

**Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
August 22, 2024**

Attendees

Board Members:

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

Guests:

Laura Anglea, Lisa Belliston, Claudia Benjamin, Kristin Bernhard, Tabitha Brown, Consuella Carter, Erin Clark, Kaneshia Clemons, Carolyn Colon, Lauren Davis, Yasmine Diggs, Antoinette Elliott, Ife Finch Floyd, Sam Fricks, Frances Gillison, Hanah Goldberg, Kim Gruber, Keisha Harrison, Robert Hill, Jen Hughes, Isabelle Keenum, Garrett Knight, Mary Lyons, Ana Magana, Niya Marilla, Lindsay McVicar, Danielle Millman, Julia Newman, Laura Newman, Mandy Palmer, Charlotte Pelz, Tranae Powell, Kristina Radlein, Yvonne Reeves, Bernard Reynolds, Ellen Reynolds, Devanie Schay, Angela Sims, Kiki Singletary-Williams, Shannon Smith-SengStack, Michelle Smith-Lank, Sheila Thompson, Balaram Tidhi, Sasha Vinson, Karen Vogtner, Paul Walker, Eleanor Walsh, Noni Walton, Jessica Woltjen, Keisha Wynn

DECAL Staff:

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Susan Adams, Elisabetta Kasfir, Bentley Ponder, Pam Stevens, Dennis Brice, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Farouk Baksh, Sarah Benton, Lari Lyn Beyer, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Malissa Champion, Stephanie Clark, Katie Davis, Rosalyn Elder, Woody Dover, Tyler Duggins, Iko Ezell-Blackmon, Shayna Funke, Janice Harris, Moriam Hassan, Melissa Herndon, Judy Holdaway, Beth Houtz, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, Yhanique Jenkins, Melissa Johns, Melinda Knowles, Nilia Lalin, Kayla Little, Laura Lucas, Marcy Maioli, Christi Moore, Abby Mozo, Miranda Murphy, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O'Callaghan, Sarah Mia Obiwo, Rhonda Parker, Valerie Perez, Chrissy Powell, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Ashley Rich, Melissa Risenhoover, Mike Rodgers, April Rogers, Brittany Sams, Barbara Sanders, Allison Setterlind, Hannah Smith, Nate Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Jill Taylor, Briana Thomas, Tamra Thomas, Veronica Thomas, Adi Valdez-Rodriguez, Laura Wagner, Kharla Walker, Brianne Walters, Vicki Watts, Lekeisha Weems, Sheryl Wilhite, Laurail Williams, Liz Young

Mr. Davis called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

The Board unanimously approved the proposed meeting agenda and the minutes from the May 16 meeting.

For inspiration Ms. Harper paraphrased a book called, *Juggling Elephants*, about managing one's life the way a ringmaster manages a three-ring circus.

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. Ms. Harper reported that she recently met the head of a children's school and shared information the GELDS and other resources on the DECAL website. Mr. Davis reported that on a trip to Greece he noticed many child care centers that operate a lot like child care centers in this country, and he was pleased to see that. Dr. Zisook shared that there was excitement at her school for the first day of school, with children starting their first school experience in Georgia's Pre-K. Ms. Morrissey reported studying data about the availability of Pre-K classes in different areas of the state.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Jacobs reported on two initiatives of the Georgia Legislature that DECAL is supporting. The Senate Study Committee on Access to Affordable Childcare (SR471) will investigate the challenges many Georgians face when seeking affordable child care options for both preschool and school-aged

children. Chaired by Senator Brian Strickland, the committee will hold its first meeting on August 28 and issue a report by December 1. DECAL is also supporting a Special Examination of the CAPS Program requested by the Senate Appropriations Committee and conducted by the Department of Audits and Accounts (DOAA). The Georgia State University Fiscal Research Center will assist the DOAA in an economic analysis with the goal of understanding whether expanding the number of children served by CAPS or increasing the subsidy rates has a greater impact on families.

- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that as of June 30, 2024, the end of SFY 2024 DECAL spent all of the funds allocated for the fiscal year with the exception of \$4.2 million in state lottery funds allocated to the Pre-K program. DECAL is in talks with the Office of Management and the Budget and may be allowed to reserve those funds for other uses. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the proposed amended SFY2025 budget, which is the same as the current budget. The proposed budget for SFY 2026 includes a \$20 million increase for Pre-K. Mr. Ringsrud also gave an update on the summer food service program Happy Helpings. As of the end of June, the program had served 2,644,424 meals at 1,025 sites in 103 counties. These numbers are not final because sponsors are still submitting invoices for reimbursement. The Georgia Legislature awarded DECAL \$100,000 for start-up grants to increase access to meals in areas with high childhood food insecurity. DECAL awarded grants to 12 new and experienced sponsors who expanded meal services to 14 previously unserved counties. Nutrition Services partnered with Happy Helpings to host several events promoting the importance of combining good nutrition with physical activity.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams gave the Board an update on the five-week Summer Transition Program, highlighting the growth in the number of children served over the past 10 years. The agency used federal relief funds to expand the size of the program, and Ms. Adams noted that the Georgia Legislature appropriated funds to continue at the same size when federal funds ran out. She reviewed the improvements to Georgia's Pre-K program that are being funded by additional lottery funds to support increased access to Pre-K and sustaining quality. For the current school year 128 Pre-K classes have been added. Ms. Adams introduced Director of Workforce Supports and Learning Christi Moore who made a presentation to the Board about the Workforce Task Force. The task force was convened in 2023 to research and make recommendations about supporting the early childhood education workforce. The task force focused on the state registry, career pathways and credentialing, and reporting data about the workforce. It was composed of teachers, directors, trainers, post-secondary education specialists, and advocates. The task force made six recommendations that Dr. Moore believes will strengthen the early care and learning workforce.
- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir introduced a series of presentations about changes to CAPS policies and new supports for Quality Rated CAPS providers. The changes are required for two reasons Ms. Kasfir explained. First, federal COVID-19 relief funds have been used to fund the expansion of the CAPS program, and the last of these funds must be spent by September 29. Second, in March the federal Office of Child Care in the Administration for Children and Families issued new rules for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) that states must adopt. States are also required to submit new CCDF plans every three years that show how the state will meet CCDF guidelines. DECAL recently completed a new CCDF plan for Georgia that goes into effect September 30. Because the federal relief funds have been exhausted, the agency must reduce the number of children receiving CAPS scholarships to 50,000, the number the program is designed to serve. CAPS implemented some changes to eligibility requirements on July 1 to facilitate this reduction. Ms. Kasfir introduced Enterprise Project Management Director Woody Dover who explained the upcoming changes to the CAPS rates. Earlier this year DECAL conducted a market rate evaluation and cost study to understand the price and cost of child care to determine the market rate for child care in each of three

geographic zones, Mr. Dover reported. For most types of care DECAL is increasing the CAPS Rate to the 60th percentile. The increase in the rate for full-time care is the largest non-pandemic increase in CAPS history, and it is expected to reduce the financial impact on families who receive scholarships. Rates for before and after school care will increase by 5%. Mr. Dover gave an example comparing rates for all three zones in 2019 (the last year before federal relief funds were used to support providers) to the rates that go into effect September 30. The example shows that reimbursement to providers will increase significantly in all three zones.

