

Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
May 21, 2026

Board Members

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

DECAL Staff

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Rian Ringsrud, Bentley Ponder, Susan Adams, Pam Stevens, Elisabetta Kasfir, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Clayton Adams, Farouk Baksh, Katrina Bernard, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Jessica Boshuizen, Dennis Brice, Jennifer Bridgeman, Vanessa Brown, Tomisher Campbell, Stephanie Clark, Kimberly Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Tammy Dill, Tyler Duggins, Bart Ellington, Shayna Funke, Moriam Hassan, Melissa Herndon, Donya Higbee, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, Lauren Jackson (Intern), Denise Jenson, Melissa Johns, Alaina Jones, Jarita Lawrence, Laura Lucas, Brittany Marks, Amy Mastin, Stephen McGarity, Andrea Moore, Abby Mozo, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O'Callaghan, Mia Obiwo, Stephen Owusu-Ansah, Valerie Perez, Bridgette Person, Lisa Pitts, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Dajuana Robinson, Michael Rodgers, April Rogers, Barbara Sanders, Pamela Scalf, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Hannah Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Thea Stevens, Rokeya Stone, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Adi Valdez-Rodriguez, Laura Wagner, Mark Waits, Noni Walton, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Erin Watson, Martine Watts, Jill West, Jada Williams, Liz Young

Guests

Charlotte Davis, Diane Early, Hanah Goldberg, Samantha Hogan, Sandra Hong, Zoe Jones, Emma Loew, Kelly Maxwell, Lindsay McVicar, Charlotte Pelz, Ellen Reynolds, Hyosub Shin, Emily Stancil, Jessica Woltjen

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 February meeting.

For inspiration Maria Franklin reflected on the month of May as a time for graduations and the opening of new chapters for children of all ages. She invited Board members to notice that life is constantly evolving, and growth is always happening. She reminded everyone that our presence in children's lives contributes to their growth.

Dr. Beam invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. She reported going to her grandson's Pre-K graduation. Ms. Morrissey reported on the NIEER press conference at the capitol. Ms. Hill said that she returned to her former child care center and read for Children's Mental Health Week.

Commissioner Jacobs and Dr. Beam presented a resolution for Susan Harper honoring her 17 years of service as a Board member and her prior leadership as Board Secretary, Vice Chair, and Chair. Ms. Harper was originally appointed to the Board by Governor Perdue and reappointed by Governor Deal and Governor Kemp. Ms. Harper received a standing ovation for her service. She reflected on DECAL's growth over her tenure on the Board and expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to serve.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy Jacobs spotlighted the recognition Georgia's Pre-K received from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Georgia is the first state with a universal Pre-K to have met all 10 NIEER quality benchmarks. Only six states have achieved that recognition, and Georgia's Pre-K serves the most children of those six. The Commissioner announced the six finalists for Pre-K Teacher of the Year (TOTY). Funds are raised privately for each finalist to receive \$500 for their own use. This year's finalists from public schools are Lacy Parrish from Robinson Elementary in Dawson

County, Leah Mays from Jefferson Elementary in Jackson County, and Marisol Rivas from West Green Elementary in Coffee County. Finalists from child care centers are Kellie McCormick from Cedars Preschool at Hudson Bridge in Henry County, Shawn Meyers from Sunrise Learning Academy in Gwinnett County, and Skyla Holmes from Angel's Paradise Learning Center in Fulton County. These six will go through a rigorous evaluation process during late summer, and the two TOTY will be announced in the fall.

- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that DECAL's expenses are on track with the budget for SFY 2026. The budget for amended FY 2026 (HB 973) includes an additional \$1.4 million from state general funds and \$17.3 million from state lottery funds for a one-time bonus for full-time state employees and Pre-K lead and assistant teachers. The budget for FY 2027 (HB 974) includes a net increase of \$28 million over FY 2026 to fund year three of the four-year phase in reducing Pre-K classrooms from 22 to 20 students; expand the extended day program to the Pre-K CAPS priority group; expand the rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program by 25 classrooms; and provide five days of paid leave for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers. The agency was also directed to use existing funds to add 1,288 CAPS scholarships, Mr. Ringsrud said. He gave a brief update on recently enacted legislation related to early childhood. HB 1123 requires public schools that offer both Pre-K and afterschool programs to allow Pre-K students to participate in their afterschool programs. HB 1193 requires literacy coaches in all public K-3 schools. SB 589 allows parents to enroll their children in Pre-K if they turn four or five by Sept. 1 and enroll children who are eligible for first grade into kindergarten instead. HB 1097 changes the mechanism through which the state receives federal criminal record history.
- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder recounted the evolution of DECAL's community outreach efforts from four empowerment zones established in 2014 to the current structure with six regional Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators. He highlighted some achievements from that team and invited Board members to interact with their local coordinators. Dr. Ponder announced that a team from DECAL will visit many of the 15 Community Impact grantees between June 1 and June 16 to learn about their projects and how they are helping local families, and he invited Board members to join a grantee visit. The number of providers that have received a star rating through Quality Rated remains steady at about 67% of all eligible providers, Dr. Ponder said. The Quality Rated Workforce Bonus continues to be well-received; 95% of eligible providers have had staff apply in 2026, and \$3 million has been paid out so far this year. Commitment to Quality payments have been going out to 2- and 3-star providers since January; a total of \$3.7 million has been paid to 1,934 providers to date. Dr. Ponder gave brief updates about research projects underway with external research partners, and he introduced Dr. Sandra Soliday Hong, Senior Research Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Hong gave a presentation about a study of language development in Pre-K conducted during the 2022–2023 school year. The study confirmed earlier research showing that Georgia's Pre-K successfully prepares children for kindergarten and that children make solid gains in language skills during their time in Pre-K. The study also found that teachers with more experience see bigger gains in children's language development.

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:26 a.m. and resumed it at 10:44 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams gave several examples about how her division is incorporating the Pre-K language development study results into Pre-K program strategies. The emphasis on teacher retention began with moving lead teachers to the K–12 pay scale and continues with the increase to five days of paid time off (PTO). Revisions to the

Georgia Early Learning & Development standards (GELDS) to be rolled out soon emphasize vocabulary development and early writing skills. Ms. Adams' division has also implemented Science of Reading courses for DECAL's Pre-K Specialists and lead and assistant Pre-K teachers. The expansion of the Rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program (STP) for dual language learners opens language development opportunities to more students, and the Pre-K team conducts ongoing analysis of child language skills. Ms. Adams also gave an update on the Summer Transition Programs. For rising kindergarteners there will be 335 classes of 14 students each (4,690 seats). For rising Pre-K children there will be 92 classes of 12 students each (1,104 seats). New classroom materials were purchased this year for inclusion classrooms and dual language classrooms.

- Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Director Laura Lucas gave Board members an update about the accomplishments of the interagency IECMH task force. The task force solicited input from caregivers for its recently-published strategic plan for 2026–2028 and has been invited to a national conference to share how they incorporated caregiver voice. Georgia continues to receive national recognition for the IECMH Medicaid billing guides. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid publish Georgia's billing guide as an example for other states to follow. Georgia was included in a national project to increase screening and effective referrals for Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Ms. Lucas said. She also showed highlights from Children's Mental Health Week and thanked Board members who participated.
- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens reviewed the 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. These will be posted for public content over the summer, and the Board will be asked to approve them at the August meeting. Ms. Stevens also reported on the national TRLECE licensing study that Georgia participated in. The study explored whether higher quality levels were associated with fewer licensing violations. The study found that, in Georgia, programs with higher QR ratings generally demonstrated stronger licensing compliance, and this finding was consistent in centers and FCCLH providers. Notably, programs with higher QR ratings also had fewer high-risk citations.
- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir shared updates about CAPS' work with the Family and Provider Advisory Councils. The CAPS team has acted on feedback from both groups, redesigning forms to make them easier for families to understand, and changing policies to streamline key processes for both families and providers. Ms. Kasfir announced that, for initial eligibility, the income limit has increased from 40% to 50% of the State Median Income (SMI), and the threshold for the Very Low Income priority group has increased from 30% to 50% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The upper limits on income for CAPS renewals have not changed. Ms. Kasfir informed the Board that data collection for the market rate cost study is underway as required by CCDF requirements. This year the agency is collecting data from two groups: (1) all licensed providers and (2) a sample of Quality Rated providers that participate in the CAPS program. DECAL is partnering with the Georgia State University Policy Lab and, for the first time, collecting data about the cost of care in a continuing effort to understand the cost of providing high-quality care.
- Head Start Collaboration Director Allison Setterlind gave an update on Head Start in Georgia. The federal Administration for Children and Families makes grants directly to local community organizations, non-profits, and school systems. Grantees customize their programs based on community needs. The grants include funding for comprehensive services that are free to enrolled families, and all children in Early Head Start and Head Start receive early screening for disability. Head Start is currently funded to serve about 20,000 children and their families in Georgia and is a big supplier of early care and education programs in rural parts of the state.

