
Board of Early Care and Learning

Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting
Thursday, November 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

Meeting Minutes

Board Members

Kristy Beam (Chair), Phil Davis, Joyce Freeman, Susan Harper, Karen Jones, Kristin Morrissey (Vice Chair), Cristina Washell, Sylvia Washington, Karla Zisook

Public Guests

Ideisha Bellamy, Ellyn Cochran, Yasmeen Diggs, Joshua England, Judy Fitzgerald, Jana Fox, Zina Hadjaz, Julie Hleap, Isabella Keenum, Kathlyn McHenry, Melissa McPhail, Lindsay McVicar, Angela Melton, Sim Nana, Lauren Pollow, Denise Ramirez, Ellen Reynolds, Laura Silva-Ortiz, Charanjeev Singh, Noni Walton,

DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner

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

Reg Griffin, Chief Communications Officer

Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner

Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships

Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services

Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer

Clayton Adams, Northeast Early Education Community Partnership Lead

Farouk Baksh, Senior Director, Information Technology

Ariana Banhan, Communications Intern

Lari Lyn Beyer, Assistant Director, QR Operations

Kristin Blevins, Professional Learning Specialist

Nieves Blocker, Quality Rated Assessor

Chondra Bolton, CACDS Project Manager

Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director

Stephanie Clark, Professional Learning Specialist

Xavier Corbett, IT Service Desk Specialist

Katie Davis, Compliance Examiner

Kim Davis, Director, Quality Rated Assessment and Regional Operations

Glenda Davis-Canteen, Early Education Community Partnership Lead NW

Jennifer Delorme, Quality Rated ERS Assessor Manager, Central

Hayat Dergaga, Research and Policy Analyst

Shayna Funke, Director, Research Partnerships and Business Supports

Moriam Hassan, Budget Analyst

Judy Holdaway, Legal Services Officer

Michelle Hughes, QR Operations Regional Assessor Manager, N/Metro

Abraham Hussain, Procurement and Facilities Specialist

Denise Jenson, Director, Quality Rated Development and Business Operations

Melinda Knowles, CAPS Development and Partnerships Project Manager

Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Contracts Coordinator
Laura Lucas, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Director
Christopher Mann, IT Service Desk Specialist
Brittany Marks, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator, Central East
Stephen McGarity, Institutional Research and Data Quality Manager
Meghan, McNail, Director of Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations
Christi Moore, Director of Workforce Supports and Learning
Miranda Murphy, Practice and Support Services Outreach Project Manager
Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor
Mia Obiwo, Workforce Quality and Process Administrator
Rob O’Callaghan, Director, Institutional Research and Data Quality
Lisa Pitts, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator SW
Bridget Ratajczak, Child and Family Development Supervisor
Laura Reid, Assistant Director Workforce Supports and Learning
Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor
Christina Rigsby, Quality Rated Standardization and Evaluation Manager
Dajuana Robinson, Community Engagement and Partnerships Manager
Mike Rodgers, Director Finance
April Rogers, Director CCS Enforcement Operations
Brenna Rutherford, Budget Analyst
Barbara Sanders, Senior Business Analyst
Devanie Schay, Quality Rated Assessor
Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director
Angela Shelton, Workforce Supports Supervisor
Hannah Smith, Research Analyst
Sonja Steptoe, Assistant Director, Business Supports and Operations
Jill Taylor, Director, Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach
Veronica Thomas, Director, Practice and Support Services
Balaram Tidhi, Senior Director, Enterprise Applications
Adi Valdez-Rodriguez, Quality Rated Assessor
Laura Wagner, Executive Director, Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning
Kharla Walker, CAPS Family Support Director
Bridgette Washington-Collier, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator, Central West
Martine Watts, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator, North
Sheila Williams, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Family and Eligibility
Jada Williams, Quality Rated Assessor, North
Laurail Williams, Legal Services Officer
Liz Young, Government Relations Director
Sheryl Young-Wilhite, Director, Human Resources

The November 20, 2025, meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held in the Oak Conference room and livestreamed.

1. Call to Order

At 9:02 a.m. Board Chair Kristy Beam called the meeting to order.

2. Welcome

Dr. Beam welcomed Board members, DECAL staff, and guests.

3. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Dr. Beam asked for a motion to accept the meeting agenda. Mr. Davis moved to accept, and Dr. Washington seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Dr. Beam asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the May 15 meeting. Ms. Harper moved to approve, and Ms. Morrissey seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

4. Inspiration

Ms. Morrissey paid tribute to veterans and cited her grandfather and her father who both served in the armed forces. She showed pictures of teachers who had a positive impact on her daughters and invited Board members to reflect on the characteristics of teachers who had influenced them. She also handed out stamped, blank “thank you” cards and invited Board members to thank someone who has made a difference in their lives.

5. Board Member Updates

Dr. Beam invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. Ms. Harper announced the death of DECAL employee Kim Brickey, a Quality Rated Portfolio Assessor, who lived and worked in Ms. Harper’s district. Ms. Harper sent memorial flowers to Ms. Brickey’s family on behalf of the Board. Ms. Freeman reported that she read to several Pre-K classes during Pre-K week. Dr. Washington also read to a Pre-K class and announced that Rome is opening a new interactive children’s museum.

6. DECAL Staff Reports

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency’s work.

a. Commissioner’s Update

Commissioner Amy Jacobs introduced two of the Georgia Early Educators of the Year for 2024–2025, Zina Hadjaz (Infant category) from the Quadrilingual Academy in Smyrna, and Laura Silva-Ortiz (Toddler category) from My Little Geniuses in Marietta. Samantha Mullins, the winner in the Preschool category from Our House in Atlanta, was unable to attend the Board meeting. Ms. Hadjaz and Ms. Silva-Ortiz each made a brief presentation and received a Board Resolution honoring her work. The Commissioner also announced the Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year, Autumn Hart from Bundle of Joy Academy in Marietta, and Teresa Swaim from West Jackson Elementary in Hoschston. Ms. Hart and Ms. Swaim will attend the February Board meeting. Funds for monetary awards for all teachers and educators of the year are raised privately, and all applications are rigorously screened. Commissioner Jacobs introduced Judy Fitzgerald, the Executive Director of Voices for Georgia’s Children, one of the sponsors of Georgia Pre-K Week. Ms. Fitzgerald recognized DECAL employees who made Pre-K Week a reality, especially Liz Young, Devon Porter, Megan McNail, Reg Griffin, and the communication team. Ms. Fitzgerald introduced Voices’ Advocacy Specialist Joshua England who shared highlights from the 15th annual Pre-K Week which was held October 6–10. Legislators and other elected officials made 170 visits to Pre-K programs across the state during the week. One legislator made 16 classroom visits over the course of the week, and two legislators have participated in Pre-K Week every year for the past 15. More than 1,000 Pre-K programs participated this year, and 144 counties were represented. Voices for Georgia’s Children will publish a final report by the end of the year. Mr. England also thanked Georgia Power, a continuing corporate sponsor of Georgia Pre-K Week.

b. Finance and Administration Update

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL’s expenses are on track with the budget for SFY 2026. He explained that encumbered funds are included in year-to-date expenses, making it appear as if some of the divisions are not on track. Mr. Ringsrud reported final numbers for the Happy Helpings program. Almost 3 million meals were served by 65 sponsors across 109 counties. Mr. Ringsrud also highlighted the impact of the Happy Helpings start-up grants. Since the state first awarded funds in 2022, new and experienced sponsors have expanded Happy Helpings into 15 previously unserved counties and served an additional 74,887 meals.

Ms. Morrissey asked the source of funds for the start-up grants. Mr. Ringsrud replied that all the grants have been funded through state general funds. He said the General Assembly made the investment to kickstart the summer meal service in parts of the state that had not previously been served.

Mr. Ringsrud continued with an update about Nutrition Services. That team led the state’s Farm to School/Farm to Early Education Month in October. During the month, the Nutrition Services team also made a site visit to the Rex Child Care and Early Learning Center.

