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## **Board of Early Care and Learning**

**Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting**  
Thursday, February 15, 2024 — 9:00 a.m.  
Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning  
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE – East Tower  
Oak Conference Room  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334  
Amy M. Jacobs, Commissioner

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### **Meeting Minutes**

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#### Board Members

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

#### Public Guests

Merodie Brown, Jennifer Carpenter, Hanah Goldberg, Robert Hill, Randall Hines, Sue Holm, Isabelle Keenum, Mary Lyons, Ana Magana, Julie Newman, Wande Okunoren-Meadows, Jennifer Paschal, Althea Penn, Jaime Rechkemmer, Kwanaine Rice, Charlotte Richards, Mona Roberts, Stephanie Searce, Michelle Smith Lank, Keisha Wynn

#### 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  
Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs  
Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner  
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  
Farouk Baksh, Senior Director of Information Technology  
Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director  
Kim Davis, Assistant Director of QR Operations  
Glenda Davis-Canteen, Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator, NW  
Tyler Duggins, QIP Special Projects Coordinator  
Bart Ellington, Budget Manager  
Moriham Hassan, Budget Analyst  
Abraham Hussain, Telecom Specialist  
Denise Jenson, Director, Quality Rated Operations  
Melinda Knowles, CAPS Development and Partnerships Project Manager  
Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, QIP Contracts Coordinator  
Kayla Little, Intern  
Laura Lucas, Director, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health  
Meghan McNail, Director of Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations  
Christi Moore, Professional Learning Director  
Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor

Rob O’Callaghan, Director, Institutional Research and Data Quality  
Stephen Owusu-Ansah, IT Systems Administrator  
Valerie Perez, Research Analyst  
Devon Porter, Summer Transition Program and Outreach Manager  
Laura Reid, Assistant Director, Professional Learning  
Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor  
Melissa Risenhoover, Administrative Assistant, Quality Rated Operations  
Mike Rodgers, Director, Finance  
April Rogers, Director, CCS Enforcement Operations  
Barbara Sanders, Business Analyst  
Jackie Shivers, Director, Pre-K Quality Support  
Sonja Steptoe, QIP Communications and Outreach Manager  
Jill Taylor, Director, Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach  
Veronica Thomas, Director, Practice and Support Services  
Laura Wagner, Executive Director, Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning  
Mark Waits, Senior Writer  
Sheryl Wilhite, Director of Human Resources  
Liz Young, Government Relations Director

The February 15, 2024, meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held in the Oak Conference room and livestreamed.

#### **1. Call to Order**

At 9:03 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. Bennecke moved to accept, and Dr. Purcell seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Mr. Davis asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the November 16, 2023, meeting. Ms. Morrissey moved to approve, and Ms. Hill seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

#### **4. Inspiration**

Ms. Morrissey recounted some of the activities and resources highlighted for Inclusive Early Learning Week taking place this week. Ms. Morrissey quoted Inclusion and Behavioral Regional Supervisor, Peggy Sutton who defined *inclusivity* on last week’s *DECAL Download* in this way, “When we talk about inclusion in classrooms, or education, it’s where we’re involving all children, with and without disabilities, where we’re making adaptations and modifications so that every child can participate and engage in ways that all children can. . . we want to involve all children and teach them to accept others for who they are.” Ms. Morrissey shared several inspiring quotations about how children learn tolerance, and she read a well-known poem called, “Children Learn What They Live” by Dorothy Law Nolte.

