

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

71,126 - Children enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program
3,682 - Georgia's Pre-K Program classrooms
4,425 - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
2,869 - Quality Rated programs in Georgia
135,326 - Registrants in the Georgia Professional Development System

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**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear DECAL Co-workers,

I recently came across a quotation that nearly perfectly expresses what I want to say as we approach the end of yet another calendar year. The key theme of my thoughts: **TOGETHER.**

Henry Ford once said,

Coming together is the beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.

I am so excited that we as a staff are gathering **TOGETHER** soon. For obvious reasons we haven't been able to be together as one group since 2019. Through your perseverance and commitment the past three years, we've continued to accomplish our work, **BUT** we've missed the camaraderie and energy created when people of like minds and common goals come together in person. That's why our **ALL STAFF** meeting on November 8 is so important.

The theme of **TOGETHER** also relates as we enter a season of holidays...Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Years. Whatever our traditions are this time of year, they are richer and more meaningful as we spend time with family and/or friends. I hope each of you is able to enjoy quality time with the people who are most important in your life as 2023 ends.

And I look forward to a successful 2024 as we continue working **TOGETHER** to serve Georgia's children and families. See you on November 8th.

Gratefully,



Meghan McNail Named Director for Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations



Meghan McNail is DECAL's new Director for Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations. She had a few minutes recently to talk about her background and what she's looking forward to in her new job.

Meghan came to Georgia from Chicago in 2001 and was hired to start the inclusion program at the Georgia Childcare Council, a precursor to DECAL. She worked with the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to develop an inclusion support position to interact directly with child care programs. In 2004, this group became part of the new DECAL with Meghan working in the Quality Initiatives division.

It was during this period that she began to see the needs of Pre-K children, particularly with behavior issues and inclusion needs. This focus helped her gain a position as a Pre-K specialist, going into schools and working with programs and teachers to ensure they were

running high quality Pre-K

“The Band’s Back Together” for November 8 All Staff Meeting

For the first time in three years, more than 700 DECAL employees will gather for an All Staff Meeting under the musical theme, “The Band’s Back Together.” The meeting takes place on Wednesday, November 8, 2023, beginning at 9:00 AM, at the Cobb Galleria Centre in Cobb County.

“The last time we met in person like this was October 1, 2019, at the Georgia International Convention Center in College Park,” said Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “Since then we have experienced a worldwide pandemic, learned to work remotely, shifted much of our work online, and begun the transition to a ‘new normal’ of hybrid work schedules in the office, at home, and in child care programs. Personally, I can’t wait to see everyone again and get back to that personal touch that makes DECAL so special among state agencies.”

Commissioner Jacobs said an All Staff Committee has worked over the past several months to plan a stellar event that is both educational and entertaining. There will be guest speakers, breakout sessions, a live podcast recording, and an employee lip-sync competition.

Another highlight of the All Staff Meeting will be the fifth annual Commissioner’s Spirit of DECAL Awards, presented to DECAL employees who exemplify the agency’s values and inspire greatness among their fellow staff members. Nominations were submitted by employees with final selections made by Commissioner Jacobs.

Watch for more details on e-mail. Everyone is encouraged to arrive early to park, enjoy a breakfast snack, find your seat, and reconnect with fellow employees, outside the squares of Zoom and Teams meetings.

running high quality Pre-K classrooms. Eventually becoming a Pre-K manager, she served in that position until the creation of DECAL's summer transition program and outreach coordinator position – something that offered experience outside of Pre-K.

“It was new and exciting to me, and I was there for the past eight years. That job helped me develop professionally. I've grown a lot, and, obviously, matured. I'm older now, but I've gotten to do a lot of things that I never would have had the opportunity to do if I had stayed on the Pre-K side of things.”

Those opportunities included working with the Commissioner and the Teacher of the Year program with the First Lady of Georgia Sandra Deal.

“I was very involved with Mrs. Deal when she read in Pre-K classrooms, so we worked together a great deal. I got to go to the Governor's mansion and met Governor Nathan Deal.”

A fun story: “I was at the Governor's mansion with Liz Young for a Pre-K week meeting with the First Lady. We were sitting in their family room talking, and the Governor walked in. He had come home from a meeting at the Capitol and wasn't feeling well. He came in, sat down, kicked off his shoes and was like *I'm just not having a great day.*”

“So the two of us were just there, hanging out in the mansion with the Governor and his wife... It was pretty amazing.”

Finally, what is Meghan looking forward to most as a director of the Pre-K Program?



