

FY 2021 ANNUAL REPORT



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**
BRIGHT FROM THE START



Enhancing School Readiness

Supporting Workforce Development

Increasing Quality and Access

Coordinating Services

Contents



A Message from Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Friends of DECAL,

After 2020, I had hoped this annual report for State Fiscal Year 2021 (July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021) would detail how the Department of Early Care and Learning's (DECAL) work of serving Georgia's children, families, and early care and education providers got back to normal. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to plague our state, country, and world.



Through it all, however, DECAL continued serving the child care and early education needs of families and child care providers through the programs and services we administer. And we began supporting families, early care and education professionals, and child care providers in new ways through an unprecedented influx of federal relief funds. These funds have helped stabilize Georgia's child care industry, have rewarded dedicated early care and education professionals, and have made quality early care more accessible to Georgia families. This year we have worked diligently to begin disbursing these funds in fair, equitable, and transparent ways.

This report will highlight our programs and services, accomplishments, and financial performance in SFY 2021...accomplished by adapting our business operations and processes to meet our customers' ever-changing needs.

I'm proud of the work DECAL has done this year, and I acknowledge we could not have been successful without the dedicated child care providers who care for Georgia's children day in and day out; the valuable stakeholders who collaborate with us for the good of Georgia's children; DECAL's passionate and professional staff; the Board of Early Care and Learning, DECAL's board that advises and supports our work; and 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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy M. Jacobs".

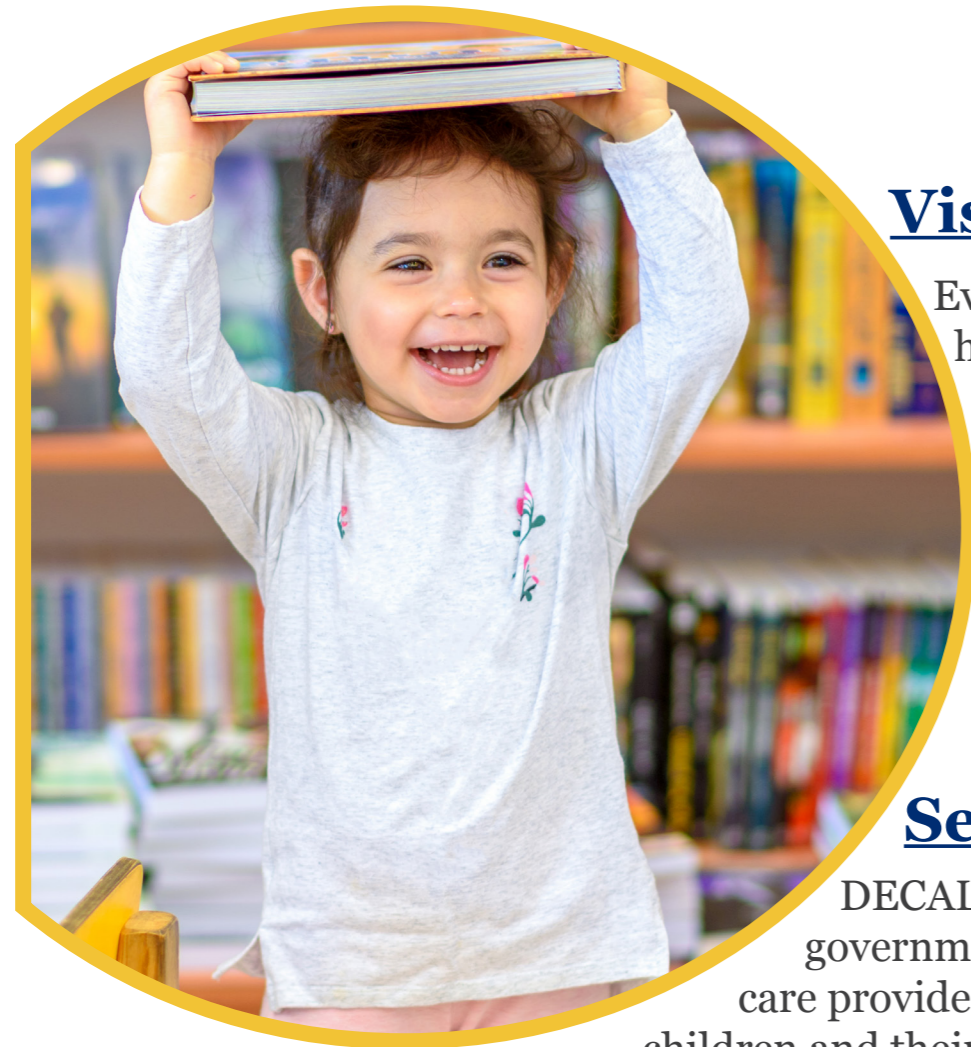
Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

