

**Board of
Early Care and Learning**

Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting
Thursday, February 16, 2023 — 9:00 a.m.
Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE – East Tower
Oak Conference Room and via GoToMeeting
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
Amy M. Jacobs, Commissioner

Meeting Minutes

Board Members

Kristy Beam, Jen Bennecke, Melissa Boekhaus, Phil Davis (Chair), Susan Harper, Joanna Hill, Kristin Morrissey, Luann Purcell

Public Guests

Shannon Gibson, Lisa Hardt, Terri Johnson, Alaina Jones, Melody McGuire

DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner

Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Reg Griffin, Chief Communications Officer

Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs

Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships

Rian Ringsrud, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration

Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services

Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer

Pamela Barner, IT Systems Specialist

Andres Bernal, IT Help Desk Manager

Chondra Bolton, CACDS Project Manager

Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director

Erika Breckenridge, CCS Administrative Assistant

Kimberly Brickey, QR Portfolio Assessor

Vanessa Brown, EHS Program Manager for Mental Health and Disabilities

Leatha Bryant, Nutrition Services Trainer/Coordinator

Tina Crooms, CAPS Constituent Services and Critical Support Manager

Kim Davis, Quality Rated Assistant Director

Hayat Dergaga, Research Analyst

Woody Dover, Enterprise Project Management Director

Rebecca Ellis, Director of Practice and Support Services

Carol Fordham, QR Regional Coordinator, Central Georgia

Andrea Fairries Moore, CAPS Administrative Services Manager

Megan Fickes, Director, Early Head Start Partnership

Iris Janet Herrera, Training Approval Specialist

Randy Hudgins, Director of Research and Policy Analysis

Denise Jenson, Director of Quality Rated

Jessica Jett, CAPS Family Support Consultant

Nilia Lalin, CCS Exemption Program Specialist

Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, EHS Business Operations Specialist
Ronald Logan, CCS Quality Support Administrative Assistant
Kay Mayfield, CAPS Director of Provider Relations
Meghan McNail, Summer Transition Program and Outreach Manager
Barbara McWethy, Workforce Support Manager
Lindsay Miller, Quality Rated Structural Quality Manager
Christi Moore, Professional Learning Director
Dana Morrison, CCS Director of Field Operations
Miranda Murphy, Training Approval Specialist
Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor
Rob O'Callaghan, Senior Research Analyst
Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner
Jill O'Meara, Community Partnerships and Projects Manager
Valerie Perez, Research Analyst
Harika Polisetty, DocuWare System Administrator
Susan Powers, CAPS Family Support Consultant
Bridget Ratajczak, Child and Family Development Supervisor
Laura Reid, Relationship Based Professional Learning Manager
Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor
Melissa Risenhoover, QIP Administrative Assistant
Michael Rodgers, Director, Finance
April Rogers, Director, CCS Enforcement Operations
Brittany Sams, CCS Director of Administrative Services and Special Operations
Barbara Sanders, Business Analyst
Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director
Jackie Shivers, Director, Pre-K Quality Support
Jessi Slater, Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialist
Michelle Smith, CCS Comp Consultant
Sonja Steptoe, QIP Communications and Outreach Manager
Robin Stevens, Director of Human Resources
Audreana Todd, QIP Special Projects Coordinator
Keva Tuck, CAPS Scholarship Administration Specialist
Mark Waits, Senior Writer
Sheryl Wilhite, Director of Human Resources
Liz Young, Government Relations Director

The February 16, 2023 meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held in the Oak Conference room and livestreamed via GoToWebinar.

1. Call to Order

At 9:01 a.m. Board Chair Phil Davis called the meeting to order.

2. Welcome

Mr. Davis welcomed Board members, DECAL staff, and guests.

3. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Mr. Davis asked for a motion to accept the meeting agenda. Ms. Harper moved to accept, and Ms. Morrissey seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Mr. Davis asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the August meeting. Dr. Boekhaus moved to approve, and Dr. Purcell seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

4. Inspiration

Ms. Harper provided inspiration saying, “Everything is fascinating for a child—the colors are brighter, and happiness always seems to be just around the corner. Every day they explore, experiment and learn new things. They discover the world through play, and this makes those early years priceless. While growing up, children begin to look up for role models around them. Whatever they dream of becoming later in life, they need encouragement, proper guidance, and inspiration. There are many things we can offer our children, but helping them build a solid character would be by far the most precious gift. Sometimes a few wise words will stick with them forever, shape the way they think, and even help them cope with challenges on the way to achieving their goals. Obstacles are inevitable, and it’s our job to teach them how to persevere and overcome them.” Ms. Harper read inspirational quotations from John Wooden, Walt Disney, Robert Kennedy, and Maya Angelou.

