

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Fellow DECALers,

I've said these things to you before...but they bear saying again and again and again.

I am earnestly PROUD of and GRATEFUL for being part of DECAL...for being your commissioner...and for working with almost 800 professionals committed to serving the citizens of our state day in and day out.



A couple of things have happened recently that especially make me feel pride and gratitude. First, several weeks ago, Governor Kemp received a letter from a committee of the U.S. Senate requesting detailed information on how Georgia has spent and accounted for federal funds for child care going back years. It was a HUGE undertaking to gather the data to respond, and the deadline was short.

BUT, respond we did...on time. Through coordinated collaboration across all DECAL divisions, we sent the Senate committee 27 pages detailing how Georgia has spent federal funds for child care and the steps we've taken to ensure accountability and responsible stewardship in dispersing those funds.

Second, by the time you read this, Governor Kemp will have held a press event announcing that Georgia's Pre-K Program has met the 10 quality benchmarks established by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Georgia Pre-K is the largest preschool program in the nation AND the first universal Pre-K program to meet all NIEER's 10 standards. This accomplishment supports Georgia's position as a national leader in early childhood education.

Of course, you've successfully created and implemented many programs, provided lots of services, and served MILLIONS of children and families over the 14 years I've been with DECAL. These are just two of the reasons I feel really proud and grateful right now.

Thank you for helping me see, once again, that WHAT we do and HOW we do it matters.

Warmly,

DECAL By the Numbers

- 4,141 - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
- 2,833 - Quality Rated programs in Georgia
- 68,700 - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program
- 15,335 - CAPS quality assurance reviews conducted in Federal FY 2025
- 65,783 - Meals served during FY 2025 to Georgia children and adults by the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)



Foundation Honors Former GEEARS Executive Director Mindy Binderman, Early Educators

On Friday, April 24, The Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning honored its Early Childhood Educators of the Year and Georgia Pre-K Teachers of the Year at a luncheon hosted by the Metro Atlanta Chamber and sponsored by MTX Group Inc., the Georgia Lottery Corporation, and others. The event included a panel discussion led by Super Bowl champion and former University of Georgia star Malcolm Mitchell, and special recognition of Mindy Binderman, former/founding Executive Director of Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS).

“Today, we are proud to highlight some of our state’s exemplary early childhood educators,” said Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “We celebrate their hard work, dedication, and passion.”

“Early childhood educators are some of the most hardworking and talented individuals that you’ll find anywhere,” commented Laura Wagner, executive director of the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “These teachers shape the hearts and minds of the next generation. I am proud to know each of our winners, and I’m thankful for the privilege of honoring them through these very special awards.”

Educators of the Year

The Georgia Early Childhood Educator of the Year Program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool. This year’s honorees are:

- Gleydis Estrada, The Golden Age Family Child Care Learning Home in Lawrenceville
- Kenyetta Robinson, Lifetime Youth Learning Center in Union City
- Gloria Linley, Towne Lake Academy, South Campus in Woodstock

The Georgia Pre-K Teacher of the Year program recognizes two Pre-K teachers, one from a public school and one from a private program.

- Autumn Hart, Bundle of Joy Academy in Marietta, Georgia, Pre-K Teacher of the Year – Private School
- Teresa Swaim, West Jackson Elementary School in Hoschton, Georgia, Pre-K Teacher of the Year – Public School

Early Childhood Champion Award

Mindy Binderman, the former/founding executive director of GEEARS received the annual Early Childhood Champion Award. During her tenure at GEEARS, she inspired and provided leadership for a statewide movement supporting early learning and healthy development for children ages birth to five. She also served as GEEARS’ lead advocate, fundraiser, and spokesperson.



**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

Quality Rated Family Support Call Center Helps Georgia Families Find Safe, High-Quality Summer Camps

As families across Georgia begin planning for summer, the Quality Rated Family Support Call Center is stepping in to make the search for safe, engaging summer camps a whole lot easier. Specialists at the call center help parents navigate the many options available and offer guidance on what to look for when choosing a program that fits their child’s needs.