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About Us

Mission

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning improves outcomes for children and families by strengthening early learning experiences in partnership with early education programs, professionals, stakeholders, families, and communities.



Vision

Every child in Georgia will have equal access to high-quality early care and education.

Services

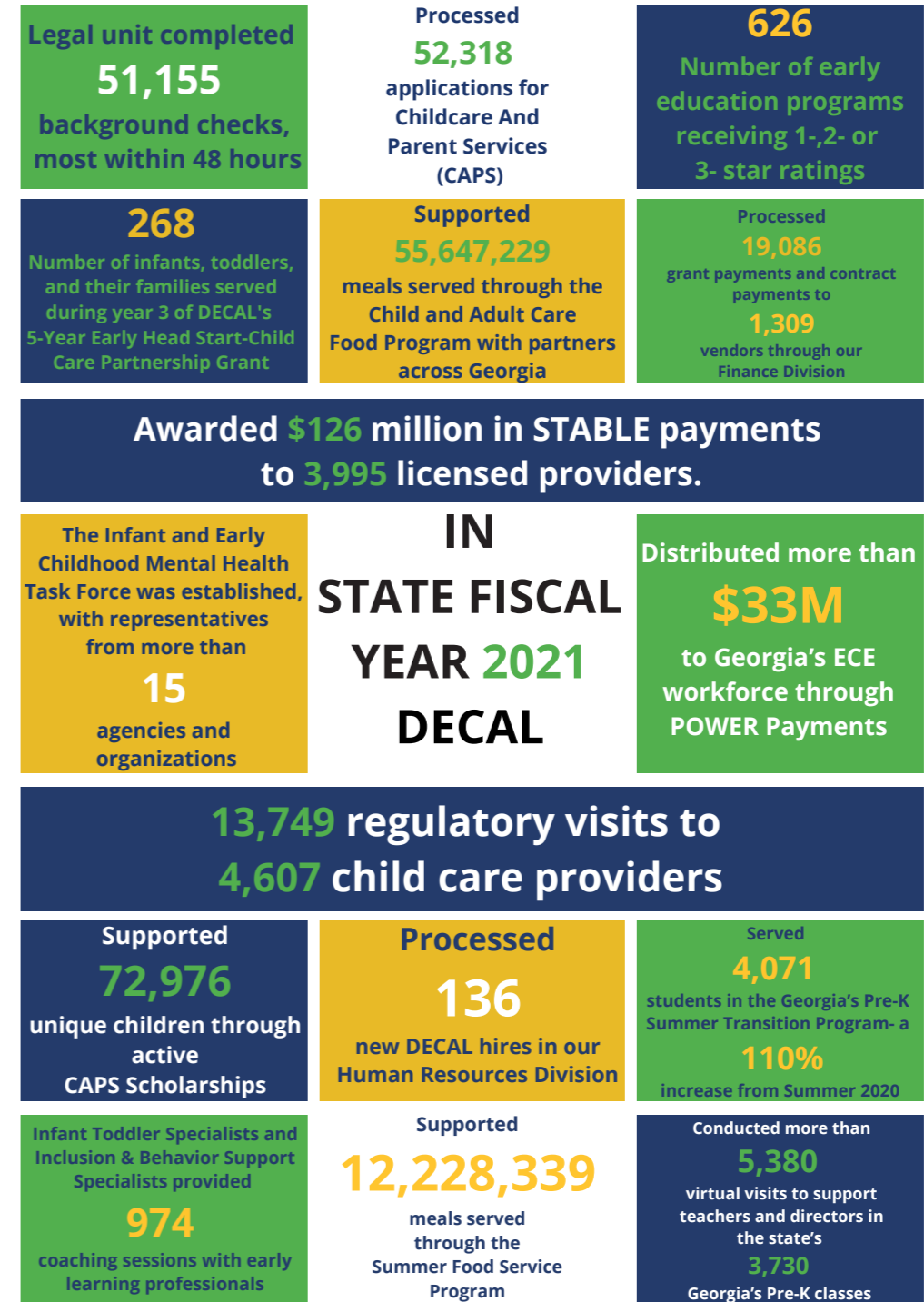
DECAL is the department of state government that supports child care providers in preparing Georgia's children and their families for school. Our

