

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning
BRIGHT FROM THE START



DECAL By the Numbers

680 - Students in the Rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program
3,816 - Students in the Rising Kindergarten Summer Transition Program
4,020 - Licensed Georgia child care programs receiving at least one payment from STABLE (Short Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities)
4,380 - Licensed Georgia child care programs
2,003 - Quality Rated child care programs
21,520 - Subscribers to DECAL Facebook Page
686 - Subscribers to DECAL YouTube Channel
970 - Approved Summer Food Service Program Meal Sites

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New Episodes
Every Wednesday

Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs



Dear DECAL Co-workers,

The day you receive this issue of *Decidedly DECAL* was **SUPPOSED** to be the first day of our “new normal.”

BUT, as you read in the e-mail I sent all of you this weekend, COVID-19 has forced us to take another detour.

Again, I assure you that I and the DECAL Executive Cabinet will continue to monitor the situation and will move forward cautiously, intentionally, and informed by the most current data and science.

I don't have the answers about this disease. **But I do know THIS:** If we...as a department...as families...as individuals...can survive and succeed against all that COVID has thrown at us, then we'll certainly be able to figure out and adjust to life moving forward. I am confident of that; I have confidence in you.

If you have any concerns about our plans for transitioning to our new ways of doing business, PLEASE talk to your manager or supervisor. And I encourage ALL of us to approach these next months with the same patience and flexibility that we mustered when the COVID nightmare began.

Thank you for your faithful professionalism demonstrated so clearly the past 17 months. I continue to be honored to serve with you in meeting the early care and education needs of Georgia's children and families.

Sincerely,

Headquarters-based, home-based, or mobile: DECAL prepared for the “New Normal”

When DECAL reopens for regular office hours, there will be fewer people in the Atlanta offices and several departments will have relocated. According to Rian Ringsrud, Deputy Commissioner of

When the People Stayed Home: Bridgeman is Children's Book Author

You probably know Jennifer Bridgeman as the Process and Quality Improvement Manager in Child Care Services. She has been with DECAL for nearly 15 years and has also spent time as a center director, Pre-K resource coordinator, and in family services with Head Start.

But last month, Bridgeman added another title: Children's Author.

"One of my bucket list items has always been to write a children's book, and 2020 just happened to be the year to do it," said Bridgeman, who holds a BS in Child and Family Development and an MEd in School Psychology. As a result, "When the People Stayed Home" was published July 30, 2021. The book tells the story of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the younger generation will remember it in future years.

"We will forever remember the spring of 2020 and the subsequent months after the lock-down for their intended purposes – to stop the spread, to try to keep others from getting sick," said Bridgeman. "To us, it meant staying home, working from home, and life still going on. I wanted to tell a story of not only why we had to do it, but also the good that was able to come from it."

"I'm not surprised that Jennifer would use her time during COVID to check something off her bucket list," said Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner of Child Care Services. "I'm also not surprised that what she created will help bring people together to look for bright spots and silver linings. That's exactly what she does for CCS every day."

Bridgeman's manager, Director of Process and Policy Catherine Broussard, agrees. "Jennifer has helped all of us this past year to keep events in perspective and look for the opportunities they presented, not the things they kept us from doing," said Broussard. "She has a unique ability to see the world as it is... but turns it into what she wants it to be. She helped us find gratitude for the little things and to understand that the challenges presented by the pandemic were only temporary.

Finance and Administration, in addition to those who have been working in a mobile capacity pre-COVID, several DECAL units are now designated as home-based, including CAPS, Finance, Nutrition, Professional Development System (PDS), and certain staff in IT and Legal.

"We have all been impressed with how our DECAL team continued to handle their responsibilities working from home during the pandemic. They never missed a beat," said Ringsrud. "Based on the productivity staff have shown working remotely these last 15 months, Commissioner Jacobs and the Executive Cabinet felt this was a good time to make these changes. Many had asked if they could continue working from a home office and saw it as an added benefit. We believe it will be for the better."

Ringsrud said while 308 people reported to the Twin Towers in downtown Atlanta before the public health emergency, that number has been cut by more than half, with 164 employees now home-based. Around 370 employees will continue to be "mobile," for example, CCS consultants and Pre-K specialists conducting visits to child care programs and Pre-K classrooms.