Dr. Beam adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:56 a.m. She brought the meeting back to order at 1:00 p.m. and opened the public comment period. Ms. Obi called on Mechelle Correll Hobbs who said,

Thank you. Good afternoon, members of the board. My name is Mechelle Correll Hobbs. I am the owner and founder of Cornerstone Learning Center in Rockdale County, Georgia. What started out for me as a way to get into the field of education, because my degree is in early ed, I wanted to be that teacher. But when I went to, as a single mom, drop my little one off at 18 months old in a preschool, I never left. I never left. I couldn't do it. And my mission then changed to become a place where people can have safe care while they go off to work, because that's what I needed. In doing so, in 2019, I opened my first location. And since then, we have thrived and continue to grow and build. We are now a founding center in the community. We are big, we are known, and our families look for us and trust us. So recently, I've dedicated my time, my energy into coming here today to be heard on a matter that is truly concerning and deeply, deeply impacting us. Like I said, I've done this for 28 years, serving children, families, and the early childhood community here in Georgia. This is not just business to me. This is my life's work. It's my ministry. It's my reputation. It's my passion. And I have spent decades building through service, sacrifice and commitment to quality care. Today, I respectfully and formally am requesting a meeting with Ms. Stevens regarding a serious concern surrounding the handling of citations that are being issued against programs and the process in which those determinations are made. Specifically, the inconsistencies, the interpretations from one consultant to the other, and how it impacts us on the back end, not just in that moment, but the rippling effects that it will have if it's not corrected. I want to be very clear. I fully support accountability, compliance, and child safety. What I want is to be heard, to be heard on the matters that I don't feel have been heard, to have an audience in which I can get a true objective interpretation of what it is we should do. Because again, if I've been doing this this long and have never, ever, ever been in situations like this, then I want to get a clear understanding so that that way we can do it right. Not just for my center, but for those that I mentor, for those that I work with, for all of the people who are doing the work and doing it because we truly care. The impact of these citations goes far beyond reports on paper. These citations threaten my business, their standing in the community, staff around, family trust, and potentially even the insurability of financial sustainability as a child care provider. More importantly, even though I know, as stated to me, when I tried speaking with the supervisor over my location. I know that citations roll off in 12 months. That doesn't matter to me. The record needs to be correct, and the record should be clear. For again, all intents and purposes, we're on the same page. We're a part of the same team. We have the same goals with Bright from the Start. So, we want to make sure that when we go this year to renew our insurance, it's not listing things of false accurate, false statements and things that can potentially require or determine whether or not we can even be reinsured. And that's a big deal for us. As a small business owner, I take that very seriously because it was hard enough trying to find insurance for child care centers without now these added pressures. What concerns me most is if this can happen to a provider with nearly three decades of experience, transparency, and documented commitment to quality care, then other providers may also fear speaking up when they believe something is unfair. So, with Bright from the Start's mission, speaking on partnerships with providers to improve outcomes for children and their families, that partnership must also include fairness, objectivity, professionalism, and the willingness to truly listen before damaging conclusions are finalized. Again, my request today is simple, but extremely important. I am asking this board to help facilitate a formal meeting with Ms. Stevens so these concerns, supporting evidence and broader implications of these actions can be properly reviewed at the highest appropriate level. Thank you for your time.