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:30 a.m. and resumed it at 10:40 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder made a presentation about the Quality Rated supports for providers and the workforce support payments. The new quality incentive payments will replace the tiered reimbursements that used to be included in weekly CAPS reimbursements. The quality incentive payments will be paid quarterly to 2- and 3-star programs. Although 1-star providers will no longer receive quality payments, most will receive higher reimbursements because of the increased CAPS rates. The Quality Rated team will also offer support to all 1-star providers in 2025 to help them achieve higher ratings. Beginning in 2025 DECAL will make \$500 annual workforce support payments to center directors and assistant directors, family home administrators and their aides or assistants, classroom lead and assistant teachers, and classroom floaters who work for any Quality Rated provider regardless of the provider's CAPS participation. The increased CAPS rates, quality incentive payments, and workforce bonuses together equate to a 34% increase in CAPS funding, the largest in CAPS history. Dr. Ponder introduced Communications and Outreach Manager Sonja Steptoe who gave the Board an update about the Thriving Child Care Business Academy which was launched in September 2023. The Academy's small study groups have been especially popular. Originally 50 were planned for the first year, but 155 have been delivered. Ms. Steptoe announced that six new study group tracks that will begin in October, one of which will support providers in navigating the CAPS/QR policy changes. Self-study guides on 32 additional topics will also go online in October.
- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens gave Board members an update on the child care business in Georgia. Since 2018 the number of family child care learning homes (FCCLH) has decreased steadily, while the number of child care learning centers (CCLC) has increased. Despite the decrease in FCCLH, total licensed capacity has increased by 7% since 2018. The average number of children present at both CCLC and FCCLH has been gradually recovering and is currently 3% below the pre-pandemic annual average. Infants and toddlers have surpassed pre-pandemic numbers and account for the greatest recovery. The average number of classroom staff present has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, but Ms. Stevens cautioned that programs still struggle to find qualified lead teachers. Ms. Stevens also presented the specific rule change concerning exempt programs that was discussed with the Board in February and May. She noted that several Montessori providers who had questions about whether the changes affected their programs have all had their questions answered, and no previously exempt programs will be required to obtain a license as a result of the proposed rule change.

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:15 a.m. and called the meeting back to order at 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Davis turned the meeting over to Legal Services Supervisor Gregory Brown who called the public hearing on proposed rule change to order. He noted that several emails or letters addressed to the Commissioner about the proposed rule change had been received and shared with the Board. (See below.) Mr. Brown asked Board Liaison Quandra Obi whether anyone had signed up to comment about the proposed rule changes. Ms. Obi called on Michelle Smith-Lank, the owner of KidsWorld in Statesboro and a past president of the Georgia Child

Care Association. Ms. Smith-Lank said, *Good afternoon, I'm Michelle Smith-Lank. I am the owner and director of Kids World Learning Center in Statesboro, Georgia. Our program was the first quality-rated center in the state of Georgia. We are a Quality Rated inclusion program. We are a language and literacy Governor endorsed program We are a 3-star Quality Rated and NAEYC accredited program And I am also on the Governor's Children's Cabinet as former president of Georgia Child Care Association and current board member.*

I am here representing that organization today and also educators across the state. I stand here with deep appreciation for the work that DECAL has done for Georgia's children and their families, and we are especially grateful for the proposed rule changes regarding children's licensing exemptions. These changes represent more than just regulatory updates. They reflect a shared commitment to the well-being and safety of every child that is in care, wherever they are in care.

For many years, GCCA has advocated for reform in this area, and we believe that every child in Georgia deserves the highest standard of care and protection. State oversight through DECAL is essential to ensure the safety and well-being of all children, wherever they are. These proposed changes are a significant step toward creating a level playing field where all businesses that care for children are held to the same standard.

As both a child care provider and a child advocate, I know firsthand the importance of maintaining high standards in early childhood settings. Families trust us with their most prized possessions, and they deserve peace of mind knowing that the environments that they need to place their children are under the same rigorous standards. These rule changes will create a much needed consistency, help ensure that every child in Georgia, regardless of their care setting, is protected and nurtured in a safe, high-quality environment.

While we are excited about these important progress, we recognize that this is just one step of many steps that DECAL and the state can continue to support licensed child care programs and all children of Georgia. Ongoing collaboration, attention, and transparency to the challenges that we are facing as child care providers is crucial in sustaining high-quality care that every child deserves.

We commend DECAL for its thoughtful leadership in addressing these vital issues and for ensuring that every child has access to the care that they need to thrive. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak today and your unwavering commitment to making Georgia a place where all children can grow, thrive, and succeed.

