

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

- 4,370** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
- 72,000** - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program this year
- 1,892** - Funded sites for Georgia's Pre-K Program
- 3,217** - Licensed Child Care Learning Centers in Georgia
- 1,131** - Licensed Family Child Care Learning Homes in Georgia
- 2,895** - Quality Rated Programs in Georgia

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**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

**Did you take the
#ClearTheCrib Challenge?**

Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear DECALers,

I waited to write this edition's letter until after our ALL STAFF MEETING 2024 knowing there'd be plenty to comment on after gathering with all 800+ of us. We met yesterday at the Cobb Galleria.

As I drove home from the event, I couldn't help but think about the quotation by Pope John Paul II with which I ended my comments yesterday morning:

- o Let us remember the past with **gratitude**,
- o live the present with **enthusiasm**, and
- o look to the future with **confidence**.

As I listened to former Commissioner Marsha Moore's comments, I felt **GRATEFUL** for the visionary leadership that created DECAL 20 years ago...and for you and all the people who have worked for the department as it has evolved and adapted to the changing needs of Georgia's children, families, and the early care and learning industry.

I left yesterday feeling **ENTHUSIASTIC** about what we are currently doing, especially after experiencing the energy that you displayed at the Galleria. Your enthusiasm was contagious...as we filled that ballroom, learned from the various "side shows," enjoyed a great meal, were entertained by DeChorale, welcomed a former Governor, recognized our colleagues who have demonstrated the Spirit of DECAL, and laughed as we tried to remember iconic songs of the past two decades.

And I am **CONFIDENT** as we end this calendar year and begin the next 20 years of DECAL's history that we will continue to faithfully serve children, families, and early care and education providers in our state. (And in the same way that there were people among us yesterday who were with DECAL when it was created 20 years ago, some of you may still be around...as leaders...when DECAL celebrates its 40th anniversary!!!)

As we move into these final months of 2024, I wish you and your family peace, rest, and joy in whatever ways you choose to celebrate the upcoming holidays. You've earned it.

Gratefully yours,



#ClearTheCrib Challenge:

October was Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Awareness Month, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) issued a #ClearTheCrib challenge across social media. The idea was to ensure nothing was in the crib with the infant or attached to the crib, and the challenge included a timed video component to see how quickly the crib could be ready for a baby to sleep in. Check out some of the fun videos and more about the challenge [here](#).

Infant safe sleep is among the top five most commonly cited rule violations at DECAL, and DECAL supported SIDS Awareness Month by highlighting infant safe sleep during October on our social media platforms. Infant safe sleep practices help to protect children from preventable accidental deaths due to smothering or choking and reduce the occurrence of SIDS. As Pam Stevens, Deputy Commissioner of Child Care Services, reminds us, “Sometimes the most basic things are the most important things. At DECAL we try to educate everyone (parents, caregivers, grandparents) about safe sleep. We want people to remember that in terms of cribs, less is more.”

Due to how important safe sleep is for our youngest children, the CCS Technical Assistance Team spends time with providers to ensure teachers understand the importance of safe sleep practices and know how to protect children in their care. CCS TA Team Manager, Jennifer Waters, states, “Safe sleep practices are easy to do and make a huge difference in

protecting our children, so we want to ensure infant teachers understand why these practices are important and how to implement them as part of their consistent daily practices. These easy proactive steps may very well save a life.”

Core principles for infant safe sleep include:

- Lay the infant down on their back.
- Avoid swaddling and do not use positioning devices unless a

DECAL Staff Gather for 'Greatest Show' to Commemorate, Celebrate, and Elevate

DECAL's Greatest Show, its 800+ employees, gathered in the center ring on October 23 to celebrate the department's 20th anniversary and mark the 10th service anniversary of Commissioner Amy Jacobs.



The 2024 All Staff Meeting at the Cobb Galleria Centre featured relevant breakout sessions, guest speakers, a fun music competition, a performance by DeChorale, and the presentation of the Spirit of DECAL awards.

The day opened with a nostalgic video that reviewed the past 20 years of the department, from Governor Sonny Perdue signing it into law in 2004 to the present day. We remembered major milestones such as our one-millionth Pre-K student, bringing CAPS into DECAL, and surviving the pandemic, and took time to recall our past commissioners.

