

**Board of Early Care and Learning**  
**Meeting Summary**  
**May 18, 2023**

**Attendees**

**Board Members:**

Kristy Beam, Jen Bennecke, Melissa Boekhaus, Phil Davis (Chair), Susan Harper, Kathy Howell, Kristin Morrissey, Kimberly Neville, Luann Purcell

**Guests:**

Dana Driggers, Ife Finch Floyd, Hanah Goldberg, Lisa Hardt, Emily Hatchett, David Howell, George Jones, Beverly Johnson, Terri Johnson, Isabelle Keenum, Emily McCullough, Amber Sansbury, Samantha Williams, Jessica Woltjen

**DECAL Staff:**

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Elisabetta Kasfir, Susan Adams, Pam Stevens, Bentley Ponder, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Andres Bernal, Chondra Bolton, Jennifer Bridgeman, Vanessa Brown, Michelle Davis, Hayat Dergaga, Rebecca Ellis, Megan Fickes, Shayna Funke, Rhonda Gunn, Denise Jenson, Melinda Knowles, Laura Lucas, Christi Moore, Kamilah Natson-Melvin, Diana Myers, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O'Callaghan, Jill O'Meara, Valerie Perez, Harika Polisetty, Anne Rein, Michael Rodgers, April Rogers, Amy Roys, Barbara Sanders, Hannah Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Amanda Tarpley, Audreana Todd, Amanda Vanmeter, Mark Waits, Sheryl Wilhite, Liz Young

Board Chair Phil Davis called the meeting to order at 8:59 a.m.

The Board unanimously approved the proposed meeting agenda and the minutes from the February 26, 2023 meeting.

In light of her retirement from the Board, Mr. Davis invited Ms. Howell to share reflections. She reflected on her 30-year career in education, which included teaching 8th grade, first grade, kindergarten, and a pre-k program that preceded Georgia's Pre-K, and serving as an elementary school principal at a school with 1,700 students. She retired from teaching in 2000 and joined the DECAL Board in 2012. Ms. Howell praised Commissioner Jacobs' leadership and expressed appreciation for the work of DECAL employees. Mr. Davis presented Ms. Howell with a Board resolution honoring her service and a commemorative plaque.

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates on their recent activities. He noted that on his drive through a rural area from Savannah, he spotted a Quality Rated provider, an encouraging sign that rural areas are being served by the program. Ms. Beam reported reading *Grumpy Pants* to a class for Children's Mental Health week and receiving lots of information and advice from children about managing stress. Dr. Purcell said she enjoyed being on the DECAL Download podcast and thanked Ms. Howell for her service on the Board. Dr. Washell reported that she also read *Grumpy Pants* to a class in Gainesville and learned a lot from the students. Ms. Bennecke thanked Ms. Howell for her many years of service to the Board. Dr. Boekhaus reported that many parents are asking her about child care for the fall, and she refers them to [qualityrated.org](http://qualityrated.org). Ms. Brock thanked Ms. Howell for her service and praised the work of all Georgia's Pre-K teachers. Ms. Morrissey thanked Ms. Howell and reported on a weekly summer program that she supports at her local library. The program is focused on child literacy and includes support for the whole family.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy Jacobs wished Ms. Howell happiness in her retirement. She announced that the CAPS ACCESS program has been extended through September 2024. DECAL will continue paying the full cost of tuition through that date. Because of a federal regulation, families will resume paying their family fee in October of this year. Look Again Week, to stress the importance of never leaving a child

alone in a vehicle, will be observed for the 10th year during the week of May 22–26. The Commissioner invited Board members to help spread the word by changing their social media profile pictures to the “Look Again” icon for the week. She also reported on some of her recent speaking engagements.

- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud gave a quarterly update on DECAL’s budget and spending. As of March 31, 2023, the end of the third quarter, DECAL’s spending is on track with 26% of budgeted funds remaining. He noted that the amended budget for 2023 (AFY2023) includes an \$8 million increase for Georgia’s Pre-K from state lottery funds to cover an increase in the employer contribution to the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP) for lead teachers at public Pre-K providers. The SFY 2024 budget includes a \$43.9 million increase for DECAL to cover rising costs of various kinds. Mr. Ringsrud also gave brief updates on the legislative session that ended recently and the Happy Helpings Start-up grants to help experienced sponsors in expanding access to meals in underserved counties. Mr. Ringsrud also reported that DECAL received another clean audit.
- Deputy Commissioner Elisabetta Kasfir for Federal Programs reviewed DECAL’s strategic goals and highlighted the goal of expanding 2Gen approaches to better support children and families. She summarized the ongoing work in CAPS to support that goal and introduced CAPS Directors, Amy Roys, the new CAPS Development and Partnerships Director, and Amanda Vanmeter and Amanda Tarpley, both CAPS Family Support Directors. Ms. Tarpley gave a presentation about Find Help Georgia, a resource and referral portal for families. The portal is a collaboration among DECAL, Prevent Child Abuse Georgia, and the Technical College System of Georgia. It has been in operation just over a year and has had almost 17,000 unique visitors. Over the coming months CAPS employees will reach out to community-based organizations to encourage them to claim websites on the portal.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams gave the Board an overview of Children’s Mental Health Week, celebrated May 1–5. She thanked Board members Beam, Neville, and Washell for taking time to read to children during the week. A number of legislators and DECAL staff also read to children during the week. Ms. Adams also reported that 10 mental health professionals will be certified as Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants this month. They will work at three pilot sites in Atlanta, Macon, and Savannah.

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a break at 10:28 a.m. and resumed it at 10:41 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner Adams and Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder presented results of the longitudinal study that followed 1,169 children who participated in Georgia’s Pre-K during 2013–2014. The study, conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (FPG), followed the children through 4th grade and is now complete. It included standardized child assessments on a wide range of skills and observations of classroom quality that measure the quality of teacher-child interactions. Key analyses include within-grade achievements each year, longitudinal patterns of growth over time, comparisons to a population of students who did not attend any formal pre-k program, and the classroom quality observations. Within-grade gains for Georgia’s Pre-K students were strongest in pre-k and fourth grade, and Georgia’s Pre-K students had significantly better scores on all language and literacy outcomes in third and fourth grade compared to their peers who did not attend. Thus, a key strength of Georgia’s Pre-K program is building foundational language and literacy skills for reading.
- Deputy Commissioner Ponder informed the Board that 64% (2,888) of all eligible providers are now Quality Rated. A total of 375 providers received ratings in the first quarter of 2023. Of these, about 60% were 2-star ratings, a slightly higher percentage than expected. Quality Rated 10-year anniversary celebrations wrapped up with Quality Rated Week, April 24–28 sponsored by GEEARS. A cohort of 15

child care learning centers (CCLC) recently completed the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement program and received their endorsements. Participating family child care learning homes (FCCLH) will receive their endorsements soon. Dr. Ponder announced that a yearlong comprehensive review of the Quality Rated program is underway. The review is a key part of DECAL's continuous improvement strategy for Quality Rated.

- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services Pam Stevens reported on attendance at CCLCs based on the observations of CCS Consultants. The number of children is rising but is still 13% below the pre-pandemic average. The number of classroom staff observed at CCLCs is just 4% below the pre-pandemic average, indicating that child care businesses are still in the process of recovering. Infant and toddler classrooms have had the strongest recovery. Ms. Stevens also presented the specific language for proposed rule changes to be voted on by the Board at its August meeting and take effect October 1.

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch at 11:30 a.m. and committee meetings and called the meeting back to order at 12:56 p.m.

Mr. Davis opened the floor for public comments. No one was present to make a comment, and no comments were received via the chat function. Mr. Davis noted that a letter to the Commissioner and the Board about licensing rules had been received in advance and would become part of the meeting record. (See below.)

Mr. Davis called for committee reports.