5. Board Member Updates

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates on their recent activities. Ms. Hill reported reading a story for Inclusive Early Learning Week at the center she used to own. Ms. Beam reported on a conversation with her young grandson about Inclusive Early Learning Week. Mr. Davis reported on a visit to a child care center in Savannah where he awarded a scholarship to a young boy and a check to his child care provider. Ms. Morrissey reported on a \$2,100 literacy grant received by a local Rotary club. The Rotary Club is partnering with the public library to offer a six-week program for families and children to promote early literacy. Ms. Purcell reported that her youngest grandson, who recently turned 3 ½ and is disabled, received his first IEP. She also commented that her seven other grandchildren have developed great empathy for children with differences because of their brother. Dr. Boekhaus reported that she recently attended the local AAP meeting at which DECAL’s work was discussed.

6. DECAL Staff Reports

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency’s work.

a. Commissioner’s Update

Commissioner Amy Jacobs shared an overview of DECAL’s strategic plan for state fiscal years 2022–2025, which was developed by the executive cabinet in the spring of 2021 entirely by Zoom. Strategic planning allows agency leadership to communicate clear direction and priorities to employees and stakeholders, and it is required by the Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget. DECAL’s Vision and Mission statements did not change a lot from the prior strategic plan, the Commissioner said, and she uses the Vision statement, “Every child in Georgia will have equal access to high quality early care and education” regularly in making decisions. DECAL’s Mission statement is “The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning improves outcomes for children and families by strengthening early learning experiences in partnership with early education programs, professionals, stakeholders, families, and communities. Commissioner Jacobs emphasized the importance of DECAL’s partnerships with those who provide direct care for children. In addition to the required components of the strategic plan, the executive cabinet also developed statements of DECAL’s values and principles. DECAL’s five strategic

goals are focused on aligning resources to improve school readiness, continuing to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and learning, developing the early learning workforce, expanding 2Gen strategies, and enhancing the use of technology and data to support stakeholders.

The Commissioner introduced Shannon Gibson from Baldwin Elementary School in Baldwin, Georgia's Pre-K public school Teacher of the Year (TOTY). Ms. Gibson made a short presentation, and Mr. Davis presented her with a Board resolution honoring her achievements. The Commissioner introduced Alaina Jones from Akers Academy in Cumming, Georgia's Pre-K private school TOTY. Ms. Jones made a short presentation, and Mr. Davis presented her with a Board resolution honoring her achievements.

b. Finance and Administration Update

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported on DECAL's budget and expenses. As of December 31, 2022, the end of the second quarter, DECAL's spending is on track, with 50% of funds remaining. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor's amended budget recommendation for SFY2023, which is unchanged from the budget submission approved by the Board in August 2022. For SFY 2024, the Governor is recommending a \$35.8 million increase to DECAL's budget, \$34.7 million of which will be allocated to Pre-K programs and the rest to CCS. For CCS the increase will fund a \$2,000 cost of living increase for CCS employees and an increase in state matching funds for the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) that will allow DECAL to continue receiving the same amount of federal funding for CAPS. For Pre-K the increase will fund the same \$2,000 cost of living increase for DECAL's Pre-K employees, a \$2,000 increase for Pre-K teachers and assistant teachers, and a 20% increase in Pre-K classroom operations, which translates to an additional \$3,676 for each Pre-K classroom.

Mr. Davis asked whether DECAL has spent all the COVID funding. Mr. Ringsrud replied that all funds from the CARES act have been spent. All funds from CRRSAA have been allocated and all but \$53 million have been spent. The remaining CRRSAA funds must be spent by September 30, 2023, and DECAL is on track to do that. DECAL received \$1.6 billion from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), and \$1.4 billion has been allocated, and more than \$1.1 billion has been spent. Some of the funds must be spent by September 30, 2023 and some by September 30, 2024. In both cases DECAL is on track, Mr. Ringsrud said.

Ms. Harper asked for examples of projects the federal relief funds have been used for. Mr. Ringsrud cited the STABLE grants that kept child care providers afloat when enrollment plummeted and the ACCESS program that pays the full cost of child care for families with CAPS scholarships. Mr. Davis thanked Mr. Ringsrud for his presentation.

c. Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Update

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams gave the Board an update about the Summer Transition Program (STP). The program has been shown to have a significant impact on math and literacy, and it was expanded to mitigate learning loss during the pandemic using funds from the Governor's emergency education relief funds. Based on feedback from families, teachers, and providers, the program will be shortened from six weeks to five, and STP teachers' salaries have been updated to reflect increases in school year salaries. Ms. Adams also reported that 73,462 children are currently enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K, an estimated 54% of 4-year-olds in Georgia, down from 60% before the pandemic and a small increase over last year. There are 60 counties (38%) that serve 70% or more of their 4-year-olds, while 29 counties (18%) serve less than 50%. There are 2,718

children on waiting lists around the state because the open slots are not aligned with the geographic areas of greatest demand. Georgia's Pre-K enrollment is trending with preschool programs and K-12 systems nationally and reflects a lower birth rate than Georgia's peak in 2007.