WSB-TV's Fred Blankenship inspires the DECAL team at the 2019 All Staff Meeting held at the Georgia International Convention Center in College Park

CAPS and ACCESS Initiative Changes Taking Place

Changes are taking place with CAPS and



Elisabetta Kasfir

the Awarding ChildCare Education Scholarship Supplements (ACCESS) initiative.

Since May 2021 CAPS, through ACCESS, has paid child care providers their full published rate for the service provided. This includes the family fee. Funds came from the Federal Government via the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act.

However, that Federal funding ended at the end of September, meaning that based on existing federal funding requirements, families would need to pay their family fee beginning in October.

However, DECAL recognizes that the transition for families back to paying a portion of their child care may be challenging, so DECAL is stepping in to provide further relief to CAPS families for the next 12 months. Through the continuation of ACCESS,

“I'm looking forward to building relationships with my team and seeing where I can take that team. I'm also excited about the provider side of it. I've always had a strong connection with them; I know many of them well. So, I'm excited to continue developing relationships with providers.”

DECAL Participates in Find Help Georgia Forum

DECAL joined the Technical College System of Georgia and Prevent Child Abuse Georgia for the first Find Help Georgia Annual Forum at Georgia State University. This annual gathering celebrates the milestones of the work over the first year and looks ahead to what the future holds for this ever-expanding statewide resource serving Georgia's families. Visit Find Help Georgia at <https://findhelpga.org>.



DECAL will fund child care costs, *minus the family fee*. This means that DECAL will pay the CAPS rate as well as continuing to pay the difference between that rate and the full rate the child care provider charges, while families are only responsible for paying their family fee. And that family fee will be no more than 7% of a family's income.

"DECAL understands that many families with CAPS scholarships are still feeling the financial impacts of the pandemic, and is committed to ensuring the fees families are responsible for between now and September 2024 do not exceed the nationally recommended benchmark for affordable child care cost of 7% of family income," said Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs.

Prior to the pandemic, families paid their family fee and the difference between the CAPS rate and what the child care provider charges as part of the cost of child care. This program is meant, in part, to reacclimate families to paying at least part of their child care costs prior to the end of the program in September 2024.

Also, in January, a 4.3% increase will be applied to child care providers' published rates used to calculate ACCESS payments. With the 4.3% increase and the extension of the ACCESS initiative, the temporary suspension of provider rate changes waiver will continue through September 29, 2024.

This means the increase in the payment to providers will be covered by ACCESS, and families will still only be responsible for paying their CAPS family fee. While ACCESS is in effect, participating CAPS providers cannot change their tuition rates for families enrolled in the CAPS program.

DECAL Offering Child Care Tuition Assistance for Early Educators in Georgia

DECAL is piloting a child care tuition assistance program for early care educators in Georgia to support child programs in the recruitment and retention of child care staff. The Child Care Tuition Assistance Program (CCTAP) will distribute funds to support the cost of child care for early educators who have children in care at the facility where they work.

Child care employees will be eligible to receive tuition assistance funds as long as they work at least 30 hours per week at pilot sites.

Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the plan begins with a pilot program that includes 24 child care centers and six family care learning homes. Using funds from ARPA, this



program will support the cost of child care for children of individuals working at 30 licensed child care programs in Georgia.

“The turnover rate among professionals working in Georgia’s early care and education industry is an obstacle to providing high-quality care to Georgia’s children,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “Through this pilot program, DECAL will pay a portion of child care costs for the children of employees of the child care programs in which they work. This tuition support will be an incentive for early care and education professionals to stay in their jobs.”

For example, it will pay 75% of child care tuition rates to the employer of each eligible staff member. A minimum of 15% of the published tuition rates must be covered by the employers, and employees are liable for 10%. However, employers have an option of covering that 10% for the employees if they wish.

DECAL Professional Learning Director Christi Moore said, “We know that turnover among early childhood educators is high and creates a barrier to providing high-quality early learning for children and families. We hope that providers who participate in CCTAP can use the additional support DECAL will provide to recruit, retain high qualified staff, and most importantly keep child care workers in their jobs and their children in care.”

Welcome New Interns

Join us in welcoming our new Communications and Government Relations Interns: Mackenzie Weston is a Political Science major at Kennesaw State University and Trey Freeman is a Mass Communications major at Clayton State University. So glad to have you with us!



DECAL Introduces Thriving Child Care Business Academy

DECAL is pleased to introduce the Thriving Child Care Business Academy. This new support will help child care providers strengthen their business practices so that their programs are more efficient and financially sound. Business owners and administrators are the heart of Georgia’s child care industry.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, DECAL created a range of financial programs and awards to support not just child care providers, but also teachers and families of young learners. With the Thriving Child Care Business Academy, DECAL adds another type of assistance to these supports: online business and financial training and related resources for owners and administrators.