#### **5. Board Member Updates**

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. He shared that he had recently attended an event at Georgia College and State University and toured the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy and was very inspired by their leading-edge research. Ms. Harper

gave accolades to DECAL staff who helped her advise a constituent whose child care business had been cited for playground violations. Ms. Beam reported that she is currently traveling around the state to work with schools in the Technical College System of Georgia, and she sees DECAL's presence everywhere and feels proud to be a part of the organization. Dr. Purcell said she was sorry she had to miss reading to a class for Inclusive Early Learning Week because her grandson was in the hospital. She plans to read next week. She also shared a story about her young granddaughter befriending an elderly man who had had a stroke. Her granddaughter was sensitive to the man's social isolation, Dr. Purcell feels, because of the child's experience with her disabled younger brother. Ms. Hill shared that she will be attending a talent show and fundraiser for Extra Special People, an organization that supports the inclusion of disabled children and adults in transformative experiences. Dr. Washell said that she is inspired by all the activities about inclusivity because it is important every day. Ms. Morrissey mentioned books about autism and said she heard an inspiring talk by 14-year-old Payton Biggers who wrote, *Autism Gives Me Superpowers!*

## **6. Recognition of Dr. Purcell**

Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs and Board Chair Phil Davis honored Dr. Luann L. Purcell on the occasion of her retirement from the Board. Mr. Davis praised her as the force behind much of the work that appears on DECAL's website. Dr. Purcell is the longest-serving member of the Board and the last charter member, having been appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue in 2006. The Commissioner thanked Dr. Purcell for her many contributions to the work DECAL has done, saying that all 700 DECAL employees have felt supported by her. The Commissioner read a commendation from Governor Kemp. Dr. Purcell made brief remarks and received a standing ovation.

## **7. DECAL Staff Reports**

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency's work.

### **a. Commissioner's Update**

Commissioner Jacobs reported on the work of the House Working Group on Early Childhood Education established in 2023 by Speaker Jon Burns to support Georgia's Pre-K. Led by Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones, the group did a remarkable job of collecting feedback from everyone, including DECAL, school superintendents from across the state, private Pre-K providers, and advocates, the Commissioner said. The group made six recommendations. The first is to restore class size to 20. Pre-K class size has been 22 students since budget cuts were required in 2012, and the smaller class size is the only cutback from that era that has not been restored. The proposal is included in the Governor's budget recommendation, the Commissioner says, and she feels confident that Pre-K will move to 20 students next school year. The change will be phased in over four years because 382 new classrooms must be added. Georgia's Pre-K will not serve fewer students as a result of having smaller classes, the Commissioner emphasized. The hope is to serve more students. The second recommendation is to increase salaries for assistant teachers to \$25,741 to improve retention (currently at 65%) and align Pre-K assistant teacher salaries with K-12 paraprofessionals. The third recommendation is to provide parity between Pre-K and K-12 teacher salaries. Progress has been made in this area in recent years, and the recommendation calls for resolving small discrepancies in the salary schedule and compensation for training and experience. The fourth recommendation calls for increasing start-up grants from \$8,000 per classroom (set in 2004) to \$30,000 and provide \$15,000 for a refresh every five years, and allocate \$80.78 per student for transportation to match what the Department of Education provides for K-12 students. Recommendations five and six will help expand program capacity by making it easier to open new classrooms. Pre-K enrollment is currently excluded from the capital outlay formula public schools must

follow for new classroom construction. There are two bills in the Legislature now, HB 941 and SB 360, that will change the capital outlay formula to include Pre-K enrollment and allow for the construction of new Pre-K classrooms. Recommendation six calls for providing equivalent lease payment subsidies for private Pre-K programs, \$14,473 per year for metro and \$10,879 for non-metro. DECAL is in full support of all the recommendations, which will require an additional \$100 million in funding, the Commissioner said.

Mr. Davis noted that the recommendations “have a lot of moving parts” and asked whether a central coordination scheme is forthcoming. The Commissioner responded that she believes the Governor will have to increase the lottery revenue estimate to fund the recommendations. When that happens DECAL will begin planning for the changes. Dr. Purcell asked whether Speaker Jones studied the trajectory of lottery funds going to Pre-K compared to K–12. The Commissioner said the working group report does include that information. Ms. Harper noted that in Dougherty County the public school buses do not pick-up Pre-K students and asked whether that is a decision made by the school systems. The Commissioner confirmed that that decision is made by the school system. The Commissioner added that additional funding for Pre-K students would help incent school systems to include Pre-K students in their transportation plans. Mr. Davis asked whether the difference in lease payment subsidies for metro vs. rural providers has been well-researched and is valid. The Commissioner responded that the amounts are current and based on true operating costs.

