



Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning
BRIGHT FROM THE START

**FY
2026**

ANNUAL REPORT



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A Message from Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Friends of DECAL,

Thank you for taking time to review this annual report for State Fiscal Year 2026 (July 1, 2025, to June 30, 2026) highlighting the work of the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). I'm proud of our accomplishments this past fiscal year on behalf of Georgia's families, child care providers, the public, and state policy makers and am pleased to share them with you.



This report reveals DECAL's continuing efforts in the past fiscal year to accomplish goals in the following areas:

- Enhancing School Readiness
- Increasing Quality and Access
- Supporting Workforce Development
- Expanding Two Generation
- Advancing Technology

As you read this report, you'll learn how and why I'm most proud of the following efforts:

- The ways we helped prepare children from birth to age 5 for success in school
- The strategies we implemented...with other state agencies...to serve the needs of children AND their families concurrently
- The efforts we made to enhance the quality of care provided to children in out-of-home child care
- The ways we expended state, federal, and private funds fairly, transparently, and with integrity
- The ways we updated technology so families and child care providers can access services and resources more easily

But DECAL didn't accomplish these things alone. Everything we did in SFY26 was in partnership with the dedicated child care providers who care for Georgia's children every day; the valuable stakeholders who partner with us; DECAL's passionate and professional staff; the Board of Early Care and Learning, that advises and supports our work; and Governor Kemp and other state policy makers.

Thank you for your interest in the well-being of Georgia's children and families and for your part in making State Fiscal Year 2026 a success for our state's children, families, and the early care and education community. If you have any questions or comments about items contained in this report, contact me at amy.jacobs@dec.al.ga.gov.

Sincerely,

Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner



The State of Child Care in Georgia

As of June 30, 2026, Georgia had 3,127 Child Care Learning Centers and 993 Family Child Care Learning Homes, with a total licensed capacity of 382,804 children.

From July 2025 to June 2026:

- The number of Child Care Learning Centers decreased by 84 centers, a change of -2.6%.
- The number of Family Child Care Learning Homes decreased by 84, a change of -7.8%.
- Total licensed capacity decreased by 4,329, a change of -1.1%.

Over the previous five years, from July 2021 to June 2026, the following trends occurred:

- Child Care Learning Centers increased by 43 centers, a change of +1.4%.
- Family Child Care Learning Homes decreased by 303, a change of -23%.
- Total licensed capacity increased by 15,091, a change of +4.1%.

Statewide trends over the last five years indicate a modest increase in the number of licensed centers and in total licensed capacity. This growth leveled off around the middle of FY2025 and has been decreasing since then. Total capacity and total centers are still higher than they were five years ago. Meanwhile, in the past decade or more, family child care homes have continued to decline in numbers, in Georgia and nationally.

Some programs are more likely to remain open than others. For example, mid to large centers are less likely to close than smaller centers. Quality Rated programs and Georgia's Pre-K sites are also less likely to close, and the higher the star rating, the less likely centers are to close.

Estimates for 2024 include a total economic impact in Georgia of \$6.52 billion for the early care and education industry, with 336,000 children in care. 2025 estimates will be available later in 2026. This study is being conducted by the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University and the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia.

About Us

Vision

Every child in Georgia will have equal access to high quality early care and education.

Mission

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning improves outcomes for children and families by strengthening early learning experiences in partnership with early education programs, professionals, stakeholders, families, and communities.

Services

DECAL is the department of state government that supports child care providers in preparing Georgia's children and their families for school. Our services focus on quality child care, early education, brain development, nutritional programs, and tools and resources for families. We support eligible families by providing scholarships to help with the cost of child care so they can work or attend school. We work to equip early care and education professionals with enhanced credentials, appropriate teaching strategies, and best practices in working with children. We also collaborate with state policymakers and stakeholders to develop and implement policies that ensure access to quality care for all Georgia children.

Values and Principles

DECAL has embraced values that define its culture, guide the actions of staff as they work each day, and set the tone for interaction as an effective, cohesive team. In addition, DECAL's work embodies principles that characterize effective early childhood system building. Early childhood system building involves the ongoing process of adapting and developing the structures, behaviors, and connections that make the components of an early childhood system operate holistically to benefit children and families.

