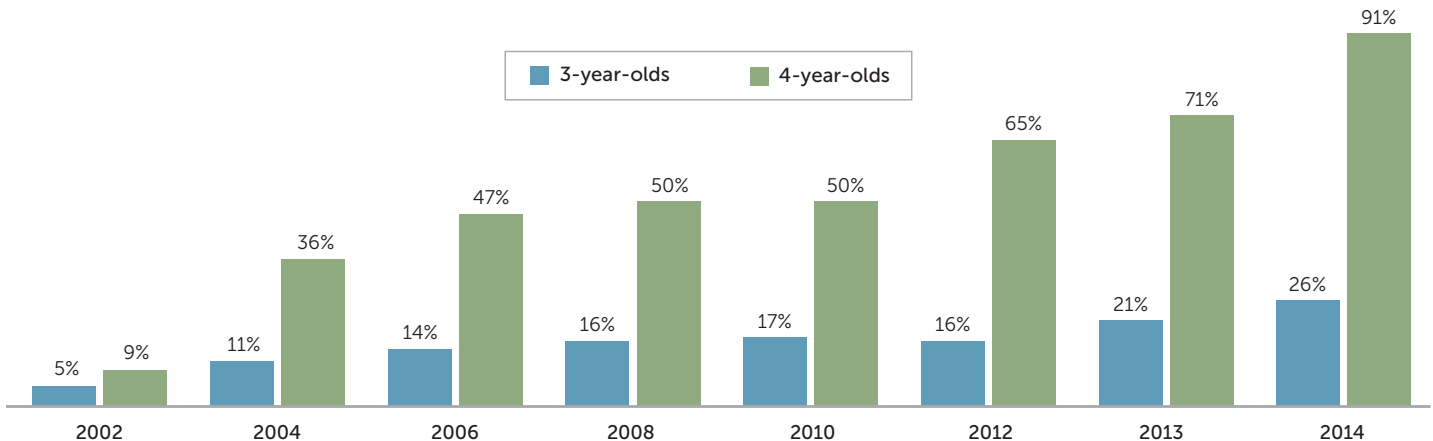
Vermont’s Participation in STARS



Source: <http://vermontinsights.org/indicators/report/4>.

Positive change is happening. Since 2002, nearly every year has seen an increase in the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in publicly funded prekindergarten programs. (See “Publicly Funded Pre-K Enrollment in Vermont.”)

Publicly Funded Pre-K Enrollment in Vermont



Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2014” (report, National Institute of Early Education Research, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey), <http://nieer.org/yearbook>.

Honoring Successes

One important early-education outcome is a child's readiness to learn upon entering kindergarten. Readiness is measured in Vermont by the Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS). Kindergarten teachers from around the state are asked to complete the KRS for each student during the fall of every school year.⁶ The assessment relies on the teacher's observations during the first few weeks of kindergarten.⁷

The KRS consists of 30 factors across domains called "Social and Emotional Development," "Approaches to Learning," "Communication," "Cognitive Development and General Knowledge," and "Physical Development and Wellness." The teacher rates each child's skills on the first 27 items as "beginning," "practicing," or "performing independently" and then judges if hunger, illness, or fatigue seems to be inhibiting the child's learning on the rest.

In the 2013–2014 school year, 49 percent of Vermont children were kindergarten ready in all areas of health and development, a 13 percentage point decrease from the 62 percent of children who were ready in school year 2012–2013.

Although the drop looked worrisome, it was difficult to ascertain the story behind it. The Agency of Education pointed to the increase in participation, specifically of children eligible for free and reduced lunch or receiving special education services—and it noted changes in data-collection methods and how blank responses were handled. Kindergarten readiness in Vermont rebounded to 52 percent

in the 2014–2015 survey.⁸

Vermont's KRS is reported by over 80 percent of kindergarten teachers in public schools. Policymakers use the results to assess progress toward systemic goals for early learning and development, and kindergarten teachers find it helps them tailor their kindergarten curriculum to the needs of their students.

In 2014, Governor Shumlin unveiled Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan to guide the individual and collective actions of Vermonters.⁹ An ambitious statewide public-education campaign called Let's Grow Kids! was also launched to create widespread understanding by the public that children's success is built from the youngest age and that quality early experiences are a necessary foundation for learning, skill building, and social-emotional development.

Wasting no time, this campaign has begun by working closely with already existing local civic networks—among them the Building Bright Futures statewide network of 12 early-childhood councils—and many organizations, businesses, and individuals. Philanthropic leadership to fund the 10-year effort comes from the Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children and two longtime partners, the A.D. Henderson Foundation and the Turrell Fund.¹⁰

Also in 2014, Vermont was awarded three large federal grants. The first was a \$36.9 million Race to the Top Early Learning

Challenge grant targeting early-childhood systems improvements and funded by the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. The second was a \$33 million Preschool Expansion grant from the US Department of Education targeting pre-K programs for low-income 4-year-olds to further improve quality, increase capacity, and expand to a full day. Finally, the US Office of Head Start made awards to two Vermont Head Start programs, increasing full-day, full-year programming slots for infants and toddlers from low-income families.



Our small state aims to be a laboratory for the nation in finding the right formula for success in child care and early education. We believe success will come from the strong leadership of Governor Peter Shumlin, collaboration between Vermont state agencies in charge of education and human services, alliances between the public and private sectors, and backing from leading philanthropies. The array of partnerships will be pivotal in advancing the early care, health, and education of Vermont's youngest citizens.

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Endnotes

- ¹ *2014 Kids Count Data Book* (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014), <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-2014kidscountdatabook-2014.pdf#page=18-20>.
- ² "How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families?" (report, Building Bright Futures, Williston, Vermont, 2015), http://cdn.buildingbrightfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/HAVYCF_3-30-15_web.pdf.
- ³ Analysis by Building Bright Futures using the Vermont's Child Care Provider Rate Schedule, <http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/cdd/care/fap/CC%20FAP%20Rate%20Schedule%20Effective%20November%202013.pdf>.
- ⁴ Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, "Early Education's Big Dividends," *Communities & Banking* 19, no. 2 (spring 2008): http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2008/spring/sp08_C&B_final_021908.pdf.
- ⁵ See http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/cdd/stars/STARS_Brochure.pdf.
- ⁶ Vermont has no assessment used across all early childhood settings prior to kindergarten, although state agencies are working closely with private providers to develop a short list of evidence-based assessments.
- ⁷ "Vermont's Statewide Reports on Kindergarten Readiness," http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-Kindergarten_Readiness_Report_2013_2014.pdf.
- ⁸ See <http://www.vermontinsights.org/indicators/report/5>.
- ⁹ See <http://www.vermontearlychildhoodalliance.org/childrens-agenda/early-childhood-framework-action-plan>.
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.permanentfund.org/about-us>.