



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**

BRIGHT FROM THE START

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

**Enhancing School
Readiness**

**Increasing Quality and
Access**

**Supporting Workforce
Development**

Coordinating Services

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A Message from Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Friends of DECAL,

State Fiscal Year 2020 (July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020) started “normally” for the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) much like previous fiscal years. We continued serving the child care and early education needs of Georgia’s children and families through the myriad of programs and services we administer and, as always, were exploring ways to grow and improve our efforts.



But, in February 2020 our “normal” changed as the country and our state were slammed by the COVID-19 public health emergency. As the needs of children, families, the child care and early education industry, and public schools changed, DECAL had to rethink how we delivered or administered every program and service we provided.

This annual report will illustrate how we began SFY 2020 AND how we began responding to the devastating circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic. This report will highlight our programs and services, accomplishments, and financial performance in SFY 2020.

I’m proud of the work DECAL accomplished in a year unlike any we have ever experienced, and I attribute our successes in facing unprecedented challenges to the dedicated child care providers who care for Georgia’s children day in and day out; to the valuable stakeholders who collaborate with us for the good of Georgia’s children; to DECAL’s passionate and professional staff; to the Board of Early Care and Learning, DECAL’s board that advises and supports our work; and to Governor Kemp and other state policy makers.

If you have any questions or comments about items contained in this report or ideas of how DECAL can continue to serve Georgia’s children, families, and early care and education community, contact me at amy.jacobs@decalfga.gov.

Sincerely,

Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

About Us

Mission

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning enhances children's early education experience to promote their academic, social-emotional, and physical development in partnership with families, communities, the early care and education industry, and stakeholders.



Vision

Every child in Georgia will have access to high-quality early care and education regardless of family income or location.

Services

DECAL is the department of state government that supports child care providers in preparing Georgia's children and their families for school. Our

services focus on quality child care, early education, brain development, nutritional programs, and tools and resources for families. We work to equip early care and education professionals with enhanced credentials, appropriate teaching strategies, and best practices in working with children. We also collaborate with state policymakers and stakeholders to develop and implement policies that ensure access to quality care for all Georgia children.

By the Numbers

During FY 2020, Legal completed **50,895** background checks, and as a part of that total, Legal remotely completed **7,025** background checks during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Legal was able to maintain timeliness by processing the vast majority of the background check applications within 48 hours."

PROCESSED
78,552
APPLICATIONS FOR
CHILD CARE AND
PARENT SERVICES
(CAPS)

RATED OVER
576
EARLY EDUCATION
PROGRAMS AT
1, 2, OR 3 STARS

EARLY HEAD START-CHILD CARE
PARTNERSHIP SERVED OVER
250
INFANTS, TODDLERS, and THEIR FAMILIES
DURING YEAR 2 OF DECAL'S 5-YEAR EARLY
HEAD START-CHILD CARE PARTNERSHIP
GRANT

Supported
66,351,232
meals served through the
Child and Adult Care
Food Program with partners
across Georgia

Processed
19,279
grant payments and contract
payments to
1,368
vendors through our
Finance Division

The Head Start Collaboration Office partnered with the GA Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics to help DECAL host Child Care Safety training for over **100** providers statewide.

SERVED MORE THAN
80,000
students in
3,855
GEORGIA'S PRE-K
CLASSROOMS

IN
STATE FISCAL
YEAR 2020
DECAL

AWARDED MORE THAN
\$3.5M
TO **3,981**
UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS
IN DECAL SCHOLARS

Enhanced and expanded Early Education Empowerment Zones (E3Zs) from four areas to six regions each with an Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator serving all **159** counties.

Supported
86,616
unique children through
active
CAPS Scholarships

Processed
138
new DECAL hires in our
Human Resources Division

The Foundation secured more than **\$750,000**, which was directly invested back into Georgia's early care and learning classrooms.

