
Board of Early Care and Learning

Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting
Thursday, November 18, 2021 – 9:00 a.m.
Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE – East Tower
Oak Conference Room and via GoToMeeting
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
Amy M. Jacobs, Commissioner

Meeting Minutes

Board Members

Phil Davis (Chair), Kristy Beam, Jen Bennecke, Melissa Boekhaus, Susan Harper, Joanna Hill, Kathy Howell (Secretary), Kristin Morrissey, Luann Purcell, Cristina Washell, Karla Zisook

Public Guests

Uzma Azhar, Hanah Goldberg, Beverly Johnson, Blanche Lamb, Maggie Reeves, Cindy Spann

DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner
Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Supports
Dennis Brice, Chief Information Officer
Reg Griffin, Chief Communications Officer
Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs
Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships
Rian Ringsrud, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration
Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services
Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer
Catherine Broussard, CCS Process and Policy Director
Glenda Davis-Canteen, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator NW
Faith Duncan, Pre-K Field Operations Director
Rebecca Ellis, Practice and Support Services Director, Instructional Supports
Shayna Funke, Lead Research and Policy Analyst
Kristin Goetz, Professional Learning Specialist
Jessica Guarneros, Research Analyst
Randy Hudgins, Director of Research and Policy Analysis
Melinda Knowles, Quality Rated Assessor
Rachale LaVoie, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator SE
Laura Lucas, Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Director
Barbara McWethy, Workforce Support Manager, Professional Learning
Christi Moore, Professional Learning Director
Sara Myers, Quality Rated Assessor
Jill O'Meara, Community Partnerships and Projects Manager
Martine Powe, Quality Rated Assessor
Laura Reid, Professional Learning Community Specialist
Anne Rein, Departmental Writer/Editor
April Rogers, Director, CCS Enforcement Operations
Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director
Angela Shelton, Professional Learning Specialist

Marcie Singletary, Standards and Assessment Specialist
Hannah Smith, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator SE
Margrett Stephens, Professional Learning Specialist
Sonja Steptoe, QIP Communications and Outreach Manager
Robin Stevens, Director of Human Resources
Diane Swift, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator, Central Georgia
Laura Wagner, Director, QIP Policy and Partnerships
Mark Waits, Interim Board Liaison
Bridgette Washington, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator CW
Liz Young, Government Relations Director

The November 18, 2021, meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held online via GoToWebinar.

1. Call to Order

At 9:06 a.m. Board Chair Phil Davis called the meeting to order. He introduced new Board members Karla Zisook representing the 4th Congressional District and Joanna Hill representing the 10th Congressional District. He also announced that Kristy Beam has been reappointed to the Board representing the 6th Congressional District.

Ms. Zisook introduced herself. She is an Instructional Coach at College Heights Early Learning Center in the City Schools of Decatur. She stated she is thrilled to be part of the Board, adding, “The work you do is amazing.” Ms. Beam said she is excited to be back on the Board after moving into the 6th Congressional District. Ms. Hill introduced herself. She retired from the child care business in July 2021 after 27 years and looks forward to being an advocate for children, families, and providers.

2. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Mr. Davis asked for a motion to accept the meeting agenda. Ms. Harper moved to accept, and Ms. Hill seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Mr. Davis asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the August 26, 2021, meeting. Ms. Purcell moved to approve, and Ms. Bennecke seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

3. DECAL Staff Reports

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency’s work.

a. Commissioner’s Update

Commissioner Amy Jacobs gave an update on the current projects funded by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), \$403.6 million, and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), more than \$1.5 billion. STABLE 4ward will distribute more than \$800 million to licensed child care providers over approximately 23 months. The CAPS program will serve an additional 10,000 children and increase the Quality Rated bonus payments by 15% for each star level. The department will also make two additional rounds of POWER payments to early learning professionals, and a broad stakeholder engagement project is underway to solicit feedback from stakeholders about how the remaining federal funds should be spent.

Mr. Davis asked whether there are any statistics available about the number of providers who have remained in business through the pandemic. Commissioner Jacobs said that the federal funding DECAL has distributed has achieved its purpose, and there are basically the same number of licensed providers as there were before the pandemic. She added that providers continue to suffer from low enrollment. Enrollment is down from pre-pandemic levels by an average of 18%. Mr. Davis asked if we have an estimate of how many children would be eligible for CAPS if unlimited funds were available. The Commissioner responded that while that

number is hard to establish, she estimates that before the November 1 expansion, CAPS was serving about 14% of the state's eligible population. Ms. Morrissey said she was excited to see the increase in the number of children served and asked what will happen after the relief funding has been spent. The Commissioner confirmed that CAPS will eventually have to return to serving only 50,000 children and said that the department will manage that process by natural attrition so that no child is disrupted during their minimum 12 months of eligibility.