Ms. Harper asked whether enrollment numbers include only those children in Georgia's Pre-K programs and not those participating in other programs. Ms. Adams confirmed that the numbers are for Georgia's Pre-K only. DECAL's goal for Georgia's Pre-K is to serve all children whose families want them to be served, she said. Research shows that before the pandemic more than 85% of children were in some type of early learning program by age 4, and it is important to honor parents' choices. Ms. Harper noted that homeschooling is growing rapidly in her area. Ms. Adams said that the pandemic has affected the choices families are making.

Ms. Adams announced that applications for Pre-K providers will open March 7 and close March 30. The window is a little later than usual to allow DECAL to adjust funding priorities. Lower enrollment presents an opportunity to move toward class sizes of 20 rather than 22, Ms. Adams said, by offering providers full funding for classes of 20, 21, or 22 students. Ms. Adams' team will also look at expanding the number of classrooms in areas with the highest waiting lists and closing some classrooms with consistently low enrollment.

Ms. Harper said she had received questions about facilities that want to have Pre-K classes but lack physical requirements such as lavatories or lunchrooms and asked Ms. Adams to confirm that structural facilities renovations are beyond the scope of the Georgia's Pre-K program. Ms. Adams confirmed that the current policy is that Pre-K funds may not be used for capital improvements. Ms. Morrissey asked whether reducing class size will help with teacher retention, and Ms. Adams confirmed that it will.

Ms. Adams introduced the Pyramid Model, a framework of evidence-based practices to promote young children's social and emotional development. At the base of the pyramid are practices that support all children, such as training the workforce to engage in positive relationships with children and create supportive environments. In the middle are targeted supports for children who may present with challenging behaviors, and at the top are the most intensive interventions for children who need mental health services. When we use the model, Ms. Adams said, we reduce the number of children who are ever going to need the most intensive interventions. In the coming year DECAL will use some of the federal relief funds to train over 1,000 educators. Currently, 22 providers are participating in a pilot program. Child Trends will conduct an evaluation of the project to help Ms. Adams' team understand how to scale implementation of the Pyramid Model.

Ms. Morrissey asked, given that the training is being funded with federal relief funds which will end, whether DECAL will be training teachers to train others. Ms. Adams replied that all the specialists in the agency—Infant Toddler, Inclusion and Behavioral Support, and Pre-K—are being trained through a train-the-trainer series so that DECAL builds the institutional capacity to train the workforce. Ms. Adams also noted that CCLC administrators will be trained as another way to build capacity. The agency has used the Pyramid Model for many years, Ms. Adams said, but having the federal funds is a great opportunity to train many people.

Ms. Adams called Board members attention to the book they received for Inclusive Early Learning Week, *You Be You*, and she read a proclamation from the Governor and presented it to Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialist Jessi Slater and Director of Practice and Support Services Rebecca Ellis.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Adams for her presentation.

d. Child Care Services (CCS) Update

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services Pam Stevens reviewed the annual process for licensing rule changes which is designed to make sure that providers and DECAL employees have plenty of advance notice. Rule changes are made, Ms. Stevens said, because knowledge about best practices evolves over time. CCS will present specific rule changes to the Board at the May 18 meeting and conduct public webinars during the summer. There will be a public hearing and the Board will be asked to vote on the rule changes at the August 24 meeting. Rule changes will go into effect October 1. She also noted that for about six months after rule changes take effect, CCS consultants provide technical assistance to help providers learn how to make the necessary changes to their operations. The first proposed rule change is an additional instance of a rule approved by the Board last year that allows DECAL to revoke a license for false or misleading information. Other proposed rule changes include requirements that parents be notified of any incidents involving their children (not just illnesses and injuries), that dates be required on transportation checklists, and that language about criminal background checks be broadened.

Mr. Davis called for a motion to authorize CCS to develop specific rule changes. Ms. Hill made a motion, and Ms. Beam seconded. The Board voted unanimously to authorize CCS to develop specific rule changes.