Mr. Brown asked Ms. Obi if anyone had submitted comments via the GoToWebinar chat function. She replied that no comments had been submitted. Mr. Brown suspended the public hearing on the proposed rules changes and asked Ms. Obi whether anyone had signed up to make general comments. Ms. Obi replied that three people had signed up to make general comments, and she called on Shannon Smith-SengStack, the founder of SoulShine. *Thank you, Hi. My name is Shannon Smith-SengStack. I am the founder of SoulShine. SoulShine has three locations in Atlanta, one in Decatur, one in Kirkwood, and one in East Atlanta. I have written down, so I've been in, I've had the privilege of serving around 10,000 children in the 19 years that Soul Shine has been around. My reason for being here today is one, I just discovered that this happened. So that, I really appreciate it, thank you.*

I have been very appreciative of DECAL as I am aware that most states are—the child care is governed by the Department of Health and Human Services—and we are very privileged and blessed to have an agency that specifically works with early childhood education because that keeps our children safe, and so I really want to share gratitude for all the help y'all have given me over the 19 years. I have been in child care since I was 14 years old.

SoulShine has survived a recession, a pandemic. We've expanded. We've supported our community. I've mentored many other people, children, and other owner-operators such as myself. The business portion is often, as I find it, not the reason that people open preschools. They do it because they have a developed passion for

early childhood education and so the business aspect and the growth and understanding how to do the STABLE grants and make sure the quarterly reports are kept up with CAPS is very challenging, and I've been blessed to have a business manager that's walked me through a lot of those things that I learned along the way. So that is what education I tried to help others with.

It's very, this job in child care in general is extremely taxing emotionally because you're in love with all of them. It is physically taxing because you're carrying all of them. It's mentally taxing because we're navigating 65% increase in operations. We've had a mass staff exodus and evolution. They've got children to care for, parents to care for, dads to care for, paperwork to fill out, businesses to run, grants to get, CAPS to manage, all while watching the economy and inflation. SoulShine does not take CAPS and is not Quality Rated. However, we offer free child care to our employees; and, just in 2023, roughly 350, although I imagine that number is up, scholarships that we provided to the community. Our staff go totally free, and our scholarships are anywhere from zero to \$200. Our tuition is at \$420. We have raised it about every two years. However, I have been reading all of the federal reports, the reports that y'all have published, many people in this room—thank you so much. I've looked at state reports, and I've also been the boots on the ground watching what is going on.

SoulShine, I can speak from my experience because I don't want to speak for other people. SoulShine has had historic disenrollment, and that is due to job losses. In the last two weeks, seven people have lost their jobs. We're blessed to have very transparent parents, and we have a huge community, and so they are transparent with us from what I believe. I am here today as an advocate for all of us working in child care. It takes each of us to make a difference for all of us. Any way that SoulShine can support, I would be happy to do. Some of the things that offhand, because I've talked to about 10 child care earners, some of them with multiple locations. Having all of the summary from the last meeting and what transpired was extremely helpful. I did not find that in subsequent years of summaries and agendas. I don't know if it does exist. It was difficult to locate. I look forward to learning more about how we're going to help as boots on the ground so that something is coming this way. Thank you so much for your time.

Ms. Obi called on Lauren Davis, the owner of iCare Child Development Center. Good afternoon. My name is Lauren Davis and I'm with ICARE Child Development Center. I came to the last meeting to share my story with you guys, and I'm going to keep coming and share my story with you guys and to keep everyone updated about the cases that I have going on. But today, I'm here to publicly share information as I receive it about my case. I feel compelled to do this as I haven't yet been afforded an opportunity to be heard and to also make sure the public and fellow providers and the DECAL Board is aware of what's going on. For those of you unaware, I have an active case in state court for a judicial review of DECAL's decision to deny me a hearing in deciding to summarily dismiss eight of my programs from the CAPS program without right to an appeal. These centers were located in Fulton, DeKalb, Stephens County, and Clayton County. In Stephens County, I own two out of the three centers located in that county. There are no other child care centers in that county. Besides the three, there were no other child care centers. Those centers were at capacity serving 115 and 85 children, respectively, and 90% of those children were on CAPS. And I also have an open due process violation case in federal court for DECAL specific violations of my due process rights. I feel like at this point, I'm not only fighting for appeal rights for myself but for all providers. Providers deserve a right to be heard, and I want to be licensed and in CAPS. What I've learned throughout this process is that DECAL does not want to be challenged. Providers don't have a voice when it comes to being challenged, on the hard things. You know, I know it's something that you guys, you know, you do if you decide if you want to hear them or not, but providers deserve a voice and a right to be heard on all things. They have a right to be heard. Some of the things that I wanted to share that I've learned in my case, which is sad, because, you know, I should have been able to have a discussion with DECAL and to see, 'What is it? Why, you know, why were my centers dismissed? Why were they treated in that way?' But here recently I've learned in the Open Records Court document that the compliance visits carried out by DECAL's Auditing Unit resulted from an internal investigation of a DECAL