The Commissioner announced the Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year (TOTY), LaNita Carey from Jackson Creek Academy in Lilburn and Stephanie Curington from Kings Chapel Elementary in Perry. She also announced the finalists for Georgia's Early Childhood Educator of the Year. For Infant TOTY, finalists are Diana Black from Pookie Bear Learning in Savannah and Sharon Floyd from Sheltering Arms in Norcross. For Toddler TOTY, finalists are Maria Claudia Ortega from My Little Geniuses in Marietta and Kayla Anderson from Greenbriar Preschool in Evans. For Preschool TOTY, finalists are Whitney Carder from Cleveland Academy in Cleveland and Hannah Beth Reeves from Academy for Little People in Chickamauga. The finalists will be scored on classroom observations and interviews. The department hopes to announce the winners in December. Mr. Davis thanked Commissioner Jacobs for her presentation.

b. Finance and Administration Update

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that the agency's budget for SFY2022 is just more than \$1 billion, and expenses for the first quarter, which ended September 30, are on track with the budget. Over the next few months his team will amend the federal funds to cover the projects funded by CRRSA and ARPA, bringing the agency's budget for this fiscal year to about \$1.5 billion. Mr. Ringsrud also announced that the Summer Food Service Program has been rebranded as Happy Helpings to attract more sponsors and families with the goal of serving more meals.

c. Child Care Services Update

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services Pam Stevens updated the Board about the SHARE grants for school-age programs. When schools closed early in the pandemic, child care providers stepped up to provide virtual learning for school aged children. Although schools have reopened, some districts have incorporated digital learning days into their calendars; consequently, child care providers continue to play a role in educating school aged children. Licensed child care learning centers, licensed family child care learning homes, and license-exempt providers who serve children with CAPS scholarships were eligible for the grants. The main components of the grant were providing training on best practices for school-age care and helping providers upgrade their facilities. CCS approved 1,382 SHARE grants to providers in 122 counties. The awards were based on provider capacity and ranged from \$1,075 for family child care learning homes to \$4,300 for child care centers serving more than 200 students. CCS used the grant application process to survey providers about the types of support they need. Grant recipients are serving 48,067 children ages 5 to 12. More than 60% of school-age teachers earn less than \$11.25 per hour, and 25% earn less than \$10.00. School-age programs commonly offer crafts, time for homework, and sports and recreation. Academic remediation is one area where CCS hopes to provide more support. Remediation is not commonly offered in after school programs, but it could benefit students who are struggling. Providers who serve only school age children are not eligible to participate in Quality Rated. To promote quality, all SHARE grant applicants were required to participate in training about best practices in school-age care. Optional trainings on a variety of subjects were also offered. The trainings were well-attended, and more than 98% of participants rated them excellent or good. A subset of the grantees is now receiving technical assistance and coaching.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Stevens for her thoughtful and complete presentation.

e. Federal Programs Update

Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir explained that CAPS added 10,000 children by raising the income limit for initial entry from 50% of the State Median Income (SMI) to 85%. For a family of four, the income limit increased from \$42,426 to \$72,124. This is the first time since 2016 that funds have been available to raise the income limit. To receive a scholarship, a family must meet the income limit and be in one of 12 priority groups. The income limit for the very low income priority group was also raised, from 50% of the Federal Poverty Level to 150%, the highest it has ever been. For a family of four, this limit increased from \$13,250 to \$39,750. The CAPS team continually monitors enrollment and adjusts the income limit for the very low income priority group up to admit more or down to admit fewer children based on the availability of funds from the federal block grant. The CAPS emergency payment policies continue in effect, and the ACCESS program continues until October 2, 2022. Ms. Kasfir invited Board members to listen to a recent DECAL Download podcast (<https://decaldownload.buzzsprout.com/211637/9551376-episode-10-caps-expansion>) for a parent's perspective about how the program is benefitting her family.

Mr. Davis asked if CAPS payments are graduated based on family income or a standard amount for any family who qualifies. Ms. Kasfir answered that CAPS has base payment rates that are standard, and there are four tiers of family fees based on income. In the absence of the ACCESS program, families pay a family fee determined by their income tier and any differential between the CAPS base payment rate and what their provider actually charges. Mr. Davis also asked if processes exist to detect program abuse or fraud. Ms. Kasfir responded that DECAL has an Audits and Compliance unit reporting to Deputy Commissioner Ringsrud that performs routine audits and investigates any reports of fraud. They also have a risk management system to identify anomalies that need to be investigated. CAPS also has a Quality Assurance unit and CAPS managers all participate in Quality Assurance, checking a sample of CAPS applications to ensure all eligibility requirements are followed. Ms. Zisook asked if CAPS is recommending that families who were not previously eligible for scholarships reapply considering the CAPS expansion and if ACCESS also covers new CAPS families. Ms. Kasfir answered that CAPS is encouraging families who were denied before November 1 to reapply, and ACCESS applies to everyone with a CAPS scholarship. Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Kasfir for her presentation.

f. Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams reported that Georgia's Pre-K Program enrollment has increased over last year from 63,000 children to 72,000 children. Typically, the program serves about 60% of the four-year-old population. Last year that number was 46%. This year it is 53% and is expected to rise during the school year. The number of children on the Pre-K waiting list has declined from 3,174 during the last school year to 3,065 in the current school year. Ms. Adams thanked Board members for their participation in Georgia's Pre-K Week and highlighted some of the week's activities. She reviewed some of the work funded by Georgia's Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and introduced Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Director Laura Lucas. Ms. Lucas defined IECMH as "a young child's capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure relationships, and explore the environment and learn." Ms. Lucas reviewed the findings in the PDG needs assessment related to IECMH, which include limited or no access to mental health services for the birth-to-5 population, lack of supports and resources to address challenging behavior and the impact of trauma, the need for a credentialing program for mental health professionals who can treat young children, and the need for investment in 2Gen strategies. Ms. Lucas reported on the progress made by the IECMH Task Force, convened in February 2021 on the recommendation of the Georgia General Assembly House Study

Committee on Infant and Toddler Social and Emotional Health to build an early childhood system of care. The Georgia Association of Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH) has been established to create pathways for early childhood professionals to earn IECMH endorsements. A partnership among the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS), DECAL, and the Department of Public Health (DPH) has started offering training to clinicians in the child parent psychotherapy treatment model, a 2Gen method. The Task Force is working on a Medicaid Services Chart that will make it easier for mental health providers to bill for their services to young children. The state has partnered with Resilient Georgia to use their regional coalitions to include the Birth-to-5 workforce in trainings. Ms. Lucas became certified in The Growing Brain Curriculum developed by Zero to Three and will provide 21 hours of training to DECAL's Infant and Toddler Specialists. DECAL sponsored 10 Task Force members to attend training on the Diagnostic Classification (DC):0-5 tool, an age-appropriate diagnostic tool for assessing young children and diagnosing mental disorders in early childhood; and the Task Force is currently working on a plan to promote this tool as best practice for clinicians working with young children. Georgia State University's Health Policy Center conducted an IECMH systems analysis and produced heat maps reflecting existing mental health behavioral services for the birth-to-5 population. DECAL also partnered with DPH to study how home visiting supports social emotional learning. Study results are expected next spring.

Ms. Harper asked Ms. Adams, in relation to lower enrollment numbers in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms, if some Pre-K classrooms had been closed. Ms. Adams said that some classrooms had been combined or closed because of low enrollment, but the department's pandemic payment policy of paying providers based on their grants rather than pro-rating based on enrollment had reduced the number of classrooms that closed. Ms. Harper asked why there is still a waitlist for Pre-K and whether it can be eliminated. Ms. Adams answered that the wait list exists because some communities do not have Pre-K programs, and, in other communities, demand exceeds capacity. She also noted that, before the pandemic, the waitlist had been reduced over several years from about 8,000 to about 5,000 students. The current waitlist is about 3,000. Ms. Harper noted that Pre-K was funded for about 84,000 slots for the current school year and asked, since only about 72,000 students are enrolled, whether DECAL has lost the funding for the additional slots. Ms. Adams explained that funding for 84,000 slots equates to about 80,000 children because there are always classrooms that are not running at full capacity. She also explained that last year the agency used funds that were unspent during the school year because of lower enrollment to fund more slots during the Pre-K Summer Transition Program to help children be ready for kindergarten. The agency continues to be funded for 84,000 slots, and Ms. Adams expects that children will continue to enroll in Pre-K throughout the school year, as they did last year.

4. Public Comment Period

At 10:24 a.m. Mr. Davis paused the staff presentations to allow for the public comment period. He asked Interim Board Liaison Mark Waits if anyone was physically present in the DECAL office wanting to make comments. Mr. Waits replied that no one was physically present. Mr. Davis asked if any comments had been received through the GoToWebinar chat function, and Mr. Waits read the following comment from Beverly Johnson of Discovery Point #61 in Conyers. "Thank you, DECAL! If it wasn't for all of you, my doors would be closed. Thank you for all being so open to talk with me any time of day during the pandemic. You all were very tangible, and totally a wonderful sounding board, a shoulder to cry on, the voice of reason and great cheerleaders. Thank you all!"

