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

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

Thursday, February 20, 2025 — 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

Jen Bennecke, Phil Davis (Chair), Maria Franklin, Joyce Freeman, Susan Harper, Joanna Hill, Karen Jones, Kristin Morrissey, Cristina Washell, Sylvia Washington

#### Public Guests

Elizabeth Arthur, Ideishe Bellamy, Sandi Bennett, Donna Chen, Charlotte Davis, Cheryl Odom Flores, Jana Fox, Joyce Freeman, Isabelle Keenum, Lakeisha McClendon, Michelle Smith Lank, Charlotte Pelz, Althea Penn, Rachel Robertson

#### DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner

Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Supports

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

Clayton Adams, Early Education Community Partnership Lead NE

Geanina Armeanu, Training Approval Specialist

Farouk Baksh, Senior Director, Information Technology

Katrina Bernard, QR Family Support Call Center Manager

Chondra Bolton, CACDS Project Manager

Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director

Jennifer Bridgeman, CCS Director of Process and Policy

Tomisher Campbell, Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator SE

Katie Davis, Compliance Examiner

Kim Davis, Director of Assessment and Regional Operations, QR

Glenda Davis-Canteen, Early Education Community Partnership Lead NW

Hayat Dergaga, Research and Policy Analyst

Sarah Dixon-Morgan, Cyber Security Attorney

Margaret Freeman, Inclusion and Behavior Support Regional Supervisor-S

Melissa Herndon, CCS Director of Field Operations

Amy Hill, Compliance Supervisor

Abraham Hussain, Telecom Specialist

Denise Jenson, QR Director of Development and Business Operations

Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Contracts Coordinator

Laura Lucas, Director, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health  
 Andrea Marable, Professional Learning Specialist  
 Brittany Marks, Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator CE  
 Stephen McGarity, Institutional Research and Data Quality Manager  
 Christi Moore, Director of Workforce Supports and Learning  
 Abby Mozo, Operations Analyst, Workforce Supports and Learning  
 Miranda Murphy, Practice and Support Services Outreach Project Manager  
 Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor  
 Rob O'Callaghan, Director, Institutional Research and Data Quality  
 Sarah Mia Obiwo, Workforce Policy and Process Admin  
 Valerie Perez, Research Partnerships Manager  
 Laura Reid, Assistant Director Workforce Supports and Learning  
 Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor  
 Ashley Rich, Relationship-based Professional Learning Supervisor  
 Dajuana Robinson, Community Engagement and Partnerships Manager  
 Mike Rodgers, Director Finance  
 April Rogers, Director CCS Enforcement Operations  
 Barbara Sanders, Business Analyst  
 Angela Shelton, Workforce Supports Supervisor  
 Hannah Smith, Research Analyst  
 Nate Smith, Professional Development Systems Manager  
 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  
 Bridgette Washington-Collier, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator CW  
 Jennifer Waters, CCS Technical Assistance Unit Manager  
 Mark Waits, Senior Writer  
 Vicki Watts, Professional Learning Specialist  
 Sheryl Wilhite, Director of Human Resources  
 Laurail Williams, Legal Services Officer  
 Sheila Williams, CAPS Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Family and Eligibility  
 Liz Young, Government Relations Director

The August 22, 2024, meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held in the Oak Conference room and livestreamed.

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

At 9:01 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. Dr. Washington moved to accept, and Ms. Bennecke seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Mr. Davis asked for a motion to approve

the minutes from the May 16 meeting. Ms. Harper moved to approve, and Dr. Washell seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

#### **4. Inspiration**

Ms. Harper talked about the practice of patience, recalling a time from her childhood when her father showed her great patience. She read a poem about being patient with children as they grow.

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

Mr. Davis invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. He asked for prayers for the family in a neighboring district whose child died in care. Ms. Harper reported hearing news that the Georgia Legislature appropriated additional funds for child care and asked Commissioner Jacobs to clarify.

