

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

63,848 - Four year olds enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program

3,772 - Classrooms funded by Georgia's Pre-K Program

2,409 - Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia

4,491 - Licensed child care programs in Georgia

3,789 - Child care programs receiving STABLE payments in first round

\$38.8 million - Payments made in STABLE payments first round

3,231 - SOLVE scholarships awarded as of Oct. 28, 2020

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Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs



Dear DECALers,

Out of curiosity, I looked back at what I wrote for last year's fourth quarter issue of *Decidedly DECAL*, and as I reviewed it, I shook my head when I read my words:

As 2019 gives way to 2020, we enter a new decade of opportunities to serve children, families, and the early care and education industry in Georgia...

Little did I (or any of us) know at the time what 2020 was going to hold...how the "*opportunities to serve children, families, and the early care and education industry in Georgia*" were going to change so dramatically.

But as COVID-19 altered families', child care providers', and our lives, you stepped up to the plate, quickly adjusted the way you did your jobs, and continued to serve the changing child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and families. As DECAL's commissioner, I'm overwhelmingly proud of what you've done...what we've done...together.

I don't know what 2021 will bring. I hope it will bring an end to this devastating disease. I hope we can return to a sense of "normalcy" in our personal and professional lives. But looking ahead, **I do know this:** If we can continue to support children, families, and providers despite this year's challenges, I am confident we will be able to successfully face and overcome whatever next year brings.

Even though we might have to celebrate the upcoming holidays differently this year, I wish you and your families healthy, safe,



New Episodes Every Wednesday

and meaningful times together, and I look forward to working with you in 2021.

Gratefully,

IT Team Completes Cloud Migration

High profile cyber-attacks like those against the World Health Organization, Zoom, and even the City of Atlanta have brought cyber security to the forefront. These attacks steal sensitive information while costing the targets money and operating time. DECAL's IT team has bolstered our cyber security and prepared us for the future.

When you hear the word "migration," you may think of animals moving from one place to another, or across the Great Plains. DECAL's IT team migrated our infrastructure and servers to the cloud: Cloud Migration. "The cloud" refers to resources like servers, databases, and storage that are accessed over the Internet. We all use the cloud in our day-to-day life through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and e-mails. By using cloud computing, users and companies do not have to manage physical servers themselves or run software applications on their own machines.

"We moved all of our servers to the cloud so that we are not dependent on the hardware and software that DECAL staff had to

manage on premise" said

DECAL Announces Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year for 2020-2021 School Year

DECAL named the Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year for the 2020-2021 school year on October 2, just in time for the agency's annual Georgia's Pre-K Week observed October 5-9, 2020. The public school winner is Heather Melillo from West End Elementary School in Rome, and the private center winner is Alderine Healey from the YMCA Paulding Early Learning Center in Hiram.

The delivery may have been different, but the news was just as exciting as the winners were announced. In past years, Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs and Deputy Commissioner of Georgia's Pre-K Program and Instructional Supports Susan Adams made surprise visits to the winners' schools. This year, due to COVID-19 and social distancing, the visits were made via online Zoom meetings.

As Pre-K Teachers of the Year, Melillo and Healey each receive a \$3,000 check for themselves, \$3,000 for a classroom makeover and supplies, and \$500 to cover out-of-the-classroom costs while they are away. Winners will serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Pre-K Program including public speaking, representing Georgia's Pre-K at various meetings, and modeling effective classroom practices.

The winners were selected from six semi-finalists who each received a classroom observation by a DECAL Pre-K Specialist. Each finalist submitted a small group video scored by outside judges and faced a panel for a professional interview.

"All Georgians can be proud of Georgia's Pre-K Program that helps lay a solid foundation on which the academic careers of the state's four year olds can be built," said Commissioner Jacobs. "Since the program was piloted in 1992, more than 1.6 million children have entered kindergarten better prepared to succeed. That preparation, however, would not have been possible without the dedicated Pre-K teachers and assistants who implement this program every day. Recognizing these committed professionals by choosing Pre-K Teachers of the Year is one way to thank them for their efforts."

manage on premise,” said Dennis Brice, DECAL’s Chief Information Officer. “Old servers and infrastructure along with old operating systems, some of which were 20 years old, were some of the reasons the migration was needed. The task was monumental but something that needed to be done.”

