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

Board Members
Kristy Beam (Chair), 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, Clayton Adams, Farouk Baksh, Iyeisha Ballard, Tamika Boone, Dennis Brice, Jennifer Bridgeman, Eboni Brown, Tomisher Campbell, Malissa Champion, Kimberly Davis, Glenda Davis-Canteen, Jennifer Delorme, Tyler Duggins, Bart Ellington, Carol Fordham, Shayna Funke, Joshua Glass, Moriam Hassan, Melissa Herndon, Donya Higbee, Daryl Hillman, Michelle Hughes, Abraham Hussain, John Huston, Denise Jenson, Jennifer Johnson, Laura Lucas, Brittany Marks, Amy Mastin, Kay Mayfield, Stephen McGarity, Tiffany Mitchell, Christi Moore, Abby Mozo, Miranda Murphy, Amir Nilforooshan, Mia Obiwo, Rob O'Callaghan, Stephen Owusu-Ansah, Valerie Perez, Laura Reid, Anne Rein, Dajuana Robinson, Michael Rodgers, Barbara Sanders, Allison Setterlind, Angela Shelton, Melyn Smith, Nate Smith, Hannah Smith, Michelle Talley, Amanda Tarpley, Jill Taylor, Veronica Thomas, Balaram Tidhi, Laura Wagner, Mark Waits, Bridgette Washington-Collier, Erin Watson, Martine Watts, Jill West, Sheila Williams, Jonathan Wolleat, Liz Young, Sheryl Young-Wilhite

Guests
Sandi Bennett, Gabrielle Clerveau, Valerie Conley, Diane Early, Akira Eiland-Sharp, Gleydis Estrada, Jana Fox, Hanah Goldberg, Meaghan Harris, Meaghan Harris, Samantha Hogan, Adelaida Jaramillo, Zoe Jones, Gloria Linley, Veronica Lopez-Delgado, Francesca McCann, Megan Mercer, Sim Nana, Laukik Patel, Monica Peart, Charlotte Pelz, Bernard Reynolds, Michelle Smith Lank, Caralina Vaz Suarez, Nejer Wilkerson

Dr. Beam called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

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

Ms. Freemen reflected on Thanksgiving and gratitude. We remember to reflect on what we're grateful for as Thanksgiving approaches, she said, and she encouraged everyone to give thanks for ordinary moments like the excitement in a young child's voice when they discover something new. She recalled a time when her children were young and she refrained from correcting them for continuing to play after they were supposed to be settled for the night. That experience became the inspiration for a song she wrote called, "Drink It In."

Dr. Beam invited Board members to share updates about their recent activities. She thanked DECAL staff and Board members for all the services the agency provides. Her children and grandchildren have benefitted from the agency's services, she said. Dr. Zisook reported on a recent village to the College Heights community learning center, which has eight classes. On the day she visited, all the children gathered to lead their families in song. Dr. Washell said she had a wonderful experience reading to children during Pre-K week, and she met some of her former students who are now Pre-K teachers. Ms. Hill also reported that she read to children at the child care center she used to own and recently retired from. Dr. Washington reported that she attended a ribbon cutting for a new Pre-K classroom and will attend Restoration Rome, where the CACFP program will be represented.

DECAL leaders provided updates about their areas of responsibility.

- Commissioner Amy Jacobs shared highlights from the four road shows during October in Tifton, Cartersville, Morrow, and Statesboro, attended by 260 child care directors, administrators, and owners. The Commissioner introduced Georgia Early Educators of the Year, Gleydis Estrada, owner of a family child care learning home in Lawrenceville and Gloria Linley from Towne Lake Academy in Woodstock. Each educator received a Board Resolution honoring her work. Kenyetta Robinson from Lifetime Youth Learning Center in Union City was also honored, but she was unable to attend. The Commissioner also announced the Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year, Skyla Holmes-Hood from Angel's Paradise Higher Learning Academy in Atlanta, the winner from a private provider; and Leah Mays, Jefferson City Early Learning Center, public school winner. Commissioner Jacobs thanked Board members for reading to children during the 16th annual Georgia Pre-K Week, held October 5–9 and introduced Suzanne Wooley, Senior Communications Manager at Voices for Georgia's Children, who shared highlights from Pre-K week. More than 950 Pre-K programs in 146 counties participated, and state leaders made 180 visits to Pre-K programs.
- Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud reported that the agency's expenses are on track with the budget as of September 30, the end of the first quarter of SFY 2027. He reported that Happy Helpings served 3,139,246 meals during SFY 2026 at 833 sites in 111 counties. The number of meals served increased by 8.5% over last year, and Nutrition Services held four community education events during the year.
- Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Susan Adams also thanked Board members who participated in Georgia Pre-K week. She gave an update about Pre-K enrollment. More than 70,000 children are enrolled in 3,886 classes, a net gain of 60 classes. About 55% of 4-year-olds in the state are enrolled in Pre-K, and the average number of children in a classroom is 18. Enrollment increased by almost 1,300 this year, and there are fewer children on waiting lists around the state. Ms. Adams introduced Veronica Lopez-Delgado, Research Professional with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIOG) at the University of Georgia, who reported the results of a survey of caregivers (families) done by CVIOG for DECAL. The survey is part of a larger project that will also include focus groups in Gwinnett, Fulton, Henry, Lowndes, Hall, Whitfield, Clayton, McIntosh/Glynn, and Clarke counties, as well as with special populations: Spanish speakers, parents of children with disabilities, and waitlisted families, Ms. Lopez-Delgado said. Before the COVID-19 public health emergency, she continued, 60% of Georgia's 4-year-olds were enrolled in Pre-K. That percentage dropped to 49.1% in 2021; and, although it is rising, it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The survey revealed that 99% of families believe that Pre-K is helpful in preparing children for kindergarten, and 98% believe it would be helpful for their child. Families cited a number of reasons for not enrolling their children in Georgia's Pre-K. Some preferred to enroll their children in a program with a shorter day, a faith-based program, a private-pay program, or to stay with their current child care provider; and 15% were unaware of Georgia's Pre-K. Ms. Adams' team has launched a marketing and public awareness campaign about Georgia's Pre-K, and she shared a new program logo and some of the marketing materials that will be distributed to Pre-K providers. DECAL is also placing some paid social media posts.

