

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

- 3,243** - Licensed Child Care Learning Centers in Georgia
- 1,113** - Licensed Family Child Care Learning Homes in Georgia
- 70,000** - Students in Georgia's Pre-K Program
- 754** - DECAL employees
- 2,907** - Quality Rated providers

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**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

Advocacy Days at the Capitol



Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear DECALers,

Last year we celebrated DECAL's 20th anniversary. This year began with the publication of a report that underscores the cutting-edge work we began 20 years ago and has evolved into who we are today.

The article, titled *States Seek to Improve Early Childhood Outcomes Through Consolidated Governance Structures*, was written by researchers with the Center for American Progress. Georgia and DECAL are mentioned many times in the article.

Following are some quotations from the report about our work.



- Georgia and Massachusetts were the first two states to create stand-alone departments for early childhood programs, with Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) launching in 2004 and the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) following in 2005.
- Georgia's former Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) recognized that early care and education programs being housed in multiple agencies had caused logistical inefficiencies in the state. He called for the creation of the Department of Early Care and Learning with three goals: 1) consolidating child care licensing into a single agency; 2) changing the culture of child care to focus on school readiness; and 3) increasing efficiency across programs.
- Georgia's DECAL serves as a catalyst for collaboration across multiple agencies. Georgia's Children's Cabinet, for example, includes members of multiple child-serving agencies, and the DECAL commissioner is a co-chair.
- DECAL also houses the state's multiagency Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force and hosts the state's cross-agency, two-generation leadership academy, which is intended to advance state agency leadership skills, offer training on interagency collaboration, and change the culture of state government to ensure services and programs are serving the whole family.
- Georgia also has a cross-agency data system that collects de-identified child-level data from across programs and agencies.
- Georgia's DECAL Commissioner Amy Jacobs believes the state's consolidated agency was a strength in its response to...the pandemic: "We would have never been able to get the [federal COVID-19 relief] funding out the door as quickly as we did [without a consolidated early childhood agency]."
- Georgia funded approximately 30 projects, the largest of which provided \$1 billion to stabilize child care businesses. As a result, Georgia's child care industry not only is more secure, but also has been able to grow.



YMCA – Thu., **February 6th** from 8:30 am-10:00 am in Room 125 CAP (drop in breakfast)

Georgia Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEERS)/Strolling Thunder— Thu., **February 6th** from 8:00 am-1:00 pm (no room listed/families & children advocate in the halls)

Georgia Child Care Association (GCCA) – Wed., **February 12th** from 8:00 am-10:30 am in Room 125 CAP (drop in breakfast)

Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) –Wed., **February 12th** from 8:00 am-11:00 am (no room listed, but coordinating some activities with GCCA)

Voices Pre-K Week Launch – TBD (Georgia Literacy Council will be participating along with DECAL)

2025 State Holidays

New Year's Day: Wed., Jan. 1
MLK Jr, Birthday: Mon., Jan. 20
Washington's Birthday: Feb. 17 - Observed Fri., Dec. 26
State Holiday: Observed on Good Friday, April 18
Memorial Day: Mon., May 26
Juneteenth: Thu., June 19
Independence Day: Fri., July 4
Labor Day: Mon., Sept. 1
Columbus Day: Mon., Oct. 13
Veterans Day: Tue., Nov. 11
Thanksgiving Day: Thu., Nov. 27
State Holiday: Observed on Fri., Nov. 28
Christmas Day: Thu., Dec. 25

Celebrating Nine Years of Inclusive Early Learning Week

Mark your calendars for this year's Inclusive Early Learning Week, February 10 – 14. DECAL is proud to celebrate nine years of promoting inclusive practices within early learning environments that benefit children, families, and early childhood professionals.

“The purpose of the whole week is to bring awareness to inclusion and

This report clearly reveals how Georgia is a successful model of an effective and efficient system of early care and education. And it supports why we at DECAL...in fact ALL Georgians...can be proud of the work we accomplish for the state's children, families, and early care and education industry.

Gratefully,

P.S. To read the entire report, go to

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/states-seek-to-improve-early-childhood-outcomes-through-consolidated-governance-structures/>

Governor Kemp Proposes Boost for Early Education and Nutrition Programs in AFY25 and FY26 Budgets



Governor Brian Kemp has released his budget recommendations for Amended Fiscal Year 2025 (AFY25) and Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26), including significant funding proposals for the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL).

The AFY25 budget includes funding for another round of startup grants to expand the Happy Helpings program, which provides summer meals to children in need. “This funding will allow us to recruit new partners and ensure more children have access to meals during the summer,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs.

Governor Kemp’s FY26 budget also proposes \$14 million in additional lottery funds to continue Georgia Pre-K’s class size reduction initiative. The initiative, now in its second year of a four-year phase-in, aims to reduce class sizes to 20 students. “We’ve seen early success in adding more classrooms, and we’re grateful for the Governor’s continued support,” Jacobs added.