Then, following a grand entrance by the day's emcee, Chief Communications Officer Reg Griffin, who welcomed everyone to the meeting and recognized staff by their length of service, Commissioner Amy Jacobs came to the podium. As she spoke, she reminded attendees of the day's purpose and theme.

“Today can be summarized by three words: commemorate, celebrate, and elevate - looking back at how DECAL began, celebrating what we've accomplished, and looking forward as we continue our work. Let us remember the past with gratitude, live the present with enthusiasm, and look to the future with confidence. I hope when we leave here today, we'll be filled with gratitude, enthusiasm, and confidence as we continue serving the children, families, and early care and education providers of Georgia.”

Commissioner Jacobs then gave a nod to commemorating our past by introducing DECAL's first Commissioner, Marsha Moore, who was on hand to remember the early days and convey her amazement and pride on how far we have come.

“I look at everybody here and I think about the 20 years of people's lives you have touched. I hope you see it every day. But to be able to serve this many people... you are improving the lives of children and providers. I want to congratulate you for carrying on this legacy and making it something to be so proud of in the state of Georgia. It's an honor to be here today with each and every one of you.”

Breakout sessions covered a variety of topics including customer service,

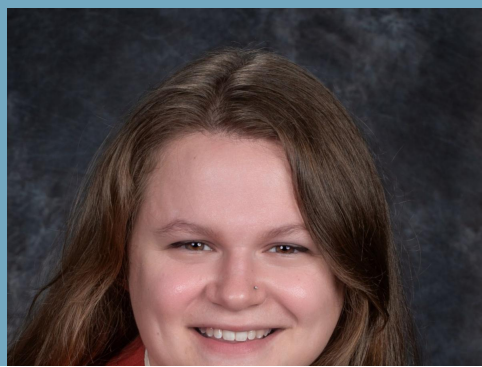
written doctor's note has been provided.

- Ensure nothing is attached to the child's clothing while in the crib: no bibs, paci clips, teething attachments, etc.
- Clear the crib of everything, including all toys, bumpers, loveys, blankets, wedges, and pillows. Nothing should be in the crib besides the infant.
- Remove all attachments from the crib, even mobiles and toys.
- Ensure the crib sheets are tight fitting on the mattress and the 2-inch or taller waterproof mattress fits snugly with no gaps.
- Use only cribs in good repair and compliant with CPSC and ASTM safety requirements for sleeping. No other devices are approved for infants to sleep in.
- Actively supervise every infant while they nap for any changes in breathing or skin complexion.

For more information on infant safe sleep, check out : [What Does A Safe Sleep Environment Look Like? \(ga.gov\)](#) because [You wouldn't put a kayak in your bed!](#)

Additionally, for all things licensing rule related, check out the [DECAL Rules and Regulations Indicator Manual](#) found on our website and updated quarterly. Safe Sleep requirements can be found in the *Safe Sleeping and Resting Requirements* chapter.

Meet Sarah Dixon-Morgan, DECAL Cybersecurity and Privacy Attorney and Privacy Officer



managing stress, discovering your career values, nutrition and movement, and understanding what happens behind the scenes at the DECAL. Following lunch, the 25 members of DeChorale gave their one-night-only performance of two selections, Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," and their repurposed DECAL-esque version of "This is Me" from "The Greatest Showman," featuring Ben Appling on guitar. The performance received rave reviews from all in attendance.

The Greatest Showdown featured Commissioner Jacobs and Reg as quiz masters pitching music clues and DECAL facts from the past 20 years to six teams from across all divisions. Each team attempted to be the first to buzz in and correctly name the song and artist. After 20 questions, two teams were tied for the lead. But after a nail-biting tie breaker, The QIPsters prevailed. Congratulations to Hayat Dergaga, Mariana Ortiz-Padilla, Audrey Lampkin, Denise Rutledge, Brittany Fordham, and Dajuana Robinson.

Six Spirit of DECAL Awards Bestowed at All Staff Meeting

Although the all staff meeting was full of fun and interesting moments, a true highlight of the event was the presentation of the Spirit of DECAL awards.

As this portion of the day began, emcee Reg Griffin took a few moments to remind us that in addition to being the 20th Anniversary of DECAL, 2024 also marked the 10th anniversary of Governor Nathan Deal's appointing Amy Jacobs as commissioner as well as her 25th year in state government. A video created by Communications Manager Jerry Brown was shown that recalled highlights from the commissioner's tenure, from her swearing in to the present day. We remembered how she has guided the department through both good and challenging times, shaping us into the "gold standard" state department we are today.

