

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

Strategic Plan

SFY 2020-SFY 2024



Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner



Memorandum from the Commissioner

TO: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning Staff
Board of Early Care and Learning Members
Early Care and Education Stakeholders
Georgia Policy Makers

FROM: Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

DATE: September 4, 2019

SUBJECT: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Strategic Plan
State Fiscal Years 2020-2024



With this memorandum I am introducing the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning’s Strategic Plan for State Fiscal Years 2020-2024.

This important plan includes DECAL’s mission and vision, the goals and objectives necessary to achieve our mission and vision, strategies to accomplish the goals and objectives, and how we will gauge our success.

This strategic plan will help us focus the next four years on the priorities we have identified; support the Governor’s strategic goals for Georgia; streamline our operations for greater efficiency; and ensure that DECAL employees, child care providers, and other early care and education stakeholders are working toward similar goals.

I encourage you to read the plan carefully, especially looking for areas where you “fit” into the plan and how you can partner with us to help meet the early childhood care and education needs of Georgia’s children and families. DECAL willingly accepts our role to lead the state’s efforts to ensure that children are cared for in safe and healthy environments and are more prepared academically, social-emotionally, and physically for Kindergarten. But I acknowledge that we cannot implement this plan on our own.

We desperately need the support of child care centers, family child care learning homes, public schools, other state agencies, child advocacy groups, and business, philanthropic, and faith-based communities to successfully meet children’s and families’ needs in our state.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we work together for the well-being of Georgia’s youngest citizens.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Amy M. Jacobs".

Vision and Mission Statements



Vision:

Every child in Georgia will have access to high quality early care and education regardless of family income or location.

Mission:

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning enhances children's early education experience to promote their academic, social-emotional, and physical development in partnership with families, communities, the early care and education industry, and stakeholders.



Executive Summary

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) strategic plan outlines the department's high level priorities for the next four years. The plan does not capture all the projects or activities in which the department and early learning community are involved but rather charts the course for improvement in select, highly strategic areas. After reflecting on past work, submitting the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state plan, and conducting a careful review of the Governor's strategic goals and the guidelines provided by the Office of Planning and Budget, representatives from DECAL's divisions, units, and programs began the planning process.

The process began with an environmental scan, or S.W.O.T. analysis, assessing the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. After that, the team revised the department's vision and mission statements and developed four strategic goals, determined measurable objectives, and identified strategies to help accomplish the goals and objectives. The four strategic goals developed by the team are:

- I. Contribute measurably to school readiness for children birth to age five in Georgia.
- II. Increase the number of high quality, affordable child care programs statewide thereby improving access and better addressing the needs of all children.
- III. Develop, engage, and retain a capable, well-trained, and effective workforce for the early care and education industry and for DECAL.
- IV. Build a framework that aligns, coordinates, and enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of DECAL programs and services across regions for children from birth to age eight.

These goals align with Governor Brian Kemp's direction and goals for the state. By working toward and ultimately achieving these goals, DECAL will contribute to a responsive, efficient, and fiscally sound state government; help lay a solid foundation for lifelong learning in the lives of Georgia's youngest citizens; help develop college and work ready students; and address the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families.

Introduction

Georgia's strategic plan for the early care and education of its youngest citizens builds on significant steps taken over the past two decades. Long recognized as a pioneer in prekindergarten investment, Georgia was one of the first states to develop an executive-level department, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), to serve the early childhood care and education needs of the state's children and their families.

Since DECAL was created in 2004, the department's focus has evolved from administering various individual programs to creating a comprehensive system of early childhood programs and services that address the needs of the whole child and family. Approximately 800,000 children ages birth to age five live in Georgia, and many of them receive services from or participate in programs administered or monitored by DECAL.

This document details DECAL's strategic plan for state fiscal years 2020 through 2024. The plan provides an overview of the department and articulates the goals, measurable objectives, and strategies that will drive the department's work the next four years.

DECAL's strategic plan exists within the context of and aligns with Governor Brian Kemp's Strategic Goals for Georgia. Governor Kemp's vision is to "Put hardworking Georgians first through streamlined, accessible, and fiscally responsible government." To support his vision, the Governor has identified the following strategic goals for the state: Make Georgia #1 for Small Business, Reform State Government, Strengthen Rural Georgia, and Put Georgians First. DECAL's strategic plan supports the Governor's vision and strategic goals for the state. (The Governor's Strategic Goals for Georgia are found in Appendix A.)

A team representing each of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs developed this plan. The team began by analyzing the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Based on the themes emerging from that analysis, the team generated goals, objectives, and strategies to address the identified weaknesses and threats, capitalize on the opportunities, and build on the strengths.