Values

- **Customer Service:** We strive to always respond professionally, courteously, respectfully, and in a timely manner to all our customers: families, child care providers, teachers, stakeholders, and policy makers.
- **Integrity:** We are honest, transparent, and accountable in our work.
- **Excellence:** We strive for quality and excellence in all we do; we use data, research, and best practices in our decision making.
- **Innovation:** We are focused on continuous improvement and are willing to try new approaches to accomplish our vision and to achieve our goals.
- **Collaboration:** We engage stakeholders and partners and value input from people and groups with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
- **Respect:** We maintain a professional work environment and value the contributions of our team members and partners in helping children and families succeed.

Principles

To build a comprehensive early childhood system for all Georgia children, DECAL will partner with others to:

- Reach all children (as early in their lives as possible) and their families with high-quality services and supports
- Create policies and procedures that help Georgia children remain healthy and safe
- Include and effectively accommodate children with special and complex needs
- Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures, and communities of children and families
- Make it easier for families to access quality early care and education and for children to transition from early care and preschool to kindergarten
- Value parents as decision makers and leaders
- Promote and maximize investment and foster data driven innovation





**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**
BRIGHT FROM THE START

By the Numbers

Conducted

9,094

CCS regulatory
visits

Processed

66,155

applications for
Childcare And
Parent Services
(CAPS)

68,729

students served in

3,841

Georgia's Pre-K
Classrooms

Licensed

3,211

Child Care Learning
Centers and

1,077

Family Child Care
Learning Homes

Approved

249

language and
literacy trainings

Surpassed

428

podcast episodes of
DECAL Download

Received **14,087** student parent
CAPS applications

68,554,821

meals provided
through the Child and
Adult Care Food
Program and the
Summer Food Service
Program.

IN

STATE FISCAL

YEAR **2026**

DECAL

Awarded

144

new classrooms
for Georgia's Pre-K
Program

Conducted **1,351** Quality Rated, on-site
observations resulting in **721** ratings

