
Board of Early Care and Learning

Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting
Thursday, February 19, 2026 — 9:00 a.m.
Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE – East Tower
Oak Conference Room
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
Amy M. Jacobs, Commissioner

Meeting Minutes

Board Members

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

Public Guests

Diane Early, Chase Jones, Charlotte Pelz

DECAL Staff

Amy Jacobs, Commissioner

Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Dennis Brice, Chief Information Officer

Reg Griffin, Chief Communications Officer

Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs

Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner

Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services

Ira Sudman, Chief Legal Officer

Clayton Adams, Northeast Early Education Community Partnership Lead

Ben Appling, Director of Audits and Compliance

Jennifer Avera, Compliance Examiner

Farouk Baksh, Senior Director, Information Technology

Calandra Beavers, CAPS Quality Assurance and Payments Consultant

Lari Lyn Beyer, Assistant Director, QR Operations

Chondra Bolton, CACDS Project Manager

Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director

Jennifer Bridgeman, Director of CCS Process and Policy

Vanessa Brown, Quality Assurance Manager, Quality Rated

Mercedes Burch, Project Coordinator, Nutrition Services

Peter Campbell, IT Support Administrator

Tomisher Campbell, Early Education Community Partnership Coordinator, SE

Christina Canada-Clark, SEEDS Supervisor, North Central West

Xavier Corbett, IT Service Desk Specialist

Tina Crooms, Constituent Services and Critical Support Manager, CAPS

Katie Davis, Compliance Examiner

Kim Davis, Director, Quality Rated Assessment and Regional Operations

Glenda Davis-Canteen, Early Education Community Partnership Lead NW

Jennifer Delorme, Quality Rated ERS Assessor Manager, Central

Tyler Duggins, QIP Special Projects Coordinator

Rosalyn Elder, CCS Lead Consultant, Exemption Unit

Emilia Emmanuel, Nutrition Services TA Coordinator

Brittany Fordham, Quality Rated Project Development and Educational Supports Coordinator
Carol Fordham, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator, Central
Rachel Fowler, CAPS Special Projects and Initiatives Manager
Shayna Funke, Director, Research Partnerships and Business Supports
Felicia Gibson, CAPS Customer Response Specialist
Aleisha Golden, Senior Risk Manager, Audits and Compliance
Dorethea Hackney, Administrative Assistant, CCS
Katie Hagan, SEEDS Program Director
Kinsey Harper, Constituent Services and Program Integrity Coordinator, CAPS
Brittany Marks, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator, Central East
Christopher Mann, IT Service Desk Specialist
CynQueshia Martin, Pre-K Instructional Learning and Assessment Analyst
Shari McClain, Pre-K Specialist, Central
Charmain McGahee, Accounts Receivable Accountant
Stephen McGarity, Institutional Research and Data Quality Manager
Christi Moore, Director of Workforce Supports and Learning
Abby Mozo, Operations Analyst, Workforce Supports and Learning
Miranda Murphy, Practice and Support Services Outreach Project Manager
Amir Nilforooshan, IT Assets and Purchase Supervisor
Mia Obiwo, Workforce Quality and Process Administrator
Rob O'Callaghan, Director, Institutional Research and Data Quality
Valerie Perez, Research Partnerships Manager
Lisa Pitts, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator SW
Dareia Printup, Quality Rated Education Specialist Coach
Bridget Ratajczak, Child and Family Development Supervisor
China Redman, Accounts Payable Accountant
Kendria Reeves, CAPS Quality Assurance and Payments Consultant
Anne Rein, Department Writer/Editor
Jessica Render, CAPS Onboarding and Support Analyst
Melissa Risenhoover, Administrative Assistant, Quality Rated
Dajuana Robinson, Community Engagement and Partnerships Manager
Mike Rodgers, Director Finance
Barbara Sanders, Senior Business Analyst
Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director
Angela Shelton, Workforce Supports Supervisor
Hannah Smith, Research Analyst
Nate Smith, Professional Development Systems Manager
Latoya Stafford, Quality Rated Payment Administrator
Michelle Talley, Quality Rated Assessor, South Metro
Jill Taylor, Director, Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach
Veronica Thomas, Director, Practice and Support Services
Bridgette Washington-Collier, Early Education Community Partnerships Coordinator, Central West
Jennifer Waters, CCS Technical Assistance Unit Manager
Martine Watts, Quality Rated Regional Coordinator, North
Sheila Williams, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Family and Eligibility

Liz Young, Government Relations Director
Sheryl Young-Wilhite, Director, Human Resources

The February 2026 meeting of the Board of Early Care and Learning was held in the Oak Conference room and livestreamed.