The Commissioner introduced the Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year for 2023–2024, Merodie Brown from New Odyssey for Children in Gwinnet County and Charlotte Richards from Chattahoochee County Pre-K. Each received a resolution honoring her achievements from Board Chair Davis and made a brief presentation.

#### **b. Finance and Administration Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL’s Q2 2024 expenses are on track with the budget. Although it appears that Child Care Services (CCS) has spent 65% of its allocated funds, the expenditures include federal relief funds that had to be encumbered in advance. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor’s amended budget recommendation for FY 2024 which includes an increase of \$17 million to DECAL’s budget. The additional funds will cover \$1,000 salary supplements paid to full-time, benefit-eligible DECAL employees last December; \$100,000 for start-up grants for Happy Helpings sponsors to establish new summer meal sites; \$1,000 salary supplements for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers; almost \$100,000 for new IT equipment for Pre-K staff; \$1.4 million for health care contributions for Pre-K lead teachers; and \$6.1 million to fund the expansion of the Summer Transition Program. The Governor’s proposed budget for SFY 2025 includes an increase of \$51 million to DECAL’s budget. This increase will cover a 4% cost of living salary increase for employees. It will also raise the CAPS provider reimbursement to the 50th percentile of market rates for child care providers in accordance with federal regulations, fund the completion of the IT equipment refresh for Pre-K staff and a new Pre-K provider management system, continue funding for the Summer Transition Program expansion, increase Pre-K lead and assistant teacher salaries by \$2,500, increase the Pre-K formula by \$1.3 million to recognize the training and experience of Pre-K teachers, provide \$10.9 million for the first year of 20-student Pre-K classrooms, and \$2.5 million for health insurance costs for Pre-K lead teachers.

#### **c. Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams shared highlights from Inclusive Early Learning Week (IELW), celebrating its 10th year in 2024. The idea for IELW came from the Inclusion and Behavior Support staff. Its goals are to increase awareness and advocacy around inclusion and supporting children with disabilities and their families, promote inclusive practices in early childhood programs, and expand access for children and families to inclusive early learning environments. New activities this year included a video featuring Payton Biggers reading her book, *Autism Gives Me Superpowers!* and a video interview with Kevin Simmons, a speech and language pathologist who is also a sensory-friendly barber. Social media engagement about IELW grew dramatically from last year to this year Ms. Adams said. Last year there were 184 mentions on social media, and this year there were more than 1,800. Last year there were 75 shares of DECAL's posts. This year there were 550 by mid-week. Ms. Adams also gave the Board an update about the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation pilot which pairs DECAL Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialists, who support birth to 5 teachers, with contracted master's level mental health professionals in three locations around the state. The mental health consultants are training teachers, supporting teachers in their mental health, and working with child care programs to identify families who may need mental health services. Ms. Adams announced that Children's Mental Health Week is May 6–10, and she reviewed the application deadlines for Pre-K programs and Pre-K Teacher of the Year Nominations. The application window for the Summer Transition Program is to be determined based on what happens with the budget.

Mr. Davis asked about the process of expanding the number of classrooms and whether the Pre-K team approaches existing providers first. Ms. Adams said that a process for funding decisions has been established over time. Continuation classrooms, those that are already funded and meeting DECAL's standards, get priority, then programs that want to expand, then applications for new classrooms. When deciding where and how to expand, Ms. Adams' team prioritizes inclusion classrooms and studies the needs of communities, not just at the county level, but by zip code or city. Pre-K specialists visit the communities they serve, and the team analyzes the data collected from providers, such as capacity, size of waiting lists, etc. The needs of families are also taken into consideration. For example, if transportation is an issue for many families, the team looks at programs that can provide transportation. If there are public providers but no private providers, the team will look for private providers to offer families more choices.

