

# Decidedly DECAL

*Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are*



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## DECAL By the Numbers

- 4,567** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
- 12,005** - CCS visits to child care programs in FY2019
- 1,793** - Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia
- 81,000** - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program
- 1.6 million** - Students served by Georgia's Pre-K Program

## Commissioner's Corner

*by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs*



Dear Fellow DECALers,

I recently ran across the following story that's funny...and sometimes true...and one that I've found myself a part of more than once in my life.

This is a little story about four people named **Everybody**, **Somebody**, **Anybody**, and **Nobody**. There was an important job to be done and **Everybody** was sure that **Somebody** would do it. **Anybody** could have done it, but **Nobody** did it. **Somebody** got angry about that because it was **Everybody's** job. **Everybody** thought that **Anybody** could do it,

but **Nobody** realized that **Everybody** wouldn't do it. It ended up that **Everybody** blamed **Somebody** when **Nobody** did what **Anybody** could have done.

To me, the "breakdown" described in this story results from the lack of two important components: leadership and personal accountability ... two factors that critically impact the success of a company, an organization, or a department of state government like ours.

As DECAL's *leaders*, I and others in Executive Leadership are responsible for ensuring that all of you know the direction in which we're going and have the support you need to do your jobs. I am personally accountable to Governor Kemp, and we as leaders are accountable to Georgia policy makers, the families of Georgia, the early care and education industry, and to ourselves and each of you.

As DECAL *employees*, you are responsible for doing what you were hired to do to serve children and families and the early care and education industry in our state. You are accountable to your managers, directors, deputy directors, the families of Georgia, the providers and sponsors with whom

since its inception  
**38 million** - CACFP meals served by Nutrition in 2019  
**34** - Episodes of DECAL Download podcast  
**3 percent** - Salary increase for Pre-K lead teachers  
**2 percent** - Salary increase for assistant Pre-K teachers, state employees

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## Early Education Community Partnership Update

By Jill O'Meara  
Early Education Community Partnership Manager

It is with great excitement that I have been given this opportunity to provide you with the most up-to-date information about our Early Education Community Partnership work on a quarterly basis. While our regional work may appear to be a lot of fun based on all of our social media posts, our team is learning that community work is not always easy. It is very complex and can be somewhat challenging to navigate. As we embark on this journey, we realize just how different the needs are in each community, and we encourage community partners to continue to invest in early learning in a way that is fitting for their young children and families.



Jill O'Meara

you work, and to yourselves.

I believe the problem in the story is that **Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody** didn't know they were a team. No one led; no one was accountable to anyone else; no one took personal responsibility.

My goal as your commissioner is that *everybody* in DECAL feels like *somebody* and that *nobody* goes without the leadership and support you need as we work together to do our jobs. We are a team.

Respectfully,

P.S. These components of leadership and personal accountability are especially important at this juncture in DECAL's evolution. In the past year, new leaders have emerged, and change has felt pervasive and constant as we've grown. Thank you for your patience, flexibility, and willingness to assume responsibility for getting the job done.

## Legal, Audits Headed West with Two New Conference Rooms

This month two DECAL divisions are moving to the West Tower of the Sloppy Floyd Building. Legal and Audits & Compliance will occupy 9,116 square feet on the fifth floor of the West Tower. The new space includes 12 offices, 40 cubicles, and two conference rooms, named after trees in the DECAL tradition --- Redwood and Juniper. Tentative plans call for Human Resources to take the Legal space on the seventh floor of the East Tower while IT/Infrastructure moves into the Audits & Compliance space on the eighth floor.



West Tower

"We all know that space in our current offices has been at a premium in recent years, due mainly to the continued growth of our agency," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "I commend and thank everyone for their patience and flexibility while we have located additional space and made the necessary renovations."

"There are still some moving pieces, but I think we will be much better equipped once all the work is done," said Rian Ringsrud, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration.

"I'm excited to have all our units together as one and no longer on separate floors or in multiple buildings," said Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer, regarding the move.

"Audits & Compliance is excited about being in closer proximity to the Legal Division, which will ease communication between our two divisions," said Ben Appling, Director of Audits & Compliance.

