

# Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



## DECAL By the Numbers

**2,853** - Quality Rated programs in Georgia

**61** - Percentage of Georgia child care providers who are CAPS providers

**4,356** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia

**278** - Pending applications

**71,598** - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program

**3,683** - Funded classes in Georgia's Pre-K Program

**4,560** - Sites for Child & Adult Care Food Program

**1,026** - Sites for Happy Helpings Summer Food Program

## Follow DECAL on Social Media



## Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Fellow DECALers,

As the calendar recently turned from 2023 to 2024, I thought about the passage of time and especially how significant this new year is for all of us. In 2024 DECAL will celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a department of state government...and, God willing, in June I will celebrate 10 years as DECAL's commissioner.



Thankfully, I'm not yet at a point in my own life where I *feel* (mentally and physically) how fast time is passing, BUT when I look at my children...and at DECAL...I'm acutely aware of how time has changed my life. When Governor Deal appointed me DECAL's commissioner, my son Charlie was 5 and my daughter Laine was 1. Now Charlie is taller than I am and is learning to drive. Laine is taller than most of her classmates and is involved in almost every sport and social activity available to her. Yet it seems like only yesterday, we brought them home from the hospital.

And DECAL: When I was appointed, DECAL had 214 employees; now we number 898. CAPS was relatively new to the department with many fewer employees than the number today. Our annual budget then was approximately \$650 million; today it's \$1.9 billion. Our focus on quality, literacy, inclusion, nutrition, and physical activity has increased exponentially. And all this growth happened even with a worldwide pandemic that lasted more than two years.

Of course, more staff and larger budgets in-and-of-themselves are not indicators of success as a department. Our success since 2004 and in the past decade can be seen in the impact we've had on children, families, communities, and child care providers through

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH**  
Spotlight

She was the founder of the Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in 1883, one of the first schools for black children in Augusta. Laney also established the first kindergarten for black children in Augusta. She also taught in Macon, Savannah and Milledgeville.

This portrait was the first of an African American woman to be displayed at the Georgia State Capitol.



Lucy Craft Laney



Pre-K, CCS, CAPS, Quality Rated, the CACFP, Happy Helpings, and our focus on 2Gen approaches to services...and the various initiatives and programs we've administered to support Georgia's child care industry.

Looking back at what DECAL has accomplished in 20 years and what we've accomplished together the past 10 years encourages me as we look ahead. There's no reason why our efforts will be any less important and impactful in 2024...and the next 10 years...and next 20 years.

I know we have made and are making a difference in the lives of Georgia's families and in the future of our state. And I feel as honored today to be DECAL's commissioner as I did almost 10 years ago when I got the call from Governor Deal.

Sincerely yours,

ARE YOU READY?

**CAPS ALL STAFF MEETING**

February 7, 2024 • 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM  
Loudermilk Conference Center  
40 Courtland St NE, Atlanta, GA 30303

TEAMWORK. TENACITY. TRIUMPH



# House Committee Calls for Smaller Pre-K Class Sizes, Higher Pre-K Salaries and More

During the 2023 legislative session, House Speaker Jon Burns requested that a working group be formed to investigate the needs of Georgia's Pre-K program. Kicking off the New Year, the Georgia House of Representatives Working Group on Early Childhood Education held a press conference at the State Capitol to announce its recommendations.

If passed by the legislature, the group's proposals will help to rejuvenate and elevate programming, restore Pre-K class size to 20 students, raise salaries of Pre-K teachers and assistants, increase start-up funds for materials and classroom furnishings, and fund capital costs associated with opening or renovating Pre-K classrooms.

Quality education has always been a priority at DECAL, and the agency is grateful to hear of the commitment not only to raise the salaries for Pre-K teachers and assistants, but also to provide individualized attention for our youngest learners.

"Georgia's Pre-K has been around for 31 years," Commissioner Amy Jacobs noted. "We've had a lot of support from previous governors, and always the General Assembly. But this really takes it to the next level. The individualized instruction that [educators]



Decal Download  
with Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

New Episodes  
Every Wednesday

Melilssa Herndon Is New  
Director of Field  
Operations for CCS





Melissa Herndon has been named as a new Director of Field Operations for Child Care Services.

