

Board of Early Care and Learning
Meeting Summary
August 27, 2026

Board Members

Jen Bennecke, Phil Davis, Maria Franklin, Joyce Freeman, Joanna Hill, Kristin Morrissey (Vice Chair), Cristina Washell, Sylvia Washington, Karla Zisook

DECAL Staff

Commissioner Amy Jacobs, Bentley Ponder, Susan Adams, Pam Stevens, Elisabetta Kasfir, Reg Griffin, Ira Sudman, Quandra Obi, Clayton Adams, Kristen Arnold, Jennifer Avera, Farouk Baksh, Pamela Barner, Chondra Bolton, Tamika Boone, Tomisher Campbell, Stephanie Clarke, Melissa Crumb-Bond, Katie Davis, Kimberly Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Hayat Dergaga, Woody Dover, Tyler Duggins, Bart Ellington, Carol Fordham, Shayna Funke, Joshua Glass, Moriam Hassan, Melissa Herndon, Janet Herrera, Donya Higbee, Amy Hill, Beth Houtz, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, Laura Hutchins, Denise Jenson, Melissa Johns, Melinda Knowles, Jarita Lawrence, Brittany Marks, Amy Mastin, Stephen McGarity, Meghan McNail, Elizabeth Milling, Tiffany Mitchell, Andrea Moore, Miranda Murphy, Amir Nilforooshan, Rob O'Callaghan, Mia Obiwo, Valerie Perez, Jessica Perschka, Bridgette Person, Lisa Pitts, Bridget Ratajczak, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Dajuana Robinson, Michael Rodgers, April Rogers, Amy Roys, Barbara Sanders, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Hannah Smith, Nate Smith, Sonja Steptoe, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Laura Wagner, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Erin Watson, Martine Watts, Jada Williams, Jonathan Wolleat, Liz Young

Guests

Ideisha Bellany, April Brown, Brent Churchwell, Annie Davis Schoch, Gabrielle Dorane Clerveau, Diane Early, Diane Gal-Szabo, Samantha Hogan, Zoe Jones, Holly Keaton, Doré LaForet, Regina Little, Megan Mercer, Charlotte Pelz, Lauren Pollow, Brandi Pye, Bernard Reynolds, Ellen Reynolds, Austin Trott, Jessica Woltjen

Ms. Morrissey called the meeting to order at 9:01 a.m.

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

For inspiration Maria Franklin shared a recent experience in which she was asked why she chose her profession. She considered offering her usual answer, that she has a passion for helping children. In that moment, she was called instead to share a more personal answer, that her daughter struggled to communicate when she was very young. Ms. Franklin resolved then that if she could help her daughter find her voice, she would help as many other children and families as she could. Ms. Franklin invited Board members to reflect on their own choices and whether there was an encounter that influenced them early in their careers. She reminded Board members, too, that everyone's work makes a difference for children and families.

