

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

- 4,398** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
- 9,924** - DECAL child care visits year-to-date FY2023
- 73,456** - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program
- 11,961** - CAPS Student-Parent Applications (5/1/22 – 3/31/23)
- 2,884** - Quality Rated providers

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**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs



Dear Fellow DECALers,

If you've visited the main DECAL office in Atlanta in the past decade, you've probably seen the three giant crayons displayed in various locations. They stood proudly in the reception area for years and are now located in the CAPS reception area on the 6th floor. Following is where they came from and why they were created...

In 1997, the Office of School Readiness (OSR- predecessor to DECAL) won the Innovations in American Government Award from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University for creating and implementing Georgia's Pre-K Program. The award included a cash prize to be used to host a national conference about the Pre-K program.

OSR hosted the conference in September 1998. It was attended by hundreds of officials, experts, and stakeholders from states around the country who wanted to learn more about what Georgia was doing in early education. The main speakers were Governor Zell Miller and U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

The giant crayons were commissioned to be the centerpiece for the main stage. The innovative pieces were created by a sign maker in Cedartown, Georgia using tubes made for rolls of carpet; the tips were fashioned out of "bondo," normally used for auto repair. After the conference the crayons stood in the elevator lobby of the OSR office on Park Place.

One year when NAEYC's national conference was in Atlanta, DECAL staff transported the crayons to the exhibition hall for

DECAL's Cultural Spotlight!

LET'S CELEBRATE
WHAT MAKES
YOU, YOU!

We're one big family at DECAL but we each represent different backgrounds and walks of life. We want to celebrate your personal values, traditions, holiday celebrations, foods, dress, and other cultural traditions of families, racial and ethnic groups with a new feature in Decidedly DECAL. If you would like to be featured, please contact Reg Griffin at reg.griffin@dec.al.ga.gov or 404-656-0239. See you in the Spotlight!



The Child Care Services (CCS) team was well represented at this year's Professional Family Child Care Alliance of Georgia Conference held recently in Jonesboro. Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services Pam Stevens was a keynote speaker and Jennifer Bridgeman, Stephanie Clark, and Malissa Champion all presented. They are shown with PFCCAG Executive Director Ana Magana.

May 22-26 is Look Again Week in Georgia

For the tenth consecutive year

DECAL's booth. While carrying the crayons to the booth, two different exhibitors wanted to buy the crayons...and when told they were not for sale, wanted to know where they could buy their own.

One thing that's changed about the crayons is the message behind the words written on them: *Ready for School*. When they were created, the message referred primarily to the way Pre-K helped prepare children for school. Since then, however, DECAL has recognized that children begin getting ready for school the day they are born, and we've broadened our focus and work accordingly (e.g., our infant and toddler work, Quality Rated, Inclusion, Behavior Supports, technical assistance, coaching, etc.).

So, next time you see the crayons, remember that while they are tangible pillars of our past, they also represent that our work has evolved and will continue to evolve as the needs of Georgia's children and families change.

Sincerely,



Retirees Making Encore Performance at DECAL

After twelve and a half years working in IT development and support, Mike Chandler decided it was time to retire from DECAL on January 31, 2021, looking forward to spending more time with family and friends and maybe doing a little traveling. Two months later he was back at DECAL in IT development and support working part-time as a returning retiree. Prior to joining DECAL, Mike worked in the private sector for major companies like Accenture, AT&T, BellSouth, and IBM. But DECAL had a different appeal for him.

"It was interesting and meaningful work, with good relationships, good pay, and a supportive environment," Mike explains.

Mike is one of 13 returning retirees who are back in part-time roles with the agency. "They have experience, less of a learning

curve, and can contribute immediately to the unique work we are

For the tenth consecutive year, DECAL is calling for families and caregivers of children to increase awareness of the dangers of leaving children unattended in vehicles. This year's "Look Again" campaign comes just ahead of Memorial Day, the unofficial start of summer, and hopes to ensure that families, child care providers, and the public understand how to prevent pediatric vehicular heatstroke during this time.