Melissa has been with DECAL and CCS for more than 14 years. She began her career as a Child Care Consultant in July 2009, and then had the opportunity to serve in multiple roles such as Southwest Region Lead Consultant, Critical Response and Training Manager, Policy and Process Improvement Manager, and for the last seven years Southeast Region Manager.

“Melissa’s vast knowledge and experience that she has gained from these roles and collaboration in projects with other divisions has prepared her for her new role as Director of Field Operations,” said Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner of Child Care Services.

Melissa holds a Bachelor’s in Child and Family Development from Georgia Southern University.

**They've Got the Spirit of DECAL!**

it to the next level. The individualized instruction that [educators] would be able to give to students, [would] be a huge game-changer for pre-K.”

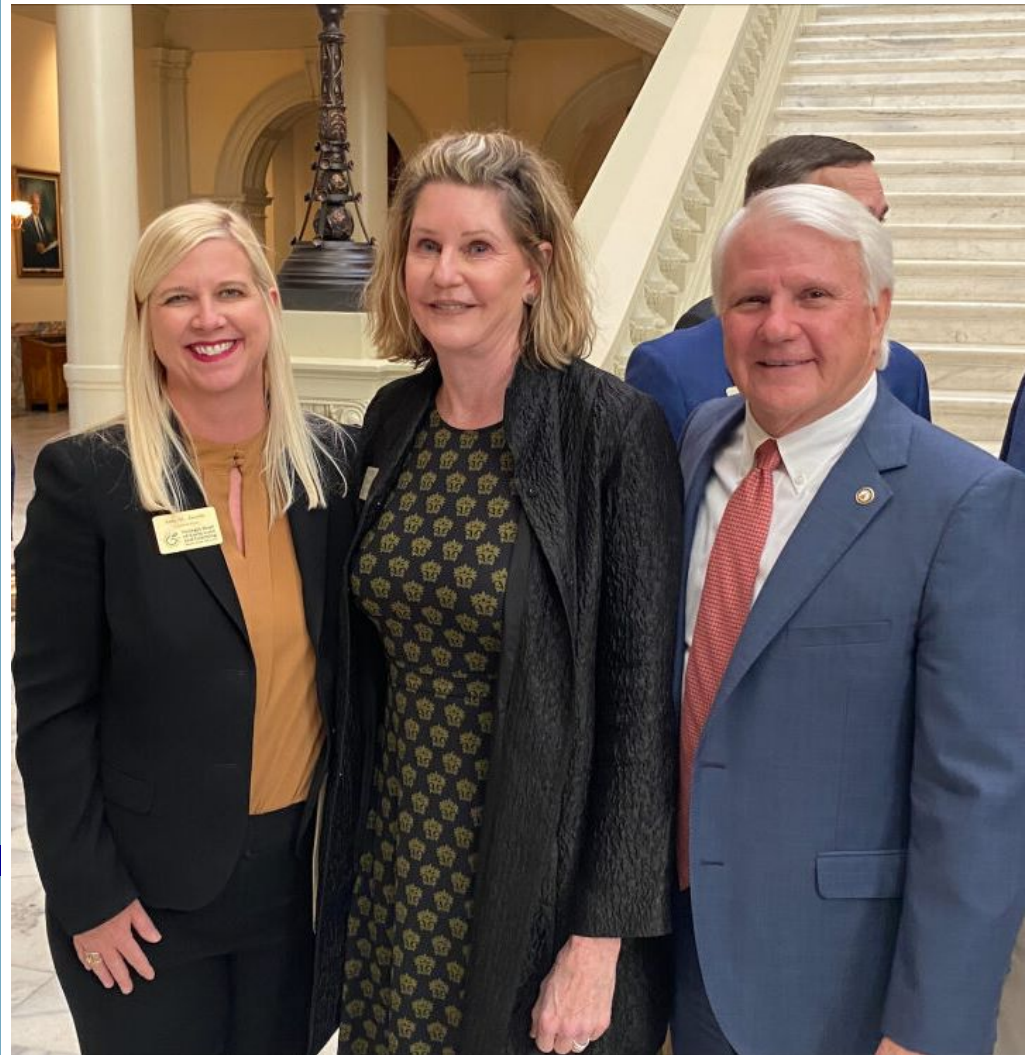
Georgia’s legislators are also committed to expanding Pre-K across the state. The recommendations to increase start-up funds for Pre-K classrooms and to allocate funding associated with opening or renovating Pre-K classrooms would skyrocket current initiatives and, importantly, help to bolster Georgia’s workforce.