Ms. Morrissey invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. Ms. Freeman reported that she had been invited to read to children at All Stars Academy in Bremen, and she announced that West Georgia Technical College (WGTC) has added a new pathway to its ECE curriculum to make it easier for students to transfer from WGTC to any university. Dr. Zisook participated in a grantee site visit to Scottdale Early Learning and reported that she was very impressed with the program's commitment to literacy and its emphasis on family literacy. Ms. Morrissey remarked on the passing of Dolly Parton and her contribution to literacy.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy Jacobs reported on the priorities received from the federal Office of Child Care (OCC) in July. The OCC will likely issue a new rule for CCDF funds in the fall, the second rule to be issued in 2026, that emphasizes deregulation, strengthening program integrity, and serving children in foster care. DECAL staff have begun working on the state plan for CCDF funds, due next spring, that will go into effect October 1, 2027 and run through September 30, 2030. The agency is conducting the child care provider market rate study now; this data helps DECAL set the CAPS reimbursement rates for the three years of the CCDF block grant. The agency will partner with Child Trends to conduct a statewide ECE needs assessment this fall to inform the CCDF state plan. The needs assessment will include written provider surveys; focus groups with providers, teachers, and caregivers; and in-person opportunities for DECAL staff to hear directly from stakeholders. These in-person opportunities will coincide with four roadshows that the agency will host around the state this fall.
- In the absence of Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration, Rian Ringsrud, Enterprise Project Management Director Woody Dover reported on DECAL's budget and expenses for SFY 2026, which ended June 30, 2026. DECAL spent 99% of its budgeted funds. There was a surplus of \$12.6 million from state lottery funds for classroom upgrades that were not needed and a smaller surplus of state general funds for the employee bonus that were also not needed. There are no changes from the current budget to the Amended SFY 2027 budget, Mr. Dover reported. DECAL's budget request for SFY 2028 includes a \$16 million increase for year four of the four-year phase-in of reduced size Pre-K classrooms and other allowable Pre-K expenses. The 2028 budget request requires Board approval. Mr. Dover also informed the Board that DECAL will be audited for SFY 2026 for compliance with federal regulations governing CCDF and CACFP funds.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams announced that DECAL has funded 140 new Pre-K classrooms this year. She showed pictures highlighting the first day of Pre-K, and she reminded Board members of Georgia Pre-K Week coming up during the week of October 5–9. Ms. Adams introduced Director of Practice and Support Services, Veronica Thomas, and Early Childhood Research Scholar at Child Trends, Dr. Doré LaForett, who made a presentation about DECAL's Pyramid Model Initiative. The evidence-based Pyramid Model supports teachers in guiding children's social and emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors. It has been in regular use by DECAL's Pre-K, Infant Toddler, and SEEDS specialists since 2015. More recently, Ms. Thomas's team has focused on building capacity in the ECE workforce to incorporate Pyramid Model practices in the classroom. Her team has offered a foundational training, group (peer-based) coaching, and practice-based (one-on-one) coaching for Pre-K teachers around the state as well as program-wide implementation in which DECAL staff support the Pre-K provider in implementing Pyramid Model practices in all its classrooms. Child Trends conducted an evaluation comparing the impact of the foundational training with that of the practiced-based coaching and found that, while training and coaching were both seen as valuable by classroom teachers, only practice-based coaching resulted in increased use of Pyramid Model practices in the classroom.

Ms. Morrissey recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:19 a.m. and resumed it at 10:36 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir gave an overview about CAPS funding and the demographics of families and providers who participate in the program. CAPS is funded by Georgia's CCDF grant and designed to serve an average of 52,400 children at an average cost of \$7,549 per child per year. CAPS' budget is \$395 million plus \$16 million for Commitment to Quality payments (C2Q) for Quality Rated 2- and 3-star providers. More than three quarters of CAPS providers are Child Care Learning Centers, and 99% of all CAPS providers are Quality Rated. Almost half of children with CAPS scholarships are school age. With respect to family characteristics, the average size is three

members, with an average of two children in care. Most parents (65%) meet the approved activity requirement through work, while 14% report training or education as an approved activity. Half of the families who report training or education are also employed. Almost 90% of families have income at or below 50% of the state median income (SMI). Ms. Kasfir also announced two recent policy updates. The CAPS Child Care Provider Rights and Responsibilities policy has been streamlined to make the annual renewal process for providers less cumbersome, and the CAPS Health and Safety Standards policy clarifies health and safety compliance standards and training requirements for license-exempt and informal providers.

- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder reported on DECAL leadership site visits to 11 of 15 Community Impact grantees. Leadership visits to the remaining four grantees, all in south Georgia, are planned for the fall. Dr. Ponder presented a summary of the evaluation of the EXPAND grants conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at UGA. The EXPAND grants were awarded to seven licensed child care providers and six community collaboratives for the purpose of expanding families' access to child care during non-traditional hours. All 13 grantees offered care during non-traditional hours, and most of the demand came from lower-income families, more than half of whom had a single parent supporting the family financially. Dr. Ponder also reviewed the guidelines for the \$19,866,040 grant from the CCDF American Relief Act Supplemental Disaster Relief Funds. Most of the funds will be used to support facility recovery in the 95 counties impacted by Hurricane Helene. Funds may also be used for workforce stabilization, and expanding the supply of child care in the affected counties. 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. C2Q payments for calendar year 2026 to date total \$7.5 million to 2,034 providers, with an average payment of \$1,947. From January through June of 2026, \$5.5 million was paid to 11,105 child care employees as Quality Rated Workforce Bonuses (QRWB). Almost 60% of employees who received bonuses and participated in a survey said that receiving the QRWB had a moderate or significant influence on their decisions to stay in their current jobs, and 75% reported an increase in job satisfaction. Almost one third of center directors reported an increase in retention, and more than half of center directors and Family Child Care Learning Home owners said the QRWB made them more likely to continue in the Quality Rated program.
- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens presented trends about child care capacity in Georgia as of the end of SFY 2026. The numbers of family child care providers and small centers have continued to decline, and the aggregate capacity of all centers, which had increased every year between 2019 and 2024, declined slightly in 2025 and 2026. She pointed out, however, that current capacity exceeds capacity in 2023. Ms. Stevens also reviewed the specific language of the proposed new rules and rule changes that the Board is to vote on later in the meeting.

