

**Board of Early Care and Learning**  
**Meeting Summary**  
**November 16, 2023**

**Attendees**

**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

**Guests:**

Tracy Baynes, Lisa Belliston, Andrea Cline, Donna Corley, Carol Daniel, Katrina Dawson, Yasmeen 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:**

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Susan Adams, Pam Stevens, Dennis Brice, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Kim Davis, Tyler Duggins, Carol Fordham, Shayna Funke, Moriam Hassan, Michelle Hughes, Denise Jenson, Dorisse Lester, Meghan McNail, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O'Callaghan, Valerie Perez, Rhonda Parker, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, April Rogers, Barbara Sanders, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Hannah Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Jill Taylor, Mackenzie Weston, Sheryl Wilhite, Sheila Williams, Liz Young

Mr. Davis called the meeting to order at 9:01 a.m.

The Board unanimously approved the proposed agenda and the minutes from the August 24 meeting.

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

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.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs 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. She gave an update on the child care tuition assistance for early educators pilot program. 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. The pilot is very popular, and another 30 pilot participants will be announced in the coming week. Commissioner Jacobs also gave the Board an update about the Georgia Council on Literacy. DECAL is staffing the Birth-to-Five subcommittee, which has met twice, and DECAL has facilitated a consensus among workgroup members about topics to be addressed. These are supporting the Birth–5 system, supporting educators, and supporting families. The subcommittee has also set goals, one of which is promoting equity in pay with K–12 teachers for early childhood educators.

- 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. 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 in September 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.
- 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 reduce processing time for CAPS applications. The pilot began on October 16, and application processing time for pilot participants has been cut from an average of 30 days to an average of 15.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams announced 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 grants have been awarded and 52 students have so far enrolled. Students who complete their programs will receive a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and either a GED or TOEFL certificate, depending on their learning path. Ms. Adams gave the Board an overview of DECAL's comprehensive Infant Toddler program. There are 11 Infant Toddler Specialists who help teachers support children's development through training and coaching and providing classroom resources. DECAL continues to make 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. 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 classes 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. 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.

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:32 a.m. and resumed it at 10:48 a.m.

- 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 ill. 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 to present the data gathered and share ideas about the future design of the program.

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. Seven licensed child care providers and six non-profits and government entities received grants. A planning period for grantees began October 1, and implementation will begin in January. The UGA Carl Vinson Institute of Government will evaluate the pilot.

- 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 who can sign up for a pre-enrollment webinar at <https://bit.ly/3hW66kN> and enroll at [www.cleanwaterforUSkids.org/georgia](http://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 in June of 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. There were slightly more staff onsite after the pandemic. The pandemic had only a slight impact on the number of licensed providers in the state. Before the pandemic there were 4,526, and there are now 4,426. The number of providers operating in the state is monitored monthly, Ms. Stevens said.

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:39 a.m. and called the meeting back to order at 1:00 p.m. for the public comment period. Mr. Davis 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.

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.

At 1:24 p.m. Mr. Davis asked whether there was any new business for the Board. Ms. Harper asked Ms. Obi to remind Board members of the importance of attending the meetings in person. There being no other new business for the Board, Mr. Davis reminded members of the next meeting, February 15, 2024, and adjourned.