Commissioner Jacobs responded that the Georgia Senate passed SB 89 which provides three types of tax credit. It increases an existing federal tax credit, creates a new tax credit for children under the age of seven, and offers a tax credit for businesses that offer onsite child care to their employees. Ms. Morrissey reported that she had the opportunity to look at an inclusion toolkit for teachers created by DECAL's Inclusion and Behavior Support team, and she was very impressed. Dr. Washell reported that the University of North Georgia is just starting to build a child care center on the Gainesville campus in Hall county, and she has been touring child care facilities at other universities and talking to staff. She has been very impressed with all they do to support children, she said. Ms. Hill said that she has been serving on the fundraising committee for Extra Special People (ESP) which provides services to people with disabilities and their families. The fundraiser, which raised more than \$1 million last year will be held this weekend. Dr. Washington reported working with the Georgia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to lobby against HB 118.

#### **6. DECAL Staff Reports**

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency's work.

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

Commissioner Jacobs announced the 2024–2025 Early Educators of the Year, Zina Hadjaz, The Quadrilingual Academy in Smyrna, in the Infant category; Laura Silva, My Little Geniuses Daycare in Marietta in the Toddler Category; and Samantha Mullins, Our House at Central in Atlanta, in the Preschool category. The Early Educators of the Year will attend a Board meeting later in the year. The Commissioner introduced the 2024–2025 Pre-K Teachers of the Year (TOTY), Elizabeth Arthur from Lincoln County Elementary, the public school winner, and Rachel Robertson from Oconee Preschool Academy, the private child care center winner. Teachers and Educators of the Year receive \$3000 for themselves, \$2000 for a classroom makeover, and \$1500 to cover the cost of substitutes and travel when they are away from their classrooms representing DECAL. Funds for these awards are raised privately. This year Ms. Arthur and Ms. Robertson attended the NAEYC conference in California in November, took over DECAL social media in December, and visited programs with their Pre-K specialists in January. They will join the Pre-K week kick off at the Capitol in March and assist with TOTY applications for 2025–2026 in April. Ms. Arthur and Ms. Robertson each made brief presentations about their work and were honored by Mr. Davis with resolutions commending their achievements.

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

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL's expenses are on track with the budget as of December 31, 2024, the end of the second quarter of SFY2025. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor's recommended amended budget for the current year (AFY 2025). The

AFY 2025 recommendation includes an additional \$100,000 for startup grants to enable Happy Helpings sponsors to establish new sites in locations with high rates of child food insecurity and an additional \$7,422,147 from state lottery funds to provide salary parity for Pre-K teachers with K–12 teachers. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor’s recommendation for the SFY 2026 budget, which includes an increase of just over \$27 million, \$5.5 million for CAPS and \$21.6 million for Georgia’s Pre-K. The funds designated for CAPS will pay for bringing CAPS provider rates to the 60% percentile of market rates and adding 500 state-funded CAPS scholarships. The additional funds for Georgia’s Pre-K will cover an increase to the Pre-K formula to reflect teachers’ actual training and experience, an increase in the employer share of employee health insurance, and funds for year two of the four-year phase-in of reduced class size. Mr. Ringsrud also gave Board members an update about legislation under consideration in the current legislative session. HB 175, initiated by DECAL, would update language related to criminal records checks to comply with federal mandates. HB 118 which would require child care centers to maintain anti-choking devices on their premises; and HB 269 would require child care centers to maintain commercial general liability insurance. Mr. Ringsrud acknowledged Dr. Washington’s work opposing HB 118 and said that DECAL supports the recommendations of the AAP.

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

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams provided updates about Georgia’s Pre-K program. DECAL added 101 new classrooms. Short-term waivers for teachers who don’t meet minimum credentials have decreased by 18%, in part, Ms. Adams explained, because the new salary structure is attracting more qualified teachers, as it was designed to do. The use of substitute teachers has dropped by 7%. Lead teacher salaries rose by an average of 13%, with 77% of teachers receiving raises from the move to the new supplement pay scale. A total of 233 teachers received a salary increase due to advanced certifications, Ms. Adams said.