Infant and Toddler
Specialists
completed
1,536
visits to early learning
programs

SUPPORTED
7,756,039
MEALS SERVED
THROUGH THE
SUMMER FOOD SERVICE
PROGRAM

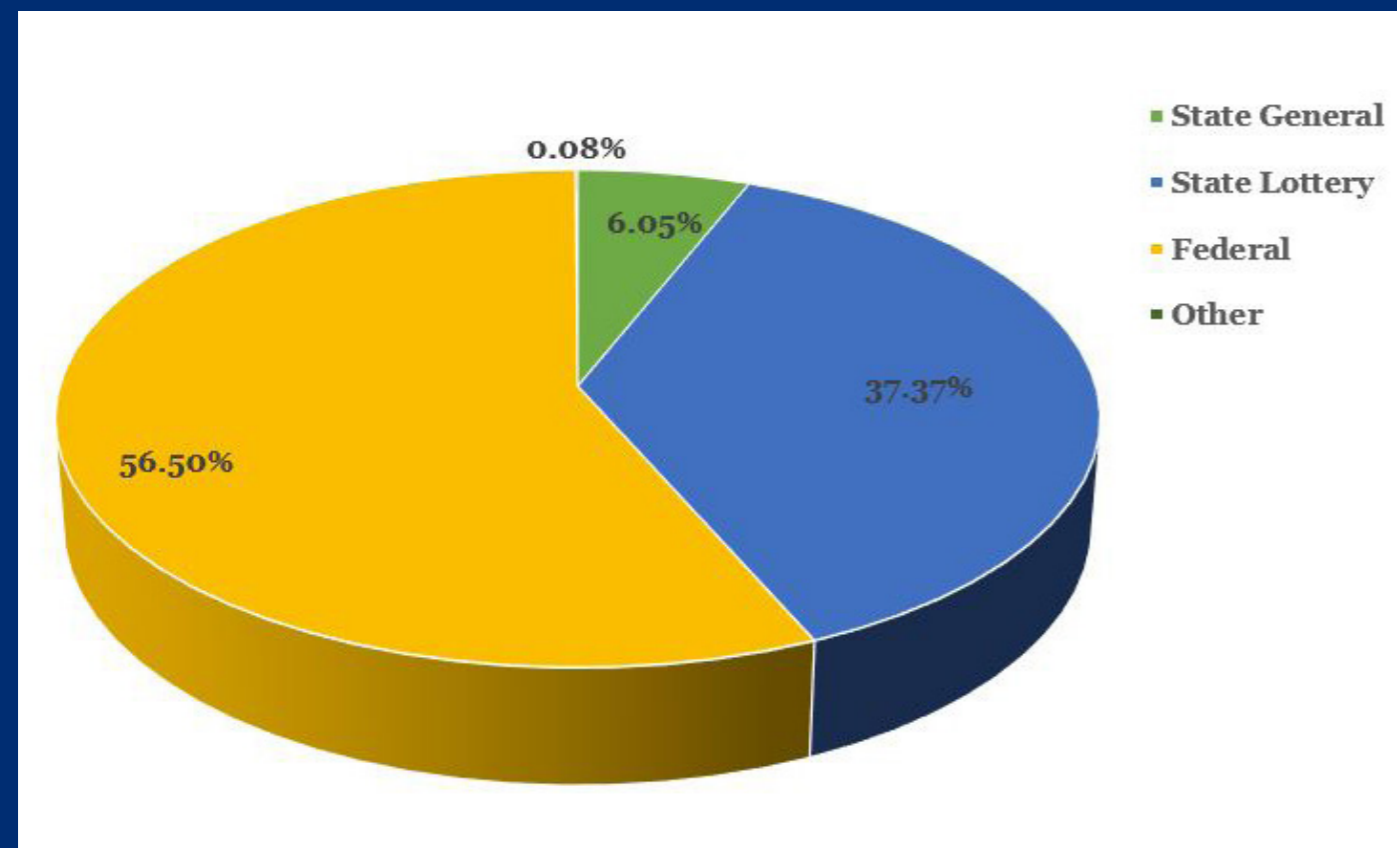
Conducted
11,480
visits to over
4,400
early learning programs
to ensure that licensing
standards have been met

Financial Highlights

FISCAL YEAR 2020 BUDGET BY FUNDING SOURCE

State General	\$61,223,188
State Lottery	\$377,933,046
Federal	\$571,499,178
Other	\$796,437
Total Funds	\$1,011,451,849

DECAL APPROPRIATION BY FUNDING SOURCE



FISCAL YEAR 2020 BUDGET BY PROGRAMS

Child Care Services	\$434,410,851
Pre-K +(HS)	\$378,107,514
Quality Initiatives	\$51,049,132
Nutrition	\$147,884,352
Total Budget	\$1,011,451,849