Ms. Morrissey adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:33 a.m. and brought it back to order at 12:50 p.m. for committee reports.

Ms. Hill reported from the Budget and Finance committee. A minimal amount of DECAL's funding is spent on operations, while 89% goes out in the form of grants and benefits. The proposed FY2028 budget remained mostly the same as FY2027 with the exception of an increase in State Lottery funding to accommodate more Pre-K classrooms. DECAL is being audited for the period from July 1, 2025, to June 30, 2026. The audit will focus primarily on federal compliance with CCDF and nutrition programs. Ms. Hill announced to Board members that the Finance committee recommends the Board approve DECAL's 2028 budget request.

Dr. Washington reported from the Programs and Rules committee. All CAPS staff began including a button in their email signature so individuals they assist can respond to a customer service survey to provide feedback on

their experience. CAPS has collected just over two months of data from the survey. Overall, the feedback is positive so far. Responses have noted challenges navigating the Gateway system. CAPS is working on sending more targeted surveys to customers to better understand more specific experiences. CCS is offering cross-collaboration initiatives in the form of Chop, Look, Listen. CCS, Nutrition, and the Infant/Toddler program are presenting together at the GAEEYC conference this year. Presentations on Chop, Look, Listen have spread to other states that are launching their own initiatives. CCS and Nutrition presented Active Play in Hot Weather: Supporting Outdoor Play in ECE Settings. Child Passenger Safety Week is September 22–25, 2026. CCS Technical Assistance, Georgia Office of Highway Safety, Department of Public Health, local hospitals, police, and EMTs will collaborate on this. Muscogee, Gwinnett, and Richmond counties have been selected as locations for events. Farm to Summer Week was June 22–26. Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program, has wrapped up. Nutrition is holding a CACFP Summit tomorrow. The Summer Transition Program for both rising Pre-K and rising Kindergarten was held for five weeks during the summer. Ninety-one classrooms held the Rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program, and 334 classrooms held the Rising Kindergarten Summer Transition Program. These classrooms were located in 62 different counties across the state.

Dr. Zisook reported from the Quality Innovations and Partnerships committee. Jennifer Delorme was appointed to Assistant Director of Quality Rated Assessments and Regional Operations. The final report and executive summary of the Economic Impact Report covering 2022–2024 was published by the University of Georgia. Findings include \$6.52 billion in total economic impact in 2024. A few changes are coming to the Quality Rated portfolio. These include updates to the child well-being standard and recognizing programs that undergo additional training. Three-star programs are now eligible to participate in the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCY-PLUS) Partnership, which is a Department of Defense (DoD) program that provides fee assistance to eligible U.S. military and DoD civilian families. New processes are in place to help rated programs that are undergoing a Change of Ownership (CoO) or Change of Location (CoL) and request that the star rating transfer. In 2027, 2Gen Community Networks will begin to bring together organizations that support both children and the adults who care for them to improve outcomes for families and communities.

At 1:03 p.m. Ms. Morrissey turned the meeting over to Legal Services Supervisor Gregory Brown who gave instructions for the public hearing on proposed rule changes and called the hearing to order. Mr. Brown noted that two written comments had been received in advance of the meeting and transmitted to Board members. Those comments are appended to this document. There were no public comments about proposed rule changes, nor were there any comments of a general nature.

Following the public hearing and public comment period, Ms. Morrissey facilitated the Board in taking three actions. The Board unanimously adopted all proposed rules changes, approved DECAL's FY 2028 budget request, and amended Board bylaws to eliminate Board committees.