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

Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams highlighted data from Georgia’s Pre-K program. DECAL continues to award more new classes each year toward the goal of reducing class size to 20 by 2028. Pre-K enrollment is declining, Ms. Adams said. One reason for the decline in enrollment is the birthrate in Georgia, which has been declining since around 2007. Other factors include changing demographics in the state and parents making different choices for preschool services. Ms. Adams reported that salary increases for both lead and assistant teacher led to improved retention rates, a small increase for lead teachers and a significant improvement for assistant teachers. Ms. Adams also reported that 763 classroom refurbishment grants of \$15,000 each were paid to eligible classrooms last school year.

7. Break

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:10 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:23 a.m.

d. Child Care Services

Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens gave the Board an update on the Chop Look Listen public awareness campaign to prevent choking. The campaign has received positive media coverage, including a radio interview with Deputy Commissioner Stevens and Commissioner Jacobs on WSB and a TV interview by Alyse Eady on Good Day Atlanta. A cross-functional DECAL team has made site visits to Seven Branches Academy in Alpharetta and Creative Kids Learning Center & Preschool in Brunswick Ms. Stevens thanked colleagues across DECAL for their contributions to and participation in the campaign and invited Ms. Morrissey to share her experience of participating in the event at Seven Branches Academy. Ms. Morrissey reported that she was very impressed by the facility and its owner. She had an insight, she said, during the event about the need to teach young children how to eat safely. Ms. Stevens echoed the importance of watching children while they are eating. She went on to report on two Super Saturday community training events in Atlanta and Dublin that DECAL hosted with Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. These were both very well attended, she said.

Ms. Morrissey asked whether the Chop Look Listen materials can be distributed to public libraries, and Ms. Stevens replied that that was a good suggestion.

Ms. Stevens introduced April Rogers, Director of Policy & Enforcement for CCS, who received the 2025 Youth Protection Leadership Award from the Atlanta Area Council of Scouting America for her work over several years planning an annual Youth Protection Seminar hosted by the Atlanta Area Council. The seminar brings together a variety of community partners for a day of learning and collaboration, all centered around a shared commitment to building a safer, stronger environment for children across metro Atlanta. Ms. Rogers gave an informational presentation about the coordinated, state-sponsored work that DECAL participates in to prevent childhood abuse and neglect. She showed a short video clip from a longer recording of interviews with child sexual abuse survivors produced by April's team and the communications team.

Dr. Zisook commended Ms. Rogers for offering her care and expertise in the service of the community.

e. Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Update

Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships Bentley Ponder shared highlights from the recently-awarded community impact grants and the Thriving Child Care Business Academy. The Thriving academy began its third year of operation in September. Dr. Ponder highlighted two new small study groups, one on Maximizing Tax Credits, which is designed to help business owners take advantage of the new Georgia child care tax credits, and another on Revenue Stacking in Georgia. Dr. Ponder gave several highlights about the Quality Rated program. New brochures and palm cards are being printed now, and Dr. Ponder showed examples. The number of providers who have received a rating remains steady at about 66%, and the distribution of ratings has not changed significantly in the last year. DECAL has awarded a total of \$8.5 million in Quality Rated Workforce Bonus payments this year, and received 21,726 applications from child care employees. The vast majority of applications are approved, Dr. Ponder said. Fewer than 10% are declined, usually because applicants don't meet work requirements. Recruitment efforts for the quality study led by Child Trends are beginning to yield results, Dr. Ponder reported, although Family Child Care Learning Homes are still underrepresented. Beginning December 1, the QR team will review applications for the Quality Rated Advisory Council, which will meet in January. Dr. Ponder gave an update on the Quality Rated revision process. Design will begin next year, and the new system is planned to roll out in 2028. Dr. Ponder closed his presentation with an update on the Quality Rated Family Support Call Center. In their first four months of operation, the team has worked with almost 4,000 families seeking child care. Dr. Ponder shared a couple of stories of families with very tight constraints who received personalized help from the call center team.

Mr. Davis asked whether the QR workforce bonuses are available to employees of providers at all star levels and in the same amounts. Dr. Ponder said, yes, that the bonus is \$500 no matter the star level.