Values and Principles

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning has embraced values that define its culture, guide the actions of staff as they do their work each day, and set the tone for interaction as an effective, cohesive team.

DECAL Values

Delivering stellar customer service
Exhibiting organizational excellence
Creating positive relationships
Always valuing others
Leading the way

In addition, DECAL's work embodies principles that characterize effective early childhood system building. Early childhood system building is the ongoing process of developing the structures, behaviors, and connections that make all the components of an early childhood system operate as a whole to promote shared results for children and families.

DECAL Principles for Early Childhood Systems Building

In its efforts to build a comprehensive early childhood system for all Georgia children, DECAL will partner with others to:

- Reach all children (as early in their lives as possible) and their families with high quality services and supports
- Create policies and procedures that help Georgia children remain healthy and safe
- Genuinely include and effectively accommodate children with special and complex needs
- Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures, and communities of children and families
- Ease access for families and transitions for children
- Value parents as decision makers and leaders
- Catalyze and maximize investment and foster data driven innovation

Department Overview

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is responsible for serving the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children ages birth through school age and their families. Georgia is one of two states in the country with a separate education department dedicated to early learning.

DECAL is unique for several reasons. First, the focus of the agency is on children from birth to age five. By creating an independent education department dedicated to serving the needs of children from birth to age five, Georgia boldly stated in policy what research had been demonstrating for some time, i.e., that high quality early learning is an economic necessity that should be accessible to all children regardless of family income or location. Second, the services for which DECAL is responsible range from monitoring child care providers to ensure they are meeting basic health and safety regulations to creating and implementing innovative early education programs and services. Finally, DECAL's success depends on partnerships and funding from many federal, state, philanthropic, and business stakeholders.

Following are descriptions of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs that foster high quality early education learning experiences for the state's youngest learners. Key accomplishments from the last planning cycle, 2017-2020, are highlighted.

Key Divisions, Units, and Programs

Quality Innovation and Partnerships

DECAL's Quality Innovation and Partnerships division (formerly System Reform) is composed of programs and services that focus on early child care and education quality improvement and internal/external partnerships. Specifically, the division implements and oversees Quality Rated, Georgia's tiered quality rating and improvement system (TQRIS) and DECAL's Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership Grant. The division also houses DECAL's Research and Policy Analysis unit and several programs and initiatives related to community outreach and stakeholder engagement.

Childcare and Parent Services

The Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program supports early education goals by providing access to high quality and affordable early learning environments for families who are considered part of a vulnerable population and have low incomes. Parents or guardians who are working, attending school, or in job training may qualify for subsidized child care through CAPS.

Child Care Services

Child Care Services is responsible for licensing, monitoring, and supporting approximately 3,000 child care learning centers and 2,000 family child care learning homes in Georgia. A Child Care Services consultant visits each licensed child care learning center and family child care learning home twice a year to ensure that programs are maintaining healthy and safe environments. Child Care Services provides regular, customer-focused licensing orientation sessions for prospective child care programs and investigates (in partnership with local and state law enforcement agencies when necessary) all safety complaints related to licensed early education programs. Child Care Services also offers technical assistance and training on child development and other topics relevant to early childhood providers and parents.

Nutrition Services

Nutrition Services administers the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in Georgia. These federal nutrition programs funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) ensure that children and adults throughout Georgia have access to nutritious meals while they are in a day care setting and during the summer when school is not in session. These programs help alleviate hunger and malnutrition and address the negative effects hunger and malnutrition have on an individual's health, educational development, and growth. The CACFP and the SFSP help improve the overall nutritional status of many of Georgia's most vulnerable citizens.

Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Georgia's lottery-funded, voluntary, universal prekindergarten program is currently funded to serve 84,000 slots in over 3,800 classes. Georgia's Pre-K Program is one of the largest in the nation and continues to be a model for other states. It continually ranks among the highest in percentage of children served and in established quality measures. The program is a model in serving the needs of children with disabilities. Since 2010, the division has offered a Summer Transition Program (STP) for children entering kindergarten whose families meet income eligibility and, since 2013, Dual Language Learners entering Pre-K. Georgia's Pre-K consultants monitor programs throughout the year and provide high quality professional development and child development expertise to providers, teachers, and families.

Georgia's Pre-K Program is offered through a mixed delivery system of public-private partnerships, i.e., in public school systems, private for-profit providers, private nonprofit providers, Head Start programs, colleges and universities, and military bases. Recent independent evaluations of the program found that it had substantive impacts on children's school readiness skills.