Additionally, the budget includes \$3.9 million to fund 500 more scholarships through the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, which helps families afford child care. Jacobs noted that the funding aligns with the Governor’s ongoing support for increasing access to quality child care.

“This is just the beginning of the budget process,” Jacobs said, emphasizing DECAL’s commitment to working with the Governor’s office and legislative leaders throughout the legislative session. “We’re thankful for these investments in Georgia’s children and families.”

Georgia General Assembly Tackles Affordable Child Care and Literacy

The Georgia General Assembly is taking significant steps to address critical

bringing awareness to inclusion and celebrate teachers and all the great things they are doing in the classroom around inclusion. Inclusion benefits ALL children; it's not just for children with disabilities. All children benefit," said Margaret Freeman, DECAL's Inclusion and Behavior Support Supervisor.

To support providers, DECAL has a Celebration Toolkit available with daily themed activities and inclusive book suggestions designed to promote inclusive practices in the classroom and encourage family participation throughout the week.

"During this week, we want to bring awareness to the importance of all children having access to early learning environments so they can participate with the proper supports and reach their full potential, no matter their need," explained Katie Hagan, Inclusion and Behavior Support Program Director. "We are thankful to be able to celebrate that we have these supports through our Inclusion and Behavior Support Program at DECAL, in order for teachers to get training and coaching to better meet the needs of all children in their care, and also for families to have a place to call for resources through our dedicated GA SEEDS Helpline."

DECAL invites staff, educators, and families to join in celebrating Inclusive Early Learning Week.

"There are many ways to participate, such as visiting local early childhood classrooms to read from our IELW book list, spreading awareness on social media, or simply discussing IELW in the community," said

Jennifer Dover, Inclusion and Behavior and Support Specialist. "We're also bringing back Flat CALi this year as a fun way for DECAL staff to help spread awareness of inclusion!"

To learn more and access Inclusive Early Learning Week's resources, visit [DECAL's Inclusive Early Learning Week webpage](#) and check out #Loveinclusion and #GaSEEDSforSuccess on DECAL's social media.

The Georgia General Assembly is taking significant steps to address two critical issues impacting families across the state: access to affordable child care and early literacy development. Recognizing the essential role these factors play in shaping Georgia's workforce and educational outcomes, lawmakers are exploring legislative solutions to support working families and enhance early childhood education.

Affordable child care remains a pressing concern for many Georgia families, with costs often consuming a large portion of household budgets. Lawmakers are examining strategies to expand subsidies, incent businesses to provide on-site child care, and increase funding for programs like Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS). By reducing financial barriers, the state aims to help parents reenter and remain in the workforce while ensuring their children receive quality care.

In addition, early literacy has emerged as a legislative priority, as studies show that reading proficiency by third grade is a key predictor of long-term academic success. Proposals under consideration include expanding access to prekindergarten programs, investing in teacher training for literacy instruction, and increasing funding for community-based literacy initiatives. These measures align with Georgia's broader goal of improving K-12 education outcomes and closing achievement gaps.

As the General Assembly continues its 2025 session, bipartisan support for addressing these issues reflects their importance to Georgia's economic future and the well-being of its residents. Advocates are hopeful that meaningful action will result in expanded opportunities for children and families statewide.

DECAL Initiates Changes in Fingerprinting Law

DECAL currently has one bill moving through the Georgia Legislature. House Bill 175 concerns the wording in the law mandating the fingerprinting of child care providers. Nothing regarding the process for providers is changing, but the bill will align Georgia law with the changes in federal law.

So, when DECAL – or any state agency – sees a need for a new law, what happens?

The first thing needed is approval from the Governor's office to proceed. As DECAL reports to Governor Kemp, we need to ensure that he is on board.

Then to proceed to the House (or Senate), we need to find a candidate to sponsor the bill. We look for legislators with whom we have a good relationship or those who sit on certain committees relevant to the proposed bill. We also find legislators who have shown an interest in early education.

As this particular bill would likely be reviewed by the House Education or House Judiciary Committee, DECAL looked at legislators who sit on both committees and have a background and interest in early education.

We identified Representative Todd Jones of House District 25 (South Forsyth/North Fulton). Jones is former chairman of House Appropriations Education subcommittee. We've worked with him in the past, and he knows about and supports early education. In October, Mr. Jones even



Dr. Bentley Ponder Advocates for Early Education at Georgia Chamber Event

On January 27, Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner of Quality Innovations and Partnerships, addressed the Georgia Chamber of Commerce Foundation, underscoring the importance of quality early childhood education in shaping Georgia's future. Dr. Ponder emphasized how investments in early learning programs not only benefit young children's development but also strengthen the state's workforce and economy. His speech highlighted the vital connection between early education and long-term economic growth, calling on stakeholders to prioritize these programs.

participated in Pre-K week and read to a class in his district.

