
Board of Early Care and Learning

Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting
Thursday, November 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, Debra Brock (Vice Chair), Phil Davis (Chair), Susan Harper, Kristin Morrissey, Kimberly Neville, Luann Purcell, Cristina Washell, Karla Zisook

Public Guests

Tracy Baynes, Lisa Belliston, Andrea Cline, Donna Corley, Carol Daniel, Katrina Dawson, Yasmee Diggs, Penelope Dixon, Annamaria Gibbs, Hanah Goldberg, Kristen Groover, Emily Hatchett, Terri Johnson, Isabelle Keenum, Jorge Key, Whitney Long, Lindsay McVicar, Angela Melton, Lauren Pollow, Ellen Reynolds, Amber Sansbury, Laura White, Jessica Woltjen

DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner
Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Supports
Dennis Brice, Chief Information Officer
Reg Griffin, Chief Communications Officer
Rian Ringsrud, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration
Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services
Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer
Chondra Bolton, CACDS Project Manager
Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director
Kim Davis, Assistant Director of QR Operations
Tyler Duggins, QIP Special Projects Coordinator
Carol Fordham, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator
Shayna Funke, Director, Research Partnerships and Business Supports
Moriham Hassan, Budget Analyst
Michelle Hughes, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator
Denise Jenson, Director, Quality Rated Operations
Dorisse Lester, CAPS Special Projects and Initiatives Manager
Meghan McNail, Director of Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations
Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor
Rob O'Callaghan, Director, Institutional Research and Data Quality
Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner
Valerie Perez, Research Analyst
Rhonda Parker, Director, CCS Field Operations
Laura Reid, Assistant Director, Professional Learning
Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor
April Rogers, Director, CCS Enforcement Operations
Barbara Sanders, Business Analyst

Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director
Angela Shelton, Professional Learning Specialist
Hannah Smith, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator, Central East
Sonja Steptoe, QIP Communications and Outreach Manager
Jill Taylor, Community Partnerships and Projects Manager
Mackenzie Weston, Intern
Sheryl Wilhite, Director of Human Resources
Sheila Williams, Director, CAPS Scholarship Administration
Liz Young, Government Relations Director

The November 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. Zisook 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 24 meeting. Ms. Harper moved to approve, and Dr. Washell seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

4. Inspiration

Ms. Harper read a poem that she wrote called, “My Fading Garden” about the changing seasons.

5. Board Member Updates

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. He shared news about a large Hyundai plant being built in his district. It is so large that the school system is expected to double its enrollment, and there is an opportunity he perceives for child care providers to grow or open new businesses. Ms. Harper expressed gratitude for the information about the SEEDS Helpline shared in the prior Board meeting. She passed it on to a Pre-K teacher with a very troubled child in her class and encouraged other Board members to check in with their constituents. Ms. Beam and Ms. Morrissey both attended the DECAL all staff meeting on November 8 and enjoyed the activities and the energy. Ms. Bennecke applauded DECAL for how well it is integrated into the Marietta school system and the community. Ms. Brock noted that the Pre-K school program at her school is going strong, and she asked everyone to remember less fortunate families who struggle during the holiday season.

6. DECAL Staff Reports

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency’s work.

a. Commissioner’s Update

Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs thanked Ms. Beam and Ms. Morrissey for participating in the all-staff meeting. She announced the Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year for 2023–2024, Charlotte Richards from Chattahoochee County Pre-K and Merodie Brown from New Odyssey for Children in Gwinnett county. The Commissioner gave an update on the pilot program to subsidize child care for early