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



By the Numbers

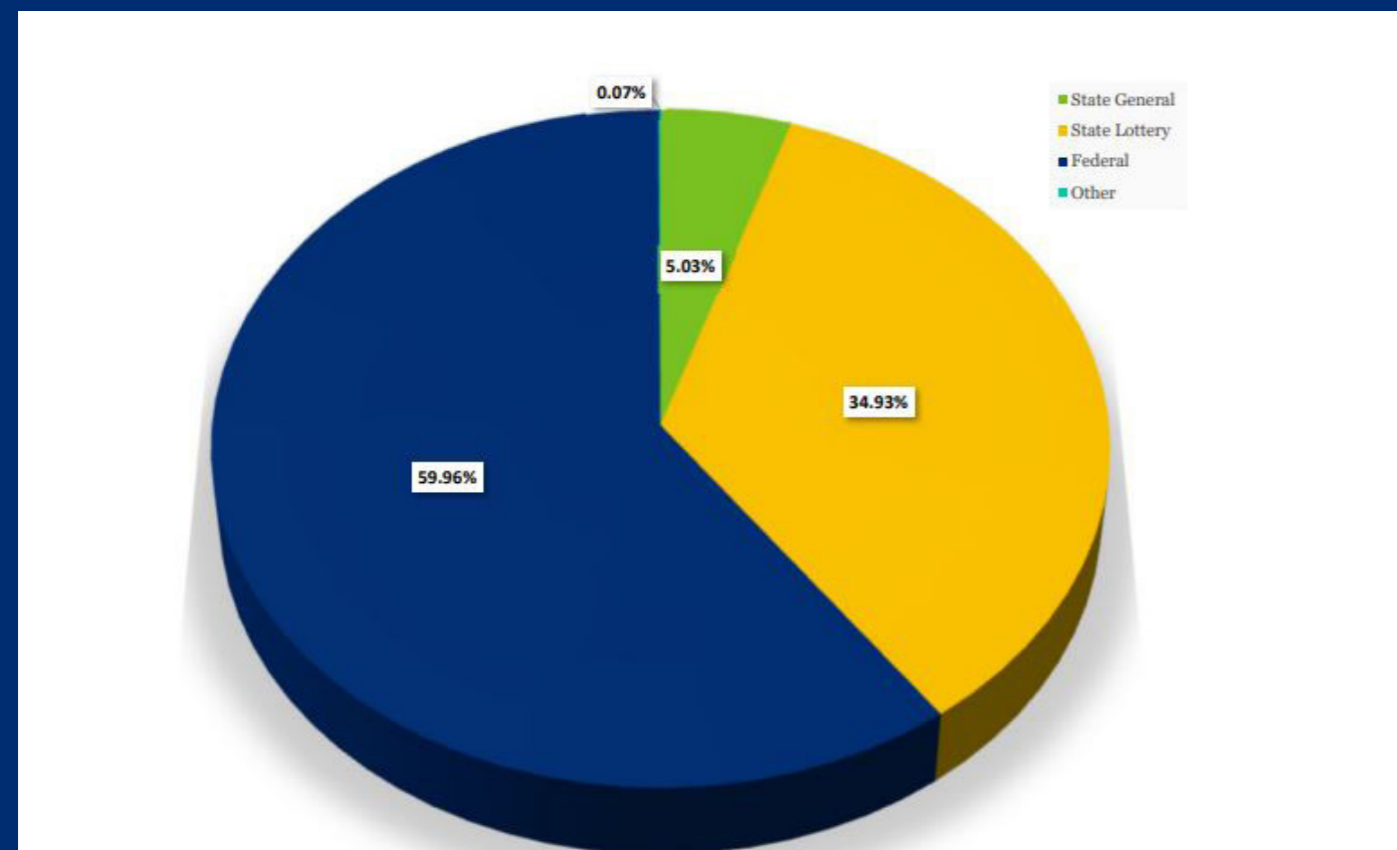


Financial Highlights

EXPENDITURES BY FUNDING SOURCE

State General	\$ 54,555,132
State Lottery	\$ 378,701,910
Federal	\$ 650,100,872
Other	\$ 807,543
Total Funds	\$1,084,165,457