- Ms. Howell reported from the Programs and Rules Committee. CAPS is conducting a student parent 2Gen pilot at three Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) campuses, Chattahoochee Technical College in Cobb County, Central Georgia Technical College in Bibb County and Wiregrass Georgia Technical College in Lowndes County. Student parents who are enrolled in credit and degree programs, workforce development programs, and adult education programs at those sites may participate. Onsite staff will provide coaching to make CAPS more accessible, improve service delivery, and help student parents identify and remove barriers to their academic success. School age grants are still available from CCS. School age programs can use the funds for age-appropriate equipment and supplies. These are especially helpful for school age programs that occupy space in early learning programs. Health and safety grants of up to \$40,000 are also available from CCS. Many compliance issues involve playground safety, and the grants may be used to improve playgrounds, transportation, and other health and safety issues. The five-week Summer Transition Program will begin almost as soon as school lets out. There will be 322 rising kindergarten classes and 71 rising pre-k classes. Each classroom will have a transition coach to help families navigate the transition. The Alliance Theater will offer an arts integration program to show teachers how to incorporate arts into their lesson plans. This summer there will be classrooms to target underserved populations, nine inclusion classrooms (five for rising pre-k students and four for rising kindergarteners) and six multi-language classes (four for rising pre-k students and two for rising kindergarteners). Nutrition Services will host a train-the-trainer Physical Activity Learning Session in June. Statewide training for early care and learning providers will begin in September. Nutrition Services applied for a \$200,000 USDA farm-to-school grant. If awarded, funds will be used to provide web-based training to Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) sponsors and offer grants to two CACFP child care centers. Nutrition Services is also planning events around the state to kick off Happy Helpings, the summer food service program. These include hydration stations, physical activity games, taste testing, and other activities.
- Ms. Morrissey reported from the Finance Committee, praising Mr. Ringsrud for the latest clean audit and noting that DECAL has had consistently clean audits throughout its history, which is phenomenal. The finance committee received updated financials as of April 30. As of that date, with 17% percent of

the year remaining, DECAL has 18% of funds remaining. Some additional funds remain for Nutrition to fund the start-up grants. Ms. Morrissey also reported that DECAL continues to distribute 93% of all funds received and retain only 7% for operations. The percentage for operations will likely increase to about 11% when all the federal COVID relief funds have been spent.

- Ms. Brock reported from the QIP Committee, saying that she is thankful for and inspired by all the work DECAL does. She reported on the Quality Rated restoration grants of \$5,000 for each eligible classroom and \$500 bonuses for eligible teachers. There are still 408 eligible providers that have not yet applied for their grants, she said, and it's important to get the word out about that. Ms. Brock reported that 24 children in the Early Head Start Partnership Program who were enrolled at a provider that DECAL terminated have been placed at other providers, and DECAL is recruiting new providers for the 2023–2024 school year. In 2021 DECAL commissioned an economic impact study of the early care and learning industry in Georgia, and the Research team is expecting the first report this fall. The Research team also asked the Urban Institute to study the needs of families who need child care during nontraditional hours. Ms. Brock reported that Community Outreach and Partnerships contracts with Quality Care for Children to operate the 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS call center to help families find high-quality child care and summer camp options. QCC, GEEARS, and Voices for Georgia's Children are helping DECAL to spread the word about this resource. This resource was especially valuable during the pandemic when families and members of the emergency services workforce needed help finding child care. Community Partnerships and Projects Manager, Jill O'Meara, reported on a symposium she attended about student parents' support needs. Georgia was highlighted as one of six states working on such initiatives, Ms. Brock said.

Mr. Davis called for a motion to proceed with an election for Board Secretary to replace Ms. Howell. Ms. Harper so moved, and Dr. Washell seconded. Mr. Davis called for nominations. Dr. Washell nominated Ms. Morrissey. Mr. Davis called for a motion to close nominations. Ms. Zisook so moved, and Ms. Beam seconded. The Board elected Ms. Morrissey unanimously.

Mr. Davis asked if there was any other business for the Board. There being none, he thanked all the Board members for their service, announced the date for the next meeting, August 24, 2023, and adjourned at 1:24 p.m.

