

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

68,000 - Students enrolled this year in Georgia's Pre-K Program
4,193 - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
2,874 - Quality Rated programs in Georgia
2,000 - One-time \$ bonus for all state employees proposed by Governor Brian Kemp for FY 2027
933 - Sites for Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program
336,000 - Georgia children in child care (2024)
120,000 - Early childhood educators in Georgia benefiting from DECAL Scholars
1,526 - Georgia's Pre-K Program classrooms who have received \$15,000 Refurbishment Grants

Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear DECAL Staff,

Every year, the President of the United States and the Governor of Georgia stand before the respective legislative bodies and deliver a State of the Union or State of the State address. Just last week, Governor Kemp spoke to the Georgia General Assembly and declared, *"As we begin a new year, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of our state and its people..."*

In context of the President's and Governor's addresses, here is my **State of DECAL 2026** address. As we begin a new year, I am encouraged that the state of DECAL is **strong** and that we **remain steadfast** in our commitment and dedication to our shared mission and vision. The following facts about DECAL support my assertion:



Current Staff: DECAL has 746 full-time staff; 18 part-time staff; and 80 contractors temps. Of those staff members, 24 have associate's degrees; 362 have bachelor's degrees; 218 have master's; 11 have doctorates; and 10 have JD degrees. The average length of service of a DECAL employee is 17.5 years. The turnover rate for employees is 7%.

Accomplishments in FY2025:

- Georgia's Pre-K Program served 71,000 students across all 159 Georgia counties.
- Nutrition Services supported 65,677,667 meals served through the CACFP and 3,123,707 meals through Happy Helpings.
- DECAL awarded 12,232 educational staff bonuses to teachers and administrators at programs receiving Quality Rated Restoration Grants totaling \$6.2 million.
- With the launch of the \$500 annual Quality Rated Workforce Bonus (QRWB) in April 2025, DECAL awarded 11,798 eligible staff members a total of \$5.9 million.
- The Thriving Child Care Business Academy:
 - Hosted 46 live webinars with 499 attendees
 - Conducted study groups with 736 enrollees
 - Conducted 54 individual TA sessions
 - Conducted 10 live business webinars for 323 trainers.
- DECAL awarded 15 Community Impact Grants totaling \$1.4 million to community organizations across the state to address critical needs, including access to child care, literacy, and food insecurity.

For these reasons, I wholeheartedly agree with Governor Kemp that "...there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of our state and its people..." and about the future of DECAL. I continue to feel honored to serve as your Commissioner and to work beside you day-in and day-out to make life better for Georgia's citizens.





New Episodes
Every Wednesday

Gratefully,

Ensuring Integrity in Child Care: Georgia's Proactive Approach

Child care programs are essential for families, yet they can be vulnerable to fraud, abuse, and oversight lapses. As policy makers, parents, and educators assess ways to improve child care systems, Georgia stands out for its proactive stance in preventing fraud and abuse.

Georgia's Approach: DECAL Audits and Compliance Division

DECAL has made significant strides in ensuring integrity in its child care programs. Since 2013, the DECAL Audits and Compliance Division has expanded its scope and capacity, focusing on transparency, accountability, and quality assurance. In 2024, the division introduced a dedicated Program Integrity Unit, further strengthening its ability to detect and prevent fraud and abuse.

Safeguards and Practices

DECAL's comprehensive safeguards include:

- Unannounced Visits: Inspections occur without prior notice to ensure genuine compliance.
- Strict Licensing Requirements: Centers must meet rigorous standards to receive and maintain licenses.
- Detailed Attendance Records: Providers are required to maintain accurate logs of children's attendance.
- Automated Billing Checks: Technology flags inconsistencies and potential fraudulent claims.
- Audits: Regular reviews of financial and operational records help identify irregularities.
- 24/7 Fraud Hotline: Stakeholders can report suspicious activity at any time, promoting transparency and public involvement.

Leadership Perspectives

Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs emphasizes, "Integrity is the cornerstone of our child care programs. Every child and family deserves the assurance that their provider meets the highest standards of care and accountability."

Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration Rian Ringsrud adds, "The growth of our Audits and Compliance Division reflects Georgia's unwavering commitment to safeguarding public resources and supporting families. Our new Program Integrity Unit is an essential step forward."

Director of Audits and Compliance Ben Appling states, "Continuous improvement and vigilance protect children and taxpayers. Our safeguards—from unannounced site visits to modern billing checks—are designed to prevent fraud before it happens."