Break

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:30 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:40 a.m.

e. CCS Update continued

Deputy Commissioner Stevens introduced Dana Morrison, CCS Director of Field Operations. Ms. Morrison made a presentation about the Compliance at a Glance dashboard that launched in January. The dashboard takes all the data CCS consultants collect about providers on their twice yearly visits and presents it in a family-friendly format. Families can see summary information about providers at a glance and drill down for more details about site visits and rule infractions. The dashboard has been incorporated into the qualityrated.org website where families go to search for child care. CCS partnered with GEEARS to develop and now promote the website. Ms. Morrison described promotional efforts and asked Board members to help promote the tool as well. Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Stevens and Ms. Morrison for their presentations.

f. Quality Innovation and Partnerships (QIP) Update

Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Dr. Bentley Ponder first gave an update about the Quality Rated program. He reported that 900 providers went through the Quality Rated process in 2022. Of these 818 were re-ratings, and 82 were new. In cohorts 1 and 2, 438 providers went through the TARO options. In cohorts 3 and 4, 462 providers went through the traditional process with live observations. Dr. Ponder also showed the distribution of 1-, 2-, and 3-star ratings providers achieved through the TARO and traditional processes.

Ms. Harper asked Dr. Ponder to explain the benefits to providers for the different star levels. Dr. Ponder replied that the tiered reimbursement rates are tied to star level. He also mentioned that 3-star providers get special banners. Mr. Davis asked whether there is a dynamic where 2-star providers decide that a 2-star rating is good enough, and it's not worth the effort of trying for 3-stars. Dr. Ponder replied that that sometimes happens but also there are 2-star providers who keep going for 3-stars.

Dr. Ponder reported that two cohorts of the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement are currently underway, with 22 child care learning centers (CCLC) and 11 family child care learning homes (FCCLH) participating. Participants are expected to receive their endorsements this spring. Dr. Ponder also announced that a Quality Rated comprehensive review process will kick off in March with a survey of providers. He also summarized the ratings awarded in the first 10 years of the Quality Rated program. Since the first classroom observation on September 13 2012, Quality Rated has conducted 8,457 observations. Of Georgia's 4,469 eligible providers, 2,858 are now rated. Dr. Ponder gave an update about the activities of the Research and Policy Analysis team. He reviewed the objectives and activities for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation Research and Evaluation grant that the Research and Policy Analysis team received in 2017. Work under that grant will conclude in March. The Research team also makes grants to external research partners, and Dr. Ponder referred Board members to several new research publications from external partners and DECAL's own research on the agency website.

Mr. Davis thanked Dr. Ponder for his presentation.

g. Federal Programs Update

Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir reviewed the history of the CAPS program at DECAL. The CCDF funding and the administration of the program were transferred from the Division of Family and Child Services (DFCS) in 2012. The eligibility function, including all the people who process applications and interact with families, remained at DFCS until 2017, when the function was transferred to DECAL. The provider management function, including payments to providers, has been handled by a vendor until now. This year DECAL will take over provider management from the vendor. DECAL is taking over provider management, Ms. Kasfir said, to create a better experience for providers. DECAL has longstanding history and positive relationships with providers, and bringing provider management in-house will allow CAPS to provide a one-stop shop for providers. DECAL may continue using a vendor to process payments to providers. Ms. Kasfir gave an overview of the CAPS organization. The scholarship administration function processes new applications. Family support processes redeterminations and helps families find resources. The program administration function supports the entire CAPS program, and the new provider relations function will manage the provider experience. Ms. Kasfir introduced Kay Mayfield, the Director of Provider Relations. Ms. Mayfield explained that CAPS has a small team now to help providers resolve issues about scholarships, payments, and reimbursement rates. To take over the work currently done by the vendor and raise service levels, the function must expand, Ms. Mayfield said planning for the transition has been going on for a year. There will be four teams, enrollment services, customer support, quality assurance and payments, and education and outreach. With the takeover from the vendor, CAPS will expand its focus on quality assurance as well as education for providers, Ms. Mayfield said. The quality assurance and payments team will take a proactive approach in reviewing requests for payments with the goal of helping providers bill correctly thereby reducing the number of adjustments that need to be made after the fact. The Education and Outreach team will offer new provider training, conduct training and/or technical assistance in the field, and reach out to newly licensed centers. Ms. Mayfield also shared the timeline for hiring and training new employees.

Dr. Purcell expressed concern that it might be difficult to recruit and hire all the employees needed for the new function. Ms. Kasfir acknowledged the challenge but expressed confidence that CAPS will meet its hiring goals. Ms. Morrissey asked where the new positions would be located. Ms. Kasfir responded that most of CAPS frontline positions are remote. Ms. Morrissey recounted an experience with a social

agency in her district that helps women in difficult circumstances get back into the workforce. The lack of affordable child care is often a barrier to their getting jobs, she said, and bringing CAPS providers on board more quickly will help remove that barrier. Ms. Purcell applauded the move to bring provider relations in-house as gutsy. Ms. Morrissey asked how the move would be funded, and Commissioner Jacobs responded that the funds would come from eliminating the vendor DECAL currently pays. Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Kasfir and Ms. Mayfield for their presentations.