“The more children who have true availability of Pre-K, the more parents who can more quickly re-enter the workforce,” said Georgia House Pro Tempore Jan Jones.

“It's time we take action,” said Speaker Burns. “We're going to work very closely with the Senate and the Governor's office to see how many of these we can get across the finish line. This will make a difference.”

DECAL, as always, is committed to Georgia's youngest learners and their families. We are enthusiastic about the prospects of this bill during the current Legislative Session and grateful for the work of our representatives and senators.

Pictured below are DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs , House Speaker Pro-Tem Jan Jones, and House Speaker Jon Burns



Congratulations to our 2023 Spirit of DECAL recipients: SEEDS Helpline Coordinator Shayla Lewis, Director of Research Partnerships and Business Supports Shayna Funke, KOALA Systems Tech Specialist Chrissy Miller, Compliance Supervisor Amy Hill, and CAPS Scholarship Administration Manager Yvette Laverne Seale.

Spirit of DECAL winners are nominated by their peers and blindly scored on the DECAL values Delivering Stellar Customer Service, Exhibiting Organizational Excellence, Creating Positive Relationships, Always Valuing Others, and Leading the way. The awards were presented during our 2023 All Staff Meeting, held on Wednesday, November 8, 2023, at Cobb Galleria Centre.



## DECAL Awards New EXPAND Grants

DECAL has awarded new Expanding Parents' Access to Nontraditional Delivery (EXPAND) Grants to seven child care providers and six nonprofit and government organizations.

Supported by research and analysis showing that the availability of high-quality child care and early education plays a key role in Georgia's workforce development and economic

# Pre-K Summer Transition Program Offered Again in 2024

A vital and necessary program for rising kindergarteners is on the DECAL agenda again for the summer of 2024.

The Summer Transition Program, which provides extra support for qualified students, helps children become adapted to the schedule and learning style they will find in kindergarten next year. Enrollment is prioritized for students who did not attend a Georgia's Pre-K or Head Start program during the 2023-2024 school year or who did not attend for a full school year.

Other students may be eligible if they are a member of a priority group. Those groups include children who have been recognized as requiring extra academic assistance, are dual language learners, are in foster care placement, are from a family without permanent housing, or have an Individual Education Program.

"Georgia's Pre-K Program helps prepare four-year-olds academically and socially for kindergarten," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "But some children did not attend Georgia Pre-K or they attended Pre-K but need additional support before entering kindergarten. DECAL created the Summer Transition Program (STP) to help these students."

"The STP is a great opportunity for these young students to build their skills and confidence before moving into kindergarten," added Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K Program and Instructional Supports.

Adams said the program will begin in early June.

"The STP provides an opportunity for these children to become familiar with school and routines in a small class size with at least one Spanish-speaking teacher," said Devon Porter, Pre-K Summer Transition Program and Outreach Manager. "It empowers teachers to strategically plan and individualize instruction to help reduce the achievement gap."

"Safety measures are in place, and our classrooms are monitored like they are during the school year. Each site is assigned a Pre-K Specialist who works with the program."

The Pre-K Specialist provides ongoing support to the teachers via instruction, classroom management, assessment, and interactions with children. Summer Programs that are located in a private child care center also have to follow the licensing rules and regulations in their summer transition program.