These changes will result in the following moves in the Atlanta offices: CAPS will move from the Agriculture Building to the 6th floor of the East Tower in place vacated by Finance becoming home-based; DECAL will retain conference rooms on the second floor of the Ag Building; the IT staff and the Support Desk has moved to the 8th floor vacated by Nutrition becoming home-based.

As for the transition back to the office, Ringsrud says we are well prepared. "PPE, including masks, sanitizer, wipes and gloves, will be provided by the department. And though not required, COVID-19 vaccinations are highly encouraged," he said.

If the department receives a report of COVID exposure in the office, the impacted workstations and floors will be thoroughly sanitized by GBA.

DECAL Employees by Type				
Employee Type	Pre COVID #	Pre COVID %	Post COVID #	Post COVID %
HQ Based	308	45%	142	21%
Home Based			164	24%
Mobile	370	55%	371	55%
Total	678		677	

DECAL Urges Child Care Programs to Follow Public Health Guidance on COVID



With a rise in COVID-19 infections, the spread of the delta variant, and new mask guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), DECAL is reminding child care programs to follow public health guidance to keep their children and families safe while we update the latest COVID-19 guidance with the Georgia Department of Public Health (GaDPH). There are currently no state mask mandates; however, individual child care programs may decide if masks are in the best interest of children, staff, and others entering their facilities. On July 27, the CDC announced that individuals should wear a mask indoors, whether they are vaccinated or not, if they are in an area of substantial or high transmission of the virus.

Licensing rules and regulations require child care programs to report COVID-19 cases and other notifiable communicable diseases to GaDPH and DECAL. Programs can report to DECAL through their KOALA accounts within 24-hours of being notified.

Every day Jennifer focused on what really matters; the relationships we have with our family, friends, and co-workers, and what they mean to us.”

“When the People Stayed Home” is available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Target. Get your copy soon...maybe the author will autograph it!

Bridgeman is pictured below with her book.



Georgia's Pre-K Program Returns for Post-Pandemic School Year

School bells are ringing for more than 60,000 of Georgia's youngest learners as Georgia's Pre-K Program begins the new school year. The first day of Georgia's Pre-K Program will vary based on school system and child care provider. It started as early as July 19 in Taliaferro County and will start as late as the week of September 6 in Murray and Webster counties. Most Georgia school systems begin the first week of August.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2021 school year saw a decline in Pre-K attendance from more than 80,000 students statewide to approximately 60,000 students. During the pandemic, Pre-K providers could choose to offer classes in-person, virtually, or a hybrid of in-person and virtual. This year classes are expected to return to the more traditional in-person format.

“Research shows that the early education of children from birth to age five is critical to their success in kindergarten and elementary school,” said Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “We believe laying a solid foundation for academic and social emotional success in our youngest learners is also important for the long-term economic

DECAL is also reminding child care programs that custodial parents must be allowed access to all child care areas of the facility while their child is in care.

While combining classrooms and children is allowed, if a COVID-19 case is confirmed, programs must identify every person who came in contact with the person, including children, to DECAL and GaDPH. Limiting the number of children and staff in each classroom will help lower the number of people who potentially would need to quarantine.

DECAL is working with GaDPH to update COVID-19 guidance with the most recent recommendations. In the meantime, child care programs should follow the rules and regulations along with CDC and public health recommendations to keep their children and families safe and healthy.

SFSP will Wrap Up with Millions of Meals Served to Georgia's Children

All summer long, sponsoring organizations for the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) have been serving free nutritious meals and snacks to any child up to the age of 18. The program will wrap up service in August or September depending on when school starts back in each community. As of June, 74 sponsors served more than 2.2 million meals in 85 counties at 970 meal sites throughout Georgia.

The SFSP is a federally funded program administered by DECAL. Many children are currently living in households where they may not have enough to eat. The program provides children with access to healthy food during the summer which helps to increase food security, lowers learning loss, and gives them the energy they need to learn, grow, and play.

Traditionally, the SFSP begins when the school year ends and runs until school resumes. Fortunately, during the onset of COVID, the SFSP was available to Georgia families when they needed it the most. The USDA responded to COVID by extending the SFSP through emergency feeding and granted flexibilities that supported access to nutritious meals while minimizing the potential exposure to the virus.