7. Lunch and Committee Meetings

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch at 11:25 a.m.

8. Committee Reports

At 12:50 p.m. Mr. Davis brought the meeting back to order and called for committee reports. Dr. Boekhaus reported from the Programs and Rules committee that about 17% of CAPS applications are coming from the Student Parent priority group that was opened in May 2022. The Find Help Georgia website continues to receive a lot of traffic, and the second most common search is for help paying for child care. CCS has funds available through April for providers who serve school-aged children to help them purchase age-appropriate materials, supplies, and training. CCS will offer Health and Safety grants beginning in March. This program has an equity focus. There are about 200 providers who receive repeated citations for playground equipment and transportation, areas that are very costly to repair or replace. Funds are targeted for providers with frequent infractions to help them improve safety. A current focus for Pre-K and Instructional Supports is recruiting and retaining teachers. One example is a project to support prospective teachers in gaining the minimum credential, a CDA, to enter the workforce. The CDA certification has two parts, training and observation. The project offers scholarships for the training and grants to professional observers to incent them to offer observations in rural areas. Nutrition Services applied for a Governor's proclamation for National CACFP week to promote awareness of the food service programs, and the nutrition pages on the DECAL website are now bilingual, English and Spanish.

Ms. Morrissey referenced a rule change that the legislature enacted and the Governor signed to allow retired teachers to come back into the workforce and asked whether retired child care employees might be able to come back and work part time as observers. Dr. Christi Moore, the Director of Professional Learning, replied that her team has been talking to the Department of Education about recruiting retired teachers as observers, especially those who were part of career education programs in high schools as long as they have some background in early care and learning. Ms. Harper commented that retired teachers can work on a 49% calendar without having their retirement income affected.

9. Public Comment Period

At 1:00 p.m. Mr. Davis paused the committee reports and opened the public comment period. He asked Board Liaison Quandra Obi whether anyone had signed up to make a public comment. Ms. Obi replied that no one had signed up. He asked whether any comments had been received via the GoToMeeting chat function. Ms. Obi responded that no comments had been received via chat. Mr. Davis noted that eight letters addressed to the Commissioner and the Board had been received in advance and would become part of the meeting record. (See below.)

10. Committee Reports continued

Ms. Morrissey reported that the Finance Committee received a report of expenses as of January 31, 2023, and DECAL's expenses are still on track with the budget. She explained that encumbrances in the Quality Rated budget represent contracts that have been awarded but the funds for which have not been fully spent.

She also reported that 94% of the funds received by DECAL are currently passed through. That percentage will likely return to 88 or 89% when all the federal relief funds have been spent. DECAL's annual audit has been completed, she said. Ms. Hill reported that the QIP committee was introduced to Kim Davis who was recently promoted to Assistant Director for Quality Rated. Ms. Hill also described the \$67 million in restoration grants that Quality Rated is making to providers for classroom improvements in advance of on-site classroom assessments. DECAL's Early Head Start Partnership served 208 children last year, Ms. Hill said, the first year under the restructured model. The Research and Policy Analysis team is conducting a study of non-traditional child care hours with the Urban Institute and an economic impact study of the child care industry. The Community Outreach and Partnerships team reported that their Twitter audience has doubled, Ms. Hill said, that DECAL is offering training on sound business practices for providers to help them when STABLE grants end, and that DECAL awarded 18 new Community Transformation grants of up to \$125,000 each.

11. Adjournment

Mr. Davis asked if there was any other business for the Board. There being none, he reminded Board members to submit their expense reports, asked for volunteers to provide inspiration at future meetings, thanked the DECAL staff who support the Board and praised DECAL's esprit de corps, announced the date for the next meeting, May 18, 2023, and adjourned the meeting at 1:10 p.m.

As noted above, the Board received eight letters with comments about CAPS provider reimbursement rates. These letters follow.

On February 15, 2023 Mr. Jay Bryan wrote, Dear Commissioner Jacobs and DECAL Board: My name is Jay Bryan and I own two of The Goddard Schools in Georgia. I am very concerned about the expiration of the enhanced provider rates for CAPS children which is set to occur on October 1, 2023. We currently have 41 students enrolled in the CAPS program at the school located in Sandy Springs on Roswell Road, and if the tuition payments are reduced on October 1 and families become partially responsible for tuition payments, we will lose a significant number of students.

CAPS has already reverted back to pre-pandemic eligibility rates, meaning a family of four cannot earn more than \$13,875 to be eligible for CAPS now. DECAL is currently paying providers almost 20% more than providers received prior to the pandemic and the infusion of federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act. There is simply no way "very low income" parents can afford to pay that difference.