educators. There are 24 CCLCs and six FCCLHs participating around the state. DECAL pays 75% of the tuition for teachers' children, and the provider decides how much of the remaining 25% teachers will pay. More than 600 providers applied to participate in the pilot program, and another 30 participants will be announced in the coming week. Commissioner Jacobs also gave the Board updates about Senate Bill 211, which created the Georgia Council on Literacy, and House Bill 538, which requires literacy training for early childhood teachers as part of their required annual training. CCS is working on the rule changes that will be needed to support annual literacy training, and the Professional Development team is working to make sure the right training is available for teachers. DECAL is staffing the birth-to-five workgroup of the Council on Literacy. The subcommittee has met twice, and DECAL has facilitated a consensus among workgroup members about three broad priorities that will serve as the framework for discussion over the next three years. The first is supporting the birth-to-five system. This includes reviewing and updating birth-to-five educator standards to make sure these are aligned with the science of reading and support the implementation of HB 538, and reviewing the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) to make sure these incorporate the most current research and align with recent updates to the K-12 Georgia Standards of Excellence. The second priority is supporting early childhood educators by exploring how to make their compensation comparable to K-12 compensation and increasing evidence-based professional development opportunities specific to literacy. The third priority is supporting families by increasing access to high-quality early care and learning, making literacy resources available to all families, and ensuring that learning environments and experiences are culturally and linguistically sensitive.

Mr. Davis thanked the Commissioner for her presentation.

b. Finance and Administration Update

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL's Q1 2024 expenses are on track with the budget. Although it appears that Child Care Services (CCS) has spent 50% of its allocated funds, the expenditures include federal relief funds which are being spent faster than the budget. Additional federal relief funds will be amended into the budget, and expenses will then be on track with the budget.

Ms. Morrissey asked whether the COVID funds have ended. Mr. Ringsrud responded that there are funds remaining. Some must be spent by September 30, 2023 and the remainder by September 30, 2024. DECAL will return to its regular base budget by the time of the November 2024 Board meeting.

Mr. Davis asked Mr. Ringsrud to confirm that expenses are conforming to Mr. Ringsrud's expectations. Mr. Ringsrud confirmed that expenses are on track. He also explained that when additional funds are amended into an agency's budget, a lot of documentation is required. Thus, there have been and will continue to be amendments as plans for spending the remaining funds become more detailed. Mr. Davis asked whether, when the federal relief funds are gone, DECAL will have the funds to provide the services it is expected to provide. Mr. Ringsrud said that he is monitoring the situation and that there is uncertainty about the economic forecast after the COVID funds are no longer circulating in the economy.

Ms. Morrissey asked what DECAL's pre-pandemic annual budget was. Mr. Ringsrud responded that it was approximately \$975 million.

Mr. Ringsrud gave a recap on Happy Helpings, the summer feeding program, and the Child & Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2023. Sponsors served

2,848,166 Happy Helpings meals at 997 sites in 100 counties (up from 85 counties in the prior year.) Sponsors and institutions served 64,883,038 CACFP meals at 3,296 sites in 157 counties during the year. Thirteen new and experienced sponsors received a total of \$105,000 in start-up grants to extend Happy Helpings meal service into previously unserved counties. They served 81,667 meals at 35 additional meal sites in 16 unique unserved counties. Grant monies were used primarily to purchase equipment and food and to pay salaries.

Mr. Davis thanked Mr. Ringsrud for his presentation.

c. Federal Programs Update

Director of CAPS Scholarship Administration Sheila Williams gave the Board an update about CAPS in place of Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir who was overseeing the CAPS payment system conversion, which had a successful launch. The new system, the Georgia Childcare and Administrative Payment System (GACAPS), brings payment processing in-house and completes the setup of the CAPS Provider Relations function. The ACCESS program continues, and families with CAPS scholarships resumed paying their family fees in October, as planned, Ms. Williams reported. Ms. Williams also gave the Board an update about a pilot program to streamline the CAPS application process and reduce processing time, which can take 30 days or more. Families who apply for scholarships are required to participate in an interview. Normally, CAPS staff schedule the interviews. In the pilot, which began on October 16, families notify CAPS when they have assembled all the required documentation and are ready to be interviewed. If the documentation is actually complete at the time of the interview, scholarships can be issued immediately. Application processing time for pilot participants has been reduced to an average of 15 days.

Dr. Washell asked how the CAPS team is contacting families about the pilot. Ms. Williams replied that the families chosen to participate in the pilot receive emails, robocalls, and SMS texts. Dr. Washell asked how families in general learn about the pilot. Ms. Williams responded that the size of the pilot is limited, and it is not being advertised. Its purpose is to test the concept that application processing time can be reduced if families contact CAPS when they have assembled their documentation.