#### **d. Federal Programs Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir reviewed the details of the ACCESS program which began in May 2021 and will continue through September of 2024. Families resumed paying the family fee in October 2023. CAPS providers received a 4.3% rate increase as of January 29, 2024.

Mr. Davis asked whether there had been complaints about resuming the family fee. Ms. Kasfir said when the change was announced, some providers did raise the concern that families could not afford the family fee, but her team explained that the funding used to pay the family fee had to be spent by September 2023, and DECAL does not have funding that would allow us to continue paying the family fee. People accepted this fact, Ms. Kasfir said.

Ms. Kasfir reported on the launch of the new CAPS provider relations function and the in-house provider payment management system, called GACAPS. The CAPS team conducted extensive outreach and offered training for providers both before and after the system conversion. There have been some

technical issues with the new system, Ms. Kasfir said, and learning the new system proved to be a hurdle for some providers. DECAL has made more than 29,000 payments to 2,860 providers since the November 2023 conversion, and payments have been made every week as usual. Ms. Kasfir also reported that staff for the CAPS 2Gen student parent pilot are being recruited and trained now. Two consultants will serve on each of three technical college campuses, and they will process CAPS applications in real time with the goal of removing child care as a barrier to parents achieving their educational goals. The pilot will begin in the spring and run at least 18 months and up to two years in order to discover what impact the scholarships have on students' academic success. Child Trends will conduct an evaluation at the pilot's conclusion.

## **8. Break**

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:40 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:53 a.m.

### **e. Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder reported that of the 4,488 providers eligible to participate in Quality Rated, 2,844 (63%) have achieved a rating. Another 19% are somewhere in the process. Last year the QR team issued 1,652 ratings. The distribution of ratings indicates that the system is a valid measure of quality, Dr. Ponder said. He also pointed out that 90% of the providers in probationary status—those who had been through the process before and failed to achieve a rating—became rated on their second attempt, and 36% of them achieved a 2-star rating. Two stakeholder convenings are planned for March at which DECAL will present an overview of the results of the Quality Rated comprehensive review and proposed revisions to the system. There will be an opportunity for participants to provide feedback, and all stakeholders will have an opportunity to provide feedback online before the QR team begins the planned system redesign. Dr. Ponder also announced that DECAL will not apply for another five-year Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grant. Instead, DECAL will support Quality Care for Children in applying for the grant. The current grant ends June 30, 2024. He introduced Stephanie Searce, Director of Workforce Development for the Georgia Association of Manufacturers. The Georgia Association of Manufacturers received an EXPAND grant, and Ms. Searce made a brief presentation about how the grant will support the Association's strategy for addressing a shortage of manufacturing workers. In a 2023 survey of Association members, 61% of participants ranked child care as a barrier to hiring.

Ms. Morrissey asked whether there is a single factor that makes child care a barrier or a mixture of factors. Ms. Searce said there are many variables and that part of her responsibility is to share information about resources such as child care tax credits with Association members. Ms. Harper commented that there is a large Proctor & Gamble plant in her district that had an onsite child care facility. The company closed the child care facility long before the pandemic, and, although she didn't know why it had been closed, she thinks that onsite child care would help manufacturers find workers. Ms. Searce said that the child care had likely been closed because of liability issues. The plant runs 24X7, Ms. Harper said, and families need overnight care. Ms. Searce agreed that onsite child care is highly beneficial and added that many of the Association's members are small- to medium-sized manufacturers who can't take on the liability. Dr. Ponder added that understanding what families really need is important to designing non-traditional solutions, and one purpose of the grants is to discover solutions that meet families' real needs. Ms. Harper asked Ms. Kasfir whether CAPS pays a different rate for non-traditional operating hours. Ms. Kasfir said that CAPS pays a differential rate for night care.