Ringsrud said the new conference rooms will be available to the entire agency. Juniper will be set up as a meeting style conference room with a fixed table for ten people, while Redwood will be more of

As you know, we have a dynamic team of six Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators who are working in each of our DECAL regions to support, sustain, and expand the successful Early Education Empowerment Zone (E3Z) work throughout the state. As DECAL's commitment to community-based work continues, our coordinators are working with community partners to align systems of support for young children and families, fostering community awareness of early education, and serving as a resource for and referral to all DECAL programs.

In order for our team to explore each county in Georgia during 2019, we have strategically planned to focus our efforts first on targeted counties. Based on quantitative data (which includes education, poverty, capacity, child care quality, and family characteristics), our team will reach out to community partners in their targeted counties by quarter. Here's an example: Clayton Adams is the Lead Community Partnership Coordinator for the North East Region (26 counties) and during the first quarter (Q1), he met with community partners in seven counties. During the second quarter (Q2), he will work to maintain relationships with community partners in the first quarter, while beginning to explore and build relationships with community partners in the next six counties.

The first set of responsibilities on an Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator job description is to provide customer service and act as the face of DECAL. Through our work in the E3Zs, we learned that much of our success was attributed to connecting people to the right resource, whether that is a resource within the community, from our DECAL office, or from one of our partnering organizations. To best serve our communities in this capacity, our coordinators have had the opportunity to work across divisions in our department so that we are best prepared as questions about DECAL come our way. As our South East Community Partnership Coordinator Kati Cosby likes to say, "We are like an old-fashioned switchboard." We don't have to be the experts in each DECAL division; we just need to know who to connect our community partners with and show them support through this process. As an example of our work, Edward Rowell (South West Community Partnership Coordinator) realized that several counties in his region did not serve Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meals last summer. In some of his conversations in one south Georgia county, he found a community partner who may be interested in serving as a sponsor for SFSP. He later made the introduction back to Nutrition at DECAL, and this began a conversation about what the process looks like to bring SFSP meals to that area.

As the first quarter ended in March, I am proud to say that our Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators courageously reached out either by phone, email, and/or in-person meetings with community partners in 42 counties. We are well on

a classroom style set up with movable tables for use by 14-16 people.

## New Name and Roles for System Reform

On March 1, Dr. Bentley Ponder, former Senior Director of Research and Policy for DECAL, became Deputy Commissioner of System Reform, which he and his team have since renamed Quality Innovations and Partnerships. Also on March 1, Randy Hudgins became Director of Research, which is now under Quality Innovations and Partnerships. Decidedly DECAL recently followed up with them to see how their transitions have been going.

*After 45 days in the position, how has the experience compared to your expectations at the time your appointment was announced?*

**Ponder:** As expected, some things are perfectly in line with what I thought the position would be, and some things are completely different. I was familiar with a lot of the work in Research and Quality Rated, but I'm blown away by all the community engagement and partnership activities. There has definitely been a learning curve.

**Hudgins:** After 45 days as the Director of Research, the experience has mostly met my expectations. To be fair, I was already on the team and worked closely with Bentley for many years, so I already had a good understanding of the job. At the same time, there have been several things I did not expect, some fun and exciting while others challenging.

*Have you encountered any unexpected challenges or opportunities?*

**Ponder:** Nothing too unexpected. Transitioning from leading a team of seven to overseeing a division of seventy brings about some "positive challenges," as I like to call them. Right now, I'm just working on understanding all of the work and talking to as many staff as possible.

**Hudgins:** Short answer, yes. All the unexpected challenges I have encountered have turned into exciting opportunities to learn and develop as both an individual and as a leader. Though Research is a relatively small team, we work across the agency, supporting all departments. It can be a challenge prioritizing the various and abundant research needs of the agency. Fortunately, I work with an amazing team, and I have the great opportunity of supporting them to develop and implement the incredible work they do.

*What are your interests and in what way does your new position satisfy those?*

**Ponder:** My interests are all about alignment and finding new and exciting ways to work across the four division teams and the Department as a whole. Both Quality Rated and our Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership have been tremendously successful, and I'm looking for ways to best support



*Bentley Ponder (L) and Randy Hudgins (R)*

our way to reach our goal of connecting with communities in all counties in Georgia by the end of 2019. I thank my amazing team for all the hard work they do every day as we support communities striving to improve the lives of young children and families.