The number of students served by the STP is 4,618.



growth, DECAL created the EXPAND Grants. The awards serve an identified need shared by many families, employers, and communities for child care services outside of the traditional hours of Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

“The EXPAND Grants reflect DECAL’s targeted focus on creating supports for families with young children, the child care industry, and other businesses that contribute to well-being and overall growth,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “In order for Georgia to have a strong workforce and economy, working families must have access to quality child care during both traditional and nontraditional hours and these grant awards will support that goal.”

There are two types of EXPAND Grants: one for licensed child care providers to expand their operating hours and a second for government entities and nonprofit organizations to form collaboratives to address the child care access challenges in their communities.

The seven providers receiving EXPAND Grants, ranging from \$50,000 to \$500,000 each, are family home providers Danielle E. Albanese and Edelina Lane and child care learning center programs Bright Horizons Preschool, Creative Labs Learning Center, Start Bright Academy Hiram, Bright Ones Learning Center, Inc., and The Learning Voyage Student Success Center.

The six EXPAND grantees from the non-profit and government sectors are Navient Health,

A project director in Putnam County agrees that the Summer Transition Program is helpful.

“The STP has exceeded my expectations,” she says. “What the children have been able to achieve with the extended days has been eye-opening. The need for the program is obvious, and the selection process is spot on to ensure the kids who need it most have first priority.”

Information about the Summer Transition Program is available on the DECAL web page at <http://www.decalschool.org/Prek/SummerTransitionProgram.aspx>. You can also email questions to [summerschool@decalschool.org](mailto:summerschool@decalschool.org).

## CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot Becomes a Reality

We are proud to announce that our CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot is now a reality. With key players in place, we project CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Consultants will be on Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) campuses and their affiliate WorkSource One Stop and Adult Education sites in late February 2024.

The CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot will provide Student Parents with direct access to CAPS consultants at their TCSG program sites. One of our main objectives is to significantly reduce and eliminate obstacles that oppose successful completion and attainment of educational goals faced by our student parent population. One of the greatest challenges facing Student Parents is access to quality child care. In response to this knowledge, the CAPS Student Parent Priority Group was created in May 2022 to support these families statewide. While the Student Parent Priority Group is a wonderful addition to CAPS, we wondered what more can we do. Thus, the CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot was born.

The CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot is funded through DECAL and will continue for one-to-two years. CAPS will provide Onsite Support from CAPS Student Parent Consultants housed at three pilot locations. Consultants will support student parents face-to-face with system eligibility, locating family resources, and goal setting. Staff training will include, but not be limited to, Family Centered Coaching, Find Help GA, and Georgia Gateway. CAPS applications for Student Parent Priority Group, case changes, and renewals will be processed onsite in real time by CAPS Consultants.

Our pilot sites include Chattahoochee Technical College (Cobb Campus), Central Georgia Technical College, and Wiregrass Technical College. A third-party data team will evaluate the

Inc., Columbus Technica College, The Manufacturers Education Foundation, Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, City of Thomasville Payroll Development Authority, and Alliance Theatre, a division of the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center, Inc. These grants range from \$100,000 to \$750,000.

“Congratulations to the 13 recipients of the new EXPAND grants,” said DECAL Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder. “We look forward to assisting the grantees in administering the funds to develop impactful programs and supports to serve the pressing needs we learned about through extensive engagement with families, providers, and other stakeholders.”

The EXPAND Grants, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), can be used for a variety of initiatives. The grants for child care providers could cover staff pay and benefits, child transportation costs, or necessary health and safety improvements to support extended hours of operation. Grants to nonprofits and government agencies could help underwrite partnerships between local businesses and child care providers to serve parents working nontraditional hours.

***Supporting and guiding the mission and vision of Bright from the Start:***

**Board of Early Care and Learning**

effectiveness of the pilot upon its conclusion. Based on this evaluation, DECAL Executive Leadership will determine if the partnership will be taken to scale.

Identifying key performance indicators is important for tracking and monitoring the success of the pilot. The following goals have been identified to serve as the foundation for tracking accomplishments of the pilot.