“When we investigated deeply, there were several technical deficiencies in the design from a security perspective. We must maintain the security and the integrity of our data to serve our customers,” said Arun Kandel, Chief Technology & Information Security Officer.

DECAL’s IT team successfully completed the migration in nine months. It was in record time and saved DECAL more than \$3 million dollars over three years while securing our environment.

“Arun jokes and says what we pulled off was like rebuilding and upgrading the jet engine of an airplane while it was flying,” Brice explained. “We not only migrated to the cloud, but we were able to rearchitect and secure the environment in the meantime without bringing down our systems during the process.”

As a result of the migration, Brice and Kandel agree that DECAL is now secure. Tools are in place to monitor and be proactive to prevent breaches and protect our data from ransomware. We now have a security operation center that is managed proactively and a disaster recovery plan if something goes wrong.

CONGRATULATIONS



Alderine Healey
YMCA Paulding Early Learning Center
(Paulding County)



Heather Melillo
West End Elementary School
(Rome City Schools)

**GA Pre-K
Teachers
of the Year
2020-2021**



DECAL Continues to Serve Effectively During Pandemic

Since March, the COVID-19 public health emergency has had a major impact on all divisions of the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. However, you have done an outstanding job of remaining flexible and making creative shifts in the way we serve children, providers, parents, and advocates statewide. We asked our team of more than 700 employees for their reflections on the past seven months. Here are some of their comments:

We are in the midst of a complete re-design of options for how a program can continue working on their path to Quality Improvement in the midst of such turmoil and things changing daily. We are embracing this change with excited trepidation! To help alleviate some of the anxiety, we make sure to take the time to remember each of us is also dealing with many issues at home and in our communities. During a work Zoom meeting where important decisions and information is being handled and discussed, it’s also important to take the time to just talk. I might start a Zoom call with a silly question to get people talking if they want: “What are you wearing on your feet right now?” “What have you been binge watching?” “What was your favorite breakfast cereal as a kid?” It only takes a few minutes, but it’s been a great

way to start our meetings with a laugh or two. I know for me



Dennis Brice



Arun Kandel

SIDS Awareness Month Observed

October was National Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Awareness Month. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, more commonly referred to as SIDS, is the sudden death of a sleeping infant less than one year of age, that cannot be explained. SIDS is one of the most frightening parts of having a new baby; but parents and caregivers can alleviate this fear by educating themselves on the risks of SIDS and familiarizing themselves with SIDS prevention techniques.

To decrease the risk of SIDS, always place a baby to sleep on their back and on a firm flat surface. Remember to use

humor is the best medicine right now.-- **LariLyn Beyer**

During this pandemic, the worst part for me is the social isolation. Like many other DECALers, I live alone and did not realize how much I would miss the social interactions we regularly enjoyed being in the office with colleagues! Our Pre-K Division management has worked hard to keep our team engaged with Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams meetings, phone conferences, and webinars, but I have a renewed appreciation for the camaraderie that can only be fully experienced in a traditional office environment. -- **Susan Breheny**

As a Pre-K Specialist, I was most impacted by COVID-19 by not being able to visit providers in person. I miss seeing the directors, teachers, and children in action every day and being able to build face-to-face relationships with the people who make up the Pre-K community. Our team has learned about how to use technology to stay connected with our providers and with each other. We have had a lot of opportunities to create resources to be used in real time (like the familiar story of the people who build the airplane while flying it). The positive side of not being able to travel is that we have more time to answer phone calls and emails because we are not stuck in traffic. Not travelling has also given us more time to reach out to providers proactively. -- **Heather Riddle**

As a Georgia's Pre-K Specialist, during the typical Georgia's Pre-K year, I visit child care centers and schools to support and monitor Georgia's Pre-K directors, teachers, children, classrooms, and families. Due to COVID-19, I am "doing Pre-K" virtually this year by:

- Holding Check-In Chats virtually with my assigned sites' teachers and directors to discuss needs.
- Creating and providing a New Pre-K Teacher Handbook and video to support new lead teachers in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms.
- Creating and providing a step-by-step flyer to assist Pre-K directors in monitoring their Pre-K teachers' use of WSO (assessments).
- Providing "Monday's Mindful Moments" each Monday for all Georgia's Pre-K teachers and directors in my territory to reduce stress and anxiety during our current times.
- Providing Professional Learning Community Facilitator Certification training completely virtually rather than, in past years, face-to-face with virtual support. -- **Kay Pollard, M.Ed.**

COVID-19 has had an impact on my work specifically as I transitioned into management the week before COVID really started to stir the 2020 pot. My first week as a manager for the CAPS program was the week that new temporary policies were rolling out for families to continue eligibility in the program if their work had been impacted by COVID-19. CAPS Temporary Policy Waivers have made it possible for many families to remain in the program as this is truly a time when families need assistance to help bridge this season of life to the next. --

caution when a product claims to reduce the risk of SIDS.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) specialized sleep surfaces have not been shown to reduce the risk of SIDS.

Do not allow soft objects, loose blankets, pillows, or bumper pads to be placed in an infant's sleep area. Infants should never bedshare with adults or other children, but it is recommended that they sleep in the same room as their caregivers for at least the first 6 months of life. Do not rely on home breathing monitors to reduce the risk of SIDS, as there is no substitution for in person watchful oversight where a caregiver can observe an infant's breathing, skin color, and tone. Ensuring you are following safe sleeping recommendations for any infant is the best way to keep them safe. A full list of the AAP safe sleep recommendations can be found on their [website](#).

Georgia Child Care Programs Eligible for Round 2 of STABLE Payments

Beginning November 16, 2020, all licensed Georgia child care providers may apply for a second round of Short Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities (STABLE) payments from DECAL. Funding for these payments comes from the federal Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress earlier this year. In the first round of STABLE payments, DECAL awarded more than \$38.8

million in financial support to

Amanda Tarpley

As a Quality Rated ERS Assessor, a large part of our job is being out in the field. Even though COVID-19 has kept us at home, we have been busy coming up with new ways to support child care providers to ensure quality care continues for Georgia's children. This modified approach has allowed us to collaborate more with other divisions and learn more about all the work done by DECAL. -- **Melinda Knowles, M.Ed.**

Filling vacancies - We have improvised and conducted interviews virtually. -- **Carrie Spangler**

Dealing with COVID-19 and other stressors of the world this year has been physically and emotionally draining. Having a manager, Rukiya Thomas, who has been extremely supportive and understanding, has been so helpful during these times. I am able to still work effectively from home, take the necessary precautions for re-entering the field, and take leave when and if it is needed to maintain a healthy balance. -- **April Brown**

In response to COVID-19, our unit has transitioned all of our trainings to webinar format to provide professional development to ECE's virtually. We also transformed our coaching processes so that teachers and programs are able to receive guidance from a distance related to Pyramid Model implementation to support social-emotional development of all children. -- **Allison OHara**

The CCS Process & Quality Improvement Unit had to revamp all three-months' worth of the new staff onboarding training to be offered virtually and introduced monthly ongoing training sessions for all of CCS staff to help them meet a new requirement of completing 24 hours of job-related training every year. In addition, new CCS mentors started the very day DECAL staff began working from home, which caused a complete reworking and adaptation of their new responsibilities. -- **Catherine Broussard, MS**

Prior to the shutdown, the Nutrition Division had scheduled in-person CACFP Nutrition Education and Culinary workshops across the state. We have shifted these training sessions to virtual training sessions that will be provided to all CACFP organizations across Georgia. Having virtual training sessions will increase accessibility to education on serving healthy meals and enhancing meal appeal through CACFP. -- **Diana Myers**

Most of the work of the Infant Toddler and Inclusion and Behavior Support programs involves onsite coaching in teachers' classrooms. When COVID-19 prevented specialists from visiting classrooms in person, the Infant Toddler and Inclusion and Behavior Support specialists didn't blink! They jumped on Zoom and Teams and continued providing their excellent support virtually. I am so proud to work with such a creative, flexible, and creative team! -- **Jennie Couture**

3,789 licensed child care providers.

DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs said the second round of STABLE payments will be paid to licensed child care providers who are open and serving families based on their attendance in October, 2020. Providers will receive \$240 for each child who attended child care in-person at least one day during the month.

“We know that family child care learning homes and child care learning centers in Georgia are struggling as a result of COVID-19,” said Commissioner Jacobs. “To expedite these payments, we are developing a simple application that will ask for attendance by age and by program, including the CAPS program and Georgia’s Pre-K Program.” DECAL estimates this round of STABLE payments could total \$55 million for licensed child care providers across the state depending on the response.

Providers can apply for STABLE through December 2, 2020, using DECAL’s KOALA portal. Payments will begin after the application period closes.



Head Start centers have been distributing resources to the families in their communities

In-person visits have been replaced with virtual visits along with the review of paperwork being uploaded by providers on DECAL Koala and reviewed by a consultant on line. -- **Laura Swann**

I work in Audits & Compliance, and the reviews that we normally do in the field resulted in desk reviews due to COVID-19. We have still managed to work with the grantees in requesting the required documents needed for review and being able to produce a final audit report. -- **Melissa Donovan**

In Practice and Support Services we have been collaborating with each other and colleagues from other parts of DECAL to create resources for families and teachers. It’s been great working with many different colleagues to put together new and innovative resources to meet the needs of different groups. Check out Chat About Children and Toddler Time at Home if you haven’t already! -- **Bridget Ratajczak**

Like the rest of the world and DECAL, CCS had to make some brave and daring decisions during COVID-19, including finding the answers to the following questions: Which services are essential and how do we balance ensuring the health and safety of children in care while also protecting our staff? Applicant Services Unit (ASU) was deemed an essential service. While programs were closing due to COVID-19, many families were considered essential workers, and these families needed care for their children. So, we donned our masks and our gloves, brought out the hand sanitizer and the alcohol wipes, and continued our jobs. We also had the privilege of being the first unit to complete virtual visits. We taught applicants how to use technology, such as Zoom, Skype and FaceTime and how to measure classrooms, playgrounds and routes to the restrooms. We created policies and best practice techniques for virtual visits. We then shared all of our knowledge not only with all of CCS but with other divisions throughout DECAL. Each member of TEAM ASU stepped up, regardless of what was asked, to ensure we continued providing excellent customer service, licensed quality programs, and exceeded expectations with policy due dates. ASU balanced work responsibilities while assisting our own children with virtual learning. Our largest roadblock to date has been difficulty in obtaining the necessary approvals for licensing, such as Fire Marshal reports, Fire and Building Certificates of Occupancy, and zoning as these offices also closed. But with roadblocks, we can find solutions. ASU has created policies and procedures to assist programs when they are struggling with obtaining approvals to operate. Through it all, we remain strong, positive, and a team. -- **Lisa Chandler**

The Finance division has been working remotely and has continued to pay our vendors, process payroll, and manage cash flow wonderfully. We achieved year-end close successfully and have been working with State auditors without any disruptions.

The Finance staff adapted to using Teams very well and, at times, encouraged everyone to comb their hair and face the PC

families in their communities throughout the pandemic.

Farm to School Grant Update

Since 2013, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm to School Grant Program has offered annual grants to schools, school districts, nonprofits, state agencies, agricultural producers, and Indian Tribal Organizations to plan, implement, or provide training on farm to school activities. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is committed to working with schools and agricultural partners to ensure healthy habits take root in early childhood.

In FY 20, \$12.1 million was distributed in Farm to School Grants – the most awarded since the grant program's inception – to 159 grantees – the most projects funded to date. These awards, administered by USDA, will help bring fresh, local foods into schools and foster economic opportunity for America's farmers over the next school year.