At the same time, inflation has affected every provider. We are experiencing increases in food, milk, diapers and wipes, supplies like toys, construction paper, and other classroom resources, cleaning supplies, and first aid kits. In addition, due to the pandemic we have experienced significant increases in expenses related to the health and safety of our schools, including monthly decontamination services and biodefense systems installed in both of our facilities. And our labor costs are significantly higher than prior to the pandemic. The increased provider rates, while incredibly helpful to providing quality care, still do not cover the cost of care for CAPS children or the demands of being Quality Rated as required by DECAL to serve these children.

For these reasons, I urge the Department to allocate the additional \$66 million that DECAL will receive for CCDBG this year to make the provider rate increases permanent. Otherwise, small providers like myself will not be able to continue to serve these children when the families inevitably cannot pay the difference.

Before I close, I would like to express my appreciation to the Department for their partnership in working with providers to help us keep our doors open throughout the pandemic. Having been a childcare provider for 13 years, our industry has never faced a more stressful time. The pandemic challenged our staff and our families in

ways we never knew, and everyone, including DECAL, stepped up to make sure we could keep our doors open to serve the children.

Please accept my sincere thanks for the support you gave to all childcare staff including cooks, directors, custodians, and of course our teachers. We appreciate all the financial support, technical assistance, and flexibility given to providers to help us keep our children healthy, safe, and educated during this difficult time. Thank you. Sincerely, Jay B. Bryan

In an undated letter, Mr. Robert Hill, VP of Operations at KIDazzle Child Care, Inc. wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, I come bearing thanks and praise for your hard work in supporting childcare providers like KIDazzle Child Care, Inc. through these unprecedented times. Your flexibility and resources have been a lifeline for us, and we're grateful for all you've done.

Now, let's talk turkey. In today's competitive market, we need to offer our hardworking teachers wages that don't make them feel like they're working at a lemonade stand.

Even with the rate increases provided by the ACCESS program, we're still struggling to attract and retain talent. It's like trying to find a unicorn that can also change diapers.

So, here's my request let's keep those rate increases coming. By allocating the \$66 million in annualized new CCDBG funding to provider rates, we can sustain these much-needed wage enhancements for our deserving teachers. This will also allow us to use ARPA dollars to provide scholarships to individual children who need it most.

Thanks for your attention and your help in creating a bright future for our children. Yours truly, Robert Hill

In an undated letter Ms. Danielle Millman, President of Otter Learning, wrote, Dear Commissioner Jacobs and DECAL Board, My name is Danielle Millman, and I am President of Otter Learning. We currently have four schools in Georgia with another 2 joining the family in March. We look forward to continuing to grow in the Peach State. I am writing to express my concern about the ACCESS program ending on October 1 and to ask the Department to dedicate the \$66 million in new CCDBG revenue to continuing enhanced provider payments of \$8400 (on average).

In the past, the economic climate and market conditions allowed childcare providers to accept CAPS at the lower rate because the labor force was less expensive, and providers were not required to meet the rigorous quality measures that are now in place to insure CAPS children receive a robust early childhood education. It was not ideal, but it was possible. Today, economic climate is very different. Labor costs are significantly more expensive as providers compete with the Targets and Costcos of the world who now pay a minimum wage of \$15 per hour which has led to unprecedented staffing shortages in the childcare industry statewide. Labor costs tend to be 60-75% of any childcare business.

If the rate goes back to \$5600 on October 1st, it will leave us at Otter Learning having to make a difficult choice. We always want to put what is best for children first, and we fundamentally believe all children deserve the best for their most critical and foundational education. Eliminating CAPS families is not a solution for us. Unfortunately, with a lower rate, we would have to consider one or a combination of these options to offset the significant financial burden:

- 1. Lower expenses across the school*
- 2. Fewer classroom materials purchased*
- 3. Increases to private pay tuition*
- 4. Set a capacity on the number of CAPS children we serve at each school*
- 5. Lower the money available for compensation increases for staff*

The effect of many of these options is less quality for students, which is incredibly disheartening for us. That is

why I am respectfully asking that DECAL dedicate the \$66 million in new revenue to extending the current provider rate of \$8400 per child per year permanently.

In closing, I would like the Board to know how much we appreciate the partnership we as a provider have with DECAL. I have schools in multiple states, and in every other state, I repeatedly hear, "Why can't we be like Georgia?". That is probably the highest compliment DECAL could receive. Georgia is literally the envy of the nation when it comes to state agency partnerships that benefit Georgia's youngest learners, especially throughout the pandemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments and for all the work DECAL does on behalf of the children and families we serve. Sincerely, Danielle Millman

In an undated letter Ms. Cheryl Odom Flores, a District Manager with the Learning Care Group in Georgia, wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding the CAPS payment rates currently in effect via DECAL's ACCESS program. My name is Cheryl Odom-Flores, and I am a District Manager with Learning Care Group here in Georgia.