Supported

95,567

unique children
through active
CAPS Scholarships

Hired and onboarded

67

full time staff and

12

temporary staff through
Human Resources Division

Distributed

87,000

books to Pre-K
classrooms and
students

Completed

2,793

Infant Toddler
and SEEDS
Coaching Sessions

Awarded

19,354

Quality Rated
Workforce Bonus
Paymens

Approximately

400

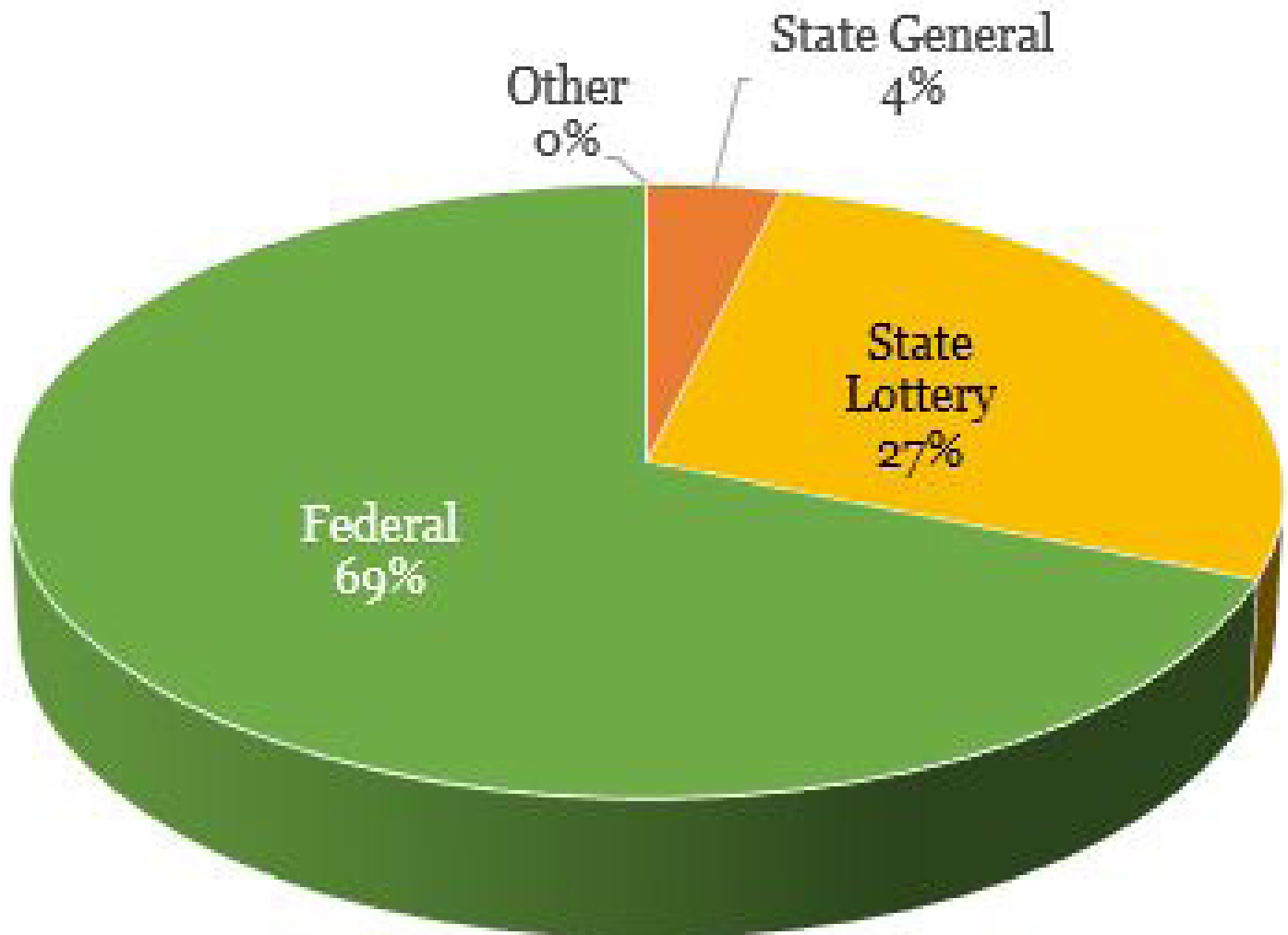
children received service
through the Infant
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation

Financial Highlights

FISCAL YEAR 2026 BUDGET BY FUNDING SOURCE

State General	\$78,758,056
State Lottery	\$580,411,020
Federal	\$593,394,138
Other	\$32,494
Total Budget	\$1,252,595,708