FISCAL YEAR 2020 GRANTS

- **Preschool Development Birth to Five Renewal Grant:** (\$3.7 million) In the first year of the grant, funding from the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five enabled DECAL to design and implement activities to help ensure that Georgia's children from birth to age five have equal access to high quality early childhood care and education. Although all children and families in Georgia benefit, the activities in the grant target the needs of children and families from vulnerable and underserved populations.
- **Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Grant:** (\$3.7 million a year for five years; currently in year two) The Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Grant provides infants, toddlers, and their families access to high-quality early education and comprehensive services by funding Early Head Start programs in child care learning centers and family child care learning homes.
- **Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation, Research, and Evaluation Grant:** (\$250,000 a year for four years; currently in year three.) Funding from the CCDBG Implementation Research and Evaluation Grant is enabling DECAL, the lead agency for the CCDBG in Georgia, to create a plan (including studies, surveys, evaluations, etc.) to determine how effectively and efficiently the state is using the grant funds.
- **Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Language and Literacy of Georgia College and State University Grant (SDD Center):** (\$211,500) Grant funds awarded by the SDD Center enabled DECAL to award grants to child care programs to implement the LITTLE ((Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments) program which supports teachers in developing critical early language and literacy skills in very young children.
- **USDA Farm to School Grant** (\$63,408 for two years): As the only Southeast USDA Region recipient to focus solely on Farm to Early Care & Education for 0-5 year olds, this funding will help strengthen Farm to ECE programming across Georgia. Grant initiatives for the first year have been transitioned from in-person experiences to virtual platforms. Farm to ECE events will include: a Farm to School and Early Care & Education Summit on serving locally grown foods and implementing related educational activities; a Vendor Summit to connect vendors and farmers with CACFP program operators to increase opportunities for serving healthy, fresh, local foods; and a Farm to ECE 101 Training. Overall, this grant will allow DECAL and its community partnerships to build upon Georgia's Farm to ECE foundations for improving access to local foods in Georgia.
- **USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program Meal Service Training Grant** (\$100,000 for two years; currently in year two): This funding enables DECAL to host five virtual training sessions to increase nutrition education and quality of CACFP meals served; provide mini-grants to support CACFP sponsors in training and implementation of CACFP Meal Patterns; and offer a five-part Healthy Cooking Video Series with a local chef. DECAL will also host a virtual CACFP Meal Service Summit to educate CACFP operators on key aspects of CACFP programming including healthy menu planning, cultural considerations, special dietary accommodations, infant feeding practices, culinary 101, adult day care nutrition, and more.

Enhancing School Readiness

Goal: Contribute measurably to school readiness for children birth to age five

In SFY 2020 the lottery funded **Georgia's Pre-K Program** served more than 80,000 children. Since its inception in 1992, the program has served more than 1.6 million children in a high-quality learning environment to prepare them for Kindergarten.

During the ninth annual **Georgia Pre-K Week** in October 2019, more than 130 state leaders made 190+ visits to Pre-K classrooms to raise awareness about the state's innovative preschool program. 2019 marks the year, since the inception of Pre-K, that we had 100% county participation.



DECAL's Summer Transition Program offered **46 classes** for Rising Pre-K students and **129 classes** for Rising Kindergarten students serving approximately **1,933 children**.



As an **Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership** grantee, DECAL oversaw the delivery of comprehensive Early Head Start services to **252 children** under three years of age. These services included health, early education, nutrition, mental health, and family support services.

Increasing Quality and Access

Goal: Increase the number of high-quality, affordable child care programs statewide, thereby improving access and better addressing the needs of all children

DECAL's Child Care Services consultants conducted more than **11,480 visits** to the **4,400+ child care programs** in Georgia to ensure they were caring for children in safe, healthy, and nurturing environments.

The Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program:

- Provided child care scholarships to **86,000+ children**
- Paid early education programs more than \$333.8 million so eligible families could work or go to school
- Processed **78,000+ new CAPS applications**
- Renewed **38,000+ scholarships** for families to remain in the program



Quality Rated, Georgia's rating system to improve and communicate the quality of child care and early learning programs, developed Temporary Alternate Rating Options (TARO) during 2020 in response to the pandemic. In 2020 TARO gave providers a choice of two ways to earn an initial rating at a time when their level of process quality, or their day-to-day activities, could not be assessed in person. The

modifications to the process allowed DECAL to rate 261 providers virtually during the health emergency, bringing the total number of providers earning star ratings associated with a 2020 cohort to 576 providers. A third way to rate programs was also developed in 2020 for renewing programs wishing to maintain or improve a current Quality Rated star rating. This new option will be deployed in February 2021. By offering virtual rating options that adhere to quality standards and do not weaken the credibility of a star rating, Quality Rated now provides a pathway for all programs to continue their journey of continuous quality improvement and ensures that DECAL continues to expand access to quality care and education for all children.

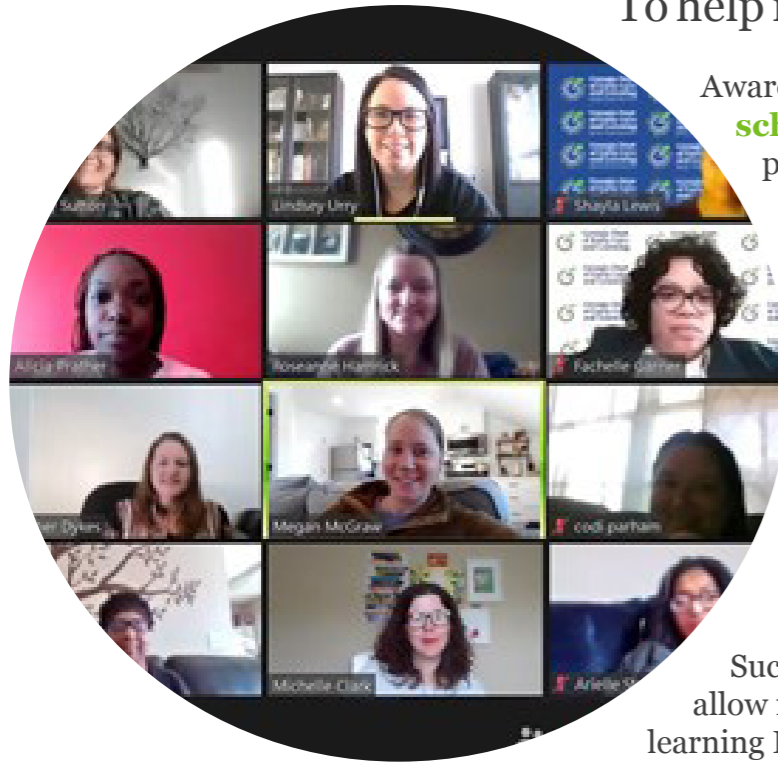
DECAL's Inclusion and Behavior Support Unit continued to support early learning professionals and families through training, coaching, and facilitation of positive behavior support plans. The Inclusion and Behavior Support Helpline provided information and resources to 518 teachers, administrators, and families, and Specialists conducted 1,228 coaching sessions with teachers, helping them implement strategies to create inclusive, positive classroom environments.

DECAL provided grants totaling almost \$2.8 million to 61 child care programs to implement the **LITTLE (Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments)** program. These grants provide training and coaching to help teachers implement responsive caregiving that promotes language and literacy development.

Supporting Workforce Development

Goal: Develop, engage, and retain a capable, well trained, and effective workforce for the early care and education industry and for DECAL

To help reach this important goal, DECAL:



Awarded approximately **\$3.5 million in scholarships and incentives** to 3,981 unique participants in the DECAL Scholars program.

Trained 55 PLC facilitators, with 46 participants completing a second certification year through the Professional Learning Community (PLC) Facilitator Initiative.

Increased the number of users in the Georgia Professional Development System (GaPDS) by 13.22% resulting in a total of **106,334 users**.

Successfully updated Georgia Training Approval to allow more virtual training opportunities for the early learning ECE workforce.

Approved 156 new trainers and **3,544 new trainings** through Georgia Training Approval.