Learning Care Group, Inc. is a childcare and early childhood education company based in Novi, Michigan. Founded in the 1960s, it is the second-largest for-profit childcare provider in North America, operating over 950+ schools in the United States.

I am urging DECAL to use the additional \$66 million Georgia will receive via the CCDBG to permanently raise the provider reimbursement rates to the \$8,400 currently being paid to Quality Rated providers under the ACCESS program. As much as I know we need additional slots, I have so many schools extremely short staffed that I am not able to take on new children presently.

Right now, Learning Care Group has 26 schools in 11 counties under 4 brand names in Georgia that provide care to approximately 1,368 CAPS children. In eight of those schools, over 75% of the children are served by CAPS. I know where these schools are located, and those families will not be able to pay their CAPS family copay plus the \$2,800 difference in the provider rate which DECAL is currently paying. In many cases, our families are paying tuition amounts over and above the rate DECAL is currently paying for CAPS students to make up the funding gaps where the state fails to pay the cost of care

If CAPS does not reimburse providers at rates closer to the \$8,400 rate, it will mean that LCG will have to make business decisions which will be detrimental to children and families in the areas they serve. And where we do keep CAPS children, private pay families will be charged even higher tuition rates to make up the difference where the state is failing to pay the true cost of care. So not only are fewer providers likely to take CAPS children, but lower provider reimbursement rates will cause private pay families to pay even more.

We thank you for all the good work DECAL has done during the pandemic in distributing much needed funds to prevent the "cliff effect" of providers closing their doors or serving fewer CAPS children. However, without sustainable funding to continue provider rates, Georgia has merely pushed the cliff effect down the road to October 1, 2023. Please allocate new CCDBG funding to sustain provider rate increases. Thank you for your time. Sincerely, Cheryl Odom-Flores

In an undated letter Ms. Jessica Van Hoose, Senior Director of Education for Child Development Schools, wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, Thank you for allowing me to submit comments on behalf of Child Development Schools, the owner of Childcare Network. As you are aware, we service working families with over 15,000 children in Georgia including 4,000 CAPS children. We are very concerned about the ACCESS program ending on October 1, 2023, returning provider payment rates to the \$5,600 per year per child reimbursement. We ask that DECAL use the \$66 million in new federal funds to establish a new permanent rate that is consistent with the current ACCESS program rates.

With the enhanced provider rate of \$8,400, we have increased salaries and hourly rates for our staff statewide,

which has become a necessity in this labor market where talent is scarce. Even with the improved teacher wages, we still have classrooms sitting empty across Georgia with children on waiting lists because we struggle to compete with other businesses paying a minimum wage of \$15 per hour or more.

If CAPS amounts are reduced, we will have to lower the wages for newly hired staff again. This increases turnover and instability in more of our programs. The children of GA deserve to be in high-quality classrooms with consistent teachers. Working families need our facilities to be open and fully functional to increase productivity and the workforce for GA families. With these proposed decreases in rates, we will also have to look at decreasing current quality support staff across the state. As you can imagine, when we become less competitive with wages, we have more closed classrooms and are unable to serve the children and families that need our care in Georgia.

Access to childcare is about more than CAPS slots. It's about making sure classrooms are open with trained staff to care for children. It is for this reason that we respectfully request that DECAL use the new \$66 million CCDBG dollars to permanently increase providers reimbursement rates for CAPS care. Sincerely, Jessica Van Hoose, Senior Director of Education

In an undated letter Ms. Rebecca Anderson, Georgia's Pre-K/Head Start Project Director for The Sunshine House, wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, Thank you for allowing The Sunshine House to submit comments. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Department for all they have done throughout the pandemic to help childcare providers continue to serve children. And as the Georgia Pre-K Director for all of Sunshine House's lottery funded classes; we thank the Department for their work in getting raises for our teachers as well as much needed 20% increase to classroom operations.

We also need that kind of permanent investment to provider rates in the CAPS subsidy program. The Sunshine House serves 432 CAPS students in its 22 locations across Georgia. The increased provider rates through the ACCESS program have allowed our schools to raise teacher pay to try to stay competitive in this difficult hiring environment. Even with the additional pay and teacher supports, we still struggle to find qualified teachers to staff classrooms. If these enhanced provider rates stop on October 1, this will lead to a lack of access to care for CAPS students as we will not be able to offer higher pay rates to newly hired teachers. It will also force our company along with other childcare centers to make difficult business decisions about new materials for classrooms and other quality enhancements.