In our next DECAL newsletter, we will spotlight two of our six Early Education Community Coordinators. Also, we have several exciting projects coming up that I can't wait to share with you. Please continue to look for our community work on DECAL's social media and don't forget to like our posts. If you have any suggestions about ways that we can support your work in your region, please feel free to reach out to me, because as you know...we're all in this together.

## Hollingsworth Recognized for Excellent Customer Service Skills



During bi-monthly team meetings, the Scholarship Administration Unit of Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program recognizes team members who exemplify one or more of the DECAL "core values." At the March 2019 meeting, CAPS Scholarship Administration Specialist Ricky Hollingsworth was recognized for his excellent customer service skills. Other team members recently recognized were (L-R) CAPS Scholarship Administration Specialists Rhae Nicole Holloway and Haven Bell, shown here with Hollingsworth.

## Regional Meetings This Month

April showers bring May flowers...and also DECAL regional meetings across the state. The agency's six regions will all hold employee meetings this month, kicking off today, with the South West Regional Meeting in Tifton and the South East Regional

those teams in continuing their work. Our Preschool Development Grant provides lots of opportunities for cross-division collaboration as well.

I think the Department has commissioned and conducted some great research, and I look forward to working with Randy on figuring out better ways to publicize the work. I'm also excited about all of the work our new early education community partnership coordinators are doing.

**Hudgins:** I have always had an interest in understanding what makes things work the way they do and how to make processes more efficient. I think the Research team at DECAL has provided me the opportunity to thrive in that sense. Additionally, and perhaps more relevant, is my new vested interest in all things DECAL. My wife and I are expecting a baby boy in September. I am excited that this new position affords me the opportunity to be intimately involved in the research that is informing policies and practices that will directly impact my family and all families in Georgia.

*What do you hope to accomplish in your first year in the position?*

**Ponder:** Basically, I hope to continue on this same path -- that is, further strengthening our already strong programs and initiatives. I am also excited to move forward on our Preschool Development Grant work and the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement. Of course, I'm also happy to see continued movement on our 20/20 Quality Rated goal, and I look forward to working on that.

**Hudgins:** In my first year as Director, I hope to continue the great work my predecessor accomplished as he created and led the Research team for many years. I hope to continue producing high quality data analyses and visualization that support our programs to do their best work and to continue conducting nationally recognized research. I also hope to continue elevating my incredible staff to continue to be the gold standard of what it means to be a research team supporting data informed practices.

*Are there any other thoughts you wish to share?*

**Ponder:** I just hope not to gain too much weight from all the division desserts. Man -- there is a lot of cake.

## Couture Selected to Serve Second Term as Act Early Ambassador

DECAL Director of Practice and Support Services Jennie Couture will serve a second term as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Act Early Ambassador for the State of Georgia for the next two years. She was notified of her selection on March 1, and DECAL congratulates her on this achievement.

The CDC in collaboration with the Association of University Centers on Disabilities began the "Act Early. Learn the Signs." initiative in 2011 to address skyrocketing autism rates in American children. Act Early aims to improve early identification of children with autism and other developmental disabilities so children and families can get the services and support they need as early as possible. Throughout the past decade, Act Early has provided thousands of families, caregivers, and physicians with information about developmental milestones and guidance on how to approach the topic.

This federally-sponsored program employs an ambassadors model, with an ambassador representing each state. Candidates must complete a competitive application process to be selected to serve as a

## Meeting in Dublin.

The North West Regional Meeting in Cartersville and the Central West Regional Meeting in Marietta will be held on Tuesday, May 7. Central East Region meets in Augusta and North East Region meets in Athens on Wednesday, May 8.

"The regional meeting planning team has been working hard to design a meeting that will be meaningful for all participants," said Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "The team has paid close attention to the survey feedback to make sure the meetings reflect what regional staff tell us they want and need."

Christi Moore, Director of Professional Learning, said this month's meetings will include more interactive activities and more opportunities to network with regionally-based staff. "We hope this will be an opportunity for participants to reflect on their daily work and how it connects to the work of other divisions," she said.

