

Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
February 19, 2026

Board Members

Kristy Beam (Chair), Jen Bennecke, Phil Davis, Joyce Freeman, Maria Franklin, Susan Harper, Joanna Hill, Kristin Morrissey (Vice Chair), Sylvia Washington

DECAL Staff

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Susan Adams, Elisabetta Kasfir, Pam Stevens, Reg Griffin, Rian Ringsrud, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Clayton Adams, Ben Appling, Jennifer Avera, Farouk Baksh, Pamela Barner, Calandra Beavers, LariLyn Beyer, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Dennis Brice, Jennifer Bridgeman, Vanessa Brown, Mercedes Burch, Peter Campbell, Tomisher Campbell, Christina Canada-Clark, Xavier Corbett, Tina Crooms, Katie Davis, Kimberly Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Jennifer Delorme, Tyler Duggins, Rosalyn Elder, Emilia Emmanuel, Brittany Fordham, Carol Fordham, Rachel Fowler, Shayna Funke, Felicia Gibson, Aleisha Golden, Dorethea Hackney, Katie Hagan, Kinsey Harper, Kiersten Harris, Kiersten Harris, Moriam Hassan, LeighAnn Hendrix, Beth Houtz, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, Demetrius Jasper, Denise Jenson, Laquita Kent, Jammye King, Melinda Knowles, Jeanielle LaRonde-ChanTack, Danyell Lynn, Brittany Marks, CynQueshia Martin, Amy Mastin, Shari McClain, Charmain McGahee, Stephen McGarity, Christi Moore, Abby Mozo, Miranda Murphy, Mia Obiwo, Rob O'Callaghan, Valerie Perez, Lisa Pitts, Dareia Printup, Bridget Ratajczak, China Redman, Kendria Reeves, Anne Rein, Jessica Render, Melissa Risenhoover, Dajuana Robinson, Michael Rodgers, Barbara Sanders, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Toni Simmons, Hannah Smith, Nate Smith, Latoya Stafford, Michelle Talley, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Jennifer Waters, Martine Watts, Sheila Williams, Liz Young, Sheryl Young-Wilhite

Guests

Diane Early, Chase Jones, Charlotte Pelz

Dr. Beam 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.

Dr. Washington made a short presentation she called, "Inspirational Pre-K stories." She showed pictures of herself as a Pre-K student and her three children (now in high school) in their Pre-K photos. Dr. Washington shared that her parents were immigrants who came to the U.S. on work visas and became citizens so that she could attend Pre-K. Because she already knew how to read, she was named preschooler of the month during her second month, her first in a series of academic honors. She also shared her delight at reading to a preschool class during Inclusive Early Learning Week last week, and she gave Board members copies of *The Berenstain Bears Go to the Doctor*, which she gives to her pediatric patients to help explain why they need shots.

Dr. Beam invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. Mr. Davis commented on the passing of a beloved teacher in Savannah, Dr. Linda Davis, who died recently in an automobile accident. Her absence will be felt in the community, Mr. Davis said. Ms. Freeman reported that she and her colleagues at West Georgia Technical College participated in the Courage to Care training offered by the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy, an evidence-based child sexual abuse prevention program that equips adults to recognize warning signs, create productive environments, and respond appropriately to concerns. She and her colleagues have become facilitators of the program, and they have incorporated material from the program into the College's curriculum. Ms. Freeman recommended the program for all child care professionals across the state. Ms. Hill reported that she served once again on the planning committee for the Extra Special People (ESP) Big Hearts gala, which raised \$1.6 million for access to summer camp for children with disabilities. She also recommended a book to Board members called, *The Joy Exchange* by Laura Hope Whitaker. Ms. Franklin