Robust oversight and public engagement are vital to maintaining high standards in child care programs. Georgia's comprehensive approach offers a blueprint for other states. Through strong leadership, rigorous safeguards, and a culture of

Pre-K Week Final Report

October 6–10, 2025 marked the 15th Annual Georgia Pre-K Week, a celebratory milestone that showcased record-setting site engagement and unprecedented participation since the program's beginning. This yearly event was begun to raise awareness of quality early childhood education and Georgia's Pre-K Program.

The 2025 event achieved the following significant benchmarks:

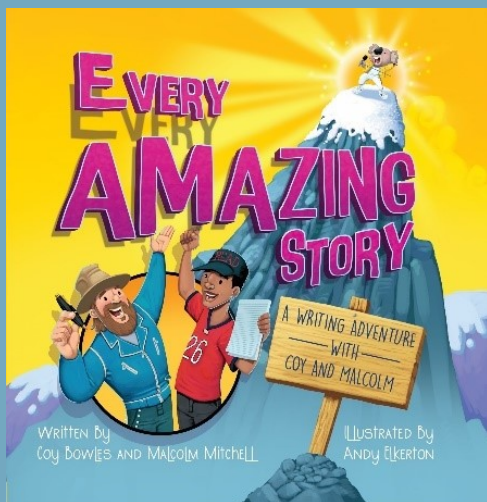
- A record-breaking 1,100 sites registered in this year's event from 144 of Georgia's 159 counties.
- State legislator participation rose to 88 legislators, many of whom visited multiple sites.
- The CALi Challenge was a success, sparking friendly competition between the legislative chambers to attend visits. The Senate came out on top with 38% participation.
- Ten out of 20 freshman legislators went on a Georgia Pre-K Week visit.
- Our corporate sponsor, Georgia Power, engaged 98 volunteers to read in 354 classrooms across 44 counties.
- Social media post engagement rose 89.8% over the past two years, highlighting the strong and growing connection with our audience.

DECAL Staff –

What's your amazing story?

This year's Pre-K Week activities featured the book *Every Amazing Story* by Coy Bowles and Malcolm Mitchell. The book tells how **everyone** has an amazing story to tell. So...

DECALers, we want to know: What is YOUR amazing story? We're asking all of you to send us your amazing story. Work, family, school, church, hobbies... tell us. Send your story in 100 words (max) or less to John.huston@decal.ga.gov. We may feature yours on social media or in the next Decidedly DECAL newsletter!



Commissioner Jacobs Addresses House Subcommittee

In December, Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs spoke before the Georgia House Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Resources and the Judiciary Juvenile Committee to share data from the recent Children's Cabinet meeting. The Commissioner described to the subcommittee high-level data such as percentage of children served by age, trends in Georgia birth rates and population, licensed child care capacity, and numbers of one-, two-, and three-star Quality Rated providers.



Ponder Participates in Early Learning Panel

integrity, Georgia demonstrates that effective fraud prevention is achievable and necessary for the well-being of children and families.

AI Guidance Added to DECAL Style Book

The QIP Division has worked with the Legal and Information Technology (IT) Teams to add important guidelines for using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to the DECAL *Style Book*. The newly added "Guidance for Using Artificial Intelligence" is located in Appendix F of the *Style Book*. The new appendix includes links to the Georgia Technology Authority website and the Peach Privacy Policy that provide current guidance on using AI tools. The AI appendix also includes a list compiled by the IT and Legal Teams of best practices that should be followed when using AI tools.

"AI provides DECAL staff an opportunity to use technology to be more efficient, but it's not without risk," says DECAL Cyber Security Attorney Sarah Dixon-Morgan. "While AI can be incredibly helpful, it can also generate false information or miss important context. Ultimately, this is another tool in our toolbelts to help meet the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families. Like everything else, we must use these tools thoughtfully and responsibly."

In addition to AI guidelines, the *Style Book* contains sections covering grammar, punctuation, agency writing style rules, branding guidelines, acronyms, technology terms, and proper citation formats. There are also many user-friendly features, including answers to Frequently Asked Questions and clickable links in the Table of Contents that take users directly to the section they want. Additionally, to make them as relevant as possible, many of the examples showing the correct way to apply the *Style Book* rules pertain to either early childhood education, DECAL, or the state of Georgia. The *Style Book* is posted on [SharePoint](#) and all DECAL staff members have access to it. If you have problems using the link, contact Sonja Steptoe at sonja.steptoe@decal.ga.gov for help.

CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Pilot: Supporting Families, Driving Success

In 2023, DECAL partnered with the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), and WorkSource Georgia OneStops to create the CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Pilot. This innovative initiative helps student parents achieve their educational goals by addressing barriers such as child care and access to community resources.