Then, as the video ended, Reg surprised the commissioner by introducing a special guest – former Governor Deal himself. Deal spoke to the staff reminiscing how Commissioner Jacobs' character evolved from the introvert he once knew into the Amy we all know today. "I'm grateful for the relationship Amy had with my late wife, Sandra Deal, and I thank her for the extra special things she has done for our state's children and families."

And then, to honor the commissioner on her anniversary, Deal presented her with her own Spirit of DECAL award. "Amy, I am very honored to present this to you, and I know that your fine service will continue."

With a huge smile and teary eyes, Commissioner Jacobs accepted the award and stepped forward to say a few words of appreciation. "What an honor it is for Governor Deal to be here," she said. "He gave me a chance 10 years ago, and he probably had no idea who he was putting in this position. But I appreciate the opportunity he gave me, so thank you."

Then Governor Deal and Commissioner Jacobs together presented the Spirit of DECAL awards to five staff members who had been nominated by their peers and chosen by the commissioner as exemplifying DECAL's values in their professional life.



In today’s increasingly digital world, safeguarding personal data and securing online assets are more critical than ever. As cyber threats continue to evolve, the demand for legal experts who can navigate the complexities of cybersecurity and privacy law are on the rise. Sarah Dixon-Morgan recently joined the DECAL legal team as our new Cybersecurity and Privacy Attorney and Privacy Officer.

After graduating from law school in May 2022, Sarah served as a judicial law clerk at the Connecticut Superior Court in Danbury, Connecticut, and then worked as a Privacy Compliance Analyst at the New York Department of Health in Albany, New York.

“My work at the New York Department of Health really prepared me for my job at DECAL,” Sarah explained. “I’m not implementing the technical cybersecurity and privacy solutions... that happens in IT...but I am helping to ensure that our contracts, processes, and documentation meet the relevant standards and protect the data with which we are trusted. The compliance aspect is the work that I enjoy doing and get to do every day at DECAL.”

Sarah says while not every state agency has a position like hers, cybersecurity and privacy are priorities for the Governor’s Office and the Georgia Technology Authority (GTA). She says she feels lucky to be working with so many talented and smart people at DECAL, like Radha Datla and William Cox, who work tirelessly to protect our systems and data.

“We are very fortunate to have someone like Sarah on our team who has a deep understanding of both the legal and technical landscapes in an ever-changing digital environment,”

Those recipients were Audits and Compliance Manager Leigh Ann Hendrix, CAPS Provider Relations Education and Outreach Manager Ann Panzica, CAPS Family Support Coordinator Jason Lewis, CCS Compliance Consultant Ashley Richards, and IT Senior Business Analyst Barbara Sanders.

Reactions on receiving the Spirit of DECAL Award

Barbara Sanders:

“Words cannot describe how I felt when Commissioner Jacobs called my name. I am incredibly honored and grateful to receive the Spirit of DECAL award. Being a part of DECAL’s family is truly a gift. I’m grateful to my amazing colleagues and leadership for their support and inspiration. This award means a lot, and I look forward to continuing my service at DECAL.”

Ann Panzica

“Receiving the Spirit of Decal Award is a profound honor which reflects not just personal achievement but also the work and dedication of the Provider Relations team. I am so grateful to work for such a positive and supportive group. It’s a moment to celebrate not just individual contributions, but the spirit of teamwork and camaraderie that drives us forward.”

Ashley Richards

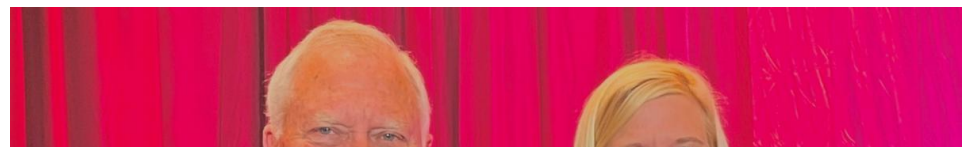
“I am truly honored to have received the Spirit of DECAL award. This recognition is not only a humbling experience for me, but it also embodies the exceptional support and inspiration I have received from those around me.”

