

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



DECAL By the Numbers

3,208 - Licensed child care learning homes in Georgia

1,061 - Licensed family child care learning homes in Georgia

2,913 - Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia

30,089 - Followers on Facebook

120 - Visits by state leaders during Georgia Pre-K Week 2025

1,127 - Pre-K sites celebrating Georgia Pre-K Week

Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear DECAL Co-workers,

There are many things I love about being commissioner of this department, and some of my most special opportunities are made possible by a component of DECAL many of you might not be that familiar with...the **Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning** (Foundation).

For example, every year, we recognize the superlative work of our state's most exemplary early childhood professionals: the Pre-K Teachers of the Year and the Early Childhood Education Teachers of the Year. I *love* being able to notify these deserving teachers that they've won. We're able to make these awards (along with many other beneficial projects) because of **funding from the Foundation**.



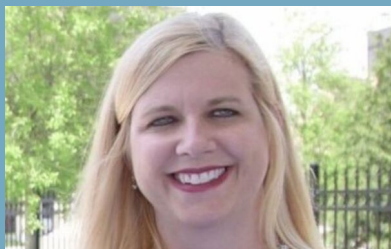
The Georgia General Assembly created the Foundation in 2017. Initially formed as the fiscal agent to respond quickly to the needs of early learning centers affected by natural disasters, the Foundation – an independent 501(c)(3) organization – is now the exclusive vehicle for supporting innovative programs and various signature projects. The Foundation impacts Georgia's early childhood education efforts from an unmatched vantage point— working with a state agency with the flexibility of a non-profit organization.

Other projects funded by the Foundation:

- The Georgia Children's Cabinet's 2Gen Leadership Academy, a nine-month initiative that equips leaders from child- and family-serving agencies with the tools to implement holistic, two-generation approaches to serving children and families.
- Early Literacy Alignment Mini Grants (together with the Georgia Foundation for Public Education) to foster collaboration between public elementary schools and Quality Rated child care programs.
- Hurricane Relief: Last year, the Foundation helped 33 early childhood programs impacted by Hurricane Helene restore safe indoor and outdoor learning environments for the children in their care.

Funding for the Foundation comes from other private and corporate non-profits, and 100% of the Foundation's revenue goes to programming efforts, with no philanthropic dollars committed to overhead and administrative costs.

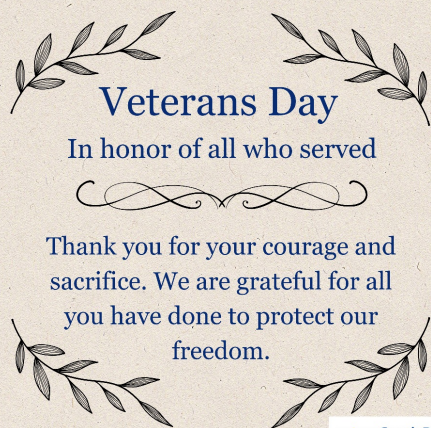
We can all be proud that our state has an entity like the Foundation. Because it exists, DECAL can serve Georgia's children, families, and the early care and education industry in ways not funded by state or federal monies. To learn more about the Foundation, contact Laura Wagner,





**New Episodes
Every Wednesday**

Grateful for you all,



GTA 2025 Fall Conference: Foundations That Last – Building Early Language & Literacy Together

On September 26, 2025, the Georgia Training Approval (GTA) team hosted the 2025 Fall Conference at Quality Care for Children in Atlanta. The event welcomed early childhood trainers from across the state for a day of learning, collaboration, and inspiration centered on early language and literacy.

The morning began with a warm welcome and retrospective updates from the GTA team, followed by a lively networking activity during which trainers shared energizers, facilitation tips, and favorite resources, setting the tone for a day of connection and growth.

Dr. Gary Bingham of Georgia State University conducted the plenary session, *“Leveraging the Science of Literacy to Promote Powerful and Developmentally Appropriate Learning Experiences from Birth to Kindergarten.”* The session introduced participants to the science of reading—a body of research that explains how children learn to read and the instructional practices that best support that process. For children from birth to age five, reading science emphasizes oral language, vocabulary development, phonological awareness, and exposure to print—foundational skills that support reading success. Dr. Bingham helped participants understand how these skills can be integrated into appropriate learning experiences.