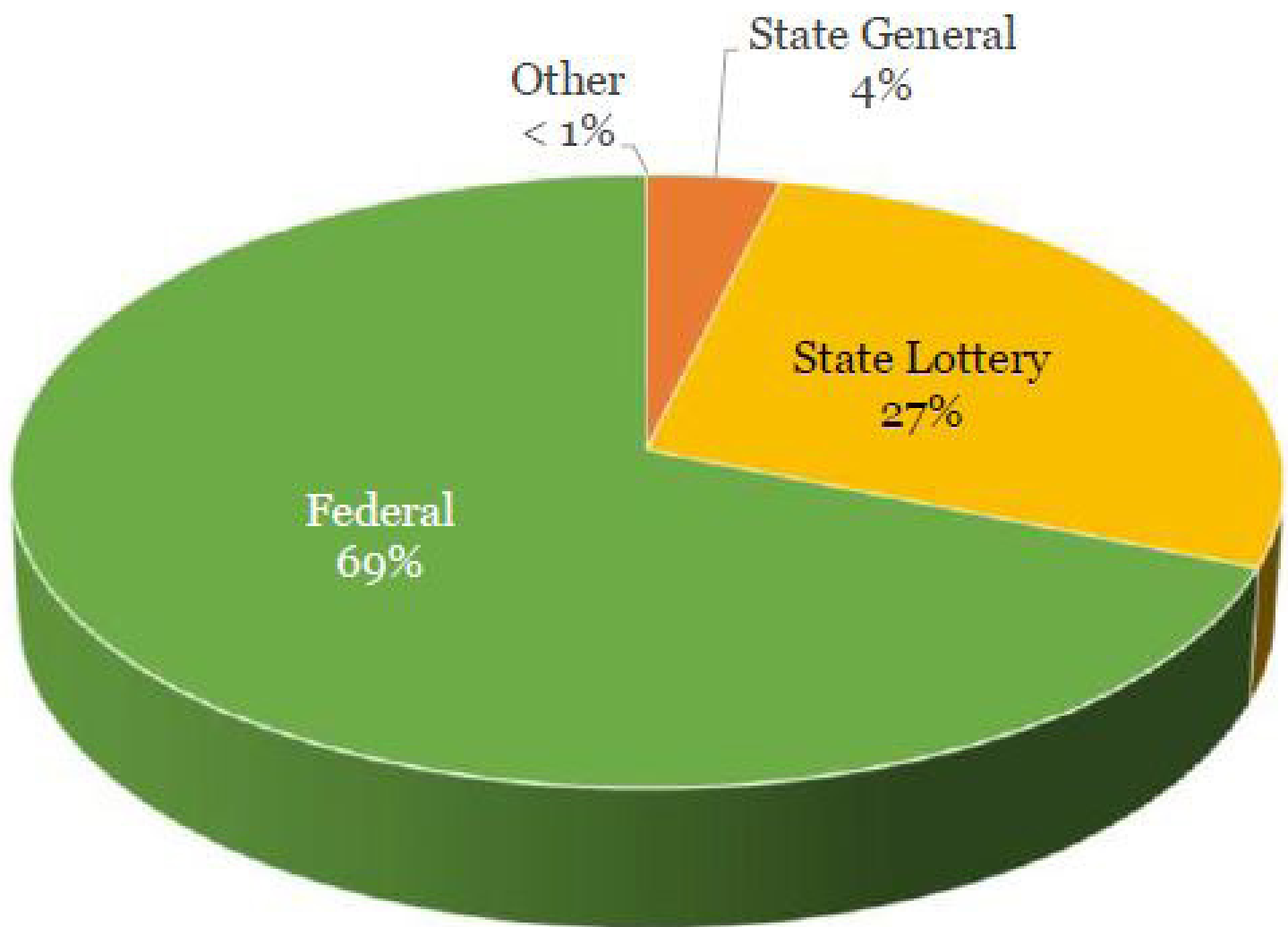
BUDGET BY FUNDING SOURCE



FISCAL YEAR 2026 BUDGET BY PROGRAMS

Child Care Services	\$420,684,185
Nutrition	\$175,064,480
Pre-K + (HS)	\$580,541,799
Quality Initiatives	\$76,305,244
Total Budget	\$1,252,595,708

BUDGET BY PROGRAMS



Enhancing School Readiness

Goal: Align, integrate, and coordinate programs to improve school readiness for children birth to five in Georgia



Pre-K

- Georgia's Pre-K Program served 68,729 children across all 159 Georgia counties in public schools and child care programs, providing a high-quality preschool experience that prepares children for kindergarten.
- DECAL continued to offer educational opportunities over the summer to children through the Summer Transition Program.
 - The Rising Pre-K program enrolled 897 dual language learners in 83 classrooms across the state. These full-day classes supported children preparing to enter Georgia's Pre-K Program in the upcoming school year, with instruction focused on classroom routines, social-emotional development, and language and literacy skills.
 - The Rising Kindergarten program enrolled 4,071 children in 331 classrooms across Georgia. This full-day instructional program was aligned with the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards and helped children build the foundational skills needed to successfully transition to kindergarten.
 - Additionally, both programs expanded access through Inclusion Model classrooms. The Rising Pre-K program enrolled 96 children in eight inclusion classrooms, while the Rising Kindergarten program enrolled 33 students in three inclusion classrooms across the state.