- Reduce and eliminate barriers accessing CAPS
- Assistance locating Quality Rated child care providers, including onsite child care
- Benchmark for evaluating educational outcomes—attendance and program completion
- Use of community resources and resource platforms
- Coaching opportunities

The CAPS Student Parent 2GEN Pilot will serve families working to complete and attain educational goals and earn higher wages, thereby creating economic generational transformations within their families. This will reduce reliance on social service programs and encourage families to take steps towards self-sufficiency while sustaining independent economic self-reliance.

## **2023-2024 Early Childhood Educators of the Year Named**

DECAL and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2023-2024. The Educators of the Year program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-18 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months). Winners serve as ambassadors for Georgia’s early childhood educators by modeling effective classroom practices and making public speaking appearances throughout the state.

This year's winning infant educator is Noel Weimer with Water Oak Family Child Care center located in Roswell; the winning toddler educator is Bianca Brown with The Greenbriar Preschool in Evans; and the winning preschool educator is Chantelle Hester with Smart Starters Academy in Savannah.

“It’s exciting and important to continue recognizing Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year,” said Laura Wagner,

Executive Director for the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “The experiences children have in their classrooms help

Phil Davis, Savannah  
First Congressional District  
(Chair)

Susan Harper, Albany  
Second Congressional District

VACANT  
Third Congressional District

Karla Zisook, Decatur  
Fourth Congressional District

VACANT  
Fifth Congressional District

Kristy Beam, Atlanta  
Sixth Congressional District

Kristin Morrissey, Cumming  
Seventh Congressional District

Luann Purcell, Ed.D.,  
Warner Robins  
Eighth Congressional District

Cristina Washell, Ed.D.,  
Cleveland  
Ninth Congressional District

Joanna Hill, Watkinsville  
Tenth Congressional District

Jen Bennecke, Atlanta  
Eleventh Congressional District

Kimberly Neville, Brooklet  
Twelfth Congressional District

Melissa Boekhaus, M.D.,  
Smyrna  
Thirteenth Congressional  
District

Debra Brock, Calhoun  
Fourteenth Congressional  
District  
(Vice Chair)

learning. The experiences children have in their classrooms help enhance their brain development and their capacity to learn and to get along with others. We can't say enough about the role these earliest teachers play in the life of a child, placing them on a successful path to lifelong learning."

Weimer, Brown, and Hester were selected from an exceptional pool of experienced lead teachers nominated by Georgia child care program directors. Candidates for Educators of the Year must have been employed as a lead teacher at a licensed 2- or 3-star Quality Rated child care provider, have had a minimum of three years' experience, and planned to continue as a lead teacher moving into the 2023-2024 school year.

As Educators of the Year, winners will receive \$3,000 for their personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and \$2,500 to cover out of the classroom costs while the teacher fulfills their duties of a Georgia's Early Childhood Educator of the Year around the state.

"The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning could not fulfill our mission and vision without the partnership of committed, competent, and caring early childhood educators," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "The dedicated professionals caring for Georgia's infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children in out-of-home child care are not just babysitting; they are imparting skills that children will need to become successful in school and in life. DECAL is honored to recognize and celebrate teachers who are helping to prepare Georgia's children for the future."



text messages by  
texting DECAL to  
474747

## Employee Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual  
Suggestion Box now!**

# WINNERS 2023 Georgia's Early Childhood Educator of the Year



**Noel Weimer**  
Water Oak Family Child Care  
Roswell, GA  
*Infant*



**Bianca Brown**  
The Greenbriar Preschool  
Evans, GA  
*Toddler*



**Chantelle Hester**  
Smart Starters Academy  
Savannah, GA  
*Preschool*



## Faces of DECAL

*DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Emilia Emmanuel, Alex Dagenhart, Andronicki Dorsey, Tina McLaren, and Lamica Roberson.*

## Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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**Georgia Dept  
of Early Care  
and Learning**

BRIGHT FROM THE START



**Contact Us**