In the afternoon, participants chose between two concurrent sessions:

- **Dr. Douglas Bell**, Professor at Kennesaw State University, led *“Supporting Teachers in Early Literacy: Practical Strategies and Engaging Approaches.”* This session offered actionable strategies for educators to foster early literacy in the classroom.
- **GTA Specialists Janet Herrera and Geanina Armeanu**

facilitated *“Backward Design, Forward Thinking: Planning Early Language and Literacy Trainings That Work.”* This hands-on session guided trainers through the process of designing professional development using a backward design framework—starting with desired outcomes and working backward to plan assessments and learning experiences.

The GTA 2025 Conference embodied its theme—**Foundations That Last**—by fostering meaningful dialogue and equipping trainers with tools to build lasting impact in early language and literacy.

Angelette Anderson	Army
Charles Cobb, Jr	Army Reserves
John Gardner	Army
Jeffery Hannah	Navy and Navy Reserves
Jihoon Kim	Army Reserves
Rhonda Parker	Army National Guard
Phillis Pope	Army Reserves
Michael Rodgers	Army
Toni Simmons	Army
Princess Walton	Army National Guard
Kaiyah Werts	Army

April Rogers Receives Leadership Award

April Rogers, Director of Policy & Enforcement for Child Care Services, recently received the 2025 Youth Protection Leadership Award from the Atlanta Area Council of Scouting America. April has been a leader in planning the annual Youth Protection Seminar, fostering collaboration to keep children across Metro Atlanta safe and supported.





Chop, Look, Listen – *The Chop, Look, Listen Initiative Helps Child Care Providers, Parents, and other Caregivers protect Georgia’s Children*

On average, a child dies every five days in the United States from choking on food, with children under age 3 at the greatest risk.

To combat this issue, DECAL is launching a new statewide initiative focusing on ways child care providers, parents, and caregivers can prevent choking in children. The educational campaign, *Chop, Look, Listen*, highlights safety fundamentals to protect Georgia’s children from the preventable danger of choking during mealtimes.

DECAL developed Chop, Look, Listen based on data from nearly 500 child care providers across Georgia. The providers acknowledged that understanding appropriate food size by age is a critical need for keeping children safe during mealtimes. The campaign will target child care providers statewide with flyers, posters, social media, and information for parents and caregivers to encourage safe mealtime practices at home.

Key messages include: **Chop** - Prepare the food right; **Look** - Observe kids while eating; **Listen** - Sit with kids and engage.

“This campaign provides child care providers with essential information about preparing food for young children and other actions adults can take to protect children while they eat,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “Keeping children safe at mealtimes takes all of us working together to apply common sense strategies related to feeding children.”

Young children have an increased risk of choking because their windpipes are narrower (about the



Workforce Supports and Learning staff, (above, L-R) Janet Herrera, Shenáe Holmes, and Geanina Armeanu are pictured with attendee Dr. Sheila Thompson, Mercer University. Training Approval Specialists Janet and Geanina planned and led the trainer event.



Dr. Gary Bingham, Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education and Director, Urban Child Study Center, College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University, shared insights during his plenary session.

Dr. Douglas Bell, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Kennesaw State University, deepened trainers’ understanding of the science of reading.



DECAL Announces 2025-2026 Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year

DECAL named its Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year for the 2025/2026 school year. The private school winner is Autumn Hart of Bundle of Joy Academy in Marietta, and the public school winner is Teresa Swaim of West Jackson Elementary School in Hoschton.

Hart and Swaim 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 finalist nominees 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 owes its success and effectiveness to the dedicated individuals working with our four-year-olds every day,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “These awards are a small token of

diameter of a drinking straw) than an adult's.

The campaign launches with two media events: The first held in Alpharetta on October 28 and the second in Brunswick on November 6.

Pam Stevens, Deputy Director for Child Care Licensing, said, "Choking is preventable. Young children do not have the cognitive skills, behavioral control, or experience to chew well and eat slowly. Whether you're caring for children in a child care program, at home, or in the community, we all can play a role in reducing choking deaths in Georgia."