CCS

- Child Care Services (CCS) continues to add national best practices to the Licensing Rules and Regulations Indicator Manuals for child care learning centers (CCLC) and family child care learning homes (FCCLH). These best practices were made accessible on DECAL's website and were covered in all technical assistance (TA) offered by CCS's TA staff.
- CCS successfully launched the Chop, Look, Listen initiative to help early childhood educators prevent choking and promote safe eating habits.

CCS hosted four Lunch & Learn webinars for CCLC and FCCLH programs on the following topics: The Required Reporting Road Map, Preparing for a Regulatory Visit, A Visit Walkthrough, and Understanding and Prevention of Choking in Children. The webinars were posted on the DECAL YouTube channel.

The CCLC and FCCLH Rules and Regulations Indicator Manuals were updated quarterly to include best practices information for all current core rules.



CCS distributed quarterly newsletters to all licensed programs including information on upcoming professional development trainings, equipment recalls, best practices, rule updates, important public announcements, etc.

Members of the CCS team presented licensing and best practices content at the 2025 National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) conference in Norfolk, Virginia.



- Nutrition Services supported 68,554,821 meals served through the Child and Adult Care Food Program and 3,123,707 meals through Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program. These nutrition programs played a vital role in ensuring children returned to school healthy and ready to learn by reducing food insecurity, promoting healthy development, and supporting routines that eased children's transition back to school.
- DECAL's Community Partnership Team actively engaged in communities across Georgia by participating in local community events, partnership meetings, and family-focused resource opportunities. Through more than 50 in-person presentations to technical colleges, Family Connection Collaboratives, civic groups, and local organizations, the team helped connect families and stakeholders with information about DECAL's programs and services. The team also facilitated more than 60 Birth to Eight Leadership Team and Child Care Engagement Network meetings, bringing together partners from across the state to collaborate, exchange best practices, and address the unique needs of their communities.

Increasing Quality and Access

Goal: Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education programs for children birth through school age in Georgia



- Quality Rated (QR) conducted 1,351 on-site observations and awarded 721 ratings, 119 of which were 3-star.
- In FY26, CAPS helped pay for child care for 74,902 unique children, 97% of whom were enrolled in Quality Rated care. (Excludes children enrolled in programs that are in a Quality Rated provisional or probationary status.)
- DECAL partnered with Child Trends to conduct Georgia's Child Care Quality Study that included classroom observations and surveys of providers and teachers in licensed child care programs across the state. Data collection concluded in FY26. Results will inform revisions to Quality Rated.
- In April 2025, Quality Rated launched its Quality Rated Workforce Bonus (QRWB) program, which provides a \$500 bonus to eligible ECE staff. In FY26, DECAL awarded 19,354 eligible staff members (not just educational staff) a total of \$9.7 million. These bonuses recognize staff working in programs that completed the Quality Rated process.
- DECAL awarded 2,217 2- and 3-star CAPS providers \$16.4 million through the Commitment to Quality (C2Q) quarterly bonuses to support their continuing efforts to provide high-quality care and education services.

- The Quality Rated Advisory Committee (QRAC), composed of Quality Rated providers, non-QR providers, and community stakeholder organizations, was relaunched to provide guidance and feedback on QR policy, processes, and procedures.
- The Child Care Services Technical Assistance Resource Suite contains more than 100 resources available in English and Spanish to increase understanding of licensing rules and their associated best practices for all programs and partners. Additional resources are regularly added.
- The Nutrition Services division conducted more than 30 trainings on offering healthy, nutritious meals and snacks and incorporating physical activity into child care settings.

Pre-K

- Georgia's Pre-K Program funded 144 new classrooms statewide, creating additional student slots to help meet the demand for high-quality Pre-K services.





