

**Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
November 20, 2025**

Board Members

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

DECAL Staff

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Susan Adams, Bentley Ponder, Pam Stevens, Reg Griffin, Rian Ringsrud, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Clayton Adams, Farouk Baksh, Ariana Banhan, Lari Lyn Beyer, Kristin Blevins, Nieves Blocker, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Stephanie Clark, Xavier Corbett, Kimberly Davis, Katie Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Jennifer Delorme, Hayat Dergaga, Shayna Funke, Moriam Hassan, Judy Holdaway, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, Denise Jenson, Melinda Knowles, Jarita Lawrence-Burdette, Laura Lucas, Christopher Mann, Brittany Marks, Stephen McGarity, Meghan McNail, Christi Moore, Miranda Murphy, Amir Nilforooshan, Mia Obiwo, Rob O'Callaghan, Lisa Pitts, Bridget Ratajczak, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Christina Rigsby, Dajuana Robinson, April Rogers, Michael Rodgers, Brenna Rutherford, Barbara Sanders, Devanie Schay, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Hannah Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Balaram Tidhi, Laura Wagner, Kharla Walker, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Martine Watts, Sheila Williams, Jada Williams, Laurail Williams, Liz Young, Sheryl Young-Wilhite

Guests

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

Dr. Beam called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

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

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.

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.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- 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 Hoschton. 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 and Advocacy Specialist from 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.

- 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. Nutrition Services led the state's Farm to School/Farm to Early Education Month in October. During the month, the Nutrition Services team made a site visit to the Rex Child Care and Early Learning Center.
- 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.

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:10 a.m. and resumed it at 10:23 a.m.

- 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 for *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 and hosted two Super Saturday community training events in Atlanta and Dublin. 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. Ms. Rogers 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.

- 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.
- 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.

Dr. Beam adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:20 a.m. She called the meeting back to order at 12:45 p.m. and 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.

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.

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.

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.