Ms. Harper asked how many children are enrolled in Pre-K and whether there has been an increase in enrollment since the end of the pandemic. Ms. Adams replied that enrollment has increased but has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. About 70,000 children are currently enrolled in Pre-K. Birth rates are lower, Ms. Adams added, and that may be affecting Pre-K enrollment. Ms. Harper asked whether there is an increase in the practice of homeschooling; and Ms. Adams replied that DECAL is not able to collect data about that.

Ms. Adams reported that all assistant teachers receive the same salary, and their pay increased by 27%. She also reviewed upcoming application deadlines. Applications for Pre-K Teachers of the Year for the 2025–2026 school year will be open from March 3–17. Applications for the Summer Transition Program will be open for continuation providers only from March 10–21; and applications for Georgia’s Pre-K will be open from March 10–28. Ms. Adams highlighted the work of DECAL’s Infant Toddler specialists and the LITTLE grants that are available to eligible CCLCs and FCCLHs. She shared photos and statistics from Inclusive Early Learning Week and reminded Board members that Children’s Mental Health Week is coming up May 5–9.

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

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens gave the Board details about the licensing rule changes the Board will vote on in May. Rules changes are needed to comply with the Georgia Early Literacy Act, HB538; better align and comply with CCDF rules; strengthen CPR requirements to better protect children in care; and make changes to some language and numbering to comply with Georgia Secretary of State requirements. Several of the proposed changes are wording

changes only and will not impact child care programs and providers. The Board will vote on rule changes in May so that new rules can be implemented July 1, 2025 as required by HB538. CCS surveyed CCLCs and FCCLHs to gauge their response to rule changes about CPR that would require all licensed programs and providers to update current procedures, train staff, and possibly incur additional expenses. The survey received a 32% response rate, and respondents were generally accepting of the proposed changes. Ms. Stevens also informed Board members of a collaborative effort with the Nutrition Services team, the Infant Toddler program, and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, to educate providers about choking hazards and how to prevent them.

## **7. Break**

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:30 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:40 a.m.

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

Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder gave a brief update about several current research projects including the Economic Impact study, which is ongoing; a Supply and Demand study, which the Urban Institute is conducting; an evaluation of DECAL's pandemic relief initiatives conducted by Child Trends; and an upcoming study that will replicate the 2008–2010 Quality Study that helped create the Quality Rated program.

Ms. Morrissey applauded the evaluation of the pandemic relief initiatives and asked whether the work is federally mandated. It would be nice, she said, to compare our efforts to those of other states. Dr. Ponder responded that it is not federally mandated, but rather a priority of the Commissioner to evaluate the impact of the initiatives on providers, the workforce, families, and DECAL staff. He added that evaluation was part of the process of planning the initiatives.

Dr. Ponder gave a status update about the Community Impact grants. Applications are being scored now he said, and he expects the grant awards will be announced in March. He also reported on Quality Rated participation as of February 6: 65% of eligible providers have received a 1-, 2-, or 3-star rating, and 7% are somewhere in the process of being rated. Of those providers who are rated, about 18% each are 1-star and 3-star, with the majority being 2-star. Dr. Ponder noted that over the past few years the percentage of programs with 2-star ratings has increased.

Ms. Harper asked whether that trend reflects more providers moving from 1-star to 2-star. Dr. Ponder replied that that seems to be the case because the percentage of 3-star providers has remained consistent over time. Dr. Ponder acknowledged that sometimes 3-star providers do go down in rating, and he reminded Board members that Quality Rated is a three-year process, and a lot can happen in three years.