Practice and Support Services

- The SEEDS Helpline received requests for support from 1,289 unique callers, resulting in SEEDS specialists completing 2,350 coaching visits and training 8,392 educators last year.
- The Infant Toddler Team completed 329 coaching visits focused on supporting language, literacy and responsive caregiving with 31 infant and toddler programs in the LITTLE (Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments) grant.
- Infant Toddler and SEEDS Specialists trained 580 early learning professionals on supporting social emotional development and preventing and addressing challenging behavior in the Pyramid Model training and coaching Initiative.
- Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) connects child care centers with mental health professionals who support the social-emotional well-being of staff, children, and families. IECMHC sites in Macon and Savannah served approximately 400 children.
- The IECMH Task Force's Prevention Workgroup, in partnership with the Center of Excellence in Behavioral Health and Wellbeing at Georgia State University, created an overview of mental and behavioral health screenings for the birth – 5 population for the early childhood workforce.

Supporting Workforce Development

Goal: Develop, professionalize, and retain a highly skilled workforce for the early care and education industry

Pre-K

Georgia's Pre-K Program retained 84.90% of Lead Teachers and 78.64% of Assistant Teachers.



**DECAL
Thriving Child Care
Business Academy**

DECAL Thriving Child Care Business Academy

- During FY26, provider enrollment in the DECAL Thriving Child Care Business Academy's 42 live webinars totaled 365
- 704 providers participated in small study groups; and Academy business coaches conducted 69 individual TA sessions.



Nutrition

The Nutrition Education and Physical Activity Specialist Team delivered five full and three virtual micro Physical Activity Learning Sessions (PALS) to 82 participants to promote physical activity best practices for children from birth to age five across ECE settings. The new virtual format increased engagement and focused on evidence-based strategies, standards, and tools to support healthier environments and lasting practice change.

- The Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) were revised to more closely align with new research in the Science of Reading and developmentally responsive instructional strategies.
- Professional Learning Specialists offered training and support to 150 early childhood educators to advance their skills in relationship-based professional learning and facilitation strategies.
- The Online Learning Library Initiative grew to 87 trainings to support early childhood educators' understanding and implementation of quality instructional strategies.
- More than 1,000 educators received financial support through the DECAL Scholars program.
- DECAL's Workforce Supports and Learning unit and Research Division launched the first annual State of the Early Care and Education Workforce fact sheet.
- Georgia Training Approval (GTA) continued to support state approved trainers through the annual GTA Conference, coordinating Training for Trainers events, hosting networking sessions for trainers, and publishing the quarterly GTA newsletter.
- The Workforce Career Levels were revised, and an initial pilot of the new levels was launched.
- The Georgia Professional Development System was enhanced with new features, including a Substitute Teacher Registry, enhanced features for Approved Sponsor Organizations, and updating the Online Learning Library Initiative (OLLI) with features to provide learners with a clearer understanding of course progress.
- The TORSH Talent online coaching platform was used by Georgia's six Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) and DECAL's Quality Rated and Practice and Supports Services divisions to support high quality instructional practices across Georgia.

Expanding Two Generation Approaches

Goal: Expand Two Generation (2Gen) approaches to better support children and families

- The Community Impact Grants, awarded for a two-year period from May 2025 through April 2027, are entering the second grant year. Grants were awarded in three categories: 2Gen Innovation Grants for Student Parent Success, 2Gen Community Literacy Grants, and Community Transformation Grants. Through these grants, community organizations are implementing locally driven solutions that address priorities such as child care access, literacy, food insecurity, and other community-identified needs, while incorporating a 2Gen approach that supports children and the adults who care for them.
- The Urban Institute continued to conduct the DECAL-funded CAPS Family Experiences Study, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups with families about their experiences with the CAPS program. Results of the study are expected in FY27 and will identify the needs of families to help inform changes to improve the CAPS family experience.
- DECAL launched the Quality Rated Family Support Call Center on July 1, 2025, to operate the 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS toll-free child care search and referral help line. During FY26, the Call Center received 5,621 phone calls.
- CAPS staff used the Find Help Georgia platform to connect families with local resources, provide referrals, and collaborate with organizations to ensure accurate information is available to assist families. In FY26, there were 299,385 searches on the Find Help Georgia site, a 40% increase from the previous year.