DECAL EXPENDITURES BY FUNDING SOURCE IN PERCENTAGES



FY 2021

EXPENDITURES BY PROGRAMS

Child Care Services	\$ 520,475,603
Pre-K +(HS)	\$ 378,868,700
Quality Initiatives	\$ 46,081,076
Nutrition	\$ 138,740,078
Total Budget	\$1,084,165,457

FISCAL YEAR 2021 GRANTS

- **Preschool Development Renewal Grant Birth to Five** (\$3.7 million for three years, currently in year two): 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** (\$3.8 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 evaluate state initiatives and policies related to the CCDBG through a research project including surveys, administrative data analyses, and other evaluation techniques.
- **Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy of Georgia College and State University Grant (SDD Center)** (\$250,000) Grant funds awarded by the SDD Center enabled DECAL to award grants to child care programs to help early learning providers implement LITTLE ((Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments), 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): Georgia was the only state in USDA's southeast region to receive this grant. 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.
- **USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program Meal Service Training Grant** (\$100,000 for two years; currently in year two): DECAL is using this funding to host five virtual training sessions to increase nutrition education and the 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.

Enhancing School Readiness

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

Despite the continuing pandemic, the lottery funded **Georgia's Pre-K Program** served more than 66,000 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.

The tenth annual **Georgia's Pre-K Week** was a virtual event celebrated in October 2020 to raise awareness about the state's innovative preschool program. Highlights included: moved the traditional in-person celebration to a virtual space; record-breaking number of sites registered to participate- 809 Pre-K sites across Georgia, representing 124 Georgia counties registered; 30 community partners engaged in the event. For the first time, Georgia Pre-K Week had Facebook Live events. Coy Bowles, member of the Zac Brown Band and author of the Georgia's Pre-K Week book *Can You Touch a Color?*, hosted three live events on Facebook, where many of Georgia's Pre-K sites tuned in and sang along, read along, or interacted with Coy as a classroom.



To help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on kindergarten readiness, access to **Georgia's Pre-K Summer Transition Programs** significantly increased. DECAL funded 23 additional Rising Pre-K classes for a total of 69, and funded 185 additional Rising Kindergarten classes for a total of 314. Approximately **4,071 children were served** in the Pre-K Summer Transition Programs.

As an **Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership** grantee, DECAL is funded to deliver comprehensive Early Head Start services to **184 infants and toddlers in 2021**. The headcount of all of those who entered and exited the program during the year shows that the partnership actually delivered comprehensive Early Head Start services to 268 children. 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

By the end of June 2021, 47,303 children, 88% of all children with a **Childcare and Parent Services** (CAPS) scholarship, were enrolled in Quality Rated care. Also, 2,007 Quality Rated-eligible providers serving CAPS children with CAPS Scholarships were Quality Rated.



DECAL's **Quality Rated** Team incorporated two new elements in Temporary Alternate Rating Options (TARO): the Quality Rated Virtual Process (QRVP) and the Live Observation-Virtual Experience (LO-VE), providing a way for programs to continue their journey of continuous quality improvement.

As per instructions from Georgia's Governor, DECAL developed and piloted a new Quality Rated **Language and Literacy Endorsement** (LLE) available to 2- and 3-star rated programs. The endorsement is to train, encourage, and support child care providers in developing critical pre-reading skills among the birth-to-5 age group.