1. Call to Order

At 9:01 a.m. Board Chair Kristy Beam called the meeting to order.

2. Welcome

Dr. Beam welcomed Board members, DECAL staff, and guests.

3. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Dr. Beam asked for a motion to accept the meeting agenda. Dr. Washington moved to accept, and Mr. Davis seconded. The Board accepted the agenda unanimously. Dr. Beam asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the November 20, 2025 meeting. Ms. Morrissey moved to approve, and Mr. Davis seconded. The Board approved the minutes unanimously.

4. Inspiration

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.

5. Board Member Updates

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.

6. DECAL Staff Reports

DECAL leaders provided updates about the agency’s work.

a. Commissioner's Update

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 that were impacted by Hurricane Helene. 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.

b. Finance and Administration Update

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 \$67,000 decrease in DECAL's required contribution to the state health benefit plan because of a state-wide change in how that plan is funded. The Governor's recommended budget for FY 2027 also includes a \$17.7 million increase, \$12 million of which will fund year three of the four-year phase in of reduced Pre-K classroom size (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.

Mr. Davis asked whether the reduction in DECAL's contribution to the state health benefit plan means that someone else will pay more. Mr. Ringsrud explained that the state health benefit plan has its own fund that employees and state agencies all contribute to. The fund is in good shape right now, Mr. Ringsrud said, and employer contributions are being reduced so that the money not spent on the benefit plan can be spent on something else.

d. Federal Programs

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. CAPS providers are also required to maintain daily attendance records; and, when they log in to the GACAPS system to submit their weekly bills, they note which days each child attended.

Ms. Harper asked whether CAPS providers are paid only for the days a child attends. Ms. Kasfir explained that CAPS' policy is to pay providers their weekly reimbursement rate for every child who attends at least one day during the week. Ms. Morrissey asked whether the system is set up to flag a particular child who attends only once a week over a period of time. Ms. Kasfir replied that CAPS does have an excessive absence policy, but a child who attends regularly once a week would not be flagged. Different families have different needs, she explained, and the policy allows regular attendance that is less than daily. What the system does flag, she said, is long periods of absence. If a family hasn't used their scholarship in the past 30 days, the CAPS team starts following up with the family.

Ms. Kasfir continued her presentation, describing the weekly validations, both manual and automated, that her team performs weekly on the weekly payment file before it is approved for payment. If the validations show any irregularities that cannot be explained, the CAPS team refers their concerns to DECAL's Audits and Compliance division. CAPS makes referrals to Audits and Compliance in other circumstances too. Examples include payments over a certain threshold that suggest an overpayment has occurred and any activity that seems suspicious. Ms. Kasfir introduced Director of the Audits and Compliance division Ben Appling, who gave an overview of how the CAPS Compliance Unit handles referrals. Referrals may come from within DECAL or from external sources. Audits and Compliance also performs ongoing analysis of data from across the agency to identify potential fraud risks and billing errors. All investigations 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.

Mr. Davis whether there is any connection between Mr. Appling's team and the state department of audits. Mr. Appling replied that there is not. Mr. Davis asked whether Mr. Appling's team uses AI tools. Mr. Appling responded that AI tools for auditing are in early stages of development, and he is interested in learning more about them. Ms. Harper asked what percentage of fraud the Audits and Compliance finds. Mr. Appling replied that his team takes a very broad view of compliance and looks for errors as well as suspicious activity. It is very hard to determine, he said, whether overbilling is the result of fraud or accidental error. Mr. Appling's team works closely with the Office of the Inspector General and the Office of Attorney General, and these partners generally determine whether intentional program violations have occurred. Ms. Harper asked what the consequences are for providers who commit fraud. Mr. Appling replied that if fraud is suspected, there is a process in place to remove providers from DECAL programs.

e. Child Care Services

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. CCS will seek the Board’s approval to create one new exempt category for military FCCLHs that do not participate in CAPS and are regulated by the Department of Defense (DOD).

Mr. Davis asked whether the DOD is effective at monitoring child care programs that are not on a military base. Ms. Stevens replied that they do a very good job and visit each program monthly.

Ms. Stevens reviewed the schedule for implementing rules changes. She 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. Harper commented that she drives by child care programs often and never sees children playing outside. Ms. Stevens confirmed that providers are required to have outdoor play more than once a day, and CCS monitors their compliance. Dr. Beam added that children are outside more often in the morning and the afternoon. During midday, she said, they have lessons, followed by lunch and naptime.

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 “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. Freeman said that she loves the resources developed by Ms. Waters’ team.