In July 2020, DECAL's Nutrition Division was awarded one of the USDA's Farm to School State Agency grants for \$63,408. Of the 159 grantees, DECAL is the only organization whose sole grant focus is on strengthening Farm to Early Care & Education (Farm to ECE) across the state to impact Georgia's children as their food preferences and healthy habits are developing.

Farm to ECE incorporates the three core elements of local procurement, gardens, and food and agriculture education to advance health and wellbeing,

times, encouraged everyone to comb their hair and face the PC camera! -- **Michael Rodgers**

Head Start has been serving Georgia families and communities in new ways but the dedication to high quality services for children remains the same! The Head Start Collaboration Office at DECAL is working with state and federal partners this fall to provide access to the health and mental health resources necessary for Georgia grantees to care for families during this challenging time. -- **Allison Setterlind**

I started working at DECAL as a new attorney in the Legal Department two months into the pandemic. Although I've been practicing law for years, it did not prepare me for everything I needed to know at DECAL. However, everyone has been so amazingly helpful and patient; what could have been an anxious and frustrating experience has been anything but. After orientation with HR and learning to use the cell phone apps through IT, I was invited to participate in training new CCS consultants. I learned how the Rules and Regs which I enforce are actually applied, and the trainers sent me all the materials so I could go back and catch up on some of the sessions when I had to tend to my legal duties. (Thanks Ashley, Rachel, and Candice.)

Through the kindness of so many, I have learned to use Koala and the other software programs (special thanks to April, Brenda, and Marcy).

You'd think I was cross-examining witnesses with all the procedural questions I've asked (Melissa, Beth, Marsha, Junya, Lisa, and Jessica – to name just a few – Thank you, thank you). I have figured out Skype, Zoom and Teams and done my best not to overwhelm (and irritate) my new best friends at IT with all my questions and help requests. I also want everyone in Legal to know how much I appreciate all of your efforts to orient me, provide me with explanations and tips on how best to proceed, proofreading, filing my documents, and so much more.

Yes, it would have all been so much easier if life were "normal" and we were in the office daily, but I must say I have been astounded and grateful for everyone's willingness to help me learn the day-to-day inner workings at DECAL. Now, based on the few times I've actually been in my office, if I could only figure out how to exit the parking deck... -- **Jody L. Peskin**

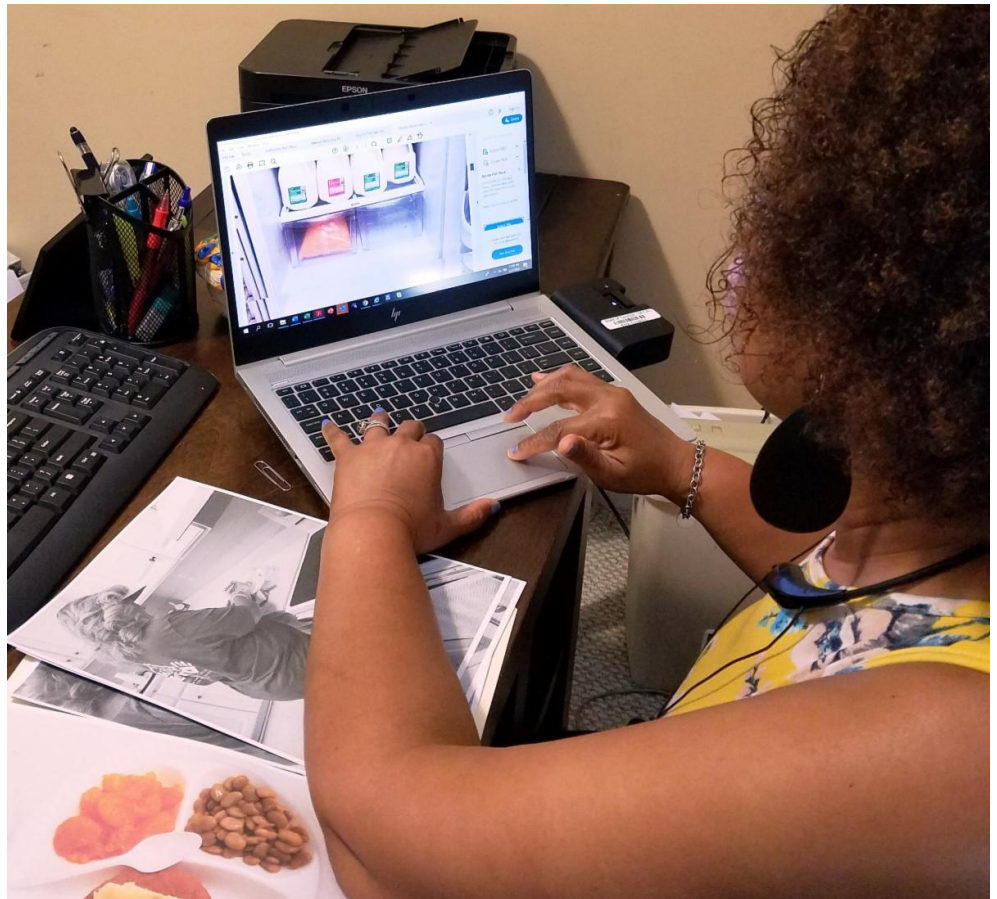
All of the Audits & Compliance Nutrition team are field based, but we are required to conduct all of our monitoring on site at the facility. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we jumped right in and developed a plan to ensure GA DECAL met all USDA monitoring regulations and program operations for CACFP and SFSP. We developed a virtual desk review plan that still allowed us to monitor program integrity and meet monitoring requirements while maintaining the safety of our facilities, children, and our staff. Our team also assisted the Nutrition Division with developing procedures and guidance to assist our facilities in