Grants Ensured Georgia Kids Had Access to Nutritious Meals & Snacks

More kids throughout Georgia had greater access to nutritious meals and snacks over the past two summers thanks to the State of Georgia. The state allocated \$300k as part of the amended budget in FY22, and the funds

“Over the past two years, DECAL has distributed more than \$1.6 billion in federal financial support to help child care providers mitigate the negative business impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “We created the Thriving Child Care Business Academy to help providers acquire the knowledge, skills, and tools to become

financially self-sustaining as those federal funding programs end.”

were used to expand summer

meals to unserved areas of the state.

As a result, 22 start-up grants, ranging from \$7k to \$25k, were awarded to 15 Happy Helpings sponsors. More than 112,000 meals and snacks were provided to children living in 27 counties not previously served by the Happy Helpings program.

“Our Happy Helpings Sponsors made extraordinary progress meeting the nutritional needs of Georgia’s children last summer with more than 2.8 million meals being served in 100 counties,” said Tamika Boone, Director of Nutrition Services. “The start-up grants offered tremendous support to our sponsors allowing them to purchase food, equipment and to pay additional staff to support meal sites in counties that were not previously served.”

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

Board of Early Care and Learning

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First Congressional District
(Chair)

Susan Harper, Albany
Second Congressional District

VACANT
Third Congressional District

Karla Zisook, Decatur
Fourth Congressional District

VACANT
Fifth Congressional District

The Academy offers live, virtual training in the form of webinars, small study groups, and individual coaching, as well as an online, bilingual self-study library. Recordings of some of the webinars will also be available online. Through these resources participants can receive training in business topics covering:

- Finances, budgets, and tax planning
- Organizational leadership
- Staff recruitment and retention
- Marketing

To view all the content, visit the Academy website at <https://www.decal.ga.gov/Thriving.aspx>.

“Through the Thriving Child Care Business Academy, owners and administrators can receive free training in best business management practices, much like the training they receive in best early childhood education practices,” said Bentley Ponder, DECAL Deputy Commissioner for Quality Innovations and Partnerships.

DECAL has chosen experts in small business operations and the child care industry to create and deliver the training: Civitas Strategies, University of Georgia Small Business Development Center at Valdosta State University, and the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. To encourage all licensed providers to take advantage of the Academy, all the training and materials are free. Additionally, participants can earn state-approved training hours and stipends for completing certain training.

The Academy is just one example of DECAL’s ongoing commitment and multi-faceted approach to supporting Georgia’s child care industry and families with young children as they surmount the challenges resulting from the pandemic. The agency has also allocated more than \$100 million in one-time bonuses for early care and education teachers. To date, it has also awarded more than \$1 billion in STABLE 4ward and Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements (ACCESS) payments, as well as tens of millions of dollars in Quality Rated Restoration Grants, to help stabilize providers. Additionally, DECAL has distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants for projects to transform and increase access to early education services in local communities. DECAL also recently created and awarded Expanding Parents’ Access to Nontraditional Delivery (EXPAND) Grants to child care providers and for-profit, nonprofit, and government organizations to serve the identified need shared by many families, employers, and communities for child care services outside traditional working hours.

DECAL Commissioner Honored

DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs was honored recently with the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration’s Kathryn

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Kristy Beam, Atlanta
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

Joanna Hill, Watkinsville
Tenth Congressional District

Jen Bennecke, Atlanta
Eleventh Congressional District

Kimberly Neville, Brooklet
Twelfth Congressional District

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

Debra Brock, Calhoun
Fourteenth Congressional
District
(Vice Chair)

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Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Kelly McConnell, Nkem Ijeh, Angela Reuwers, Annette Walker, and Codi Parham.

the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration's Kathryn E. Hensley Distinguished Public Service Practitioner Award. Commissioner Jacobs was recognized for her "exemplary public service" while serving as Commissioner and making "significant strides in putting children and their parents at the forefront of policy and program development." The award recognized the Commissioner's work as a national leader and champion of the 2Gen approach. Commissioner Jacobs has led DECAL since June 2014. She has served under Governor Nathan Deal and Governor Brian Kemp.



Members of the DECAL Child Care Services Team recently participated in the annual conference of the National Association for Regulatory Administration in Indianapolis. The CCS team presented four sessions and served on one panel.

Employee

Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual
Suggestion Box now!**

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
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BRIGHT FROM THE START



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