

# Infusing a Culture of Education

THE HISTORY OF QUALITY  
EARLY CARE AND LEARNING  
IN GEORGIA



**Georgia Dept  
of Early Care  
and Learning**

BRIGHT FROM THE START



Prior to 2004, the idea of a state department strictly for children under the age of five was unheard of.

Before 2004, no state in the country had a department of state government that focused solely on the early education and child care needs of children under age five and their families. Georgia was one of the first states with such a department when it created Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, generally referred to as DECAL. Commissioner Amy Jacobs described DECAL as “a one-stop-shop to find child care and other supports you might need for your child.”

The department merged functions of the former Office of School Readiness, the Office of Regulatory Services in the Department of Human Resources, and the Georgia Child Care Council. These functions included administering Georgia’s Pre-K Program, licensing child care learning centers and family child care learning homes, overseeing federal nutrition programs (the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program), overseeing the state’s network of regionally-based child care resource and referral agencies, and housing the Head Start State Collaboration Office.

## Opportunities Identified

Before 2004, support from the state was fragmented and confusing for child care providers according to Mark Waits, who began working for the Office of School Readiness (OSR) in 1997. At that time, OSR regulated private child care centers that offered Georgia Pre-K, but the Department of Human Resources (DHR) regulated child care centers that did not offer the Georgia Pre-K program.

Even though the state licensing rules and regulations were the same for child care programs that offered Georgia Pre-K and programs that did not offer Georgia Pre-K, the two regulatory agencies approached monitoring and regulation differently, creating vastly different experiences for child care providers.

And housing regulatory consultants in two different state departments didn’t make sense from an efficiency standpoint, either. OSR consultants and DHR consultants literally passed each other on the road as they visited the centers they regulated. Having multiple consultants traveling the same geographic regions was a waste of resources, particularly in rural areas of Georgia where distance was more significant.



The fragmented services were equally confusing for Georgia families seeking support. With funding and services for children under age five divided among several departments, parents had to connect with different contacts to find child care, apply for financial assistance for child care, request meal services, and more. Locating resources and understanding the path to access those resources was a disjointed, complicated process.

Inefficiencies affected all stakeholders: child care providers, families, state policymakers, and taxpayers.

## Where We’ve Been...

**1992:** Governor Zell Miller establishes the Georgia Lottery for Education with proceeds designated by statute to fund a voluntary prekindergarten program and a college scholarship program (Georgia’s Pre-K Program and the HOPE Scholarship).

**1992-93 School Year:** Georgia Pre-K is piloted for 750 low-income children.

**1995-96 School Year:** Georgia Pre-K is opened to all four-year-olds in Georgia, regardless of family income.

**1996:** Office of School Readiness is established.

**2003:** Sonny Perdue is elected.

**2003:** Ben Scafidi is tasked with writing a bill for a department to serve children from birth-age 5.



## Infusing a Culture of Education

When Sonny Perdue began his term as governor in January 2003, he saw the logistical inefficiencies in serving young Georgians, but he also noticed a bigger problem. Child care for children under age five was viewed as simply that: child care.

The state licensed child care centers based on health and safety, but no academic or developmental goals were required. Perdue recognized an opportunity to serve Georgia's youngest residents better by adding an academic component to their care, and he wanted to pursue it.

"Governor Perdue wanted to infuse a culture of education into child care, making it more than simply babysitting," Waits explained.

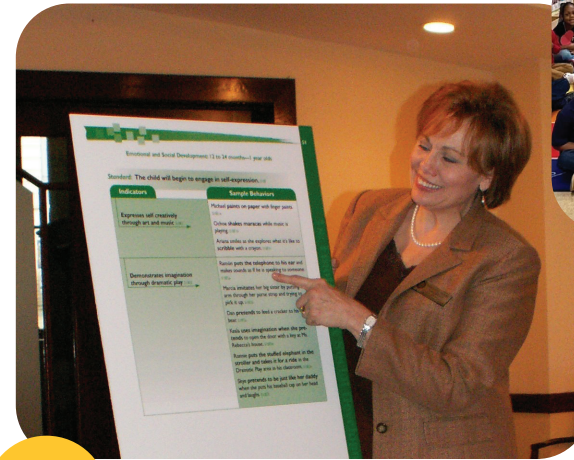
Governor Perdue charged his Education Policy Advisor Ben Scafidi to explore the idea of creating a child

care and early education agency with the following three goals:

- Consolidate child care licensing under one roof.
- Change the culture of child care from babysitting to early education.
- Make serving the early care and education needs of Georgia's children and families more efficient.