staffer suspected of fraudulent activities within the CAPS program. That investigation eventually included not only ICARE, but a number of other providers.

DECAL received information indicating that a temporary employee assigned to the CAPS program was essentially selling CAPS scholarships, accepting payments for approving applications for CAPS. DECAL's auditing department conducted an extensive investigation and determined that the employee was approving a very high value of CAPS scholarships within unusually short time frames. And I'm asking myself, 'How can this happen?' So, I go to the CCDF state plan and just see, you know, 'What is the internal processes in place to avoid something like that happening?' And it says, 'Check and describe all activities the lead agency conducts to identify unintentional program violations and include description of how each activity assists in identification and prevention of unintentional program violations.' All this stuff they have, activities to fight fraud and ensure program integrity, says the Audit and Compliance division develops a risk assessment tool used to identify providers who have indicators suggesting that an intentional or unintentional or administrative error may have occurred. The risk, I'll get down to the part, the real part. It says the system reporting identifying cases with a missing disposition, system report identifying cases with no children, system report identifying cases missing a family, system report identifying cases who have supervised as a case manager, system report identifying the percentage of certificates assigned to a provider approved by the same case manager, comparison of the capacity of a child care provider to the number of children they bill for, comparison of client employer to the child care center the child is attending, and system report that identifies Georgia's Pre-K students receiving full-time care.

So, what DECAL, in my situation, seems to want to do is put that on the provider. I don't know who this employee is, but the fact that an employee can sell CAPS scholarships, and then you then put that on the provider, not even tell the provider what that is about. But my first question is, 'How does that happen with supervisors in place that are supposed to be checking behind the kids and the families that you guys are approving for these scholarships?'

If somewhere where DECAL is going wrong and everybody needs to know about it, again, I'm gonna keep coming, I'm gonna keep sharing my case, but providers have the right to be heard, providers have the right to answer to any accusations and charges. Please, please, please pass some legislation, which there already is, OCGA 20-1A-10.1 says, 'Determination regarding payment and eligibility pursuant to any federal program should be preceded by a notice and an opportunity to be heard.' DECAL needs to honor that opportunity to be heard instead of fighting against providers that have to spend thousands of dollars. I've spent \$120,000 in court so far to get DECAL to try to hear me.

Ms. Obi called on Eleanor Walsh, the Director of The Nest nursery school. Ms. Walsh read a letter dated August 21 that she had submitted in advance of the Board meeting. She also noted that Deputy Commissioner Stevens had reached out in response to the letter, and Ms. Walsh expressed optimism that her issue would be resolved. This is the letter: To the DECAL Board of Directors, I am writing on behalf of The Nest Nursery School, a small nonprofit childcare center in Atlanta. At this point we have been cited three times and incurred a fine regarding our climbing structure (which has been removed). I would like to outline the situation and ask that someone intervene on our behalf for resolution of this issue. I will also be attending the Board meeting tomorrow to share this in person.

On May 13th 2024, we were alerted to a citation to our child care center regarding our climbing structure. This citation referenced an incident on April 10, 2023 when a child fell off the structure and broke her arm.

We were heartbroken to hear that a structure the children adored was deemed unsafe. The structure was designed and installed with a contractor and several family members of the school. We were hoping we would be able to make adjustments to the structure, but Bright from the Start determined they could not license it anymore since it was a homemade structure, and they didn't know how to evaluate it for safety.

We were given until May 28th, 2024 to submit a plan of improvement. We sent out a refutation, but we did not hear back from BFTS until June 10th, 2024, when it was overruled. We heard back that our plan of improvement was denied on June 11th, 2024. Nine days later on June 20, we had our licensing study. During this visit, we were issued another citation because the climbing structure was still present at the facility.