Governor Brian P. Kemp has proclaimed May 22-26, 2023, as Look Again Week in Georgia, saying, "Public awareness of the dangers of vehicular heatstroke and of simple prevention strategies can save lives. The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, along with the State of Georgia, is committed to eliminating child vehicular heatstroke deaths in childcare settings, at home and elsewhere."

DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs said hundreds of thousands of children in Georgia are cared for daily by licensed child care providers, most of whom regularly transport children. "Nationally, 33 children died from pediatric vehicular heatstroke in 2022 and three have died so far this year. When DECAL receives reports of children left in vehicles by providers, we investigate each incident."

Jacobs said "Look Again" is a message not only for child care programs and teachers but for anyone caring for a child - parents, grandparents, other family members, neighbors, and friends - to always account for the children in their care as they drive them from place to place.

curve, and can contribute immediately to the unique work we are doing," explained Sheryl Young-Wilhite, DECAL Director of Human Resources. "It benefits everyone all the way around."

State Personnel Board Rules prevent returning retirees from working more than 1,040 hours a year, with work hours averaging around 20-29 hours per week. Schedules are flexible, depending on the work of each department.

No one understands DECAL better than Mark Waits, who worked for the agency and its predecessor, the Office of School Readiness, for 21 years as a writer, editor, and ultimately Special Assistant to the Commissioner and Liaison for the Board of Early Care and Learning, and then retired in 2018.

"I believe in the mission and vision of DECAL...and appreciate that the department afforded me the opportunity to do a job that I love and that I am good at with people who have become more than just co-workers," said Mark, also a returning retiree.

Mark also enjoys editing part-time for a national, nonprofit early education research organization based out of state; serving on the board of and volunteering at the Cedartown/Polk County Humane Society; visiting Pawleys Island, South Carolina two to three times a year; and going to New York City to enjoy the latest shows on Broadway.

"Call me a snob, but if I can't see the original cast, I don't want to see the show," Mark explained with a grin.

Other retirees returning to DECAL are Fred Allen with Audits & Compliance; Cassandra Jakes-Beasley with CCS; Connie Fisher with IT; Janet Goggins with CCS; Earlene Huston with CCS; Rena Keene with CCS; Willie Jackson with IT; Sherra Jones with CCS; Judith Nino with CAPS; Margaret Pringle with CCS; and Georgia Thomas with QIP.

Wilhite says the returning retirees have helped DECAL with recruiting and retention as well as the staffing shortage affecting all industries. If you are approaching retirement but are interested in working part-time for DECAL after you retire, contact your supervisor or the Human Resources Team.

Governor's Mansion Hosts Teachers of the Year

Our Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year Shannon Gibson and Alaina Jones and Early Childhood Educators of the Year Elianne Aguilera, Tierra Faulcon, and Mary Williams recently visited the Georgia Governor's Mansion for a behind-the-scenes look at everything from the dining room to the beehive. It was a beautiful

day to honor these outstanding teachers who make it all happen.

“When you arrive at your destination, check the front and back of your car, and after you’ve looked, just to be sure, Look Again. There is absolutely no reason for a child to suffer or die in these conditions,” she stressed.

Jacobs said technology is helping in the effort: “Sensors in car seats and vehicles and phone apps signal reminders when you reach your destination,” she said. “These technological resources help build habits to check the backseat after driving. And if these aren’t options, you can always place a stuffed animal in your passenger seat as a reminder that your child is in the back.”

Officials also remind the public to act responsibly and quickly if they see a child left alone in a vehicle by calling 911 immediately; emergency personnel are trained to respond.

For more information, visit www.dec.al.ga.gov or www.noheatstroke.org.



Teachers were also treated to lunch at Canoe with special guests Malcolm Mitchell and Coy Bowles.



Cultural Spotlight: DECAL is like a Village to this Native of Honduras

Nilia Lalin, a CCS Exemptions Unit Specialist, has always felt a calling to help women, children, and families, going back to her childhood growing up in Honduras. Nilia is proud of her Garifuna culture, a language and group of people residing in Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and Nicaragua. Today, the global population of Garifunas stands at 300,000, many of whom live in the US and Canada.



