



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**
BRIGHT FROM THE START

Brian P. Kemp
Governor

Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**DECAL Announces Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year
for 2021-2022 School Year**

Winners from Centers in Savannah, Marietta, and Chickamauga

ATLANTA, Ga., (December 10, 2021) – The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named its inaugural Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2021-2022. The infant winner is Diana Black from Pookie Bear Learning Center in Savannah, the toddler winner is Maria Claudia Ortega from My Little Geniuses in Marietta, and the preschool winner is Hannah Beth Reeves from the Academy for Little People in Chickamauga.

As Educators of the Year, Black, Ortega and Reeves will receive \$3,000 for their personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and up to \$2,500 for their school to cover travel costs and stipends for substitute teachers as the teacher fulfills their duties as Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year. Winners serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year program through activities related to modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances.

The new program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-18 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months).

Program directors working with early childhood teachers dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young children were asked to nominate applicants for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educator of the Year through an online application. Winners were selected from six semi-finalists who each received a classroom observation and faced a panel during a personal interview.

“Early child development helps build a foundation for lifelong learning, behavior, and health,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “The experiences children have in early care and education programs help shape the brain and the child’s capacity to learn, develop important social skills, and respond to daily stresses and challenges in a healthy manner. This new program honors exemplary educators and is another way to celebrate those teachers who are helping to build that foundation for lifelong learning and healthy development.”

Among other requirements, candidates for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year must have been employed as a lead teacher in the age group for which they were nominated at a licensed 2 or 3-star Quality Rated child care provider that is in good standing with all programs administered by DECAL. They also had to have a minimum of three years of experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2021-2022 school year.

“It’s so exciting to finally have our inaugural Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the year winners,” said Carrie Ashbee, Executive Director for the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “The experiences children have in their classrooms help shape the brain and the child’s capacity to learn and to get along with others. We can’t say enough about the role these earliest teachers play in the life of a child, placing them on a successful path to lifelong learning.”

About DECAL

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning is responsible for meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia’s children and their families. It administers the nationally recognized Georgia’s Pre-K Program; licenses child care centers and home-based child care; administers Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program and federal nutrition programs; and manages Quality Rated, Georgia’s community-powered child care rating system.

The department also houses the Head Start State Collaboration Office, distributes federal funding to enhance the quality and availability of child care, and works collaboratively with Georgia child care resource and referral agencies and organizations throughout the state to enhance early care and education. For more information, go to www.dec.al.ga.gov.