We also received an email on August 16th, 2024 alerting us to another citation from May 15th, 2024. Apparently when we had a virtual incident follow-up regarding an injury unrelated to the climbing structure, we were issued a second citation. As of August 21st, 2024, we have received no report outlining the parameters for this citation. Also on August 16th, we received an email saying we were two and a half months late to submit a Plan of Improvement, and there would be another follow-up visit.

We have now had three citations regarding the same structure. The first was sent to us over a year after the inciting incident (a child breaking her arm). The second was shared with us three months after it was issued with no report offering further information. This second citation was issued two days after the first, which outlined that we had until May 28th, 2024 to address the problem.

The third citation was issued nine days after our plan of improvement was denied. We understand that we were past the initial deadline for addressing the problem, but surely you can understand that we did not want to put forth the money and effort to remove the structure if our suggested amendments would be acceptable. We did make those amendments before our June 20th, 2024 licensing study. Nine days was not enough time to remove an entire structure installed in the ground which required specialized skill and extensive time to disassemble.

Bright from the Start licensed and inspected our climbing structure during our regular visits for six years, including the one on December 7th, 2022. We were never alerted to any issues. Bright from the Start retroactively decided that our structure was unsafe, then cited us three times, and issued a fine all over a year after the child's injury on the structure. If the structure was unsafe enough to warrant all this disciplinary action, surely we would have heard about that between its installation in 2017 and the May 2024 beginning of this ordeal.

The disorganization of this process has been frustrating and taxing on the school's time and efforts. Repeatedly, when we have spoken to people from BFTS over the phone or Zoom, they have been sympathetic and rational. Then bureaucracy will take over, and rulings will be made without a full understanding of the circumstances. We are very frustrated to be under Deficient standing with DECAL, when we run a high quality program which educates and supports children at the most integral time of their lives. We urge you to think about this situation (and all situations you encounter) with human rationality instead of these over-organized, under-accountable processes.

In this environment where running a preschool is so incredibly difficult, we depend on DECAL to be a partner and not an adversary.

Thank you.

Eleanor Walsh

Director

The Nest Nursery School

CCLC-39771

Mr. Brown asked Ms. Obi if anyone had submitted comments through the chat function. Ms. Obi read one comment submitted via the chat function from Noni Walton, the Executive Director of the Oak Leaf school in Fayetteville. She wrote, Good Morning, I would like to provide the following comments to be addressed during the Public Hearing: 1. As our programs require advance notice when withdrawing a child. Is it possible that CAPS abides by the same policy by requiring at least a 2-week period before transferring children's scholarships? Sincerely, Noni Walton.

At 1:25 p.m. Mr. Brown asked Ms. Obi whether anyone else had signed up to comment on the proposed rule revisions. She replied that no one else had signed up. Mr. Brown turned the meeting over to Mr. Davis who called for committee reports. Dr. Washell and Dr. Beam reported from the Program committee about the CAPS 2Gen pilot underway on three technical college campuses, the schedule for 2025 CCS rule changes, the Family Peer Ambassador program, and Nutrition Services' Veggie Ready 2024 campaign to encourage children to try new vegetables. On behalf of the Finance committee Ms. Morrissey recommended the Board adopt both budget requests presented by Mr. Ringsrud as a single motion, and she noted that as of July 31 DECAL's expenses are on track with the SFY2025 budget. Ms. Hill reported from the QIP committee that the Office of Head Start (OHS) had asked DECAL to extend its Early Head Start (EHS) grant twice. DECAL was able to honor the first request even though most of the EHS staff had found other positions. DECAL was not able to continue after July 31, but, with OHS approval, used grant close-out funds to provide transitional support 123 children. Ms. Hill also reported that 65% of all child care providers are now Quality Rated, and she gave an update on the Quality Rated revision process.

Following the committee reports Mr. Davis asked whether there was any further discussion about the proposed rule change. Hearing none, he called for a motion to approve the rule change proposed by DECAL. Ms. Hill made a motion, and Dr. Washell seconded. The Board approved the rule change unanimously.