reported that she also read to a preschool class during Inclusive Early Learning week and spoke with teachers about the importance of having movement breaks throughout the day. Dr. Washington noted that President Trump was expected to visit her district later in the day.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy Jacobs shared highlights from DECAL's FY2025 Annual Report and encouraged Board members to look at the report on DECAL's website. The agency conducted 8,599 CCS visits, supported 64,571,148 meals through the federally funded Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), served 70,572 children in Georgia's Pre-K, processed 66,155 applications for CAPS scholarships, and conducted 1,600 Quality Rated observations. The Commissioner also gave an update about DECAL's communications with the agency's federal partners, mainly the Office of Child Care (OCC) in the Health and Human Services department. Most of DECAL's funding comes from the federal government through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) administered by the OCC. The OCC monitors state programs; and, in January, DECAL completed an on-site monitoring visit with OCC representatives. Although the agency is waiting for the formal response from OCC, the Commissioner has heard informally that the agency passed the visit with flying colors. She gave Board members an update on the weekly monitoring of CAPS expenditures by OCC. OCC has always monitored payments weekly; but, in the aftermath of the irregularities discovered in Minnesota, the OCC has implemented a more thorough weekly check. Commissioner Jacobs reported that the extra weekly work for DECAL staff has not impacted the timing of weekly CAPS payments to providers. She also announced that DECAL has been awarded \$19,866,040 in CCDF American Relief Act Supplemental Disaster Relief Funds to be used for recovery efforts by child care providers in 90 Georgia counties who were impacted by Hurricane Helene, and the agency is awaiting further instructions from OCC about how the money may be spent. The Commissioner also invited Board members to save the date for the Shaping Futures luncheon to be hosted by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce on April 24.
- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL's expenses are on track with the budget for SFY 2026. He presented the Governor's recommended budget for FY 2026, which includes funding for a one-time, \$2,000 salary supplement for DECAL employees and Pre-K teachers, including lead teachers and assistant teachers. He also presented the Governor's recommended budget for FY 2027, which includes a small decrease in DECAL's required contribution to the State Employees Benefit Fund and a \$17.7 million increase, \$12 million of which will fund year three of a four-year phase in to reduce Pre-K classroom size from 22 to 20 students. Lastly, Mr. Ringsrud reported on legislation being considered by the Georgia Legislature during the current session. HB 1123 would ensure that after-school programs are accessible to Pre-K students. HB 1146 would initiate a pilot program to expand Georgia's Pre-K Program to 3-year-old children. HB 1147 would create a grant program to enhance the reimbursement rates for CAPS providers; and HB 1193 is the proposed GA Early Literacy Act of 2026, which would fund literacy coaches to support classroom teachers.
- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Deputy Commissioner Elisabetta Kasfir gave a presentation about the comprehensive system in place to prevent and detect fraud in the CAPS program. Her team collaborates with both Child Care Services (CCS) and Audits and Compliance team to make sure that public funds are not misused. CCS provides the first line of defense, thoroughly vetting child care programs during the licensing process and sharing with CAPS any changes observed during monitoring visits. When a child care provider applies to join the CAPS program, the CAPS team verifies the provider's licensing status and business documents and re-verifies annually thereafter. The CAPS payment system is also separated from the system that creates scholarships for families, making attempts

to manipulate the payment system extremely difficult. If fraud or billing errors are suspected, the CAPS team makes a referral to Audits and Compliance. Ms. Kasfir introduced Director of the Audits and Compliance division Ben Appling, who gave an overview of how the CAPS Compliance Unit handles referrals. All reviews begin with an unannounced site visit, Mr. Appling said. Compliance auditors then request records, observe operations, analyze data, and determine whether any funds must be repaid to DECAL. Compliance and Audits also performs ongoing analysis of data from across the agency to identify potential fraud risks and billing errors.

- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens announced rule changes that her team is working on for implementation in October. Most are changes to language only and will not impact child care providers. Ms. Stevens will present the proposed rules at the May Board meeting, post them for public content during the summer, and ask the Board to approve them at its August meeting. Ms. Stevens introduced Technical Assistance Unit Manager Jennifer Waters, who shared an update about the CCS resource suite, a set of printable resources that providers can download. These resources link licensing rules to the “best practices” for the care and education of children. Ms. Waters shared a thought from the National Association of Regulatory Agencies that the goal of monitoring is not to find noncompliance but rather to prevent it. There are more than 80 resources available to all child care programs and providers. Ms. Stevens concluded the CCS report with data about child care providers. The number of centers shrank from FY 2024 to FY 2025, and the number of family child care learning homes continued its decline. However, the number of large child care centers—those with a capacity greater than 160 children—rose slightly. After the current fiscal year ends in June, Ms. Stevens’ team will analyze child care capacity into the state to learn whether that is stable.

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:27 a.m. and resumed it at 10:41 a.m.