Ms. Silva-Ortiz asked whether the Thriving Business Academy materials are available in Spanish. Dr. Ponder responded that some are, and he directed Ms. Silva-Ortiz to Assistant Director of Business Supports and Operations Sonja Steptoe to learn about the materials and activities that are available in Spanish.

f. Federal Programs

Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Families and Eligibility Sheila Williams gave the Federal Programs presentation in the absence of Deputy Commissioner Elisabetta Kasfir. Ms. Williams reviewed the CAPS organizational structure and the overall workload. The CAPS team processes applications, provides support to families and providers, and manages an ongoing caseload. Ms. Williams announced two changes related to eligibility went into effect in October. CAPS raised the threshold for the very low

income priority group from 10% to 30% of the federal poverty level and the initial eligibility threshold from 30% to 40% of the state median income. In fiscal year 2025 CAPS processed 66,155 new applications and 47,870 renewal applications. Of these, 16% of new applications and 49% of renewal applications were approved. About 80% of rejected renewal applications are rejected because families did not complete the process or submit their verification documents. About 20% of new applicants identify as student parents, and their applications are approved at a rate of 28%. Over the past year, the CAPS team increased the number of quality reviews it conducts, reviewing almost 10,000 cases and over 5,500 calls and has seen that an increase in quality reviews results in a reduction in errors.

8. Lunch and Committee Meetings

Dr. Beam adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:20 a.m.

9. Committee Reports

At 12:45 p.m. Dr. Beam called for committee reports. Dr. Washell reported from the Programs and Rules committee that CAPS has transitioned from their previous communication platform, NexxPhase, to the CAPS Customer Engagement Platform (CEP), which has streamlined communication processes. She then shared that Child Care Services is undergoing a review of all licensing rules to look for opportunities to determine possible new rules, redundancy, and rule deletion. She said that every November providers receive information on renewing their licenses, which must be paid by January 1. Finally for Child Care Services, Dr. Washell reported that the division is hosting various webinar lunch and learn sessions, including one on January 7 called “Tiny Airways, Big Risks” about understanding and preventing choking. For Pre-K and Instructional Supports, Dr. Washell reported that the DECAL Early Language and Literacy Lab serves as an online hub for educators to access high-quality language and literacy trainings. As of the end of October 2025, the Georgia Training Approval team has approved 178 trainings to be included in the Lab. Dr. Washell shared that in September 2025 Georgia Training Approval team hosted its annual conference for state approved trainers. Finally for Pre-K and Instructional Supports, Dr. Washell reported that in collaboration with the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy, they are offering training for DECAL staff focused on understanding the Science of Reading. For Nutrition Services, Dr. Washell reported that the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) has continued to operate as usual, serving over 64 million meals in fiscal year 2025. She also reported that Nutrition Services supported the “Chop, Look, Listen” initiative and that October was Farm to School and ECE month with the theme “Apple of our Eye.” Nutrition Services is currently recruiting organizations to participate in Happy Helpings this summer, she added.

10. Public Comments

Following the first committee report, Dr. Beam asked Ms. Obi whether anyone had signed up to make public comments. Ms. Obi replied that no one had signed up and no comments were received via the chat. Ms. Beam called for committee reports to continue.

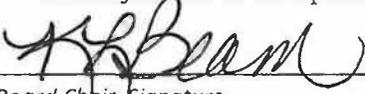
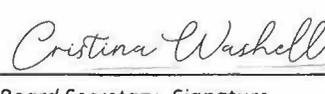
11. Committee Reports (continued)

Ms. Morrissey reported from the Budget and Finance Committee that they received a tour of the updated DECAL website and highlighted that you can use the AI tool “Ask CALi” on the site to ask questions. She reported that the budget is on track as of October 31, with 66% of the year remaining and 64% of the budget remaining. Ms. Morrissey reported that 88.9% of DECAL’s spending for the current fiscal year has gone to grants and programs, with 11.1% spent on operations. Ms. Freeman reported from the Quality Innovations and Partnerships Committee that if any board members would like to tour a Quality Rated program, they can reach out to Kimberly Davis, Denise Jenson, or Quandra Obi. A Quality Rated staff person will be happy to

take them to a star-rated program and show them the things that Quality Rated looks for in high-quality programs.

12. Adjournment

Dr. Beam reminded Board members of the 2026 meeting dates and the next meeting on February 19, 2026. She adjourned at 1:02 p.m.

	<u>2/19/2026</u>		<u>2/19/2026</u>
Board Chair, Signature	Date	Board Secretary, Signature	Date