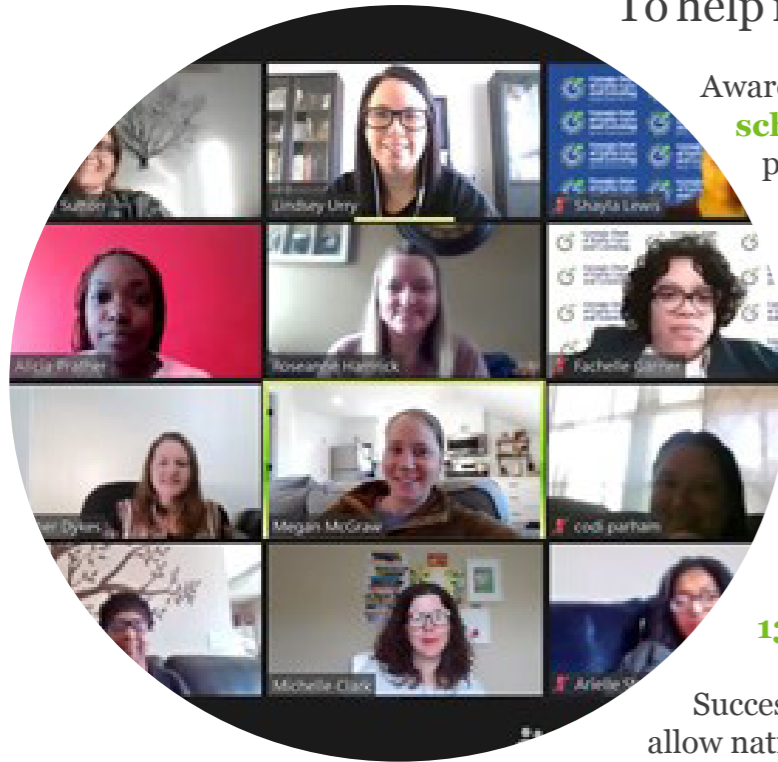
DECAL's Inclusion and Behavior Support Unit continued to support early learning professionals and families through training, coaching, and facilitating positive behavior support plans. The Inclusion and Behavior Support Helpline provided information and resources to 333 teachers, administrators, and families, and Specialists conducted **725 virtual coaching sessions** to help teachers implement strategies to create inclusive, positive classroom environments.

DECAL helped 74 early learning programs implement **LITTLE** (*Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments*). This support was funded by grants to 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 million in scholarships and incentives** to 2,708 unique participants in the DECAL Scholars program.

Provided more than **\$33 million in supplemental payments** to 33,403 members of the early care and education workforce through the **Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition (POWER)** program.

Saw an increase in the number of users in the **Georgia Professional Development System (GaPDS)** of 15.8% for a total of **139,471 users**.

Successfully updated Georgia Training Approval to allow national and statewide training organizations, known as **Approved Sponsor Organizations (ASOs)** to receive approval to offer high-quality training in Georgia.

Organized and supported 99 **Peer Support Network** sessions for providers participating in or interested in becoming Quality Rated.

Approved 149 new and returning trainer applications and 2,185 new trainings through **Georgia Training Approval**.

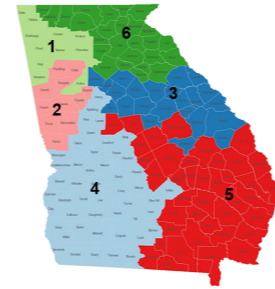
Expanded the number of online trainings available to early learning workforce and DECAL staff through the **Online Learning Library Initiative (OLLI)** to 32, with 25 offered in English and Spanish.

Certified 44 **Professional Learning Community (PLC)** facilitators through the PLC Facilitator Initiative.



Coordinating Services

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



DECAL's six Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators effectively served the Department's mission through a range of initiatives. Beyond bi-weekly newsletters they distributed during 2021 that informed child care providers of timely and critical

supports available to them, the Coordinators led monthly meetings of the **Child Care Engagement Networks (CCENs)** in every county of the regions they cover. They also held 65 virtual meetings designed to create a safe space for providers to participate in conversations about what's going on with them, their programs, their staff, and the children and families they serve.

The Coordinators also convened quarterly **Birth to Eight Collaborative** meetings within their assigned regions that were key components in their ongoing community-based work. These 34 meetings brought together community stakeholders who are invested in promoting high-quality early learning services across the birth-through-age 8 continuum. The gatherings supported the roll out of DECAL programs as well as community-driven initiatives and facilitated coordination of system-building efforts targeting young children in the regions. Additionally, in partnership with Georgia State University's Child Welfare Training Collaborative, the Coordinators and the DECAL Instructional Supports Team worked together to host two conferences to increase understanding and strengthen capacity related to trauma-responsive care for the birth to five population.