Every child deserves access to high quality early childhood education, but as we know quality costs money. That's why Sunshine House is asking DECAL to use the \$66 million in new federal funds to the Child Care Development Block Grant to making provider rate increases permanent. Adding additional CAPS slots only works if childcare centers have staff to serve those centers, and continuing the enhanced provider rates is crucial to our ability to do that.

Again, thank you for all the Department does for the early childhood education community. Sincerely, Rebecca Anderson

In a letter dated February 14, 2023 Mr. Asher Jacobs, a member of Milestone Education, wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, Thank you for allowing Milestone Education to comment on the additional funding Georgia will receive from the federal government through the CCDBG in 2023 for Georgia's CAPS program.

First, let us express our appreciation to the Department for the work they have done in supporting children, families, teachers and childcare center staff throughout the pandemic. We currently serve approximately 450-500 children through the CAPS program in our 10 locations across Georgia. We are relatively new, so we have only served CAPS children in Georgia since the rates were enhanced thanks to ARPA funding.

Milestone has been able to provide CAPS children a robust education that lives up to the Milestone standard

with these enhanced rates. However, we are aware that this funding is currently set to end on October 1, 2023.

We write to urge DECAL to dedicate the \$66 million in new CCDBG funding to Quality Rated CAPS provider payment rates as there is no way our CAPS families can pay a \$2800 difference between the previous rate of \$5600 and the current reimbursement rate of \$8400. As you know, every center serving CAPS children in Georgia is now deemed by DECAL to meet Quality Rated standards that exemplify a quality early childhood education. But quality costs money, and we need to find a sustainable source for the enhanced provider reimbursement rate in order to continue providing that quality care. If not, we are concerned that we will lose most of our CAPS children as they will be replaced with private pay families in those classrooms.

The staffing shortage in the early childhood education industry and the lack of access to childcare by private pay families is real. We have waiting lists at most of our schools. And the market demands that our trusted teachers be paid more than we paid for labor prior to the pandemic. If the state's funding is inadequate to support quality programming, we will need to give those openings to private pay parents who can afford to pay so that we can continue to pay the increased wages and benefits such as health insurance for our teachers.

For these reasons, we urge DECAL to dedicate the \$66 million in new CCDBG funds to permanently increase provider rates to support providing CAPS children with a quality education. Thank you, again, for all the Department has done and is doing to support our industry and the children and families we serve. Sincerely,
Asher Jacobs

In an undated letter, Ms. Michelle Smith Lank, the owner of Kids World Learning Center, wrote, Dear DECAL Board and Commissioner Jacobs, My name is Michelle Smith Lank, and I own Kids World Learning Center in Statesboro. My center is NAEYC accredited and has a 3 star Quality Rating, and I also serve on the Georgia's Children Cabinet with Commissioner Jacobs and First Lady Marty Kemp. I was the first center in the state of Georgia to be Quality Rated. Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments today.

Kids World Learning Center currently serves 70-80 CAPS scholarships for Bulloch County and surrounding area children annually. In light of the ACCESS program ending on October 1, I write to urge DECAL and Governor Kemp to designate the new \$66 million in federal funds for the CAPS subsidy program to permanently increasing reimbursement rates to providers. As a provider, I am very grateful to DECAL for recognizing that a high quality early childhood education costs more by increasing providers rates to \$8400 with ARPA funding. But despite the ARPA funding ending on October 1, our increased costs to provide high quality care will continue and only get greater with time.

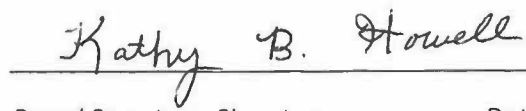
As you know in December, Georgia reduced eligibility rates for "very low income" families who receive CAPS back to 50% of the federal poverty rate and 50% of state median income. This means a single mom with two young children cannot earn more than 9,155 dollars to retain eligibility. There is no way our parents can afford to pay the copay once the \$2800 enhanced payment ends on October 1. Once those parents withdraw for financial reasons or if they are dismissed for non-payment of their copay, we will offer those spots to private pay families, of which we currently have a 6-8 month waitlist. We simply cannot afford to operate quality without full payment of all of our clients at capacity.

To close, I would like to thank DECAL for their commitment to helping providers such as myself survive the pandemic and continue with our quality care. I am in hopes of keeping the momentum going on provider reimbursement rates by allocating the \$66 million in new federal funds to make those increases permanent. Sincerely, Michelle Smith Lank

 5/18/23

Board Chair, Signature

Date

 5/18/23

Board Secretary, Signature

Date