Ms. Morrissey asked how families submit their documents. Ms. Williams replied that most upload their documents through Georgia Gateway. Applicants receive an email from CAPS with instructions about how to upload their documents to Georgia Gateway and how to confirm that their documents were uploaded successfully. Ms. Morrissey asked whether there are alternative ways to submit documents. Ms. Williams said they can fax their documents, mail them, email them to DECAL if necessary, or bring them to the office. Commissioner Jacobs added that one of the biggest issues in the CAPS application process is the interview, in part because there is a lot of phone tag. DECAL is not required to conduct interviews; we do the interviews, the Commissioner said, to provide extra support for families, such as helping them identify a priority group they may belong to or pointing them to other services they need. Ms. Morrissey asked how long an interview typically lasts. Ms. Williams replied that the average is about 28 minutes. Ms. Morrissey commented that the time is well spent.

Dr. Washell asked how families who don't speak English are accommodated in interviews. Ms. Williams replied that the interviewers use LanguageLine Solutions which has interpreters for 290 languages.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Williams for her presentation.

d. Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Update

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams reported on a grant program for technical colleges in the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) to support them in embedding entry level ECE credentials into adult education programs for non-traditional learners. Seven technical colleges have been awarded grants ranging from \$70,000 to \$120,000, and 52 students have so far enrolled. Students who complete their programs will receive a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and a GED. Ms. Adams gave the Board an overview of DECAL’s comprehensive Infant Toddler program, which is part of Georgia’s CCDF block grant state plan to improve quality in infant and toddler classrooms. There are 11 Infant Toddler Specialists who help teachers support children’s development through training and coaching and providing classroom resources. DECAL continues to award LITTLE grants to promote children’s language and literacy skills. Nine FCCLHs and 11 CCLCs will participate in LITTLE this year, and the program will support more than 400 children. Another initiative to improve infant and toddler care is the pilot CCR&R referral program. CCR&Rs provide technical assistance to child care providers going through the Quality Rated process. Infant and Toddler classrooms tend to score lower on the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) than classrooms for older children. In the referral program, CCR&R staff can refer individual classrooms to DECAL’s Infant Toddler Specialists for intensive coaching on the ERS “Big Three,” relationships, interactions, and schedules. Ms. Adams also reported on Georgia’s Pre-K enrollment and teacher retention. Pre-K classrooms are serving 70,855 children this year, compared to about 80,000 before the pandemic. There is an uptick in the waiting list, and the pilot of smaller class size continues. Lead teacher retention from last year to this year is 80%, and assistant teacher retention is 67%. Although the retention rate for assistant teachers is concerning, it is an improvement over the prior year when the rate was 60%.

Ms. Zisook congratulated Ms. Adams on all of the initiatives for infants and toddlers, saying she was proud of DECAL for the intentional plans in place for developing oral language skills, which are key to future literacy; and she hopes to see these plans scaled up and delivered around the state. Ms. Adams responded that the Birth-to-5 Committee of the Georgia Council on Literacy is having discussions about capacity and how to scale up.

Ms. Adams introduced Meghan McNail who was recently promoted to Director of Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations. Ms. McNail introduced Polly McKinney and Olivia Amato from Voices for Georgia’s Children who made a presentation about Georgia’s Pre-K Week, which was held October 2–6. More than 900 providers from 140 counties participated in Pre-K Week activities, and 109 state leaders made 142 visits to Pre-K sites. Two thirds of current legislators (156 out of 236) have participated in a Pre-K week while in office.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Adams, Ms. McNail, Ms. McKinney, and Ms. Amato for their presentations.

7. Break

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:32 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:48 a.m.

e. Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Update

Director of Quality Rated Operations Denise Jenson gave the Board an update about the Quality Rated program in place of Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder who was on medical leave. Ms. Jenson reported that of 4,520 providers eligible to participate in Quality Rated, 2,872 (64%) have achieved a rating. Ms. Jenson also gave a progress report on the

comprehensive review of Quality Rated. The team recently wrapped up data walks with stakeholders and is planning community forums for early next year to present the data gathered and share preliminary ideas about the future design of the program.