One of the biggest priorities for families is safety. Call center staff encourage parents to ask whether camps conduct criminal background checks, follow clear health and nutrition policies, and ensure staff hold current CPR and first aid

certifications. These questions help families feel confident that their child will be in a secure, well-supervised environment.

Quality matters too. Parents are advised to ask about daily schedules, age-appropriate activities, group sizes, and staff-to-child ratios. Training in child development is another important factor that can make a big difference in a child's experience.

To make the process even easier, the agency has created a Summer Camp Checklist—a practical tool filled with questions families can use when evaluating programs. It covers everything from safety procedures to activity materials, helping parents uncover hidden costs and understand what a camp truly offers.

But at the top of the list is one simple question: Will your child enjoy the camp? Because while safety and structure matter, summer should still feel like summer—fun, engaging, and full of opportunities to explore.

With the help of the search and referral services offered by DECAL's Quality Rated Family Support Call Center, Georgia families can head into summer feeling informed, prepared, and ready to choose a camp where their children can learn, grow, and have a great time.

Pre-K Week Declaration at the Capitol

Save the date! Georgia Pre-K Week returns October 5–9, celebrating more than 70,000 Pre-K students in all 159 counties. This year's declaration was made in both houses of the state legislature on March 19.

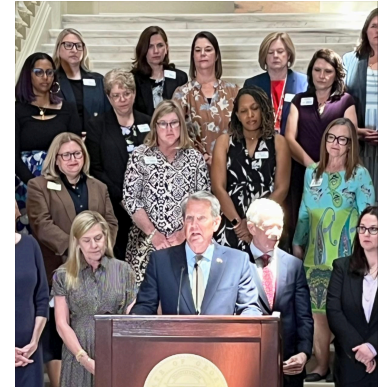
This year will mark the 16th amazing year of Georgia Pre-K Week – an annual event DECAL sponsors in conjunction with [Voices for Georgia's Children!](#) This event has highlighted the incredible impact of early learning and the importance of investing in our youngest learners. Every year legislators and other public leaders visit and read to Pre-K



Governor Announces National Recognition for Georgia's Pre-K Program

Georgia's Pre-K Program is a step above the rest! At a press event at the Capitol on April 22, Governor Brian P. Kemp announced that our Pre-K program has achieved something no other state-funded program has accomplished: It has become the largest such program in the nation to meet all 10 recommended quality benchmarks established by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) – and is the first universal program to do so.

The accomplishment is celebrated in NIEER's [2025 State of Preschool Yearbook](#). Only five other states meet all 10 of NIEER's research-based benchmarks for quality — Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, and Rhode Island—in this year's report. But none of those programs has the reach of Georgia program. NIEER's benchmarks measure teacher qualifications, class sizes, early learning standards, and curriculum supports.



Commissioner Jacobs opened the event at the Capitol saying, “Today, Georgia’s Pre-K Program is celebrated as being a step above the rest.” She continued by outlining some of the unique elements of the program:

- It has served four-year-olds and their families since 1992 – 34 years!
- More than 2 million children have become better prepared for kindergarten.
- There has been a \$10B investment from the Georgia Lottery for Education in the program.
- Georgia Pre-K reaches every corner of the state in all 159 counties.
- It has removed barriers by offering quality education at no cost to families.
- Governor Kemp then acknowledged “the incredible work and achievement of our early care and learning team” and thanked Georgia state legislators for their support.

The event drew the attention of a wide array of local and national media. You can see some of the reports below or watch the entire event at <https://youtu.be/NrZB0hE3MJk>.