Instructional Supports includes the Practice and Supports unit and the Professional Learning unit. The Practice and Supports unit supports teachers, leaders, and providers as they increase their instructional knowledge and skills particularly relating to inclusive early education and infant toddler care. The Professional Learning unit offers professional learning opportunities for teachers and leaders, such as using relationship-based professional learning strategies, supporting Dual Language Learners and their families, and using the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS).

The DECAL Scholars program supports early educators in earning an initial or higher degree or credential through scholarships and wage supplements. Other initiatives include the Georgia Trainer Approval System and the Georgia Professional Development System (GaPDS).

DECAL Support Units

The work of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs would not be possible without the support of the following other groups within the department:

- Finance and Administration
- Information Technology
- Communications
- Human Resources
- Legal Services
- Audits and Compliance
- Research and Policy Analysis
- Government Relations

Environmental Scan - SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis

DECAL leaders began creating the strategic plan by conducting a SWOT Analysis of the department's work. The discussion helped identify the needs and priorities for the strategic plan.

Strengths:

- Growth and improvement of the Quality Rated program – strong initial acceptance by programs; strong policies in place to guide the administration of the program
- Implementation of a new technical assistance model by the child care resource and referral agencies resulting in more programs receiving a Quality Rated star rating
- Strong, consistent support of Georgia's Pre-K Program by the Governor, legislature, and other key stakeholders
- High engagement and increased momentum in the Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships

- Formation of strong relationships across child serving agencies as a result of working together on the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant
- Growing levels of community engagement that began with the Early Education Empowerment Zones and continue through the Quality Innovations and Partnerships division
- Financial resources and incentives that allowed units like CAPS and Nutrition Services to expand
- Improving relationships with key stakeholders including providers, families, and the public
- Expanded availability of effective training opportunities for programs including Nutrition Services, Child Care Services, and the GELDS training and resources offered by Pre-K and Instructional Supports
- Strong internal processes and improvements in procedures to evaluate results and to identify data driven practices and procedures

Challenges:

- The need for greater efficiency and speed in internal processes to continue improving customer service
- Distractions that come with new federal legislation or regulations that can take over the agenda of a department and disrupt planned activities
- Keeping staff, particularly new staff, trained and engaged with relevant resources to help them provide a high level of customer service and balance competing priorities and also providing cross-training to develop broad knowledge of DECAL programs and services
- The need for increased awareness of and knowledge about DECAL’s programs and services among all stakeholders
- Aligning collaborative services and programs to provide the best possible service for Georgia’s children and families
- The need to provide additional support for children, families, and caregivers whose primary language is not English
- The need to enhance the use of data and a research agenda across the department

Opportunities:

- Georgia’s voluntary tiered quality rating and improvement system, Quality Rated, which relies on support and funding from private business and philanthropic sources to increase the support of quality child care services in the state
- The Quality Rated public awareness campaign to significantly raise awareness of and engagement in quality improvement activities across the state
- The development of a statewide campaign to help families, providers, and others understand the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS), *Today’s Play Shapes the Future*
- The new state plan for the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant for 2022-2024
- DECAL as one of seven Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grantees in Georgia

- Summer Transition Programs that include lower staff ratios, additional supports for children with high needs, and on-site technical assistance: one program for children about to enter Kindergarten and another for children about to enter prekindergarten (especially for dual language learners)
- Collaboration with the Georgia Department of Education on multiple initiatives including participating in the state’s longitudinal data system
- The creation of the Early Education Empowerment Zones (E3Zs) in 2014 that identified communities of high needs based on indicators including: education, poverty, capacity, quality of early learning, and family characteristics
- Improved service delivery models to improve customer service across the department and data and technology improvements throughout DECAL to automate processes and improve efficiency
- Stronger branding and communication of DECAL’s child nutrition programs to increase awareness among partners and stakeholders
- Stronger collaboration across the education system to create better alignment of services for children birth to age eight

Threats:

- Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant funding ended 12/31/2018
- Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership expensive on a per child basis
- Quality Rating and Improvement System validation
- Potential need for more federal funding
- Unintended impacts associated with the transition to the Georgia Gateway Integrated Eligibility System (IES)
- Potential resistance to change
- Non-compliance/performance of institutions/sponsors on the nutrition programs
- Lack of viable, sustainable sponsorships in the nutrition programs
- Loss of institutional knowledge at state and federal level
- “A few bad apples” determine the perception of the entire child care program population; leads to unfair branding of child care programs
- Barriers to certain rule changes that could create transformational changes in licensed early child care and education programs
- Unintended or unexpected consequences resulting from foundational changes; must have adequate time to study, research, plan, and implement
- Pre-K waiting list; high closure rate of Pre-K programs
- High teacher turnover in birth to five programs
- Potential concerns from private trainers as DECAL expands DECAL training initiatives
- Accessibility to early childhood credential programs