Our dedicated team of **CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Consultants** provides personalized, hands-on support to ensure families receive the assistance they need. Services include:

- **In-person CAPS assistance** for quick and reliable help
- **Same-day service** for applications, renewals, and real-time changes
- **Individualized referrals** through FindHelp Georgia and local community agencies

Student parents can also participate in Family Centered Coaching (FCC) sessions that empower them to set goals, create strategies, and take the lead in shaping their future with guidance from our consultants.

Consultants are located at Chattahoochee Technical College, Central Georgia Technical College, Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, and West Georgia Technical College. Student Parent Consultants work with student parents across all areas of TCSG, including credit-bearing programs, adult education, and work-based learning.

Nearly **70%** of participants in the CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Pilot successfully completed the CAPS enrollment and received funding. This success can be attributed to in-person

In January, Dr. Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations & Partnerships, participated on an early learning discussion panel at the 20th annual Media Symposium hosted by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.



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

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Susan Harper, Albany
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Joyce Ann Freeman, Bowden
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
(Vice Chair)

Karen Jones, Ed.D., Warner Robins
Eighth Congressional District

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

Joanna Hill, Watkinsville
Tenth Congressional District

assistance, easier access to CAPS staff for inquiries, increased motivation among student parents, and dedicated consultants who provide personalized support.

Word on the Street

We have received emails from many student parents expressing their gratitude for and sharing their positive experiences with the pilot program.

- “Thank you so much for your help and patience.”
- “Thank you soooo much oh my goodness. You don’t know the goodness and relief you’ve just brought into my life. Thank you so much.”
- “I really appreciate the assistance and your time working with me!”
- “Thank You Jesus...I am trying to do the right thing and support myself and son but the more I try to do right, I feel like it’s not enough. But hearing this has truly taken a weight off my shoulders because I didn’t know what else to do or where else to turn. So, thank you.”

What’s Next

The CAPS 2Gen Student Parent Pilot has demonstrated a lot of promise, helping families to access resources and to achieve their educational milestones.

Our next step, in collaboration with Child Trends, a research partner who is completing an external evaluation of the pilot, is to assess what we have learned from our work in the pilot, and start thinking about how we will support our student parents enrolled in the CAPS program in the future.



DECAL Celebrating Inclusive Early Learning Week

Governor Kemp has officially designated February 9–13, 2026, as Inclusive Early Learning Week in Georgia, celebrating inclusive education for the 10th consecutive year. DECAL is committed to ensuring that children of all abilities have equitable access to high-quality early childhood programs that meet their individual learning and developmental needs while fostering a sense of belonging and engagement.



Maria Franklin, Adairsville
Eleventh Congressional District

VACANT
Twelfth Congressional District

VACANT
Thirteenth Congressional District

Sylvia Washington, MD, Rome
Fourteenth Congressional District

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Division for Early Childhood, early childhood inclusion reflects “the values, policies, and practices that uphold the right of every infant and young child and their family, regardless of ability, to participate fully in a wide range of activities and settings as members of families, communities, and society.” At DECAL, our SEEDS (Supporting Early Education & Development for Success) Program prioritizes creating high-quality early learning environments where children with disabilities are meaningfully included.

The SEEDS Program supports early learning professionals through professional development and coaching so they can adapt their learning environments, daily activities, and teaching practices to ensure that every child can participate. The program also works with families to provide referrals to child care programs that promote adaptive learning practices and to identify community resources within their area. By calling the SEEDS for Success Helpline, early childhood providers and families can request support or resources from the SEEDS Program to help them better understand and address the social, emotional, and developmental needs of all children.

Katie Hagan, SEEDS Program Director, said, “During this week, we celebrate our 10th Inclusive Early Learning Week 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. We are thankful we can offer these supports through our SEEDS Program. Through SEEDS we can train and coach teachers to better meet the needs of all children in their care and through our dedicated GA SEEDS Helpline, we provide a place for families to call for resources.”

We encourage providers and staff to celebrate Inclusive Early Learning Week in several fun ways! A provider celebration toolkit containing examples of ways providers might engage children, staff, and families throughout the week will be shared with all programs. We invite all DECAL staff to join us in promoting adaptive learning practices during Inclusive Early Learning Week!

Be sure to share the ways you celebrate adaptive learning practices by posting on social media with the hashtag #ALLKidsAllAbilities and #GaSEEDSforSuccess!

**Sign up for DECAL text
messages by texting
DECAL to
470-574-3300**

Employee Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual
Suggestion Box now!**

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Annette Walker, Calandra Beavers, Dujuana Robinson, Lucius Mayes, and Gwen Kahn.

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Contact Us



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**
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