engage families and communities, and enhance the quality of the ECE setting. The two-year grant project will provide accessible statewide training on implementing a successful Farm to ECE program, create dialogue on local procurement among Child Nutrition Program (CNP) purchasers, vendors and farmers, create a database of Georgia's Farm to ECE initiatives, and foster partnerships with Farm to ECE stakeholders. DECAL's grant initiatives will include virtual components of a 101 training series, Vendor Summits, and a Farm to School and Early Care & Education Summit as well as a spotlight program and hands-on implementation workshop benefiting child care organizations in counties with high obesity and food insecurity. By leveraging USDA's Farm to School State Agency grant and community partnerships, DECAL will build upon Georgia's Farm to ECE foundations for improving access to local foods in CNPs across the state while emphasizing local procurement and nutrition and agricultural education efforts for Georgia's youngest learners.

navigating some of the new CACFP and SFSP program changes during COVID-19. Also, we have worked with IT for alternate methods to obtain records virtually from facilities, thus reducing the burden on our facilities and staff. While we never expected for the COVID-19 pandemic to still be ever present in 2020, our team has been resilient, diligent, devoted, patient, and a champion of change. I can truly say that we have been blessed!

Our team has remained healthy, and we were able to continue working while many in the nation dealt with the isolation of COVID-19 and job losses/cuts. We truly miss our DECAL family and opportunities to come together as a team, but thankfully, we have been able to increase our virtual staff meetings and are hopeful for opportunities in the future! I believe our team and DECAL has proven no matter where you work (physically) or what obstacles and challenges are presented, we will exemplify our DECAL values! (DECAL values: Delivering stellar customer service, Exhibiting organizational excellence, Creating positive relationships, Always valuing others, and Leading the way.) --

Aleisha Golden



Nutrition Examiner Tabitha Moreland is shown conducting a meal observation virtually.





*Home-based child care facility **My Little Geniuses**, located in Marietta, GA, has a backyard garden with a variety of fruits and vegetables planted and grown for the children to learn the process and gain first-hand experience. As a passionate educator for early care learning, Maria Ortega of My Little Geniuses, connects children with their food through this hands-on experiential learning, a component of Farm to Early Care & Education (Farm to ECE).*

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The Faces of DECAL

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DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Kori Woodward-Dickens, Donna Johnson, Catherine Broussard, Jerry Brown, and Devon Porter.



Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE, 754 East Tower,
Atlanta, GA 30334
404-656-5957

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**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
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BRIGHT FROM THE START