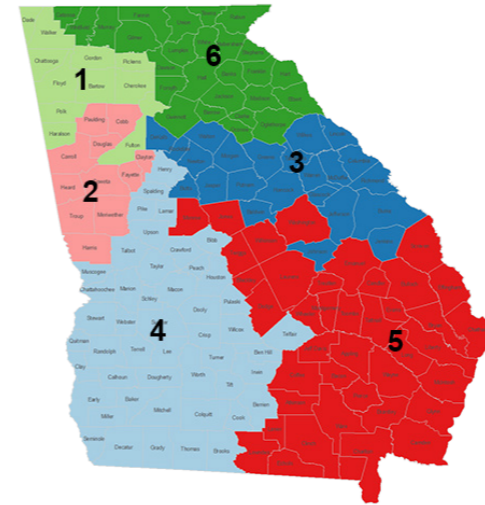
Expanded the Peer Support Network (PSN). Ambassadors facilitated approximately 20 meetings per quarter, supporting networks of providers through the state.

Trained 1,377 teachers to use the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) to complete lesson planning through the state's child care resource and referral (CCR&R) network.



Coordinating Services

Goal: Build a framework that aligns and coordinates DECAL programs and services across regions for children from birth to age eight



The **Research and Policy Analysis** Team worked diligently in 2020 to track and analyze COVID-19 related data collected by the agency and to use public health metrics to inform the agency's response to the pandemic. The work included detailed analyses of administrative data and preparation of unique daily, weekly, and monthly reports, as well as developing a process to interpret Georgia Department of Public Health metrics in the context of child care.



DECAL administered federally funded **Child Nutrition Programs** in 36 out of the 38 (95%) Georgia counties with a food insecurity rate of 20% or higher and in 114 out of 120 (95%) Georgia counties with reported adult obesity rates of 30% or higher.

DECAL supported 66,351,232 meals served through the **Child and Adult Care Food Program** and with partners across Georgia, supported 7,756,039 meals served through the **Summer Food Service Program**.

The Quality Innovations and Partnerships Division responded to the health emergency by enhancing supports to providers and families in a number of ways. DECAL's decision in 2019 to align all divisions into six regions made it easier for the Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinators to organize programs and services across the state during the pandemic in 2020. The Coordinators created six regional **Child Care Engagement Networks** that meet monthly in every county and distribute bi-weekly newsletters to offer timely and critical supports to child care providers. The Coordinators also hosted two large trauma conferences to help providers address the needs of children and families during these stressful times.

The **Quality Rated Help Desk** initiated outreach to providers and responded to more than 2,300 calls and emails to help them navigate modified processes for earning star ratings. The Community Outreach Team delivered assistance to members of the Essential Services Workforce and other families in collaboration with Quality Care for Children, which received 12,000 inquiries from families and furnished them with more than 2,600 referrals to child care providers. Supplementing those efforts, the Communications Team publicized DECAL's enhanced services and posted helpful information for providers and parents on Quality Rated's social media platforms, growing the audiences across all platforms by 11% overall.

DECAL formed a **Cross-Agency Child Council** to assist in coordinating services among state agencies, child welfare partners, and public advocates. The Council will implement Georgia's Birth to Five Strategic Plan.

Technological Advancements

DECAL's IT team supported the agency's FY 2020 achievements toward its goals through improvements in applications, security, and infrastructure.

Applications:

Successfully moved all DECAL applications and infrastructure to the cloud. The cloud migration gives DECAL a much improved system for reliability, security, cost effectiveness, and availability.

Enabled Essential Services Workforce CAPS Pre-screener applications with Gateway during the ESW crisis.

Deployed newly required reports in DECAL KOALA for CCS by enabling virtual visits for annual report/inspections, and the reporting of communicable diseases, program status changes and child abuse, neglect, and deprivation.

Implemented DECAL KOALA Phase 6 – Online Exemption Applications – system generation of all exemption certificates and letters.

Put in place the GEMALTO interface for faster Criminal Records Check processing.

Enabled changes for cohort processing for Quality Rated.

Loaded FY2020 data in CACDS for all sources and validated the child counts.

Implemented document upload feature in PANDA to support Pre-K specialists with virtual visits.

Migrated OLLI (Online Learning Library Initiative) Training to GaPDS. Registrants can now attend the OLLI trainings through GaPDS.



Security:

Enabled MFA for all DECAL staff.

Established a 24/7 Security Operation Center with Airnet.

Accomplished the rationalization & deployment of security tools.

Accomplished Operational Software rationalization and licensing consolidation, saving DECAL about \$1 million.

Infrastructure:

Established 24/7 Operational Support with Airnet.

Moved all priority production resources to Microsoft Azure.