This fall, our exec team explained the legislation to him, described why it was important, and asked him to sponsor this bill. Representative Jones agreed.

At that point, the bill, like all bills, moved to the legislative counsel, the lawyers of the legislature, where members make revisions to ensure all technicalities are correct. Our legal department and government relations staff work extensively with the counsel during this time.

When that step is complete, the sponsor gets a printed copy of the bill from the counsel and obtains signatures from at least four colleagues to be co-sponsors, affirming that this bill should move forward.

That's where our bill is now. Next steps include reading the bill on the House floor and being assigned to a committee. Jones and a DECAL representative (likely General Counsel Ira Sudman) will testify before that committee on the necessity of the bill.

If the bill moves out of committee, it will be reread on the House floor and then be voted on by the all the representatives. Assuming it passes, it moves over to the Senate.

At that point, we will find a senator to carry it through the Senate. And the process begins again. After the Senate passes the bill, it goes to Governor Kemp to be signed into law.

We'll keep you updated on this and other DECAL-related bills moving through the legislature this session



Rapid Pandemic Relief Stabilized Georgia's Child Care Industry, Studies Show

Recent studies by DECAL, in collaboration with the University of Georgia and Georgia State University, reveal that Georgia's child care sector weathered the pandemic better than many other states. The research attributes this resilience to swift state and federal funding combined with strategic policy decisions by DECAL. Future analyses will explore the economic impact of the child care industry in the post-pandemic period.

"Governor Brian Kemp encouraged early care and pre-kindergarten providers to prioritize safety for children and communities," said Dr. Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships. "In the early months of the pandemic, many child care providers temporarily closed due to stay-at-home orders, school shutdowns, and families sheltering in place. These challenges defined much of spring and summer 2020 as health professionals, governments, and families navigated a global crisis."

Despite concerns about potential long-term declines in child care capacity following the pandemic and the end of federal relief funds, Georgia's child care sector has remained stable.

As of June 30, 2024, Georgia reported:

- 3,234 Child Care Learning Centers
- 1,141 Family Child Care Learning Homes
- Total licensed capacity: 388,243 children

Shelton Joins NASLEE Cohort

We're thrilled to announce that Workforce Supports Supervisor Angela Shelton has



been accepted into the 2025 cohort of the National Association of State Leaders in Early Education (NASLEE) Leadership Academy, a 12-month executive leadership program specifically designed for state early education administrators.

Funded by private foundations that support NASLEE's mission, the Academy empowers early childhood state leaders to connect, learn, and exercise their collective influence to improve outcomes for all young children.

Angela joined DECAL in March 2020 and is celebrating 20 years in education this year. She began her career as a teacher, later serving as a Lead Instructional Coach before bringing her expertise to DECAL.

Congratulations, Angela, on this well-deserved honor! We are proud of your commitment to advancing early education and know you'll make an incredible impact through this prestigious program.

Georgia's Pre-K Teachers of the Year Share Inspiring Visits

Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year, Elizabeth Arthur and Rachel Robertson, recently spent time in classrooms across the state, connecting with students, teachers, and Pre-K Specialists to share ideas and celebrate early learning.

Elizabeth Arthur visited Childcare Network in Evans alongside her Pre-K Specialist, Monica Natoli. She engaged with students during center time, observed Pre-K Day components, and collaborated with teachers on lesson plans and activities. Elizabeth also worked with Monica as she conducted a program visit for DECAL, making it a memorable day for all involved.

Meanwhile, Rachel Robertson joined Pre-K Specialists Anne Honerbaum and Tonya Royal at Coralwood Center in DeKalb County. The group, accompanied by Principal Melanie Castelle, visited classrooms led by Ms. Gilmartin, Ms. Harper, Ms. Walker, and Ms. Hubbard. Together, they enjoyed a day of learning and interaction with enthusiastic students and dedicated educators.

These visits highlight the dedication of Georgia's Pre-K teachers and specialists in fostering a love of learning and supporting early education across the state.

Trends in Child Care from July 2023 to June 2024:

- Child Care Learning Centers increased by 8 centers (+0.2%).
- Family Child Care Learning Homes decreased by 57 (-4.8%).
- Total licensed capacity grew by 4,428 children (+1.2%).

Five-Year Trends (July 2019 to June 2024):

- Child Care Learning Centers rose by 169 centers (+6%).
- Family Child Care Learning Homes declined by 330 (-22%).
- Total licensed capacity expanded by 28,693 children (+8%).

The data highlights an ongoing statewide shift: the number of licensed child care centers has modestly increased, while family child care homes have steadily declined—a trend seen in Georgia and nationally over the past decade. Notably, the growth in licensed capacity outpaces the increase in facilities, reflecting that larger centers are serving more children.

