

**Board of Early Care and Learning**  
**Meeting Summary**  
**February 15, 2024**

**Attendees**

**Board Members:**

Kristy Beam, Jen Bennecke, Phil Davis (Chair), Susan Harper, Joanna Hill, Kristin Morrissey, Luann Purcell, Cristina Washell

**Guests:**

Merodie Brown, Jennifer Carpenter, Hanah Goldberg, Robert Hill, Randall Hines, Sue Holm, Isabelle Keenum, Mary Lyons, Ana Magana, Julie Newman, Wande Okunoren-Meadows, Jennifer Paschal, Althea Penn, Jaime Rechkemmer, Kwanaine Rice, Charlotte Richards, Mona Roberts, Stephanie Scarce, Michelle Smith Lank, Keisha Wynn

**DECAL Staff:**

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Susan Adams, Elisabetta Kasfir, Bentley Ponder, Pam Stevens, Dennis Brice, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Farouk Baksh, Andres Bernal, Tamika Boone, Kim Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Tyler Duggins, Bart Ellington, Moriam Hassan, Abraham Hussain, Denise Jenson, Melinda Knowles, Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Kayla Little, Laura Lucas, Christi Moore, Meghan McNail, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O’Callaghan, Stephen Owusu-Ansah, Valerie Perez, Devon Porter, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Melissa Risenhoover, Mike Rodgers, April Rogers, Barbara Sanders, Jackie Shivers, Sonja Steptoe, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Laura Wagner, Mark Waits, Sheryl Wilhite, Liz Young

Mr. Davis called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m.

The Board unanimously approved the proposed agenda and the minutes from the November 16, 2023 meeting.

For inspiration Ms. Morrissey recounted some of the activities and resources highlighted for Inclusive Early Learning Week, taking place this week. Ms. Morrissey quoted Inclusion and Behavioral Regional Supervisor, Peggy Sutton who defined *inclusivity* on last week’s *DECAL Download* in this way, “When we talk about inclusion in classrooms, or education, it’s where we’re involving all children, with and without disabilities, where we’re making adaptations and modifications so that every child can participate and engage in ways that all children can. . . we want to involve all children and teach them to accept others for who they are.” Ms. Morrissey shared several inspiring quotations about how children learn tolerance, and she read a well-known poem called, “Children Learn What They Live” by Dorothy Law Nolte.

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. He shared that he had recently attended an event at Georgia College and State University and toured the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy and was very inspired by their leading-edge research. Ms. Harper gave accolades to DECAL staff who helped her advise a constituent whose child care business had been cited for playground violations. Ms. Beam reported that she is currently traveling around the state to work with schools in the Technical College System of Georgia, and she sees DECAL’s presence everywhere and feels proud to be a part of the organization. Dr. Purcell said she was sorry she had to miss reading to a class for Inclusive Early Learning Week because her grandson was in the hospital. She plans to read next week. She also shared a story about her young granddaughter befriending an elderly man who had had a stroke. Her granddaughter was sensitive to the man’s social isolation, Dr Purcell feels, because of the child’s experience with her disabled younger brother. Ms. Hill shared that she will be attending a talent show and fundraiser for Extra Special People, an organization that supports the inclusion of disabled children and adults in transformative experiences. Dr. Washell said that she is inspired by all the activities about inclusivity because it is important every day. Ms. Morrissey mentioned books about autism and said she heard an inspiring talk by Cecily M. Ford who wrote, *Autism is My Superpower*.

Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs and Board Chair Phil Davis honored Dr. Luann L. Purcell on the occasion of her retirement from the Board. Mr. Davis praised her as the force behind much of the work that appears on DECAL's website. Dr. Purcell is the longest-serving member of the Board and the last charter member, having been appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue in 2006. The Commissioner thanked Dr. Purcell for her many contributions to the work DECAL has done, saying that all 700 DECAL employees have felt supported by her. The Commissioner read a commendation from Governor Kemp. Dr. Purcell made brief remarks and received a standing ovation.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Jacobs reported on recommendations from the House working group on early childhood education to support Georgia's Pre-K. These include restoring class size to 20, increasing pay for assistant teachers, providing parity in pay for lead teachers with K–12 teachers, increasing per-classroom operating funds, and allowing for the use of lottery funds to construct new public school classrooms and subsidize lease payments for private child care programs. The Commissioner introduced the Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year for 2023–2024, Merodie Brown from New Odyssey for Children in Gwinnet County and Charlotte Richards from Chattahoochee County Pre-K. Each received a resolution honoring her achievements from Board Chair Davis and made a brief presentation.
- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL's Q2 2024 expenses are on track with the budget. Although it appears that Child Care Services (CCS) has spent 65% of its allocated funds, the expenditures include federal relief funds which had to be encumbered in advance. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor's amended budget recommendation for FY 2024 which includes an increase of \$17 million to DECAL's budget, \$16 million of which will go to Pre-K projects. The additional funds will also cover \$1,000 salary supplements for full-time, benefit-eligible DECAL employees and \$100,000 for start-up grants for Happy Helpings sponsors to establish new summer meal sites. Mr. Ringsrud also presented the Governor's proposed budget for SFY 2025 which includes an increase of almost \$50 million to DECAL's budget. This increase will cover a 4% cost of living salary increase for employees. It will also raise the CAPS provider reimbursement to the 50th percentile of market rates for child care providers in accordance with federal regulations and fund the first year of recommended improvements to the Georgia's Pre-K program.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams reported on the activities for Inclusive Early Learning Week. The goals for Inclusive Early Learning Week are to increase awareness and advocacy around inclusion and supporting children with disabilities and their families, promote inclusive practices in early childhood programs, and expand access for children and families to inclusive early learning environments. Ms. Adams gave the Board an update about the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation pilot which pairs DECAL Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialists, who support birth to 5 teachers, with contracted master's level mental health professionals in three locations around the state. Ms. Adams announced that Children's Mental Health Week is May 6–10, and she reviewed the application deadlines for Pre-K programs and Pre-K Teacher of the Year Nominations.
- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir informed the Board that CAPS providers received a 4.3% rate increase as of January 29, 2024. Through the ACCESS program, which continues through September 2024, DECAL pays providers' published rates, minus the family fee. Ms. Kasfir reported on the system conversion to the GACAPS system, which brought provider payment processing in house. DECAL has made more than 29,000 payments to 2,860 providers since the conversion, and child care providers have logged into the system 135,869 times. The CAPS student parent pilot is underway now, Ms. Kasfir reported. Staff are being recruited and trained now, and the pilot will begin in the spring and run through the fall of 2025.