Utilizing funds from Georgia's federal \$11.2 million PDG B-5 Grant, the Coordinators created **three categories of grants** to support communities across Georgia in launching tailored initiatives to ameliorate the effects of trauma, support student-parents enrolled in postsecondary education and their young children, and respond to local challenges aligned with specific focus areas identified in the PDG Needs Assessment.

DECAL hired an **Infant Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)** director in November 2020, the first state level leadership position dedicated to early childhood mental health and to working with other state child serving agencies and providers to build an early childhood system of care.

A cross-agency IECMH task force was established in February 2021 to promote coordinated policy and collaborative service delivery for young children with (or at risk for) social and emotional health needs.

DECAL formed and convened a **Cross-Agency Family Council (CAFC)** composed of 16 family members who also serve on family councils for other state agencies and family service organizations.



DECAL administered federally funded **Child Nutrition Programs** in 81 out of the 83 (97%) Georgia counties with a

food insecurity rate of 20% or higher.

Nutritious meals were available to senior adults through the **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** 46 Georgia Counties of which 37 have an adult obesity rate of 32 % or higher.

DECAL supported 55,647,229 meals served through the CACFP and with partners across Georgia, supported 12,228,339 meals served through the **Summer Food Service Program**.

The **Communications and Outreach** Team monitored the use of qualityrated.org child care search tool and coordinated the work of the Quality Care for Children 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS Call Center in referring families to Quality Rated Providers, resulting in 10,871 inquiries from families and 3,626 referrals to child care providers. The Quality Rated Help Desk responded to more than 2,600 calls and emails from providers interested in or participating in Quality Rated.

Technological Advancements

DECAL's IT team supported the agency's FY 2021 achievements toward its goals through improvements in applications, security, and infrastructure. The service desk managed more than 10,000 tickets and provided new hardware to 750 employees and contractors

Applications:

Completed STABLE Payments Round 2 and 3 and issued \$126 million to child care providers in FY 2021.

Completed development for STABLE 4ward applications to fund \$900 million over the next 23 months.

Processed the POWER Supplemental Payments Round 1 and distributed over \$33 million.

Developed DECAL Security Awareness tracking functionality associated with employee CRC internal applications.

Processed the DECAL KOALA Phase 7 license amendments.

Completed several performance enhancements including migration of PDF creation from client to server in MyKOALA.

Quality Rated:

Created and expanded eligibility access for 2022 Quality Rated cohorts.

Developed functionality to identify new CAPS Provisional and Probational statuses in Quality Rated.

Enhanced the provider search and appended additional information for language and literacy endorsements which was requested by the Governor's Office.

Significant modifications deployed due to the pandemic including alternate scoring functionality and allowing Option B-C portfolios to have 1 or 2 rating.

PANDA:

Completed 14 enhancement releases, which included a cloud-based prototype for the PM Client replacement.

Overhauled the roster component for easier navigation, seamless transfer of students between classes, document upload functionality to validate student identity, and the creation of several reports to aid in roster maintenance.

GAPDS:

Implemented new functionality for Approved Sponsor Organization (ASO), which allows training organizations to apply through GAPDS to offer DECAL approved training in Georgia.

CACDS:

Developed data extraction scripts in support of the Resultant CACDS 3.0 re-engineering project and the 3Si Executive Dashboard analytics.

Re-engineered the GOSA interface to significantly enhance the data matching process which improved student data integrity.

ATLAS:

Provided support for Colyar's cloud migration project, which included over 160 hours of user acceptance testing and results validation.

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) 2021.

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.

In May, 2021, DECAL had some great news for families who receive CAPS scholarship assistance in paying for child care. Through the federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), DECAL received funds to help eligible Georgia families negatively impacted by the pandemic pay for child care. DECAL is using this historic investment in early learning to support families through a special initiative called ACCESS - Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements. ACCESS is intended to temporarily alleviate the financial burden of child care for families in the CAPS program. As part of this funding, CAPS family fees, the portion of child care paid for by families, are waived under the ACCESS initiative through service period ending October 2, 2022. Families will not pay their provider any tuition related fees or co-payments for child care services. CAPS will pay child care providers their full published rate for the type of care provided, including the family fee.

In addition, DECAL continued the Supporting Onsite Learning for Virtual Education (SOLVE) program, first introduced on 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.