These trends may vary across different regions within the state. However, licensing visit data from 2024 suggests that the average number of children aged birth to four observed in licensed programs, as well as the average classroom staff size, have returned to pre-pandemic levels.

For more details, visit DECAL's website at www.decals.ga.gov.

Technical College of Georgia in Clarkston Helps Covington Woman Find Success and Employment in Early Childhood Education

Sescily Bell of Covington, a working mother of seven, recently entered Georgia Piedmont Technical College seeking a high school diploma. But she earned much more than that. Bell finished her high school diploma and also received a Technical Certificate of Credit (TCC) in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in less than a year before going on to enter the Early Childhood Education workforce.

Bell's drive and hard work drove her to success. But also assisting was a grant from DECAL awarded to Piedmont Technical College.

The grant, the Early Childhood Care and Education Pipeline Grant, gives free tuition and other financial supports to students like Bell. The intent is to build a pipeline of adult education students in technical colleges who want to work in Early Childhood Education – a field that has seen a severe shortage of qualified workers. So far, the grant has supported 191 students, 101 of whom were English language learners.

The grant is administered by DECAL in partnership with the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). The funds come from DECAL's Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). Technical colleges apply to be a part of the grant program.

Of the 60 who have graduated, 43 have entered the child care workforce while 105 are currently in the pipeline completing their coursework and/or practicums.

Ms. Bell spoke at the recent DECAL board meeting and described how the grant enabled her to achieve her goals.

"January 7 was the day that my life changed. I was offered an opportunity



State. January 5 was the day that my life changed. I was offered an opportunity to go to school and complete my high school education and earn a Technical Certificate of Credit (TCC) in ECCE," she said. "I attended with a variety of students, some who spoke fluent English and some who did not. But they all gave the CPH program a try.

"I got to work on my own schedule with teachers online and at the facility to guide me through. I wound up finishing high school credits in 45 days. It took me 10 months to finish both high school and college and earn the certificate. Now I'm a teacher. I specialize in children with Down syndrome, and autism, and dyslexia, and I love my babies. I teach my children how to write, how to speak. I would never have had the opportunity if it had not been for the grant."

Ms. Bell is shown below (fourth from left) with her family, TCSG Executive Director of Adult Education Bobby Creech, DECAL Board Chair Phil Davis, Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs, and Dr. Christi Moore, DECAL Director of Workforce Supports and Learning.



DECAL Announces Three Winners for 2024-2025 Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year

DECAL and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named the three winners of Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2024-2025. The program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-15 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months).

The winner in the infant category is Zina Hadjaz from The Quadrilingual Academy in Smyrna. In the toddler category, the winner is Laura Silva from My Little Geniuses Daycare in Marietta. The winner in the preschool category is Samantha Mullins from Our House at Central in Atlanta.

The Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning awards each winner \$3,000 for her personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and up to \$2,500 for her school to cover travel costs and stipends for substitute teachers as the teacher fulfills their duties as Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year. Winners serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year program through modeling effective

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

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VACANT
Thirteenth Congressional District

Sylvia Washington, MD, Rome
Fourteenth Congressional District

Childhood Educators of the Year program through modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances.

Child care program directors from across the state nominate teachers through an online application. Winners are selected from six finalists based on a classroom observation and an interview with a panel of early childhood experts.

"Child care teachers working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are not babysitters," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "These early childhood educators are professionals who play a crucial role in building a strong foundation for children's academic, physical, and social growth.

These Early Childhood Educators of the Year awards honor teachers who demonstrate excellence in caring for Georgia's youngest learners in child care settings. Their dedication to providing high-quality care and early education is shaping the future of our children, communities, and state."

Among other requirements, candidates for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year must have been employed as a lead teacher in the age group for which they were nominated at a licensed 2- or 3-star Quality Rated child care program that is in good standing with all programs administered by DECAL. They also must have a minimum of three years of experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2024-2025 school year.

"We are excited to continue this special recognition of Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for the fourth consecutive year," said Laura Wagner, Executive Director of the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. "The care young children receive in their early years is critical in shaping their brain development and laying the groundwork for their overall health and wellbeing. Competent, qualified, professional early childhood educators are key in guiding them on a successful journey toward lifelong learning."



Congratulations



Zina Hadjaz

The Quadrilingual Academy
Smyrna, GA

Infant Category



Laura Silva

My Little Geniuses Daycare
Marietta, GA

Toddler Category



Samantha Mullins

Our House at Central
Atlanta, GA

Preschool Category



Employee Suggestion Program



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text messages by
texting DECAL to
474747**

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Glenda Davis-Canteen, Brittany Sams, Marissa Moaton, Kevin Schnell, and Duane West.

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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