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:40 a.m. and resumed it at 10:53 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder gave the Board an update about the Quality Rated program. Of the 4,488 providers eligible to participate in Quality Rated, 2,844 (63%) have achieved a rating. Another 19% are somewhere in the process. Last year the QR team issued 1,652 ratings. The distribution of ratings indicates that the system is a valid measure of quality, Dr. Ponder said. Two stakeholder convenings are planned for March at which DECAL will present an overview of the results of the Quality Rated comprehensive review and proposed revisions to the system. There will be an opportunity for participants to provide feedback, and all stakeholders will have an opportunity to provide feedback online before the QR team begins the planned system redesign. Dr. Ponder announced that DECAL will not apply for another five-year Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grant. Instead, DECAL will support Quality Care for Children in applying for the grant. The current grant ends June 30, 2024. Dr. Ponder introduced Stephanie Scarce, Director of Workforce Development for the Georgia Association of Manufacturers. The Georgia Association of Manufacturers received an EXPAND grant, and Ms. Scarce made a brief presentation about how the grant will support the Association's strategy for addressing a shortage of manufacturing workers.
- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens reported on the Health and Safety grants funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). One goal of the grants was to help facilities that have struggled to meet licensing requirements for outdoor play equipment improve the safety of their outdoor areas. Of the almost \$33 million in funds awarded, more than \$15 million went to playgrounds for items such as rubber mulch, poured-in-place surfacing, playground equipment, storage, shade structures, and fencing. Grant funds were also used for indoor equipment such as refrigerators, stoves, toilets, sinks, flooring, storage, cameras, diapering tables, and bedding. CCS identified 213 programs that had compliance issues for several years running and offered technical assistance in exchange for additional grant funds. Of these, 158 accepted technical assistance. Ms. Stevens also introduced licensing rule changes. The changes to be introduced this year apply only to exempt programs. The number of exempt categories will be consolidated from 14 to seven. Two categories of exempt programs are allowed to receive CAPS scholarships, and their application process will not change. Exempt programs that do not receive CAPS, however, will be allowed to self-register rather than apply to CCS.

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:38 a.m. and called the meeting back to order at 1:01 p.m. for the public comment period. Mr. Davis asked Ms. Obi if anyone had signed up to speak or submitted comments through the chat function. Ms. Obi responded that no had signed up or submitted comments.

Mr. Davis called for committee reports. Ms. Beam reported from the Program committee. The CAPS team will soon be publishing a library of short videos about how to navigate the program. CCS has formed a partnership with the YMCA to ensure that play equipment designed for older children is safe for younger children. The CCS team is also preparing for a federal monitoring visit the week of April 8–12. Nutrition Services will visit a child care program in Cumming during national Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) week March 10–16, and the team is working to extend Happy Helpings into previously unserved counties this summer. Pre-K and Instructional Supports has implemented a secure new platform for professional development that allows for individualized learning paths. Ms. Morrissey reported from the Finance committee that DECAL's expenses are still on track with the budget as of January 31, and DECAL continues to operate with 91% efficiency. Ms. Morrissey also reported that DECAL received its 20th annual audit with no findings, and the Board applauded. Ms. Hill reported from the QIP committee, which heard a report on the Thrive Child Care Business Academy. Since the Academy launched in September 2023, 371 providers have attended large group webinars, 263 have

participated in small study groups, and 63 have requested individual coaching sessions. The committee also heard reports about the EXPAND grantees, the Quality Rated review, and the Early Head Start transition.

At 1:15 p.m. Mr. Davis thanked DECAL's IT team for providing a much-improved audio and video experience. He thanked Dr. Purcell again for her 18 years of service. He reminded members of the next meeting, May 16, 2024, and adjourned.