- The CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Pilot, a DECAL initiative with the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) and WorkSource Georgia, supported student parents by addressing barriers to education. Consultants provided in-person CAPS assistance, resource referrals, and Family Centered Coaching, fostering success through a holistic 2Gen approach that benefits families across Georgia. The pilot launched in spring 2024 at three TCSG campuses and then expanded to a fourth campus in spring 2025 and continued working with these four campuses through 2026. The pilot team also maintained a presence at three WorkSource Georgia sites, assisting participants with CAPS eligibility and resource needs. Additionally, pilot staff supported many other TCSG campuses statewide by offering information sessions about the CAPS program and eligibility.
- The CAPS Family Advisory Council met quarterly to continue providing guidance on policy, procedures, program direction, and planned changes. CAPS implemented many of their recommendations to improve and streamline the CAPS family experience, including a new scholarship document that was clearer and more understandable for families.
- DECAL's Family Peer Ambassadors attended 243 events, where they shared child development and quality child care resources with 11,110 families.
- During Happy Helpings events and other DECAL-hosted outreach activities, Nutrition Services staff engaged directly with families to provide practical nutrition education, including tips for preparing healthy, affordable meals at home, understanding food labels, and building balanced lunches for children. These events featured hands-on activities, informational materials, and interactive demonstrations to promote long-term healthy habits for the whole family.

Advancing Technology

DECAL IT: A Year of Transformation and Impact

DECAL IT continued to advance the agency's mission through technology innovation, operational excellence, and strategic modernization efforts. By partnering closely with business leaders, providers, and state stakeholders, the IT team delivered solutions that enhanced services, strengthened security, and positioned DECAL for future growth.

A major milestone was the successful launch of the new Family Portal and Ask CALI chatbot, providing Georgia families with easier access to information, improved self-service capabilities, and a more modern digital experience. This initiative reflects DECAL's commitment to serving families through accessible and user-friendly technology.

The IT team also made significant progress in its cloud and data modernization strategy, expanding Azure-based infrastructure and advancing enterprise analytics capabilities through Microsoft Fabric and Databricks initiatives. These efforts are improving scalability, strengthening disaster recovery, enhancing reporting capabilities, and creating a stronger foundation for data-driven decision making.

Supporting Georgia's GA@WORK implementation was another key achievement. DECAL IT led critical readiness activities, including identity management, integrations, operational planning, and go-live support to help ensure a seamless transition for agency staff.

Cybersecurity remained a top priority throughout the year. The team enhanced security monitoring, strengthened governance and compliance processes, and proactively responded to emerging threats to protect agency systems and data.

Operationally, DECAL IT maintained a strong focus on service excellence by modernizing infrastructure, improving device management, resolving enterprise technology issues, and ensuring the reliability of critical systems that support DECAL's programs and services.

The organization also strengthened project governance, portfolio management, and enterprise architecture practices, increasing transparency, improving prioritization, and driving better alignment between technology investments and business outcomes.

These accomplishments highlight the dedication, expertise, and teamwork of the entire IT division. Together, DECAL IT continues to deliver secure, reliable, and innovative technology solutions that support DECAL's employees, early care and education providers, families, and the citizens of Georgia.



DECAL Executive Cabinet

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**Georgia Dept
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BRIGHT FROM THE START

Board of Early Care and Learning

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First Congressional District**

**VACANT
Second Congressional District**

**Joyce Freeman, Bowdon
Third Congressional District**

**Kristy Beam, Ed.D., Atlanta
Fourth Congressional District
(Chair)**

**Karla Zisook, PhD., Decatur
Fifth Congressional District**

**Jen Bennecke, Atlanta
Sixth Congressional District**

**Kristin Morrissey, Cumming
Seventh Congressional District
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**Karen Jones, Ed.D., Warner Robins
Eighth Congressional District**

**Cristina Washell, Ed.D., Cleveland
Ninth Congressional District
(Secretary)**

**Joanna Hill, Watkinsville
Tenth Congressional District**

**Maria Franklin, Adairsville
Eleventh Congressional District**

**VACANT
Twelfth Congressional District**

**VACANT
Thirteenth Congressional District**

**Sylvia Washington, MD, Rome
Fourteenth Congressional District**



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