[WABE](#)
[Fox 5](#)
[The 74](#)
[Gwinnett Daily Post](#)
[11 Alive](#)

classrooms, interacting and having a fun time with the students. DECAL staff members, along with our Pre-K Teachers of the Year – and CALi – visited the Gold Dome to promote the program. You can view photos of the launch here:

<https://www.georgiavoices.org/pre-k-week-launch>



[WJBF Augusta](#)
[WRBL Columbus](#)
[WSAV Savannah](#)



Program Integrity Unit Update

In 2024, the Audits and Compliance Division established a dedicated Program Integrity Unit to strengthen oversight and safeguard public resources. The unit currently consists of Aleisha Golden, Senior Manager of Program Integrity and Risk Management, and Shea Sherrod, Compliance Investigator.

DECAL is deeply committed to transparent stewardship of public funds and protecting services for eligible children and families. The Program Integrity Unit proactively identifies, prevents, and addresses fraud and abuse across all DECAL programs. What makes this unit unique is its ability to assess risk at the individual program level and across programs agency-wide, requiring expertise across the full spectrum of services.

Using a multi-layered, proactive approach, the unit monitors allegations of fraud, leverages advanced analytics, and develops preventive system controls. These efforts allow DECAL to identify risks early, respond swiftly, and continuously strengthen internal controls to prevent systemic fraud.

“We can’t assume fraud won’t happen here. Professional skepticism and accountability are essential to protecting our programs,” said Aleisha Golden. Here are some of the key fraud prevention and detection measures we’ve put in place since we started:

DECAL and Agency Friends Honor *Every Amazing Story* Contest Winners

In February, DECAL took its mission on the road to celebrate the incredible creativity of Georgia’s youngest learners. As a follow-up to our annual Georgia Pre-K Week celebration, Commissioner Jacobs joined forces with some special friends of the agency to honor the winners of our statewide *Every Amazing Story* photo and video contest.

Partnering with Coy Bowles of Zac Brown Band and Malcolm Mitchell, a UGA alum and Super Bowl champion, we challenged Pre-K students across the state to submit photos or a video that captured their own amazing stories. Two classrooms were selected for their exceptional storytelling: Ms. Pruett’s class at Dodge Primary School in Eastman (photo winners) and Ms. Smith’s class at Len Lastinger Elementary School in Tifton (video winners).

The “Amazing Story” Tour

A team, led by Commissioner Jacobs and our guest authors, traveled to both schools to personally commemorate their wins... and the energy in the classrooms was electric!

At Dodge Primary, the authors led an engaging read-aloud session of their book, *Every Amazing Story*. But this wasn’t just a typical storybook reading; it was an interactive experience for students. Bowles and Mitchell involved the children with songs and activities that brought the pages to life. The highlight for our team was watching the students confidently present their winning photos to the DECAL team. And both Bowles and Mitchell remarked on how impressed they were by the “young storytellers” we serve every day.

Impact Across the State

The celebration continued at Len Lastinger Elementary in Tifton as a second round of musical entertainment and interactive reading activities took place, ensuring Ms. Smith’s students felt the full weight of their achievement. To wrap up the festivities, the DECAL team distributed miniature Cali plushies to every student, leaving them with a tangible reminder of their big win.

Why This Matters to Our Mission

Commissioner Jacobs commented, “Events like these remind us why the work we do at DECAL is so vital. By providing these platforms to students, we aren’t just managing programs, we are fostering literacy, building student confidence, and supporting the educators who make Georgia’s Pre-K program a national leader.”

- **Statewide Fraud Reporting:**
 - Online: [Report Now](#)
 - ReportFraud@decalfraud.gov
 - 877-88-GATIP (877-884-2847).
- **Real-Time, Data-Driven Monitoring:** Continuous review of program data to identify trends, anomalies, and risk indicators
- **Risk Analytics:** Development of a centralized analytics tool to support program oversight
- **Internal Control Assessments:** Regular evaluations with recommendations to strengthen safeguards
- **Specialized Investigations:** Targeted investigations when risks or allegations are identified

“If you see something, say something, even if you’re unsure. Let our unit take it from there,” said Shea Sherrod.