Mr. Davis asked if there was any further discussion about the budget requests presented by Mr. Ringsrud. Hearing no further discussion, and noting the Finance committee's recommendation, he asked for a second to the Finance committee's motion. Ms. Harper seconded, and the Board approved both budget requests unanimously.

Mr. Davis called for nominations for the vacant position of Vice Chair to fill the unexpired term of Debra Brock. Dr. Zisook nominated Dr. Beam, and Dr. Beam was elected unanimously.

Mr. Davis presented the Board meeting dates for 2025: February 25, May 15, August 28, and November 20. At 1:45 p.m. he reminded Board members of the next meeting November 21 and adjourned.

As noted above, several emails or letters about the proposed rules revisions were received by the Board in advance of the meeting. Contact details have been intentionally removed.

In an email on July 15, 2024 Cory Lawrence from the Victory Baptist School in Loganville wrote, *We love that the categories have been combined, but my reading of the proposed changes indicates that a private, educational program is no longer able to receive license exemption for the following:*

Before school program

After school program

Both a before school and after school program

Category 3 and point (i) states that a program can only be exempted if it "...does not provide care before, after, or both before and after the customary school day."

My first thought was that these before and after school programs were moved to a different category, but Category 4 specifically excludes "...before and after school care."

Please advise how a private school with either (or both) a before or after school program can exempt the licensing requirement.

Thanks,

Cory Lawrence

In an email on July 17, 2024 Kelsey Folks, the owner of Augusta Kids & Company wrote, *How will this affect our current exempt summer day camps? Kelsey Folks*

In an email on July 17, 2024 Elizabeth Mitchum, the Director of Christian Education for the First Presbyterian Church of Thomasville, wrote, *Dear Commissioner Stevens and Other Interested Officials:*

I am writing to commend the proposed amendments for Child Care Learning Centers.

I serve as the Director of Christian Education for First Presbyterian Church, Thomasville, GA. The church has hosted a preschool as a ministry to the community for over 100 years. In my tenure of 12 years, we have served children 12 months to 5 years of age in half-day, faith-based preschool classes. FPCT Preschool operates on the school year calendar, mid-August to mid-May from 8:30 to 11:30 Monday through Friday. Our children go to a variety of settings following the preschool morning, including at home with parents, family or sitters; in-home daycare and the local YMCA child care center who provide transportation from the church for participating children over 2.

Even though we were approved for Exempt status several years ago, one of the biggest obstacles to serving our families is the limited care we have been able to offer to children under 24 months of age. Based on the previous Bright from the Start policy, children under 2 could not attend more than 8 hours a week. This meant that families had to choose a maximum of 3 mornings. The Preschool was required to operate on an early pick-up schedule for these children, so that morning's attendance did not exceed 2.5 hours. In some cases, this involved children with older siblings in the program who were allowed to attend 5 days a week. In nearly every case, families had to make alternate pick-up and childcare plans. Ultimately, this policy hurts children and families.

In our environment, even for the youngest class, age-appropriate learning takes place during every morning of Preschool. Childcare is certainly a component, but early learning is the goal. Children benefit from the structure of daily attendance. The younger child will acclimate far better under a daily routine, rather than an every-other or 2-3 days a week. Families can count on the consistency of a Monday - Friday schedule. In our program we do not feed the children lunch or offer a specific naptime, so the adherence to 8 hours a week has been difficult to understand from all sides.

I am grateful that once the proposed amendments are approved, all children within the Preschool program can be on the same schedule. This will benefit staff, children and families. I applaud Child Care Services for considering what is truly best for children and families in proposing these amendments. I can speak for our community of Thomasville, and believe that the sentiment is echoed across the state: we are in a childcare desert. There simply are not enough spots for children needing care across Georgia communities. Any way that we can support families with reliable, affordable Preschool and childcare options, we should work together to do so.

Thank you sincerely for your consideration.