DECAL's Infant and Toddler team continued to offer Toddler Time at Home, a weekly thematic calendar of activities for families to use with their 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 second round of SEEDS webinar series and a series on infant and toddler development.

The SEEDS for Success Helpline helped families locate available child care for their child with a disability and provided referrals to needed services. Helpline staff also assisted child care providers by providing information and services to address persistent, challenging classroom behaviors.

COVID Response (continued)

The DECAL Family Peer Ambassadors, supported by the Child and Family Development Unit, shared more than 1,250 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, payments were based on the 2020-2021 Pre-K grant agreement and varified lead teacher credentials. Payments were not prorated by student enrollment.

To meet the needs of children and families, Pre-K staff, and communities, DECAL allowed flexibility in how providers delivered Georgia's Pre-K Program services. Providers were allowed to select from three different instructional models: traditional, hybrid, and full distance. Regardless of the instructional model, programs chose to offer Pre-K services.

Pre-K specialists supported teachers, children, and families by providing information and effective online learning, take-home instructional packets, and in-person learning strategies to help maintain a safe and healthy learning environment.

Pre-K specialists supported programs by providing information and resources to directors and teachers to transition from face-to-face instruction to learning at home. They conducted regular virtual sessions on topics that directors and teachers indicated were most needed.

To help families keep children engaged in developmentally appropriate learning at home, Pre-K continued to develop the Georgia's Pre-K at Home weekly calendar of activities. The weekly calendars, aligned with the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS), included activities for literacy, phonological awareness, music and movement, science, math, fine motor and social-emotional skills.



The Pre-K Summer Transition Program operated successfully in summer 2021. More than 4,000 students received onsite services during a six-week onsite program.

Updated resources and information were posted on the Teacher page and Director Resource page to provide resources, ideas and information related to COVID-19 .

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.

DECAL partnered with the School of Social Work Child Welfare Training Collaborative at Georgia State University to provide the second annual summit on trauma and resilience. More than 600 families and early learning professionals attended the summit, *Building Community Resilience to Early Childhood Trauma*, which was held twice virtually.

DECAL approved 534 virtual trainings through Georgia Training Approval (GTA).

Via the Connections Matter curriculum, 221 ECE professionals, including DECAL and CCR&R staff, were trained on trauma informed care, brain development, and resilience.

During the pandemic, DECAL ensured Georgia's children continued to have access to nutritious meals. In 2021, 67,875,568 free meals were served to 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 gave sponsors an opportunity to be creative in providing meal , including allowing parent/guardiant meal pickup, drive-through meal services, and home 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.

The Research and Policy Analysis Team worked diligently in FY2021 to continue tracking and analyzing 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 facilitating research supporting the distribution of pandemic-related funds from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

DECAL'S Quality Rated Team created new Temporary Alternate Rating Options (TARO) that incorporate two innovative elements, the Quality Rated Virtual Process (QRVP) and the Live Observation-Virtual Experience (LO-VE) to give providers several options for earning a star rating during the pandemic.

The Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators formed Child Care Engagement Networks in the six DECAL regions to give providers a forum in which to get support, resources, and strategies to keep their businesses open and to serve families effectively during the health emergency.

The 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS Call Center that is overseen and funded by DECAL furnished child care referrals to 3,626 families and enhanced services such as facility registration assistance to parents in that group who provide essential services during the pandemic.

COVID Response (continued)



By April 1, 2020, 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 allowed CAPS to support the families of medical personnel, first responders, child care personnel, and others throughout the year, as COVID-19 impacted 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 changed payments from being based on attendance, to being based on enrollment. This helped safeguard providers by allowing them to continue to receive payment for any child with an active scholarship regardless of if the provider was open or temporarily 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 emergency CAPS maximum reimbursement rate policy waiver increased families' access to quality child care by paying child care providers their full published rate based on the type of care provided.
- The emergency CAPS family fee waiver temporarily alleviates the financial burden of child care for families enrolled in CAPS. Families do not pay their provider any tuition related fees or co-payments for child care. CAPS pays the provider their full published rate, including the portion typically paid by the family.



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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Second Congressional District**

**Kathy Howell, Carrollton
Third Congressional District
(Secretary)**

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Georgia Dept of Early Care and Learning

BRIGHT FROM THE START

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