While most providers and staff act with integrity, government-funded programs are inherently vulnerable to fraud. DECAL maintains strong partnerships with state and federal agencies, including making referrals when appropriate to the Office of Inspector General, HHS, and the Attorney General’s Office.

“Program integrity is about more than compliance; it’s about protecting the trust placed in us by families, providers, and taxpayers,” Golden emphasized.

Looking ahead, the **Program Integrity Unit** plans to roll out fraud prevention training, a formal anti-fraud policy, and opportunities to share best practices across teams.

"Seeing the joy on these students' faces is a testament to the hard work our entire agency puts in year-round," she continued. "We are grateful to our staff and our partners for helping us turn this contest into a lifelong memory for these children."

Photos below are from the visits to Tift County (Top) and Dodge County (Bottom).



'Look Again' Campaign Calls Awareness to the Rising Number of Child Vehicular Heatstroke Deaths

On April 30, we launched our “Look Again” initiative in partnership with the Governor’s Office of Highway Safety (GOHS) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The campaign kicked off during a press event at 10 a.m. at the Georgia Department of Public Safety Headquarters, bringing together state partners focused on preventing heat-related child deaths in vehicles.

Commissioner Jacobs joined Captain Maurice Raines who spoke on behalf of the Governor’s Office of Highway Safety, and Captain Crystal Zion speaking for the Georgia Department of Public Safety.



Pictured above are (Top) Aleisha Golden, Senior Manager of Program Integrity and Risk Management, and (Bottom) Shea Sherrod, Compliance Investigator.

The campaign’s core message was illustrated via a demonstration using a thermometer to show how quickly temperatures rise inside a parked vehicle and how extreme heat can become dangerous in a matter of minutes, even when outdoor conditions do not feel severe or immediately threatening. Vehicular heatstroke remains a persistent but preventable danger nationwide. Since 1998, more than 1,000 children have died from being left in severely hot vehicles. In 2025, 31 child deaths were reported nationwide, highlighting the need for continued prevention efforts across states and communities. In Georgia, these incidents continue to occur. During FY2025, 10 children were left in vehicles by child care providers statewide. So far in FY2026, eight children have been left in vehicles, reinforcing the importance of consistent safety practices among all caregivers and transportation providers.

“These are entirely preventable cases that require an adult’s constant awareness and responsibility when transporting children,” said Allen Poole, Director of GOHS. “Through our partnership with DECAL and NHTSA, we continue reinforcing simple habits like scanning the back seat every time you leave a vehicle, even during routine trips or brief stops.”

Commissioner Jacobs emphasized that the “Look Again” message applies broadly to anyone responsible for a child’s well-being, including parents, grandparents, and caregivers across Georgia communities.

“Once you arrive at your destination, check both the front and back of your car, then look again. Consistently accounting for every child transported may be the difference between life and death. There is no reason for a child to suffer or die in these conditions,” she said.

The campaign continues through August with additional outreach, training reminders, and prevention resources shared across Georgia to support families and providers across the state.

View the entire news conference here: <https://youtu.be/a-QTN2wkY2k>



Report on DECAL's Cross-Collaboration Group

The DECAL Cross-Collaboration group is an initiative led by CCS to bring together training, coaching, and technical assistance managers, coordinators, and other staff across all divisions of DECAL. This initiative was born out of a desire to bring all these people to the same table to help provide streamlined messaging and develop cross-

Join Us for DECAL’s Sixth Annual Children’s Mental Health Week

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh7E1H7zJYI>

connections in the work we all do, internally and externally.