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:12 a.m. and resumed it at 10:32 a.m.

- Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs Elisabetta Kasfir reviewed the CAPS fact sheet, a reference tool for basic information about CAPS. It includes the purpose of the program, cost and funding information, eligibility requirements, a snapshot of program characteristics, and information about priority groups. (CAPS is designed to serve 52,400 children, about 14% of potentially eligible children in the state. Almost 60% of child care providers accept CAPS scholarships.) The fact sheet is updated frequently, Ms. Kasfir said, and the current version is always posted on the CAPS website. Ms. Kasfir

reviewed several CAPS policy updates that went into effect on October 6, the most significant of which is that providers are now allowed to make certain case changes in the CAPS systems to streamline their billing and reimbursement. Ms. Kasfir praised both the provider advisory council and the family advisory council for giving valuable feedback and recommendations that her team has incorporated into policies and communications. She also recognized the CAPS Employee Advisory Group, which provides a channel for frontline employees to give input to management.

- Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services (CCS) Pam Stevens introduced Process and Quality Improvement Manager Jennifer Johnson, who made a presentation about the CCS Licensing Quality Assurance Framework her team implemented early in 2025. The purpose of the framework is to promote consistency with CCS policies and procedures among all CCS consultants, who are divided into six regional teams and 11 specialty units. Ms. Johnson's unit works with a team for six months, observing consultants at work, reviewing reports, and offering targeted coaching. The process is not punitive, she stressed, and is intended to create a culture of continuous improvement and engender public confidence in DECAL's licensing practices.
- Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Bentley Ponder reported that the number of providers that have received a star rating through Quality Rated remains steady at about 65% of all eligible providers. He announced that DECAL has made almost $11 million in Commitment to Quality (C2Q) payments to 2- and 3-star Quality Rated providers in 2026. So far this year, 2,093 QR providers have received at least one payment, and 1,629 have received all three. Dr. Ponder reviewed results about the $500 Quality Rated Workforce Bonus (QRWB) paid annually to qualifying employees of Quality Rated providers. Since April 2025, the agency has distributed $18 million, 83% of which been paid to front-line staff (71% to classroom teachers and 12% to other staff). Almost 60% of recipients have been in the workforce less than 10 years, which means that the bonus is reaching them at a point where retention is key. The research team surveyed teachers and staff, center directors, and family child care home operators and learned that 75% of teachers and staff felt that the bonus had a significant or moderate influence on their job satisfaction, and nearly half reported that it would have a significant or moderate influence on their decision to stay in their jobs. Among center directors who saw an improvement in retention, 90% credited the bonus. More than half of center directors and family child care operators reported that they would be more likely to remain in the Quality Rated program because of the QRWB. Dr Ponder reviewed the economic impact report for 2022–2024, to which data for 2025 has recently been added. He reminded Board members that Georgia's birth through 5 population has declined by 0.4% since 2020. The industry's total impact on Georgia's economy declined from a high of $7.2 billion in 2023 to $6.52 in 2024. Total impact declined again in 2025 to $6.35, but it is still greater than in 2019, the last year before the pandemic. Dr. Ponder also reported that the application window for the next round of community impact grants was open from October 2 to November 2, and the agency received more than 100 applications. The application for hurricane Helene recovery grants is being developed now and will be available early next year, he said.

Following staff presentations, Dr. Beam opened the public comment period. She asked Mr. Waits if anyone had signed up to make a comment. He replied that one person had signed up, and he called on Ayesha Rollins, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Ms. Rollins urged the Board to promote a "Safe Arrival Act" that requires families to report a child's absence from child care within 30 minutes of their expected arrival time. After 30 minutes, providers call the family. She noted that morning arrivals are often rushed because adult caregivers have to get to work and often have only a few minutes for drop-off. She gave Mr. Waits a printed copy of her proposal.

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Dr. Beam called for a volunteer to provide inspiration at the next meeting. Dr. Zisook volunteered. Dr. Beam reminded Board members of the next meeting on February 18, 2027, and adjourned at 1:13 p.m.

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