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, while the number of very small centers—with fewer than 90 children—shrank. After the current fiscal year ends in June, Ms. Stevens’ team will analyze overall child care capacity in the state to learn whether that is stable.

Ms. Freeman asked whether larger providers are buying up smaller programs. Ms. Stevens replied that that is happening. She added that a number of franchise agreements with providers that bought franchises 20-25 years ago are expiring, and the franchise holders are now allowed to sell their businesses. Mr. Davis asked whether the downturn could be the result of employers in the private sector offering child care to their employees. Ms. Stevens replied that CCS does not see a lot of that. Ms. Morrissey wondered whether overhead expenses are too great for smaller businesses to operate profitably. Ms. Stevens said “yes” that the bigger providers can leverage economies of scale. She added that a lot of smaller businesses that have been operating for decades are getting really great offers. Ms. Freeman asked whether the consolidation process is making it more difficult for families in rural areas to access child care. Ms. Stevens said, “yes,” and that is a concern because the bigger providers are reluctant to open new centers in rural areas; but she added that, in rural south Georgia, there is some growth in the number of providers.

7. Break

Dr. Beam recessed the meeting for a short break at 10:27 a.m. The meeting resumed and staff reports continued at 10:41 a.m.

f. Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) Update

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 of Family Child Care Learning Homes will continue, and data collection for the study will conclude in the spring.

Ms. Harper asked for clarification about what standalone school-age programs are. Ms. Funke replied that they are licensed child centers that specialize in school-age children. They may offer before- and after-school care and full-time care during school breaks.

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..

g. Georgia's Pre-K and Instructional Supports Update

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.

Ms. Harper asked whether the amount of screen time is limited in Pre-K and in child care programs generally. Director of CCS Process and Policy Jennifer Bridgeman replied that screen time in all licensed programs is limited to 30 minutes per day. Ms. Harper advocated for an outreach campaign to make families aware of the risks associated with too much screen time.

Ms. Adams 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. The workforce is 97% female and 50% African American. More than two-thirds, 78%, work full time. More than half are under 40, and 32% are under 30. Both lead and assistant teachers earn less than \$30,000 per year on average. The average is just over \$26,000 for assistant teachers, and just under \$30,000 for lead teachers. These averages do not include Georgia's Pre-K teachers who recently transitioned to the K–12 pay scale. About half, 51%, of the workforce has no degree or credential. Of the 49% with a degree or credential, nearly two-thirds are ECE-specific. Dr. Moore also highlighted the \$33.6 million that DECAL invested in professional development over the past year.

8. Lunch and Committee Meetings

Dr. Beam adjourned the meeting for lunch and committee meetings at 11:17 a.m.

9. Public Comments

At 1:01 p.m. Dr. Beam reconvened the meeting for public comments. She 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.

10. Committee Reports

At 1:05 p.m. Dr. 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 produced three webinars for 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. Dr. Washington also reported that Head Start Collaboration Director Allison Setterlind made a short presentation about Head Start and will be sharing additional information for new Board members.

Ms. Harper expressed concern about Pre-K waiting lists. She mentioned Dougherty County in particular because there is a lot of poverty in the area. Ms. Adams replied that there is not a long waiting list in Dougherty County at this time. The Pre-K team maintains a list of counties with more than 25 children on waiting lists, and Dougherty County is not on that list, but Pre-K Specialists do outreach to schools and child care programs throughout the state. Ms. Harper agreed that low-income families may be isolated and unaware that Pre-K seats are available. Ms. Morrissey commented that there are a lot of areas where no Pre-K programs exist, and families who move to Georgia cannot find Pre-K seats for their children.

Commissioner Jacobs responded that the agency is working with a vendor to implement a public awareness campaign about Georgia's Pre-K. Ms. Harper asked whether reducing class size to 20 students will make it


more challenging for families to find Pre-K seats. The Commissioner reminded Board members that DECAL is adding Pre-K classrooms all around the state and that school systems are now allowed to include Pre-K students in their headcounts for the purpose of accessing capital funds to build new classrooms. Dr. Washington asked whether she could promote the 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS number to parents seeking Pre-K seats, and she was assured that she may.

Ms. Morrissey reported that the Budget and Finance Committee received a presentation about the agency's expenses versus budget as of January 31, 2026. With 40% of the fiscal year remaining, 44% of budgeted funds are available.

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 that a significant number of survey respondents consider DECAL's requirements easy 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.

11. Adjournment

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


Board Chair, Signature

5/21/26
Date


Board Secretary, Signature

5/21/26
Date