Scafidi began gathering research and spent most of 2003 working with legislators to write a bill that created an agency dedicated to young children. The bill, SB 456, was passed by the Georgia General Assembly in 2004 and signed by the Governor on June 12, 2004.

"The Republicans barely controlled the State Senate at that time, and the Democrats barely controlled the State House," Scafidi explained. "So, when the legislation passed, it really was bipartisan." After the bill passed, Scafidi was tasked with



making recommendations on staffing and organizational consolidation. He immediately recommended Marsha Moore, the Executive Director of the Office of School Readiness at that time, as the first commissioner. Governor Perdue appointed Moore as the commissioner on July 1, 2004.

Moore shared the Governor's concerns about the lack of educational preparation for Georgia's youngest residents. She knew that research supported that a child's most significant brain development occurred in the first five years of life, and she felt that Georgia could do more to enhance development in children during the years from birth until they entered Pre-K. "Children learn so much before age three, and we were missing an opportunity to prepare them for Pre-K," she said. "We just weren't seeing the outcomes we wanted in Pre-K or kindergarten at that time. I was confident that if we developed a

department that focused on younger children with the same intensity the Department of Education gives to K-12 students, that could change."

From a stewardship perspective, it also troubled Moore to think that the state was not using taxpayer resources to do everything possible to prepare children for the future. By ignoring the possibilities of educating from birth to five, she felt the state was doing a disservice.

"The tax dollars the state received to help children were not being put to optimal use," she said.

Moore wanted the state to lead the charge in changing how young children are served. She was excited by the message DECAL would send to the rest of the country, demonstrating the importance of social-emotional learning and offering resources and support to families of young children.



**June 12, 2004:**  
SB 456 bill signed by Governor Sonny Perdue.

**July 1, 2004:**  
Marsha Moore appointed commissioner.

**Oct. 1, 2004:**  
DECAL is launched.

**2012:** CCDF policy and funding is transferred to DECAL.

**2012:** CAPS Funding and Administrative Functions transferred to DECAL.

**2017:** CAPS Eligibility Function is transferred to DECAL.



## The New Agency

Passing the enabling legislation was just the first step in creating DECAL. Overseeing the merger of the different entities required intense collaboration and planning to determine where services and funding fit, design processes, and select staff members for leadership roles. Scafidi recalls lengthy meetings between Moore and her deputies, the Department of Human Resources, and the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. Determining what dollar amounts and personnel would be transferred to the new department could not happen overnight.

DECAL officially launched on October 1, 2004, with approximately 300 employees.

Since the goal was to infuse learning into early childhood, one of Moore's first priorities was to establish early learning standards. She convened a team of experts to create benchmarks for birth to age three that aligned with the existing Georgia Pre-K standards, which correlated with the standards for kindergarten.

Next, Moore wanted to develop quality training for child care learning programs and increase their staff training requirements, which would in turn improve the quality of care provided in child care learning programs. She worked with United Way and the private sector to establish the new training and programming. These experts developed a child development certification that was offered at technical colleges across the state.

Once the courses became available and accessible, Moore raised training requirements for the teachers. After teachers completed the program and earned their CDA, they received financial compensation.

## Quality Assured

As Waits describes it, launching DECAL began a positive ripple effect. The child care centers with Pre-K programs began emphasizing quality, which affected not only their Pre-K classes but also their classes for infants and toddlers.

In 2011, Governor Nathan Deal began his administration by appointing Bobby D. Cagle as Commissioner of DECAL. One of the Governor's first directives to Commissioner Cagle was to create a quality rating and improvement system that would identify, communicate, and enhance the quality of care provided in Georgia's child care industry.