Ms. Harper asked whether the use of LENA vests is assessed or could be assessed during the Quality Rated process. Ms. Jenson responded that the specific use of LENA vests is not evaluated in the current system. However, there are language assessments embedded in the Environment Rating Scales (ERS), and these are the foundation for the “Big Three” that Deputy Commissioner Adams referred to in the CCR&R referral pilot. These language assessments are known as the “Big Three” have been demonstrated to be the most critical for child development outcomes, Ms. Jenson said. She added that the data received from the use of the LENA vests is being incorporated into the Quality Rated review. Ms. Harper commented that it is her hope that teaching language skills will become second nature to all infant and toddler teachers. Ms. Jenson added that as we analyze our data and incorporate current best practices in the field, language and literacy, engagement, and relationship building will be foundational to our new system. Ms. Harper commented that infant toddler teachers need to recognize that emotional and cognitive development are just as important as physical caregiving.

Ms. Zisook asked how the Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS) are incorporated in the Quality Rated process and how revisions to GELDS will be incorporated into the new Quality Rated system. Ms. Jenson responded that the QR revisions are timely because GELDS and other measures are being revised too, and the QR team will incorporate processes from across the agency to make sure there is a seamless experience for providers. Currently GELDS is incorporated into the portfolio assessment as part of intentional teaching practices, and teachers are required to incorporate GELDS into lesson planning and curriculum development.

Ms. Jenson introduced Director of Research Partnerships and Business Supports, Shayna Funke and Director of Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach, Jill Taylor who made a presentation about the EXPAND grant pilot program. The EXPAND grants are funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and were awarded to seven licensed child care providers and six non-profits and government entities received grants. Child care providers will use their grants to extend their operating hours. Non-profits and government entities will use the funds to develop collaboratives with other organizations, and the grants allow them some latitude about the solutions they implement. A planning period for grantees began October 1, and grantees are supported by a DECAL team of subject matter experts that includes representatives from Legal, Finance, CAPS, Research, CCS, and Nutrition who can answer grantees’ questions. Implementation will begin in January and run through December 2024. The UGA Carl Vinson Institute of Government will evaluate the pilot.

Ms. Morrissey asked about the feasibility of opening a facility to provide overnight care only. Such a facility might employ retired teachers, she said. Commissioner Jacobs responded that the purpose of the pilot grant program is for providers and other organizations to discover solutions for providing child care during nontraditional hours that thrive in their local communities. The solutions must meet licensing rules, she added, and DECAL is not in the business of opening child care centers.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Jenson, Ms. Funke, and Ms. Taylor for their presentations.

f. Child Care Services (CCS) Update

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services Pam Stevens introduced CCS Director of Field Operations Rhonda Parker who made a brief presentation about the Clean Water Georgia Kids

Campaign to remove lead from drinking water. The program is a partnership between the Georgia Department of Education and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International, funded by the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act (WIIN) of 2016. The program is free to all licensed child care providers. Providers can sign up for a pre-enrollment webinar at <https://bit.ly/3hW66kN> and enroll at www.cleanwaterforUSkids.org/georgia. Deputy Commissioner Stevens reported on changes in attendance and staffing at child care programs after the pandemic. Attendance numbers reflect observations by CCS consultants, not license capacity or enrollment. On average, there were only about 2 fewer children (or 3%) present in CCLCs as of June 30, 2023 compared to pre-pandemic attendance. Children are coming back, Ms. Stevens said, and that's good for the child care business. In FCCLHs there are 8% fewer children present, but because FCCLHs have a license capacity of no more than six, 8% represents less than one child. In the last quarter of FY 2023, which ended June 30, there were 1% more staff onsite than before the pandemic. The numbers do not show, Ms. Stevens cautioned, whether providers added new employees or existing employees worked more or longer shifts. The number of licensed providers in the state declined by 100 over the course of the pandemic, from 4,526 to 4,426 currently. The small decline is an indication that the stabilization funding succeeded, Ms. Stevens said. The number of CCLCs grew from 3,079 to 3,239, while the number of FCCLHs declined from 1,447 to 1,187. The number of FCCLHs was declining even before the pandemic, and the number of providers operating in the state is monitored monthly, Ms. Stevens said.