Each morning session will have training on self-care and secondary trauma from experts at Georgia State University's Child Welfare Training Collaborative.

## Hartman Honored for Years of Service



After more than 22 years of service to the state of Georgia, Director of Policy and System Reform Carol Hartman has retired. Associates and former co-workers recently honored her with lunch and a "Carol, Cookies and Cake" reception. In a special proclamation, Governor Brian P. Kemp thanked Carol for

state ambassador for a single two-year term. After the term, the ambassador may choose to reapply.

Couture, who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Georgia College, said she has always been interested in social and emotional development in young children. She has direct field experience, having worked as a special education teacher with children ranging from infants to eighth graders. She has been a part of the DECAL family since 2007.

Couture recently attended a meeting for Act Early where the CDC recognized Georgia's work with the program. "As they have in the past, they specifically cited the state of Georgia as exemplary in carrying out the Act Early initiative," said Couture. Refusing to assume all the credit for this accolade, she added: "It's truly a reflection of the work we all do here at DECAL with Act Early. Our efforts absolutely do not go unnoticed; rather, they are recognized on a national stage."



*Director of Practice and Support Services Jennie Couture (left) with Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K Program and Instructional Supports*

## News from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning

As the Georgia Foundation of Early Care + Learning enters its second year of fundraising, the Board

garnering "tens of millions of dollars in federal grants to support children and the families of Georgia." During her time with the state, Carol also served with the Georgia Child Care Council and the Georgia Department of Human Resources. Shown presenting the Governor's proclamation are Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs and Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Dr. Bentley Ponder.

## DECAL Collaborates with Quality Care for Children on Summer Camps Campaign

DECAL is collaborating with Quality Care for Children (QCC) to help parents find camps and child care programs in Georgia for the summer.

"Summer camp does more than just provide child care for a family when children are not in school," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "Attending camp in the summer can help children learn how to work with others, build meaningful relationships, accept guidance, express creativity, and become more independent and confident. Sometimes, however, families don't know what to look for or what questions to ask when looking for a summer camp for their children. DECAL and QCC have partnered to create these resources so families can do their homework and make informed decisions about the right camp for their children."

Parents can speak with a summer camp referral specialist by calling 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS (877-255-4254) Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. and Fridays from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

DECAL and QCC have produced a thirty-second public service announcement to promote the campaign through print, broadcast, and social media. The campaign is currently underway. You can view the PSA at: <https://youtube.com/QWGs1EaNPus>



Board of Early Care and Learning

of Directors unanimously voted to adopt a new vision statement that more accurately reflects the direction of the Foundation. With a new vision also comes a newly adopted mission statement to answer the question - *How are we going to get there?* This "road map" supports the vision and better communicates the purpose of the Foundation to board members, staff, partners, and stakeholders.

Our Vision:

The Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning's mission is to **support access to high quality early childhood education** to Georgia's youngest learners and their families, providers, and teachers through **established strategic investments, collaborations and partnerships** in order to **drive Georgia's current and future workforce.**

Our Mission:



In other news, the Foundation has been working with the entire DECAL team to streamline the process of Emergency Reporting and Relief for child care providers. A new comprehensive survey is in the pilot phase and will be disseminated throughout regions affected by natural disasters. The survey responses will assist DECAL in fulfilling state and federal reporting requirements. In addition, the survey will provide necessary information to determine if the Foundation can provide aid or further assist in relief efforts.

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

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Eleventh Congressional District

Jerri Kropp, Statesboro  
Twelfth Congressional District  
(Vice Chair)



Thanks to Governor Brian P. Kemp for meeting recently with our Georgia's Pre-K Program 2018-2019 Pre-K Teachers of the Year Stephanie Westhafer and Becky Haden. Also making the visit were Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K Program and Instructional Supports Susan Adams, Summer Transition and Outreach Manager Meghan McNail, and former Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning Coordinator Sarah Johnson.

Watch on POLAR



Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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Melissa Boekhaus, MD., Mableton  
Thirteenth Congressional District

Vacant  
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**The Faces of DECAL**

*DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Jada Hoggard, Mandi Sloan, Woody Dover, George Davis, Demetrius Wilburn, Claudia Sorto, and Stacey Oatis.*