Ms. Obi called on Rachel Shelton who said,

Good afternoon. I'm Rachael Shelton, and I'm a mother and a teacher, and I have served as an educator in Cobb County daycare centers. I have found that as I have toured schools and worked at the schools, that unfortunately, I believe that the quality of care at many of them has not met what I would expect for a good

quality center. And I know that DECAL, that's your goal is to seek to make sure that the quality is at the best possible quality. People leave their precious children in these schools. And right now, many schools are opting to keep their classrooms at the maximum number of children allowed by our state, and they want to hire only one teacher to be in the classroom at a time. I found this in more than one school or more than one center, excuse me. So, the state ratio allows for 15 three-year-olds with one teacher and as many as 12 two-year-olds with one teacher. When there's one teacher, the level of supervision is unacceptable for being able to take proper care of young children, particularly with those current state ratios. With two teachers as a mandate, there may still be the occasional oversight, but with one, it's an accident waiting to happen. When there are two teachers in charge of any group, children will be interacted with much more. And we know that that's very important, especially at these young ages, to interact with the children, have conversations. I'm not seeing enough of that, obviously, myself being one teacher in a class with 12 two-year-olds, obviously even three-year-olds, many are not potty trained. So, some argue that 20 or more children enrolled in a class can cause issues such as overcrowding of the space, which I understand, then we must find a way of funding payroll for two teachers with groups of 17 or 18 three-year-olds, for example. Our children deserve two teachers in the room in every class for ages birth through five years old, and especially infants and one-year-olds who are helpless. Obviously, it would be a tragedy if a teacher were to become incapacitated and have to wait on someone to happen to notice a teacher, I'm sorry. So, if a child care facility cannot keep consistently 17 or 18 three-year-olds enrolled, such as would already require two teachers, they should close the class or even the school. The state is able to keep two teachers in our pre-K programs, so schools should be required to give this base level of care to all, and especially younger children and infants. And basically I would like, I would recommend that the legislature, or I'm sorry, liaison recommend to those who have the power to make those decisions, make it much safer. I know that funding can be difficult, a difficult situation, but I think it's worth it and I think it is doable to make sure that every child care center has two teachers in every classroom, birth to age 5.

Following the public comments, Ms. Beam called for committee reports.

Ms. Franklin reported from the Programs and Rules Committee. CAPS made changes to expand the work of their Family Support team. These efforts focus on community engagement, centering family voice, and outreach efforts based on feedback from CAPS families. The Family Supports team will partner with different teams across DECAL, including the QIP Early Education Community Partnerships coordinators and Nutrition Services. DECAL Nutrition Services will host events across the state to kick off Happy Helpings and a CACFP Service Summit later this Summer. The USDA issued a final rule to expand fluid milk options in school and programs that participate in CACFP.

Ms. Morrissey reported from the Budget and Finance Committee. The committee received an updated financial report covering the period through April 30, and agency expenses remain on track with the budget. The agency continues to operate with great efficiency, Ms. Morrissey said, with 89% of funds received going out for grants and programs. Ms. Morrissey called on Mr. Ringsrud to announce the audit results for the previous year. He informed the Board that DECAL received notice of another clean audit, marking 22 successive audits without any major findings.

Ms. Freeman reported from the Quality Innovations and Partnerships Committee. Several efforts are being made to increase the response rate for the Market Rate Survey. The Thriving Child Care Business Academy worked with Civitas to develop trainings focused on state and federal credits to help providers understand and take advantage of them. Webinars, small study groups, self-study guides, and video tutorials are all options for providers to learn more about tax-related topics.

Dr. Beam told Board members that a proposal has been submitted to dissolve the Board committees so that the Board meetings can be shorter. If the Board accepts the proposal, DECAL staff who present to the Board will include the information they now present over lunch into their morning presentations. This proposal requires a

change to the Board’s bylaws. Chief Counsel Ira Sudman and his team have drafted that change and included it with the other materials Board members received. Dr. Beam asked that Board members review the proposed changes and be prepared to vote on the proposal at the next meeting on August 27, 2026. She adjourned the meeting at 1:21 p.m.

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