Ms. Morrissey asked whether it's likely that family child care providers have become uncomfortable having people in their home as a result of the pandemic. Ms. Stevens responded that we do not know the reasons for the decline. She added that being a family child care provider is difficult. Work days are at least 12 hours, and most family providers work without any support staff. There are also a number of family providers who have been in business for a long time and are approaching retirement. Some of these started businesses so that they could be home with their own children, and there are many more jobs now that allow working from home. She added that we need to continue to learn about evolving business models for child care. Ms. Morrissey asked whether a low unemployment rate drives demand for more child care. Ms. Stevens said yes and added that the pandemic made everyone aware of how important child care is, and it will be exciting to see what happens next. Ms. Harper commented that being a family provider requires dedicating a portion of one's home to the business. Ms. Stevens said that CCS consultants hear anecdotally that when families come to pick up their children at the end of the work day, they sit down and want to chat, making the provider's work day even longer.

Mr. Davis thanked Ms. Parker and Ms. Stevens for their presentations.

8. Lunch and Committee Meetings

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch at 11:39 a.m.

9. Public Comment Period

At 1:00 p.m. Mr. Davis called the meeting to order. He asked Ms. Obi if anyone had signed up to speak or submitted comments through the chat function. Ms. Obi responded that no had signed up or submitted comments.

10. Committee Reports

Mr. Davis called for committee reports. Dr. Washell reported from the Program and Rules committee. The CAPS team has hired a manager, Carolyn Morkeh, for the Student Parent pilot on TCSG campuses, which is designed to remove barriers that prevent parents who are students from completing academic study. Student

Parent consultants are being interviewed now. CAPS partnered with Prevent Child Abuse Georgia to convene the first Find Help Georgia Annual Forum. Commissioner Jacobs gave the keynote, and more than 100 people attended. The CAPS Family Support team has launched an assessment questionnaire that asks families about resources they need. Materials about the resources they need are immediately emailed to them. Since the assessment was launched in September, 191 families have completed it. The first round of CCS Health and Safety grants was completed September 30. The first round of funding went to FCCLHs and CCLCs with license capacity less than 100. Round 2, for CCLCs with a license capacity of 100 or more, began on October 1 and will run through March 2024. In the Pre-K/ISS division, training on the Pyramid Model continues via Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Participants who complete the training receive stipends, training credits, and resource kits. Nutrition Services celebrated Farm to ECE month in October, hosting a Farm to ECE Summit and a trip to a working farm. The Nutrition Services team also hosted a Physical Activity Learning Session (PALS) for ECE professionals and attended a strategy session for ending hunger among senior citizens. Ms. Morrissey reported that the Finance committee received an update on DECAL's expenses through October 31, and expenses are on track with the budget. DECAL continues to pass through 91% of the funds it receives, spending only 9% on operations. Ms. Brock reported that she was excited to hear about all of the initiatives going on in QIP. The Quality Rated team is now accepting requests from providers for voluntary reassessments. These had been suspended during the push to get all CAPS providers rated. Among other policy changes is a requirement that providers receive a minimum ERS score of 3.0 to be rated. This means that providers can no longer receive a 1-star rating based on their portfolios alone. Ms. Harper added that another policy update makes it easier for teachers to understand how to differentiate lesson plans based on children's stages of development. Ms. Brock noted that the CCLCs in the Early Head Start program do not have full enrollment at the moment, but recruitment is underway. The FCCLHs are at 100%. The Thriving Business Academy has had a successful launch. Fourteen large group trainings have been conducted so far, and attendance is encouraging. Eight small study groups are also underway with a total of 41 participants. Mr. Davis thanked the committees for their reports.

11. Adjournment

Mr. Davis asked whether there was any new business for the Board. Ms. Harper said she appreciates all the effort that goes into planning the Board meetings and asked Ms. Obi to remind Board members of the importance of attending in person. Mr. Davis announced the date for the next meeting, February 15, 2024, and adjourned at 1:24 p.m.

 2/15/24

Board Chair, Signature

Date

 2/15/24

Board Secretary, Signature

Date