Mr. Davis said that comments like that make the work well worthwhile, and it's a personal honor to serve the children of Georgia by serving on the Board of DECAL.

5. DECAL Staff Reports (continued)

Staff reports resumed after the public comment period.

a. Quality Innovation and Partnerships (QIP) Update

Deputy Commissioner for QIP Bentley Ponder introduced Community Outreach and Partnerships Director Laura Wagner who made a presentation about the Trauma-Responsive Care Grants. Through a competitive application process, DECAL funded four trauma responsive care grantees for one-year, \$10,000 grants. Grantees have developed and are implementing local projects with a focus on how early childhood trauma can impact future learning and development for the birth-to-5 population and their families and communities. They are participating in training and receiving ongoing technical assistance and support from the Child Welfare Training Collaborative at Georgia State University. Grantees are the Cobb Collaborative, Dalton/Whitfield County Family Connection, Jasper County Family Connection, and Jones County Family Connection. Mini-grants of \$5,000 each were also awarded to support promising local practices begun under the Early Learning Leadership Collaborative Grants by the Bartow Collaborative, Baldwin County Family Connection, Cook County Family Connection, Community Partnership of Elbert County, and United Way of West Georgia.

Director of Research and Policy Analysis Randy Hudgins gave an overview of the stakeholder engagement project to collect stakeholder feedback about how to use the remaining federal relief funding awarded to DECAL. DECAL partnered with the Urban Institute to develop a process to include voices from the early learning workforce, child care providers, DECAL staff and partners, and families with young children. The Urban Institute is fielding surveys, conducting interviews and focus groups, and analyzing some of the department's administrative data. Preliminary results are expected by the end of December.

Dr. Ponder announced that Megan Fickes joined DECAL as Director of the DECAL Early Head Start Partnership on October 18. Ms. Fickes has a wide range of Head Start and Early Head Start experience. Dr. Ponder reported that the department is on track with the CAPS/Quality Rated goal. As of October 31, 2021, 92% of children with CAPS scholarships are cared for by a Quality Rated provider, and 84% of CAPS providers have achieved at least a 1-star rating. The Quality Rated team has rated more than 810 providers this year using the Temporary Alternate Rating Options (TARO). Quality Rated will continue using TARO for 2022 Cohorts 1 and 2, returning to live observations in Cohort 3. To help ensure continuity of care and minimize disruption to families, CAPS and Quality Rated have developed a provisional Quality Rated status for providers who are newly licensed or new to CAPS and a probationary status for providers who attempt to achieve a star rating but do not earn enough points on their first attempt. Providers with provisional and probationary status are required to go through a formal process to achieve their star ratings. Dr. Ponder also reported on the successful completion of the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement pilot, a priority of Governor Kemp. To earn the endorsement, eight providers participated in professional development, received technical and financial support, and created growth plans that were reviewed by the Instructional Supports division. Providers who received the endorsement are: ABC, Another Bright Creation Early Learning and Daycare Center, Palmetto; Discovery Point #61, Conyers; Giselle Learning Academy, Clarkston; Kid's World Learning Center, Statesboro; Minnie Howell Child Development Center, Atlanta; Rising Star Learning Center, Mableton; The Learning Station, Ellenwood; and Whitfield-Dalton Day Care Center, Dalton. Child Trends will complete an evaluation of the pilot early in 2022. Deputy Commissioner Adams also congratulated the providers that earned the endorsement and acknowledged the Professional Learning team in Instructional Supports who took the lead on developing the content on language and literacy that is appropriate for young children and that aligns with other state literacy programs.

Board member Luann Purcell said, "I'm just so proud of how in all the departments, in all the things that we've heard today, how you're using federal funds to really meet the needs of our child care centers so

they can meet the needs of our children and how we have continued with actually providing quality professional development that's going to lead to better achievement at the third grade level. It's so tempting during trying times to go into a mode of treading water, but it's so clear that every department, all the staff under the leadership of the Commissioner, have truly forged ahead to make this a time of meeting the needs of our children and our families. And I just want to say, 'thank you.' I appreciate what you're doing."

Mr. Davis asked Dr. Ponder if funding may be a barrier to providers who have not started working toward becoming Quality Rated. Dr. Ponder said quality depends on the staff who teach and care for children, and there may be barriers to quality related to staffing challenges. He expects the stakeholder engagement process to produce some insights about potential barriers.

6. Adjournment

Mr. Davis asked if there was any other business for the Board. There being none, he reminded Board members of the 2022 meeting dates, the next being February 17, 2022. At 10:56 a.m. he adjourned the meeting.



Board Chair, Signature

2/17/2022

Date



Board Secretary, Signature

2/17/2022

Date