The group meets bi-annually and has had three meetings to date. Some of the things/initiatives emerging from the group's conversations are:

- The Chop, Look, Listen Super Saturday training events (CCS, Nutrition, Child-Development, Infant-Toddler)
- The DECAL Rolodex (a quick, easy reference to all persons involved and contact information for this work)
- Internal training streamlining for cross-divisional awareness
- Provider resource sharing (bringing together resources from all divisions on certain topics – playgrounds was the last one done)
- Newsletter cross-connections for resources and information
- Brainstorming for ongoing collaborations/initiatives – looking into additional Super Saturday training opportunities
- CCR&R collaborations/meetings

In the future we will look at the following: data trends from the different divisions and what the data is telling us from a provider standpoint; ways to streamline onboarding initiatives in each of the divisions; additional sharing of provider resources.

New Conference Room Now Open

The new Maple Training Room (MTR) is now open! The MTR is a newly renovated training space located on the 13th floor, Suite 1354 East Tower. The room can be reserved for use.

The MTR is a state-of-the-art training room that accommodates up to 30 people. It was designed to support staff learning and professional development and is tailored to instruction, collaboration, and engagement.

Use the following email address to reserve the room in Microsoft Outlook Calendar: MapleTrainingRm13fl-30@dec.al.ga.gov
IT Room Support

Upon reserving the room in Outlook Calendar and receiving a reservation

Take a 'PAWS' with CALI from May 4 to 8 as we mark DECAL's sixth annual recognition of **Children's Mental Health Week**. Since 2020, when DECAL first established the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Director position—led by Laura Lucas in the DECAL Pre-K and Instructional Support Division—our agency has taken a bold leadership role in building the infrastructure to support the social-emotional health of Georgia's youngest children and their caregivers. We have made incredible strides in workforce development, policy, and financing, and the core of our mission remains the promotion of early childhood mental health. As Laura Lucas often reminds us, "Many people still do not associate mental health with young children. Everyone has mental health, including infants and toddlers." This week is our chance to change that narrative.

Our new theme: "Take a PAWS with CALi," features Commissioner Jacobs and our favorite companion, CALI. As a child's mental health is deeply influenced by their early experiences and relationships, we are focusing on grounding techniques that help adults and children bring their minds and bodies back to the present moment when emotions feel overwhelming.

Using a two-generation approach, we are modeling how to "Take a PAWS" to share our calm rather than joining the chaos:

- **For Adults (Sharing your calm):** Pause your body, Acknowledge your feelings, Watch your breath, and Settle your body.
- **For Kids (Understanding feelings and calming big emotions):** Pause your body, Ask how you feel, Wiggle your fingers and toes, and Stretch your arms like a tree.

How You Can Participate

Help Spread the Word. Soon, you will receive an email containing a custom **Children's Mental Health Week Zoom background** to use throughout the week. We also encourage you to visit our [Children's Mental Health Week webpage](#) to share resources with child care providers, including classroom activities, self-care resources for teachers, and a new video featuring Commissioner Jacobs and CALI. "Children's Mental Health Week is an opportunity for young children and their caregivers to better understand the importance of social and emotional development," says Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner of the Pre-K and Instructional Supports Division. "It also provides us a chance to address the negative stigma around mental health."

Don't forget to share your celebration photos on social media using the hashtags **#littlekidsbigfeelings** and **#DECALCMHWeek2026**.

Let's work together to nurture healthy connections and promote children's mental health across Georgia.

Legislation that Matters!

Here are some pieces of legislation that passed during the 2026 General Assembly and are set to become law.

HB 1123: Requires public schools that offer both pre-K and afterschool programs to allow pre-K students to participate in afterschool care starting in the 2026-2027 school year.

confirmation, submit a ServiceNow Catalog request for an IT Readiness Tech Check. We highly recommend scheduling this tech check 2–24 hours before your meeting. **To book an IT Readiness Tech Check, use the link below:**

[Conference Room Setup - Service Portal](#)

If you need help with IT equipment or have general IT questions, contact us at:

Technical Assistance:
ITServices@dec.al.ga.gov or 404-463-1198.