In 2012, DECAL launched Quality Rated to encourage and help providers increase the quality of care they offered and to help families identify quality child care programs in their communities.



"Before 2012, we had established standards of care, but with Quality Rated, child care programs earn one, two, or three stars," says Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir. "A star rating communicates to families that the provider is going above and beyond the minimal requirements for state licensing."

DECAL supports child care programs in multiple ways as they work to earn a star rating. Georgia's network of child care resource and referral agencies, funded through DECAL, provides training and technical assistance to child care providers participating in Quality Rated.

In 2012 Governor Deal designated DECAL as the lead agency for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), federal monies granted to each state to accomplish two goals:

1. To provide low-income families who are working or participating in education and training with help paying for child care
2. To improve the quality of care for all children.



## Additional Benefits to Families

Georgia had been subsidizing child care for low-income families who were working or going to school through a program called the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program. For years, CAPS was administered by the Georgia Department of Human Resources. Administration of the CAPS program, including funding and personnel, was transferred from DHR to DECAL in 2017.

DECAL has streamlined the process for participating in and benefitting from CAPS for child care providers and for families. Eligibility for CAPS is handled by DECAL rather than the Division of Family and Children's Services, and the payment process for providers has been enhanced. That transition brought policy, funding, and eligibility for CAPS under one roof DECAL has also added a component to CAPS focusing on family support.



## Benefits to Child Care Programs

Since 2004, DECAL has worked hard to change the way child care providers, owners, directors, and teachers perceive the department.

According to Commissioner Jacobs, "DECAL has definitely moved from being a regulator to being a supporter of child care. Obviously, ensuring the health and safety of children in child care is of utmost importance, but over the years, we transitioned from serving purely as a regulator to asking child care providers, 'How can we support you better?'"

Rather than policing, DECAL partners with providers to offer Georgia's families high quality early learning experiences.

## A System That Simply Makes Sense

"Realizing how important early education is, it just made sense is to put all of these programs and services under one roof," says Dr. Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships.

Former Education Policy Advisor for Governor Perdue Jennifer Rippner agrees. "The efficiencies created by DECAL resulted in the state serving our youngest citizens more effectively," she says. "Housing early care and education services in one department allowed the state to focus on meeting the needs of children in a specific age range whose services had been disjointed."

Other states quickly noticed the progressive efforts happening in Georgia around early childhood. Commissioner Moore was invited to speak across the country to other states seeking to serve this population more effectively, contemplating a similar transition. Nearly 20 years later, Georgia is still perceived as a leader in proactively serving families with children from birth to age five.





## Next Steps

“DECAL came to the right place at the right time,” Ponder says. “Early education as a priority has exploded in the last 30 years.” While DECAL staff involved from the start are thrilled by the expansion of the department over time and its many benefits for stakeholders, they are even more excited about the possibilities ahead. One of DECAL’s next priorities is improving access to mental health services for young children.

“Now, 9% of kids ages birth to five have a significant mental health challenge, which must be addressed. DECAL doesn’t offer therapy directly, but we were asked to coordinate this work since we understand the needs of young kids and families,” Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K Program and Instructional Support Susan Adams says.

“We have convened an infant/toddler mental health task force,” says Commissioner Jacobs, “who is guiding the development of support to teachers and families seeking mental health resources.”



Jacobs also wants to expand educational opportunities and supports for families of children from birth to age five with greater economic needs. With the consolidation of resources created by DECAL, all these goals have a greater chance of becoming reality.

Mark Waits, whose career predates DECAL, said, “You can’t look at the creation of DECAL without calling it an evolution. It would have been incredibly difficult to bring together all these programs, services, and the needed infrastructure of technology, human resources, finance, etc. at one time. The journey to create DECAL began with Georgia’s Pre-K Program, and I don’t think anyone ever dreamed the department would have the breadth, depth, and scope it has today.”

Adams agrees: “DECAL has evolved since 2004 and will continue evolving as the needs of Georgia’s children and families change.”







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