COVID Response

The COVID public health emergency had a major impact on all divisions of DECAL. Throughout the crisis, DECAL employees have creatively shifted the way the agency serves children, providers, parents, and advocates statewide. The following information summarizes DECAL's response to COVID-19 in calendar year (not state fiscal year) 2020.

To date, DECAL has awarded more than \$92 million in Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding to licensed child care programs in Georgia impacted by COVID-19. In the first round of STABLE (Short Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities) payments, DECAL awarded more than \$38.8 million in financial support to 3,789 licensed child care providers. A second round awarded \$54 million to 3,677 providers. The money paid out so far represents about two-thirds of the \$144 million Georgia received this year under the CCDBG provided for in the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

DECAL implemented the Supporting Onsite Learning for Virtual Education (SOLVE) program September 1, 2020. The program assisted parents with a child enrolled in a school system using a primarily virtual learning model, so that the parents could go to work or school. SOLVE helped families find a safe provider to send their child to for their virtual learning and helped families pay for this unanticipated cost.

DECAL expanded the newly implemented financial program in December 2020 to include children and young adults with disabilities whose school systems offered a primarily virtual learning model and who needed care while their parents work. The program, originally offered scholarships for students ages 5-12 only. Under the expanded SOLVE program, children and young adults up to age 22 who have a disability are eligible for a SOLVE scholarship regardless of the family's income. Also, the SOLVE payment rate for caring for children and young adults with disabilities was increased based on the provider's location, facility type, and Quality Rated star level. SOLVE is administered by DECAL's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) division that oversees Georgia's subsidized child care for low income families. To date, more than 5,000 SOLVE scholarships have been awarded to Georgia children and their families. SOLVE is funded by the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, part of the federal CARES Act.

Child and Family Development, Infant Toddler, and Inclusion and Behavior Support Units created multiple online tools for families including Toddler Time at Home, a weekly thematic calendar of activities for families to implement with their young children, and Chat About Children, a video series with developmental information for families with young children.

Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialists and Infant Toddler Specialists continued promoting positive classroom climate and inclusion through virtual coaching, training, and behavior support to early childhood educators through a variety of web platforms. Training included a web series on social emotional development and a series on infant and toddler development.

The SEEDS for Success Helpline provided support during the pandemic by helping families locate available child care for their child with a disability as well as providing referrals to needed services. Helpline staff also assisted child care providers with information and referrals for virtual support for classroom and behavioral issues.

COVID Response (continued)

The DECAL Family Peer Ambassadors, supported by the Child and Family Development Unit, shared social media posts with their networks on topics such as child development, developmental monitoring, and social emotional well-being.

To ensure that Georgia's Pre-K Programs received adequate funding for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers through the pandemic, DECAL executed payments monthly based on the contract amount.

Although onsite Pre-K classroom services ended on April 1st, programs supported children and families through online learning, take-home packets, and other distance learning strategies.

Pre-K Specialists continued to support programs using online platforms. They provided information and resources to program directors and teachers to assist with the transition from face-to-face instruction to providing learning for children at home. They conducted weekly virtual sessions on topics that directors and teachers indicated were the most needed.

Pre-K Specialists developed a weekly calendar of activities to keep children engaged in developmentally appropriate learning while at home. The theme-based instruction, aligned with Georgia's Early Learning and Development Standards, provided ideas for activities in literacy, phonological awareness, music and movement, science, math, fine motor, and social-emotional skills. Included on the family resource page are links to virtual field trips, screen-free activities, ideas for outdoor play, and resources to support families in all areas of their child's development.

An addendum to the 2019-2020 Pre-K Providers' Operating Guidelines was created to provide guidance to Pre-K providers because of the COVID-19 public health emergency.



DECAL allowed 2019 -2020 Pre-K funding to be carried over until September 30, 2020. This provided additional time for programs to expend remaining funds on allowable expenses.

The Pre-K Summer Transition Program operated successfully in summer 2020. More than 1,900 students received onsite services during a four week onsite program.

A Teacher Resource page and Director Resource page were launched on the DECAL webpage to provide resources, ideas, and information related to COVID-19 and assist programs in meeting the needs of children and families.

Pre-K Updates, including information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Georgia's Department of Public Health Department, and other relevant resources, were emailed to program directors each week, and bi-weekly webinars were held. The webinars were recorded and placed on the Directors Resource page.