Dr. Ponder provided details about the new quarterly Commitment to Quality (C2Q) payments for 2- and 3-star CAPS providers that have replaced the former weekly tiered reimbursements. 2-star programs will receive a 5% quality incentive bonus, and 3-star programs will receive a 10% bonus. 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 encourage them to go through the rating process in 2025 with the goal of achieving higher ratings.

Ms. Freeman asked whether providers are required to spend the bonus payments in a certain way. Dr. Ponder replied that the payments are structured to encourage providers to use the funds on quality improvement, but they are not required to do so.

C2Q payments for the first calendar quarter of 2025 will be issued beginning February 27 for the period from September 30, 2024 through January 5, 2025, Dr. Ponder said.

Ms. Harper asked Dr. Ponder to clarify that providers may spend the bonus payments as they see fit, and he confirmed that there are no restrictions on how bonus payments may be spent. Ms. Morrissey asked whether it might be hard for providers to plan their expenses, given that they don't know the exact amount they will be receiving. Dr. Ponder said that in that regard C2Q payments are not different from the CAPS tiered reimbursements that the C2Q payments replace.

Dr. Ponder also gave details about the new \$500 annual workforce support payments. These payments will be made throughout the year to eligible employees at FCCLHs, CCLCs, and standalone school age programs that are Quality Rated at the 1-, 2-, or 3-star level. Providers do not have to participate in CAPS for their employees to be eligible for the workforce support payments. The payment process begins in April.

**f. Federal Programs Update**

Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir gave Board members an overview of rules changes issued by the federal Office of Child Care (OCC) within the division of the Administration for Children & Families (ACF) which administers the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF). New rules went into effect on April 30, 2024. Georgia is already in compliance with some of the new rules and applied for, and was granted, waivers for the implementation of the remaining rules until August 1, 2026. Two of the new rules—shifting from reimbursement to prospective provider payments, and paying providers based on enrollment rather than attendance—require major policy and system changes. The federal waiver is effective until August 1, 2026. GACAPS system changes are planned to go live June 17, 2026, and the new enrollment-based prospective payment structure will be in place for the service week beginning June 22, 2026.

**8. Lunch and Committee Meetings**

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:20 a.m.

**9. Public Comments**

Mr. Davis called the meeting to order at 12:51 p.m. He asked Ms. Obi if anyone had signed up to make a public comment or submitted comments via the Teams chat function. She replied that no one was present to make a comment and that no comments had been received through the chat function.

**10. Committee Reports**

Mr. Davis called for committee reports. Dr. Washington reported from the Program and Rules committee on four major developments happening at DECAL: CAPS attrition, CCS's Lights on After School event, the Peer Support Network, and the Happy Helpings Georgia's Summer Food Service. CAPS is in the process of returning to its pre-pandemic service levels and currently serving 60,000 children. CCS surveyed providers about proposed rule changes to improve playgrounds. The Peer Support Network is a program of 15–18 ambassadors hosting quarterly meetings with child care stakeholders to foster community engagement in the state. Lastly, Dr. Washington reported that 59 counties in Georgia do not have a summer nutrition program and that the Governor's FY2025 Amended Budget included \$100K for Happy Helpings Georgia's Summer Food Service Program start-up grants to expand meal services to underserved communities. On behalf of the Finance committee, Kristin Morrissey reported that DECAL's SFY2025 expenses remain on track with the budget as of January 31, 2025 and said that 89% of DECAL funding is spent on grants and benefits with

only 11% going to operations. Ms. Franklin reported from the QIP Committee that the new Quality Rated Family Support Center is launching in-house in July 2025; the QR team is offering additional supports and resources to 1-star Quality Rated providers to help them improve their star ratings; and the Community Partnership Team is shifting from a regional model to a subregion-specific approach to strengthen collaboration and host Birth–8 meetings.

#### 11. Adjournment

At 1:45 p.m. Mr. Davis reminded Board members of the next meeting, May 15, and adjourned.

			
Board Chair, Signature	Date	Board Secretary, Signature	Date