As noted above, a letter addressed to the Commissioner and the Board from Katie Davidson and dated May 12, 2023 follows. Ms. Davidson wrote,

*Commissioner Jacobs and DECAL Board,*

*I write to you today to request your consideration in revising Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning policy, specifically The Childcare Learning Center Rules.*

*My child is currently enrolled at a childcare facility, in Bibb County. She is a healthy and thriving three-year old and has been in this facility since June 2021. Our family, residents of Knoxville (Crawford County), has been happy with the care given to her until this point in time. This is a relatively new childcare facility with policies and processes just being hammered out in the last year or so. I would like to bring one of their policies to your attention. I understand that any change in policy is a slow and tedious process, and that any change that may come from this will not help my family as we will have aged out of this childcare facility by the time any policy change might be enforced. However, having spoken with leadership at every level within my child's daycare and receiving no help, I have no choice but to raise this issue to you all with the hope that this can save some other family potential angst.*

*The facility's policy I want to bring to your attention is below (facility name omitted intentionally, and*

emphasis added)

XXXXXXX Parent Handbook 2022-2023, Potty Training Policy Amendment August 5, 2022 reads in part—

“Children in the Two and Three-year-old classrooms will adhere to the new potty training policy, effective immediately.

Children that remain accident free for a 2 week period may wear underwear at school. Pull-ups will be worn during nap time until the child remains dry for a consecutive 30 days. Parents are responsible to provide a weekly supply of pull-ups, at a minimum two sets of clothes, and underwear for their child. **If a child has five accidents in class, they will be asked to remain at home for 1 week to work on using the restroom independently.** Parents are encouraged to help their child transition out of diapers/pull-ups at this time.”

The DECAL policy which I request be amended is below—

The Childcare Learning Center Rules Page 21 of the Childcare Learning Center Rules 10-1- 22, 591-1-1-11, paragraph (2) states that “personnel shall not... punish toileting accidents”.

Cite as Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. R. 591-1-1-.11 Authority: O.C.G.A. § 20-1A-1 et seq. History. Original Rule entitled "Discipline" adopted. F. Dec. 23, 1997; eff. Mar. 1, 1998, as specified by the Agency. Amended: F. Dec. 4, 2015; eff. Dec. 24, 2015. Amended: F. May 26, 2017; eff. June 15, 2017.

Having spoken with the Deputy Commissioner for Childcare, Ms. Pam Stevens, I understand that the policy in question is permissible according Bright from the Start policies, and that a suspension for toileting accidents is not considered punishment. However, as I cannot imagine this policy is within the intent of the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, I would like to request that a revision be made to the Childcare Learning Center Rules so that this policy, or one like it, can no longer be levied against children and their families.

Below is some background information about my family’s specific experience with this policy and how it has affected our children and our family, for your consideration.

The childcare environment that we are in, specifically in Crawford County, is difficult. There are few Quality Rated providers, which leaves us having to drive 30 minutes away from home, and to Bibb County for childcare. Bibb County does not have many options for us either, and when first moving back from Overseas in 2021, there was one facility with an opening for my then one (1) and two (2) year old. So, this is where we went—and where we stayed. Along the way, we have looked at other facilities and options, but there are always waitlists—lots of waitlists. For example, for this Summer I was able to get my now four (4) year old in to childcare at one facility, but that facility does not have a space for my three (3) year old. So, we will have our children at two different childcare facilities in Bibb County this Summer, which is less than ideal.

The daycare policy that is in place does not benefit the child or the parents of said child, and in our experience has had the opposite of the intended impact. During a particularly difficult week in daycare, after a period in which she was out of school due to illness, our child had multiple accidents. During pickup, my usually energetic, happy child was pitiful and appeared stressed. She told me that her teachers were mad and sad with her and asked me not to be mad at her. She was dejected. I explained to her that accidents happen, and that we loved her and knew she was capable and that we would all keep trying. The next several days, she cried all the way to daycare—she didn’t want to go, and she was feeling that her teachers were upset with her. All this to say—the policy may have had great intentions, but the reality of it was that its implementation served to shame and stress our entire family, most notably our three (3) year old.

So, while it seems as though we are stuck in a bad situation as there are really no other good options for two full-time working parents, ultimately, we do not want our child to have to leave the facility. She is thriving,

*loves her friends and teachers, and is learning so much. We just want the peace of mind that comes with knowing that regardless of how many toilet accidents our three (3) year old has, she and we will be offered reliable daycare in a safe environment.*

*Thank you for your attention and for your continued support of the children of the State of Georgia.  
Respectfully, Katie Davidson.*