A Best Practices in Virtual Engagement training was developed for DECAL staff and state-approved trainers with more than 300 participants completing the training.

DECAL approved 443 new virtual trainings and 215 training conversions from face-to-face to virtual.

Nineteen online courses, including three new virtual trainings, were launched on the Online Learning Library Initiative (OLLI).

The DECAL Scholars program was expanded to provide financial support to teachers taking virtual Child Development Associate (CDA) training courses.

DECAL worked with Georgia State University to develop psychological safety training, completed by more than 480 DECAL and CCR&R staff.

Legal worked with IT and vendors to create a streamlined criminal record check application process that made it easier for providers to comply with background check requirements and receive timely results. This reduced the waiting time for most background check letters to be issued in one day and allowed providers to hire employees almost instantaneously, which was critical during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, Legal worked with the Office of State Administrative Hearings and witnesses to virtually present testimony and argument to the Court when practicable to ensure the department's legal interests were secured in a timely manner.

In response to COVID, DECAL initiated emergency feeding procedures to ensure children had access to nutritious meals when schools closed. In 2020, 63,312,876 free meals were served to Georgia's children through the SFSP and CACFP. Many program flexibilities were granted to allow program operators to serve meals safely to children while minimizing potential exposure to COVID-19. These flexibilities allowed sponsors to be creative in providing meal service to children from allowing parent meal pickup, drive-through and meal delivery. DECAL continues to issue regular program guidance, best practices, and answers to commonly asked questions to provide support to CACFP and SFSP providers continuing to serve meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.



COVID Response (continued)



Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) established the Essential Services Workforce priority group to support the child care needs of Georgia's essential workers and committed to serving 1,000 children through this priority group. This priority group was implemented by April 1, 2020 and allowed CAPS to support the families of medical personnel, first responders, child care personnel, and others as COVID-19 shifted their child care needs.

CAPS created emergency policy waivers to accommodate the shifting needs of child care providers and families during the public health emergency. These policy waivers included:

- The emergency CAPS payment policy waiver helped safeguard providers by allowing them to continue to receive payment for any child with an active scholarship regardless if the center was open or closed or if the child was absent or present.
- The emergency CAPS state-approved activity policy waiver allowed families to continue to receive CAPS Scholarships, even if the family encountered a permanent loss or reduction of employment or could not attend an education/training program due to COVID-19.
- The temporary suspension of CAPS provider rate changes protected families from cost increases in their child care as many families were experiencing job losses and hours reductions due to COVID-19.
- The temporary suspension of family signatures on CAPS arrival and departure records supported providers in maintaining social distancing measures at their programs to help protect program staff and families.
- The temporary suspension of disallowing billing for CAPS and another state or federal program during the same service period helped stabilize provider payments as families received child care through other federal programs while child care programs closed due to COVID-19. This policy waiver allowed child care providers to charge both CAPS and another state or federal program for care during the same time period to help stabilize child care programs as enrollment and attendance plummeted due to the pandemic.



DECAL's Child Care Services Division did the following in response to COVID:

- Developed a COVID protocol for consultants conducting essential onsite investigations.
- Modified relevant licensing and exempt rules to reflect all Executive Orders from the Governor's office.
- Partnered with the Department of Public Health to develop a COVID Health and Safety Checklist for child care providers.
- Developed policies and procedures to replace in person visits with virtual visits for child care providers.
- Trained the Child Care Services staff on conducting virtual visits.
- Trained family child care learning home providers, child care learning center providers, and license-exempt providers on how to participate in a virtual visit.
- Created and updated COVID FAQ documents.
- Developed a hybrid model for child care facility incident investigations.
- Partnered with the Department of Public Health to develop guidance for child care providers on COVID prevention and response.
- Partnered with and identified programs (such as YMCA's) who were available to care for essential Health Care Personnel.
- Worked with DECAL development team to display School-Age Online Learning Programs during the public health emergency.
- Worked with DECAL development team to enhance DECAL KOALA and KOALA Outback to allow for family child care learning home and child care learning center providers to report open/closed status, report COVID confirmed and suspected cases, and upload administrative documents for virtual visits.



Executive Cabinet



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Kathy Howell, Carrollton
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(Secretary)

Phil Davis, Stone Mountain
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Georgia Dept of Early Care and Learning

BRIGHT FROM THE START

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