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

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Ninth Congressional District
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Joanna Hill, Watkinsville
Tenth Congressional District

Maria Franklin, Adairsville
Eleventh Congressional District

VACANT

SB589: The “Quality Basic Education Act” ensures two changes to Georgia law, effective July 1, 2026. This Act allows parents or guardians to now enroll their children in Georgia’s voluntary pre-K program if they turn four or five by September 1st, while also permitting parents to enroll their children, who are eligible for first grade, into kindergarten instead.

HB 1193: The Georgia Literacy Act of 2026 aims to significantly improve literacy across the state by establishing school-based and regional literacy coaches to provide direct support to teachers and students, creating a literacy coaching endorsement for educators, and requiring all public schools, as well as local school systems, to develop integrated literacy plans. This Act also includes provisions for a statewide literacy awareness campaign, and the termination of the Georgia Council on Literacy.

Stay Connected with CAPS Connect

What is CAPS Connect? It’s a great resource newsletter where you can discover everything that’s happening in CAPS. In the most recent edition, you can learn about

- Key information on scholarship type changes
- The Change of Ownership and Change of Location Application and Approval Process
- One-on-One Child Care Business Coaching now available through the DECAL Thriving Child Care Business Academy
- And so much more...

You can [read the latest edition at this link](#).

Meet the Interns



Name: Zeniya Lukonde

Hometown: Decatur, Georgia

College: Junior at Spelman College

Major: Psychology, Pre-Law

Department: Legal

Tasks: I assist the legal team with daily operations, including preparing exhibits and supporting documents for hearings. I digitize and organize archival physical court records into a centralized digital system, create infographics to inform DECAL employees about privacy and AI policies, and develop centralized SharePoint sites to improve communication and access to information.

Postgrad: Attend a dual-degree MSW/JD Program while completing an American Sign Language certified interpreting program

Hobbies: Exercising, reading, playing the trumpet

Name: Ana Luisa Onofre

Hometown: Originally from Brazil but I now live in Alpharetta, Georgia

College: Sophomore at Kennesaw State University

Department: Communications & Government Relations

Tasks: I track legislation concerning DECAL, though I occasionally work on PowerPoints, graphics, and even newsletters as part of this internship. I am majoring in International Affairs and plan to work as an international policy consultant; then eventually become a diplomat.

Twelfth Congressional District

VACANT

Thirteenth Congressional District

Sylvia Washington, MD, Rome
Fourteenth Congressional District

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



Hobbies: My hobbies include reading, writing, and painting pottery.

Employee Suggestion Program



Visit the Virtual Suggestion Box now!



Name: Shreya Shankar
Home Town: San Jose, California
Year in College: Second Year Masters Student at Emory
Department Working in: QIP, Research and Policy Analysis
Tasks: I clean and analyze child care datasets, creating data visualizations and reports to highlight key quantitative findings.
My Major: Health Policy and Data Science
What I want to do after college: I would like to stay in policy analysis, contributing to development and implementation through data analytics.
Hobbies: I love playing with my dog and knitting in my free time!



Name: Gabrielle Banks
Home Town: Marietta, Georgia
School: Junior at Kennesaw State University
Department Working In: Communications & Government Relations
Major: Communications, Public Relation Major/ Marketing Minor
What I want to do after college: I want to work in MarComm
Hobbies: Cooking/baking, pottery



Name: Tanvi Kattula
Hometown: Gainesville, Georgia
School: Currently a 3rd year student at the University of Georgia
Major: Management Information Systems
Department Working In: IT department. Recently, I have had the opportunity to create Power BI reports and develop applications.
What I want to do after college: I would love to go into the data analytics area. It's something that I have been interested in for a while now, and I think that's

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Katie Hagan, Kenneth E.

Smith, Megan O'Bara, Whitney Farley, and Chelsea Lane.



where I would be happy.

Hobbies: I love to read and be with friends and family.

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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404-656-5957



**Georgia Dept
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