Quality Rated celebrates a Decade of Stars

Quality Rated and GEEARS celebrated the tenth anniversary of Georgia's quality rating system April 24-28, 2023, with #QRWeek all across Georgia.

State Senator Blake Tillery (below, top photo) and State Representatives Becky Evans (below, middle photo), Bethany Ballard (below, second from bottom) and Jason Esteves (below, bottom photo) were among the special guests who helped celebrate with students at Cornerstone Children's Center in Vidalia, A Child's Campus in Decatur, the Central Georgia Technical College Child Development Center in Warner Robins, and The Waseca School in Athens.



Garifuna communities along the Caribbean Sea are mostly in coastal towns and villages of the Central American countries.

“My heritage has always influenced how I treat others, especially working with families with small children at different capacities throughout the years,” Nilia explains. “I found my passion in serving this population early on in my career. In the Garifuna culture, women are the center of the family and play the most important role in raising children.”

Born in 1982, Nilia's parents relocated to the United States and New York City in 1993, where the 11-year-old began learning English. Later, she worked as a teacher's aide while completing her Bachelor of Professional Studies and her Masters of Public Administration at Metropolitan College of New York. She moved to Atlanta in April 2016, joining DECAL as an Early Head Start Specialist in the Quality Innovations and Partnerships Division. In July 2019, she transferred to Child Care Services as an Exemption Unit Specialist. Being fluent in Spanish and English has provided Nilia with opportunities to support a diverse population. “I want my co-workers to know that I'm always available and happy to assist with anything related to translation for programs and DECAL as a whole with the Spanish speaking community,” she said.

“Like DECAL, I believe that all families with small children deserve access to high quality care and education regardless of who they are or where they live,” Nilia explained. “In Garifuna communities, the entire village is involved in providing a safe and healthy environment for children to thrive in. I see DECAL as my village...and together we can ensure that children and their families receive the best early care and educational services.”

“Nilia is always one to offer support amongst her team and our providers by offering her time, knowledge, and caring for the children at programs,” said her supervisor, CCS Exemption Unit Manager Chrissy Powell. “She has helped other staff by assisting in visits, putting together resources for county school boards, and volunteering her time in helping with the translation of multicultural programs.”

Based on her personal experience and passion, it is no surprise that one of Nilia's favorite quotes is the African Proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Along with C.S. Lewis' quote, “Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching.”

DECAL Cultural Spotlight celebrates our diverse personal values, traditions, holiday celebrations, foods, dress, and other cultural traditions representing different families, racial, and ethnic groups. If you would like to be featured, please contact reg.griffin@decalfga.gov or 404-656-0239.





The Coalition on Adult Basic Education recently honored DECAL and the Technical College System of Georgia for our 2Gen work assisting student-parents. Shown receiving the award is Deputy Commissioner of CAPS Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Dr. Bentley Ponder, and Cayanna Good, Assistant Commissioner, Office of Adult Education, TCSG.

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

Board of Early Care and Learning



Georgia's Pre-K Program Specialist Anne Honerbaum reads to students at the Maxwell High School of Technology in Lawrenceville during their recent read-a-thon. The school raised

Phil Davis, Savannah
First Congressional District
(Chair)

Susan Harper, Albany
Second Congressional District

Kathy Howell, Carrollton
Third Congressional District
(Secretary)

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)

Lawrenceville during their recent read-a-thon. The school raised \$2000 for both Pre-K classes to maintain their tower gardens inside and two raised beds outside.



CHILDREN'S
MENTAL HEALTH WEEK

May 1st-5th

#littlekidsbigfeelings
#DECALCMHWeek2023



Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning
BRIGHT FROM THE START

**Children's
Mental
Health
Matters**



Employee Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual
Suggestion Box now!**

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Perri Walden, Ashley Dorsey, Christina Miller, Bart Ellington, and Jennifer Avera.

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