Elizabeth Mitchum

In an email dated July 26, 2024 Jamey Wood, the Academic Dean and Business Officer of the King's Academy wrote, *Our program is currently exempt under Category 13. Is this exemption category being completely removed with no replacement? Does this mean that any child care program that is free will have to be licensed? If so, we will definitely want to make a comment. Jamey Wood*

In an email on August 1, 2024 Hannelore Gottschalk, AMI Directress and Head of CountrySide Montessori School, wrote, *Good afternoon, This email is addressed to Bright from the Start concerning the Proposed Amendment of Rule 591-1-1-46.*

Does CountrySide Montessori School at the Little Mulberry Park, L.L.C., automatically apply for a new exemption application, or does the existing exemption status continue to be valid?

CountrySide Montessori School at the Little Mulberry Park, L.L.C., is accredited and recognized since 2006 by the Association Montessori Internationale/USA, serving primary students 3-6 years of age.

CountrySide Montessori School's exemption number is

EX- 44060 with 3 exemption categories:

EXMT-14486, EXMT-14487, EXMT-14488

Your response to this email at your earliest convenience will be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully submitted

Hanne Gottschalk

In an undated letter Ms. Gottschalk also wrote, Dear Ms. Stevens, CountrySide Montessori School (CountrySide) is owned and operated by Mrs. Hannelore Gottschalk and has been since its February 2005 inception. Mrs. Gottschalk has a Masters Degree in Early Child Development and Family Living, as well as being an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) certified teacher for the Montessori Primary program, ages 3-6.

CountrySide Montessori School has operated under an "Exempt" status during the entirety of that time. CountrySide Montessori is accredited and recognized by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI/USA) since 2006, teaching Primary students, 3 to 6 years of age according to established AMI Montessori Internationale (AMI) curriculum standards.

Accredited private non-public programs with an established curriculum for three and 4 year olds should be allowed to remain for consideration, due to the large numbers of Montessori Schools in Gorgia and their positive influence on students. Atlanta had a strong AMI Montessori Training center for many decades.

Younger 3- and 4- year -old children attend for up to 4 hours per day, M-F, and Kindergarten aged students stay until 3:00 or 3:30 pm. Our educational summer camp program for children ages 5 to 9 years old has offered valuable educational programs to children of our community.

The purpose of this letter is to respectfully request that CountrySide's Exemption status remain in place, and that CountrySide can continue its Montessori School operation as it has for the last 19 years.

We welcome an onsite inspection and review of CountrySide Montessori School at your convenience.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Hannelore Gottschalk, M.A.

In an email on August 19, 2024 Cara Friedline, the Toddler/Primary Division Head for Springmont Montessori School, wrote, I have read the proposed exemption for the 2025 rules and regulations book. It seems that the exemption for mixed age classes is going away. That concerns me for my own school, but also, all the other Montessori Schools in Georgia. Georgia is one of the most prolific states for thriving Montessori schools due to having multiple training centers here with a history going back to the 60s. It seems that the ability to have mixed ages, including children older 5 and 6 years old in a class with younger students is under threat based on these rule changes. When the Star Rated system came into fruition, Montessori leaders, including myself, worked along side BFTS leaders to find ways for Montessori schools to comply give some of the unique characteristics of our schools. It seems that we may need to look for ways to partner again as our methods for

independence, and mentorship for children is under threat again. Please reconsider this rule change as it has unintended consequence that are detrimental to our Montessori schools' philosophy.

Warm regards,

Cara Friedline

In an email on August 20, 2024 Heather Maccabe, the Head of School for Arbor Montessori, wrote, Good Day,

I am writing to inquire about the email dated July 15, 2024

I am the Head of School for Arbor Montessori. We are an AMI Montessori school that serves children ages 18 months through 8th grade. Our youngest children do fall under BFTS however we have always had a variance that allows for mixed ages. Mixed ages is an integral part of a Montessori experience and not having this would eliminate our ability to offer a comprehensive Montessori program. Not only am I concerned for Arbor, I am concerned for other Montessori schools in Georgia. Georgia has a long history of multiple Montessori training centers and it is known worldwide for its quality Montessori offerings.

I would welcome any information that you may have in regards to what must be done to ensure that mixed ages and other key Montessori cornerstone qualities are not eradicated with these potential new rulings.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmly,

Heather Maccabe