Many of the SFSP sponsors have been serving meals consistently since March 2020. Sponsors found creative ways to serve meals such as grab-and-go service, preparing multiple days-of meals that were picked up at one time and delivering meals at school bus routes. “This effort was tremendous in ensuring that our children had the nutritious meals they needed when schools closed,” said Tamika Boone, Director of Nutrition Services.

Pictured below: North Georgia Community YMCA has been a SFSP Sponsor since 2012. The organization provides healthy meals to kids enrolled in their summer youth development programs.

growth of Georgia by helping to build a competent and qualified workforce.”

Supporting and guiding the mission and vision of Bright from the Start:

Board of Early Care and Learning

Phil Davis, Savannah
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(Chair)

Susan Harper, Albany
Second Congressional District

Kathy Howell, Carrollton
Third Congressional District
(Secretary)

VACANT
Fourth Congressional District

VACANT
Fifth Congressional District

VACANT
Sixth Congressional District

Kristin Morrissey, Cumming
Seventh Congressional District

Luann Purcell, Ed.D.,
Warner Robins
Eighth Congressional District

Cristina Washell, Ed.D.,
Cleveland
Ninth Congressional District

VACANT
Tenth Congressional District

Jen Bennecke, Atlanta
Eleventh Congressional District

VACANT
Twelfth Congressional District

Melissa Boekhaus, M.D., Smyrna
Thirteenth Congressional District

Debra Brock, Calhoun
Fourteenth Congressional District
(Vice Chair)



Finalists Named for Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year 2021-2022

In May DECAL announced the six finalists for 2021-2022 Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year representing high quality early childhood education programs in Austell, Cordele, Hoschton, Lilburn, Norcross, and Perry.

The 2021-2022 finalists are LaNita Carey from Jackson Creek Academy in Lilburn; Stephanie Curington from Kings Chapel Elementary School in Perry; Shelley Hoster from 1st Creative Learning Academy #2 in Norcross; Teresa Swaim from West Jackson Elementary School in Hoschton; Marie Thebaud from Kiddie Kottage Academy in Austell; and Lisa West from Crisp County Pre-K in Cordele.

Each finalist received a \$500 cash prize from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning after their applications were reviewed and scored by a panel of impartial judges. Next, the six finalists will each receive a classroom observation by a Pre-K specialist this fall, submit a small group video to be scored by outside judges, and face a panel for an in-office personal interview.

In September, DECAL will select a winner from a local public school system and a winner from a private child care center. They will receive a \$3,000 check for themselves, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover and supplies, and \$2,500 to cover out-of-the-classroom costs while the teacher is away.



Employee Suggestion Program



Visit the Virtual Suggestion Box now!

DECAL Searching for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year



DECAL and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning are seeking applications for the inaugural 2021-2022 Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year Program. The new initiative recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-18 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months).

The top six finalists (two from each category) will each receive \$500 for their personal use, and the top three winners (one from each category) will receive an additional \$3,000 for their personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and up to \$2,500 for their school to cover travel costs and stipends for substitute teachers as the teacher fulfills their duties as Georgia's Early Childhood Educator of the Year.

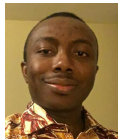
Program directors working with early childhood teachers dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young children may nominate them for Georgia's Early Childhood Educator of the Year through an online application found on the DECAL website at www.decgal.ga.gov or on the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning website at www.gaearylved.org. Eligibility requirements are listed with the application. Deadline for applications is **Friday, September 3, 2021, at 5:00 PM.**

Faces of DECAL

While today marks the day when many DECAL staff members will return to work at the Twin Towers after being home-based for 17 months, a number of employees have been reporting to the office on a regular basis throughout the pandemic. These include the individuals featured in the banner of this newsletter and those pictured below. Thank you for your dedication!

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Andrea Farries Moore, Andres Bernal, Adrean Rhodes, Alphonso Rembert, and Antavius Thompson.

Pictured below are (L-R) Stephen Owusu-Ansah, Amir Nilforooshan, Ebony Ford, Shanell Fairell, Nate Smith, and Blessings Blandford.



Sign up for DECAL text messages by texting DECAL to 474747

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE, 754 East Tower,
Atlanta, GA 30334
404-656-5957



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