Strategic Goals, Measurable Objectives, and Strategies

To help ensure that every child in Georgia will have access to high quality early care and education regardless of family income or location, DECAL will focus on four strategic goals in 2020-2024:

- I. Contribute measurably to school readiness for children birth to age five in Georgia
- II. Increase the number of high quality, affordable child care programs statewide thereby improving access and better addressing the needs of all children
- III. Develop, engage, and retain a capable, well-trained, and effective workforce for the early care and education industry and for DECAL
- IV. Build a framework that aligns, coordinates, and enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of DECAL programs and services across regions for children from birth to age eight.

Goal I

Contribute measurably to school readiness for children birth to age five in Georgia

Measurable Objectives

By 6/30/2024, 50% of all children receiving child care subsidy will be in two- or three-star Quality Rated programs.

Each year, DECAL will continue to assess the factors that influence Georgia's Pre-K Program waiting list and implement strategies to increase program access.

Strategies

- Provide incentives to increase the number of two- and three-star Quality Rated programs that will provide services to children receiving subsidy
- Develop resources and services specifically targeted to support the school readiness of dual language learners
- Increase the number of dual language learners served in Georgia's Pre-K Program
- Increase the percentage of children served in Georgia's Pre-K Program in targeted communities
- Increase the number of Georgia's Pre-K Program teachers who have participated in a Professional Learning Community

- Work in partnership with local school boards and communities to meet DECAL’s objectives
- Provide training and resources to early learning professionals on understanding children’s developmental milestones and development surveillance
- Encourage all eligible family child care learning homes and child care learning centers to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program

Goal II

Increase the number of high quality, affordable child care programs statewide thereby improving access and better addressing the needs of all children

Measurable Objectives

By 12/31/2024, 75% of Quality Rated eligible programs in targeted counties will be Quality Rated with a 1-star, 2-star, or 3-star rating.

By 12/31/2020, 100% of Quality Rate eligible CAPS provider programs will be Quality Rated with a 1-star, 2-star, or 3-star rating.

By 06/30/2021, 50% of Quality Rated eligible programs in each Child Care Service region will be Quality Rated with a 1-star, 2-star, or 3-star rating.

By 6/30/2024, all (159) counties in Georgia will have at least one child nutrition meal site during the summer months.

Strategies

- Decrease processing times across all applicable programs
- Increase the number of high quality programs accepting child care subsidy in targeted communities
- Develop effective, coordinated technical assistance models to guide quality improvement across DECAL programs
- Make nutrition education resources available to families and early childhood programs especially focusing on counties with high obesity rates

- Ensure availability and access to CACFP/SFSP in counties with a high rates of food insecurity
- Develop training for providers and DECAL staff on supporting homeless families
- Ensure consistent, intentional, authentic, equitable stakeholder engagement in designing, developing, implementing, and improving applicable DECAL programs and services

Goal III

Develop, engage, and retain a capable, well-trained, and effective workforce for the early care and education industry and for DECAL

Measurable Objectives

By June 30th of each state fiscal year, the number of registered users in the Georgia Professional Development System (GaPDS) will increase by 15%.

By 6/30/2020, DECAL will meet and maintain a 90% employee achievement rate for the department's inter-agency training curriculum, DECAL University.

Each year, DECAL will assess and implement strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our internal workforce.

By June 30th of each state fiscal year, the number of infant/toddler credentials awarded by the Technical College System of Georgia will increase by 10%.

Strategies

Strategies specific to the internal workforce:

- Enhance and expand the existing on-boarding process for new employees (those with less than 24 months of DECAL service)
- Identify positions for which bilingual language skills would be an asset and target recruitment efforts toward meeting that need
- Leverage the use of technology to work more efficiently and effectively
- Design informational resource tools that provide FAQs and points of contact from each program area to better inform/train staff
- Facilitate exposure to all DECAL programs and promote cross-agency knowledge among all DECAL staff

Strategies specific to the external workforce:

- Target existing federally funded scholarships and incentives for early childhood teachers to address workforce needs
- Use the targeted CCDF funds to incentivize higher salaries more consistent with the market rate for qualified educators
- Increase the number of staff possessing a Technical Certificate of Credit (TCC) credential or higher who work in child care centers serving at least 10 children receiving subsidy
- Develop or enhance resources to support external communications
- Increase the bilingual workforce in the early learning community

Goal IV

Build a framework that aligns, coordinates, and enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of DECAL programs and services across regions for children from birth to age eight.