Commissioner Jacobs pointed out this year's Pre-K book, *Every Amazing Song*, by Coy Bowles and Malcolm Mitchell. It is being distributed to Pre-K programs now, in advance of Georgia Pre-K Week. Mr. Davis shared a recollection from 1995; then-Governor Zell Miller, who was a close friend of Dolly Parton, invited her to help promote *The Little Engine that Could* to young readers in Georgia. That encounter led Parton to start the Imagination Library which has given 332 million books to children around the world.

Ms. Morrissey asked if there were any further Board business and, hearing none, reminded Board members of the next meeting on November 19, 2026 and adjourned at 1:13 p.m.

As noted above, two comments were received in advance of the Board meeting. These are appended here.

July 27, 2026

Mary Kk

good afternoon my name is Mary Kate Daniels. I am 67 years young. I will be 68 September 12. I've been doing Childcare pretty much all my life. I have two more years to work. I moved from 6482 Clint Court to 3477 Peachtree corners Circle the set up is pretty much exactly the same. I moved one block away not even a whole block I had to relocate because they're remodeling the building and they want everybody out or I would've stayed there and continue doing Childcare, but everybody had to move out. this really hurt I can't say anything I'm lost for words Thank you

August 24, 2026

Aisha Rollins, Aisha

aisha.rollins@snhu.edu

Greetings my name is Aisha F. Rollins,

I have Attached a written proposal on some changes that can take place which may prevent or help lessen the probability of our children being forgotten in hot cars.

I have been deeply involved in the Deja Coleman case, (She is the young mother who accidentally left her one-year-old child in her vehicle resulting in tragedy). The same thing happened to a grandmother in Kentucky ending with the same outcome, however she didn't face any jail time.

Mrs. Coleman has been in jail since the incident happened on July 29th. While I don't personally know Mrs. Coleman, I recognize based on my educational background in social work how this can happen to anyone based on their current situation and the science that proves we operate on auto pilot at times.

Thank you for taking the time to read my proposal

Aisha~

GEORGIA SAFE ARRIVAL CHILD CARE PROPOSAL

Public Comment to the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Board of Early Care and Learning

Submitted by	Purpose
Aisha F. Rollins, LMSW, CCMA, CNA Healthcare Professional Georgia Resident & Parent	Request consideration of a statewide Unexpected Absence / Safe Arrival notification requirement for licensed child care programs.

The Request

I respectfully ask DECAL to study and consider a **Safe Arrival / Unexpected Absence Notification requirement** for Georgia licensed child care programs. When a child is scheduled or normally expected to attend, does not arrive, and the parent or guardian has not reported an absence, the program should initiate a prompt safety notification and continue follow-up until the absence is reasonably verified.

Why This Matters

A parent or caregiver may sincerely believe that a child was dropped off, particularly when routines change or another adult is responsible for transportation. A simple message stating that the child did not arrive can create a critical second safety checkpoint. This is not intended to punish families for an absence. Its purpose is to ask: **"Your child was expected here today but did not arrive. Is your child safe?"**

SAFE ARRIVAL PRINCIPLE: Expected child + no check-in + no reported absence = prompt safety contact

Existing Models Georgia Can Build Upon

New York City: 24 RCNY § 47.27(c)(3) requires notification by telephone, text, email, or another immediate means **within one hour of scheduled arrival** when a child is unexpectedly absent, with a record of the notification and information obtained.

New Jersey: N.J.S.A. 30:5B-15.2 requires a parent or guardian to report an absence. If a child is absent without notification and staff do not know why, the center must **immediately attempt to contact the parent or guardian** to report and determine the reason for the absence.

Georgia: DECAL regulates licensed child care programs and maintains current licensing rules and health-and-safety guidance. This proposal asks Georgia to consider adding a specific unexpected-absence safety response to that framework.

Recommended Georgia Standard

- **1. Expected-arrival information.** Maintain the child's normal/scheduled arrival window and current authorized contacts.
- **2. Prompt notification.** If no check-in and no reported absence, initiate contact no later than **30 minutes after expected arrival**.
- **3. Multiple methods.** Permit automated or staff-initiated text, phone, email, app alert, or another reliable immediate method.
- **4. Human escalation.** If unanswered, require repeat attempts and staff follow-up, including alternate guardian/emergency contact when appropriate.
- **5. Documentation.** Record contact attempts, responses, and how the unexplained absence was resolved.
- **6. Technology-neutral implementation.** Allow existing attendance/communication tools; do not require a specific vendor.