Ms. Harper said that she hopes the grants will push manufacturers to recognize that offering child care is a great benefit for employees.

**f. Child Care Services (CCS) Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens reported on the Health and Safety grants funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and offered to all child care learning centers and family child care learning homes. Grants ranged from \$5,000 to \$40,000 based on license capacity and were targeted for durable equipment to help facilities meet DECAL's health and safety standards. One hope that CCS had for the grant program, Ms. Stevens said, was to help facilities that have struggled to meet licensing requirements for outdoor play equipment improve the safety of their outdoor areas. Of the almost \$33 million in funds awarded to date, more than \$15 million went to playgrounds for items such as rubber mulch, poured-in-place surfacing, playground equipment, storage, shade structures, and fencing. Grant funds were also used for indoor equipment such as refrigerators, stoves, toilets, sinks, flooring, storage, cameras, diapering tables, and bedding. CCS also identified a subset of 213 programs that had compliance issues for several years running and offered technical assistance in exchange for additional grant funds. Of these, 158 accepted technical assistance. Ms. Stevens also introduced licensing rule changes. The changes to be proposed this year apply only to exempt programs. In soliciting feedback from families and providers, Ms. Stevens' team found that there is confusion about the rules for exemptions. The proposed changes will consolidate the number of exempt categories from 14 to seven. Two categories of exempt programs are allowed to receive CAPS scholarships, and their application process will not change. Exempt programs that do not receive CAPS, however, will be allowed to self-register rather than apply to CCS.

**9. Lunch and Committee Meetings**

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch at 11:38 a.m.

**10. Public Comment Period**

At 1:01 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.

**11. Committee Reports**

Mr. Davis called for committee reports. Ms. Beam reported from the Program committee. The CAPS team will soon be publishing a library of short videos about how to navigate the program. CCS has formed a partnership with the YMCA to ensure that play equipment designed for older children is safe for younger children. The CCS team is also preparing for a federal monitoring visit the week of April 8–12. Nutrition Services will visit a child care program in Cumming during national Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) week March 10–16, and Ms. Morrissey will participate. Nutrition Services is also working to extend Happy Helpings into previously unserved counties this summer. Pre-K and Instructional Supports has implemented a secure new platform for professional development that allows for individualized learning paths. Ms. Harper commented that she uses Facebook to promote the DECAL website when people have asked her for help finding child care. Many people are unaware of the many resources on the website, she said. Ms. Harper also asked about differences in rules for playground equipment used in K–5 schools vs. Pre-K programs. Ms. Stevens said that all rules about playground equipment are derived from *Caring for Our Children*, but standards for K–5 may be less stringent. After school programs licensed by DECAL must adhere to DECAL's rules, she said, and the partnership with the YMCA will help promote the use of

equipment that everyone can play on. Ms. Morrissey reported from the Finance committee that DECAL's expenses are still on track with the budget as of January 31, and DECAL continues to operate with 91% efficiency. Ms. Morrissey also reported that DECAL received its 20th annual audit with no findings, and the Board applauded. Ms. Hill reported from the QIP committee, which heard a report on the Thriving Child Care Business Academy. Since the Academy launched in September 2023, 371 providers have attended large group webinars, 263 have participated in small study groups, and 63 have requested individual coaching sessions. The committee also heard reports about the EXPAND grantees, the Quality Rated review, and the Early Head Start transition.

## 12. Adjournment

Mr. Davis thanked DECAL's IT team for providing a much-improved audio and video experience. He thanked Dr. Purcell again for her 18 years of service. He reminded members of the next meeting, May 16, 2024, and adjourned at 1:15 p.m.



Board Chair, Signature

Date

 5/16/24

Board Secretary, Signature

Date