

Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
February 20, 2025

Board Members:

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

DECAL Staff:

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Susan Adams, Elisabetta Kasfir, Bentley Ponder, Pam Stevens, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Clayton Adams, Geanina Armeanu, Farouk Baksh, Katrina Bernard, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Jennifer Bridgeman, Tomisher Campbell, Katie Davis, Kim Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Hayat Dergaga, Sarah Dixon-Morgan, Tyler Duggins, Margaret Freeman, Melissa Herndon, Amy Hill, Abraham Hussain, Denise Jenson, Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Laura Lucas, Andrea Marable, Brittany Marks, Stephen McGarity, Christi Moore, Abby Mozo, Miranda Murphy, Amir Nilforooshan, Mia Obiwo, Rob O'Callaghan, Valerie Perez, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Ashley Rich, Rachel Robertson, Dajuana Robinson, Michael Rodgers, April Rogers, Barbara Sanders, Angela Shelton, Hannah Smith, Nate Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Veronica Thomas, Jill Taylor, Laura Wagner, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Jennifer Waters, Mark Waits, Vicki Watts, Laurail Williams, Sheila Williams, Liz Young, Sheryl Young-Wilhite

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

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

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

For 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.

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 yesterday 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.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- 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.

- 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 K12 teachers. Mr. Ringsrud reviewed the Governor’s recommendation for the SFY 2026 budget, which would include an additional \$27 million for CAPS and Georgia’s Pre-K. 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.
- 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%, and 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, and 233 teachers received a salary increase due to advanced certifications. All assistant teachers receive the same salary, and their pay increased by 27%. Ms. Adams 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.
- 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.

Mr. Davis recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:24 a.m. and resumed it at 10:40 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder gave a brief update about several current research projects and the Community Impact grants which are being scored now and will be announced in March. Dr. Ponder 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. 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. At the end of 2024 DECAL was able to offer a fourth-quarter boost payment to eligible providers, 98% of which received the payment. 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 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.
- 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.

Mr. Davis adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:20 a.m. and called the meeting back to order at 12:51 p.m.

Mr. Davis 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.

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.

Mr. Davis asked for a volunteer to provide inspiration at the May meeting, and Dr. Jones volunteered. Mr. Davis reminded Board members of the next meeting on May 15, 2025 and adjourned at 1:02 p.m.