Measurable Objectives

By 6/30/2024, each DECAL service region will have five community-based collaboratives focused on early childhood education and supported by DECAL.

By 6/30/2024, DECAL will have combined or consistent service regions across applicable agency programs to provide more efficient and effective support and service delivery to Georgia families and child care providers.

Strategies

- Analyze DECAL programs, services, and staff roles/responsibilities to help identify opportunities for cross-agency coordination
- Provide regular training and technical assistance to all DECAL staff relating to effective, efficient, timely, and courteous service for all customers: families, providers, stakeholders, policy makers, and the general public.
- Leverage technology to maximize data driven communication and decision making among DECAL divisions

- Develop a coordinated research agenda across applicable DECAL programs and services
- Hold regional meetings with DECAL staff to discuss cross-agency issues and increase inter-program collaboration
- Regularly engage families, providers, and stakeholders to ensure that the department's website is easily accessible, applicable, and user-friendly

Conclusion

The SFYs 2020-2024 Strategic Plan highlights DECAL's commitment to continually improve its programs, services, and processes to achieve its mission and vision to ensure that every child in Georgia has access to high quality early care and education regardless of family income or location.

DECAL will continue to create and implement innovative, high quality, state supported early childhood programs. The department will continue to focus on and improve customer satisfaction and enhance support for Georgia's children and families by more efficiently aligning DECAL's services and programs and by continuing to cultivate and strengthen partnerships with external stakeholders to maximize efficiencies as good stewards of limited public funds.

DECAL helps ensure families that their children are safe while they are working or pursuing education. DECAL helps ensure that Georgia businesses have an engaged and qualified workforce by laying a foundation for lifelong learning during children's most critical developmental years. And DECAL's work ensures that Georgia is actively preparing its citizens to meet the demands and expectations of a 21st century economy.

Appendix A: Governor's Strategic Goals for Georgia

Vision:	Put hardworking Georgians first through streamlined, accessible, and fiscally responsible government
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Governor's Strategic Goals for Georgia

- **Make Georgia #1 for Small Business**
 - Cut obsolete, unnecessarily burdensome, and bureaucratic hurdles for small business
 - Maintain Georgia's competitive tax environment
 - Develop a skilled workforce to meet current and future needs across the industry spectrum
 - Expand Georgia's role as a world-renowned hub for global commerce
 - Ensure taxpayers can easily navigate and find necessary information through government interfaces
- **Reform State Government**
 - Maintain Georgia's AAA bond rating
 - Maximize taxpayer value with conservative budgeting
 - Expand public-private partnerships and leverage technology to best utilize limited state resources
 - Improve agency call centers and similar constituent services to be courteous and helpful
- **Strengthen Rural Georgia**
 - Increase rural broadband access for economic growth, educational opportunity, and healthcare access
 - Deploy regional strike teams to areas with economic challenges or lessening populations to collaborate with local leaders and seek opportunities for growth
 - Address Georgia's teacher shortage by removing barriers to professional entry and increasing pay
 - Dismantle Common Core and reduce high-stakes testing for a more student-centric approach to learning
 - Improve literacy rates for students in third through twelfth grades
- **Put Georgians First**
 - Crack down on gang activity and human trafficking affecting every community across Georgia
 - Lower costs, improve quality, and increase access to quality healthcare in every region
 - Continue efforts to keep students, teachers, and personnel safe on campus
 - Expand access to mental health resources in schools for children and young adults

Appendix B: Glossary of Key Terms

Many adults play key roles in children's lives. To be consistent and clearly understood, this plan uses terms in the following ways:

Children: Refers to all children prenatal through age five, regardless of developmental level.

Parents: Includes mothers and fathers, adoptive and foster mothers and fathers, kinship caregivers (grandparents and other family members raising children), guardians, and other adults acting as parents

Families: Children's immediate and extended families, however they define themselves. This term can also include family members who are caregivers (family, friend, and neighbor caregivers).

Early Learning Professionals: Includes any adult who works in a paid capacity to care for and/or teach children ages birth to age five and their families. This includes, but is not limited to: licensed child care providers and directors in child care learning centers or family child care learning homes; preschool teachers and directors; staff and directors of licensed school-age programs (usually serving children and youth ages five to 12 years old); school staff including Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers and assistant teachers, special education teachers, family support workers, literacy coaches, and administrators (e.g., principals and vice principals) – plus early intervention workers, speech and language pathologists, home visitors, librarians, nutrition and health services staff, teacher coaches and mentors, trainers, and consultants.

Providers: Includes early learning and health care professionals, depending on the context.