Jason Lewis

“Thank you very much. I am still at a loss for words. The support from and my relationship with my manager and team indeed paved the way for my receiving this award. They all are remarkable individuals and make it so pleasant to come to work each day.”

Leigh Ann Hendrix

“I am extremely honored to receive the Spirit of DECAL award! I am humbled by the kind words my staff wrote when nominating me. This award is a reminder of what we can do when we all work together, because without my team I would not have the opportunity to be a winner. I am thankful for my mentors and managers who have all had a hand in this accomplishment.”



said Ira Sudman, DECAL General Counsel. “Since joining DECAL, Sarah has begun streamlining our data sharing agreement process, organizing our documentation, and updating the workflow to be easier to access and understand.”

Sarah also talks with each group of new employees, focusing on tangible things they can do to implement best practices for keeping data secure. “For example, I talk about how to identify suspicious emails and how to protect their devices. Focusing on practical takeaways helps ground cybersecurity and data privacy and make it relevant for everyone.”

A self-admitted “tech nerd,” Sarah says she stays up to date through social media and news sources like the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).

“Now, it seems like every major news outlet reports on data breaches and privacy violations, so it is easier to stay up to date on current cybersecurity and privacy events,” she said.

DECAL and YMCA Host Lights On Afterschool Events

DECAL and the YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta hosted three events Thursday, October 24, to celebrate afterschool programs and their vital impact on children, families, and communities. Lights On Afterschool events were held at Cooper Elementary School in Loganville, Stripling Elementary School in Norcross, and Wilson Creek Elementary School in Duluth.

A major highlight of these events were recent upgrades to playgrounds at the participating schools, funded through DECAL’s Child Care Services Health and Safety Grants.

“Thanks to these grants, playgrounds have been transformed into safe,



Former Governor Nathan Deal joined Commissioner Amy Jacobs in recognizing our 2024 Spirit of DECAL Winners at the 2024 All Staff Meeting held October 23, 2024, at the Cobb Galleria Centre. Governor Deal presented a special Spirit of DECAL Award to Commissioner Jacobs in recognition of her tenth anniversary at DECAL and her 25th year in state government.

DECAL's Greatest Show in Pictures



engaging spaces where young minds can explore, learn, and thrive,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “Afterschool programs are essential in fostering children’s growth, and these playground improvements are a key part of creating environments where they can flourish.”



DECAL has awarded \$80 million in Health and Safety Grants to child care programs across Georgia, funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$40,000 have been provided based on program capacity, enabling significant enhancements to

outdoor play spaces that support healthy, active learning.

The total health and safety grant to the YMCA of Metro Atlanta was more than \$1.3 million: \$143,000 for upgrades to twelve YMCA programs; \$1 million for upgrades to 32 afterschool programs in Fulton County; and \$175,403 for upgrades to six afterschool programs in Gwinnett County.

“At the YMCA of Metro Atlanta, we believe afterschool programs, combined with safe and creative play areas, are essential for nurturing the potential of every child,” said Lauren Koontz, president and CEO of the YMCA of Metro Atlanta. “These new playgrounds ensure that children have not only a safe haven for learning and connection but also the physical space to thrive socially and academically.”

Below are photos from the events.



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

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

Joanna Hill, Watkinsville
Tenth Congressional District

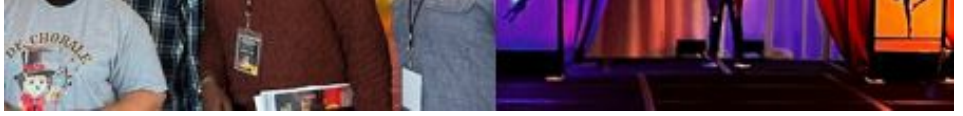
Maria Franklin, Adairsville
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Employee Suggestion Program



Visit the Virtual Suggestion Box now!

Sign up for DECAL text messages by texting DECAL to 474747

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Jessica Truman, Leslie Truman, Robert Freeman, Jihoon Kim, and Marissa Moaton.

Georgia Pre-K Week Marks 14 Years



For the fourteenth year, DECAL and Voices for Georgia’s Children held their annual Georgia Pre-K Week, October 7-11, 2024. The event celebrates quality early learning and highlights the importance of early childhood education across the state.