- In the absence of Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder, Director of Research Partnerships and Business Supports Shayna Funke and Director of Quality Rated System Development and Business Operations Denise Jenson reported from QIP. In its first six months of operation, Ms. Funke announced, the Quality Rated Family Support Call Center responded to almost 4,000 inquiries. Of these, the call center specialists made more than 2,000 referrals to 10,000 providers, 86% of which are Quality Rated. Ms. Funke also reported on the progress of the ongoing Quality Study with researchers at Child Trends. She announced that the researchers have exceeded their targets for study participants from Child Care Learning Centers and school-age programs and have reached about half their target for Family Child Care Learning Homes. Recruitment and data collection for the study will conclude in the spring. Ms. Jenson reported that the number of providers that have received a rating remains steady at about 67% of all eligible providers. She announced that DECAL awarded a total of \$9.9 million in Quality Rated Workforce Bonus last year to almost 20,000 child care employees. Also in 2025, the agency made \$18 million in quarterly Commitment to Quality (C2Q) payments to 2- and 3-Star Caps providers. Twenty-five providers have been selected for the Quality Rated Advisory Council, which will hold its first meeting March 11, she said.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia’s Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams reported on Inclusive Early Learning week, which was celebrated last week, February 9–13. This year marked the 10th anniversary of the celebration, the goals of which are to increase awareness of and advocacy for young children with disabilities and their families and expand access for these children to high-quality adaptive learning environments. Ms. Adams showed pictures and thanked Board members for participating. She also invited Board members to participate in Children’s Mental Health Week, coming up May 4–8, and she introduced Director of Workforce Supports and Learning, Christi Moore. Dr.

Moore gave Board members an overview of a report her team has put together about the state of the early care and education workforce, including aggregate demographics, credentials, and compensation.

Dr. Beam adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:21 a.m. She brought the meeting back to order at 1:01 p.m. and 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.

Dr. Washington reported from the Programs and Rules committee that CAPS made changes to the annual redetermination process for families. She relayed that a significant number of families are lost to services during re-verification, and research is being done to understand why they are either unresponsive to CAPS or not submitting the proper documentation. To improve continuity of care, all CAPS notifications and milestones were shifted back two weeks earlier with the goal of both improving retention rates and reducing stress to families. Preliminary data indicates this is a positive change, and the division has seen a consistently higher retention rate, as high as a 10% increase in the number of families approved at their annual redetermination. Dr. Washington then shared that Child Care Services has administered three webinars to child care providers since February 2025. Topics include how to prepare for visits and guidance on choking prevention, and another webinar in April will focus on required reporting. Each webinar has had at least 350 participants. For Pre-K and Instructional Supports, Dr. Washington reported that applications are open for current Georgia's Pre-K grantees to offer the Summer Transition Program for rising Pre-K or rising Kindergarten students. Additionally, applications will open this month for new Pre-K classrooms. Eligible applicants include local school systems, charter schools approved by the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia, Head Start programs, and licensed child care learning centers that meet the space requirements. Funding priority will be given to communities with a Pre-K waiting list of 25 or more students and counties with a Pre-K saturation rate at or below 60%. For Nutrition Services, Dr. Washington reported that Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program, is recruiting sponsors and their applications are due May 15. Kick-off events will be held statewide in June and July to raise awareness and engage families. Earlier this month DECAL partnered with No Kid Hungry to host a summit focused on expanding rural, non-congregate meal programs during the summer, which included workshops on innovative partnerships, menu planning, and financial management. The CACFP hosts a national awareness week from March 15 to March 21. Governor Kemp signed a proclamation recognizing CACFP Week in Georgia, and this year's theme will be Stirring Up Goodness. Nutrition Services will visit a meal site during CACFP Week and invite Board members to participate.

Ms. Morrissey reported from the Budget and Finance Committee that they received a presentation that looked at the budget one month further than the budget that was presented during the board meeting, which was at 50% of the year. The presentation during the committee meeting looked at the remaining 40%. They received a breakdown by program name and learned more about money being paid to staff and money going out to grants and programs. Ms. Morrissey reported that the total budget remaining would be 44% without encumbrances.

Ms. Freeman reported from the QIP committee on two studies that will soon be available. The first is a study conducted by the Urban Institute that examines how state and local regulations shape the process of starting a licensed child care facility in Georgia. Ms. Freeman noted the significant number of survey respondents who consider DECAL's requirements an easy process to follow. The second study is on economic impact covering the years 2022 to 2024 and will be published by UGA. Findings from this study include \$6.52 billion in total economic impact in 2024. In this year's economic impact study, researchers are focusing on the ECE workforce with preliminary results expected in the fall. The committee also learned about the work being done through DECAL's Community Impact Grants. Scottdale Early Learning, Kennesaw State University, and the Black Child Development Institute were highlighted for their work. For Quality Rated, Ms. Freeman reported that members of the QR anchor team are completing the Environment Rating Scales state anchor reliability

recalibration with the authors of these instruments to ensure the continued integrity of the QR system. In October 2025 the Thriving Child Care Business Academy marked its third year of operation and provider interest in the trainings remains strong. Total enrollment in webinars, small study groups, and individual coaching sessions has exceeded 600 participants.

Dr. Beam reminded Board members of the next meeting on May 21, 2026. She adjourned at 1:19 p.m.