Launched in 1992 as a pilot program with just 750 students, Georgia’s Pre-K Program has become a nationally recognized model, laying a solid foundation for academic excellence and future success for more than two million children statewide. This year’s Georgia Pre-K Week continued the tradition of inviting state and local leaders to engage with Pre-K classrooms across Georgia.

“Georgia Pre-K has consistently garnered bipartisan support and advocacy from governors, state, and local leaders,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “This annual event offers a valuable opportunity for advocates to witness firsthand that their commitment to the program yields significant benefits.”

“Quality early learning lays the foundation for lifelong success – nurturing curiosity, fostering resilience, and empowering children to reach their fullest potential,” said Judy Fitzgerald, Executive Director of Voices for Georgia’s Children. “We understand the crucial role that early education plays in a student’s success. Children who experience quality early learning environments are more prepared for kindergarten, and this early start helps set them on a positive path for the future.”

Research shows children enrolled in the Georgia Pre-K Program make significant growth across all learning domains, including math, language and literacy, and social-emotional skills. Those gains happened for all students, regardless of gender or income differences. Those gains were shown to be sustained through the end of kindergarten, with another period of higher-than-expected gains occurring in 4th grade.

Georgia Power returned as a premier sponsor of Georgia Pre-K Week, continuing a decade-long tradition of supporting early education. Georgia Pre-K Week 2024 is supported by Governor Brian Kemp and First Lady Marty Kemp, state commissioners, state and local elected officials, and other longstanding community partners across the state.

DECAL Names Pre-K Teachers of the Year

DECAL has named its Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year for the 2024-2025 school year just in time for the annual Georgia Pre-K Week. The public-school winner is Elizabeth Arthur from Lincoln County Elementary School in Lincolnton, and the private child care center winner is Rachel Robertson from

Oconee Preschool Academy in Watkinsville.

As Pre-K Teachers of the Year, Arthur and Robertson each receive \$3,000 for themselves and \$4,500 for classroom and program use. Winners serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Pre-K Program by public speaking, representing the program at various meetings, and modeling effective classroom practices.

The winners were selected from six finalists. Each finalist submitted a video of small group instruction scored by outside judges, had a CLASS observation, and faced a panel for a personal interview.

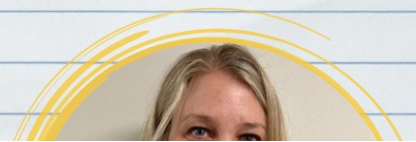
“Georgia’s Pre-K Program is only as successful and effective as the dedicated women and men who work with Georgia’s four-year-olds every day,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “These Teacher of the Year awards are a small way for us to recognize and reward their professionalism and commitment to Georgia’s children and families. Because of the exemplary work of these Pre-K teachers, Georgia children have entered Kindergarten better prepared for school.”

“Since the beginning of Georgia’s Pre-K Program 32 years ago, more than two million children have entered Kindergarten better prepared to succeed in school,” said Susan Adams, Deputy Commissioner of Georgia’s Pre-K Program and Instructional Supports. “Teachers are the heart of the Pre-K program. Elizabeth and Rachel are wonderful examples of the difference a skilled and passionate teacher makes in a classroom. They not only inspire young minds but also lay a foundation for a lifelong love of learning. We celebrate their commitment to excellence in education within Georgia’s Pre-K Program.”

Among other requirements, candidates for Georgia’s Pre-K Teacher of the Year must have been employed as a Georgia’s Pre-K lead teacher during the 2023-2024 school year, taught as a lead teacher in a Georgia’s Pre-K classroom for a minimum of three years, and must be planning to continue as a lead teacher in a Georgia’s Pre-K classroom during the 2024-2025 school year.

This school year more than 71,000 four-year-olds are attending Georgia’s Pre-K Program. The voluntary, lottery-funded Pre-K program has been recognized as one of the top programs in the nation, based on quality standards, teacher qualifications, and enrollment.

Congratulations!





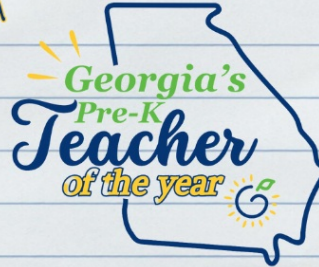
Elizabeth Arthur

Lincoln County Elementary
Lincolnton, GA
(Public)



Rachel Robertson

Oconee Preschool Academy
Watkinsville, GA
(Private)



Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE, 754 East Tower,
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