The campaign clearly and succinctly provides information about how to chop and prepare food, what sizes are appropriate, and which foods present greater choking hazards. To view free resources and learn the Chop, Look, Listen safety practices, visit <https://www.decal.ga.gov/CCS/Choplooklisten.aspx>.

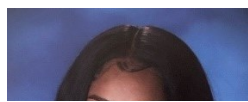
our appreciation for their professionalism and commitment to Georgia's children and families. Thanks to the outstanding efforts of our Pre-K teachers, our children are entering Kindergarten better prepared to thrive."

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 2024/2025 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 2025/2026 school year.

Hart (L) and Swaim (R) are pictured below.



Welcome the DECAL Interns!



Jaida Hayes
School: Clayton State University
Major: Communications



Commissioner Honored with Georgia 2Gen Award

The Georgia Children's Cabinet named DECAL Commissioner Amy

M. Jacobs as the recipient of the prestigious Georgia 2Gen Champion Award at the recent Georgia 2Gen Summit, hosted in partnership with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

This award recognizes Commissioner Jacobs' visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to advancing two-generation (2Gen) strategies that support children and their caregivers—ensuring that families thrive together. Under her guidance, DECAL has expanded initiatives that integrate early childhood education, workforce development, and family support services, creating a holistic framework for generational success.

“Through her tireless efforts, Commissioner Jacobs has elevated Georgia's national reputation as a leader in 2Gen innovation,” said DECAL Chief Communications Officer Reg Griffin. “Her work has empowered communities, strengthened families, and laid the foundation for brighter futures across the state.”

Recent highlights of her impact include the launch of 2Gen Innovation Grants, which fund



Major: Communications
Department: Communications/Government Relations

Favorite thing so far: I've really enjoyed the outreach and team coordination side of the communications department here at DECAL. The way we connect with media outlets and other agencies, plan, partner, and host different events, make creative and engaging promotional material, anything we can do to share our messages and resources with the people who need them has shown me the many facets of what it means to be a part of a communications team. I'm glad to have gained that experience!

Fun Fact: Jaida founded and is the president of the Art Club at Clayton State University.



Christine Bonaparte
School: Emory University Rollins School of Public Health
Major: Public Health
Department: QIP

Favorite thing so far: My favorite thing so far is working with the QIP team in making a comprehensive toolkit that involves local DECAL Impact grantees. Working on this project has

allowed me to grow my community health outreach skills and advance my research skills. I am so grateful to have such a supportive team here at DECAL!

Fun fact: I love to travel and have been to more than 10 countries!



Nava Pidugu
School: Georgia State University
Major: Computer Information Systems with a double concentration in Cybersecurity and Data Analytics
Department: IT Department

Favorite thing so far: The highlight of my internship so far is the team. Everyone is friendly, generous with their time, and eager to teach. That kindness creates a warm, fun department culture where I feel comfortable asking questions and learning fast. I also genuinely love what I am learning day to day.

Fun fact: I toured five-star hotels, restaurants, and cultural landmarks across Monaco, Paris, Nice, and Barcelona to study European hospitality practices.



Ariana Banhan
School: Georgia Institute of Technology
Major: Literature, Media, and Communication
Department: Communications Department

Favorite thing so far: My favorite thing about my internship so far is all the people I've been able to meet. DECAL is such a large organization with so many departments, yet everyone is so kind and courteous to help one another even in the midst of their hectic and busy schedules. Being able to explore various facets of the communications field

programs that simultaneously improve access to high-quality early education and help parents secure family-supporting jobs. Her leadership has also fostered cross-sector collaboration among schools, nonprofits, and local governments to address literacy, food insecurity, and economic mobility.



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



Board of Early Care and Learning

Phil Davis, Savannah
First Congressional District

Susan Harper, Albany
Second Congressional District

Joyce Ann Freeman, Bowden
Third Congressional District

Kristy Beam, Ed.D., Atlanta

through this internship alongside a great team has made my time here at DECAL a treasured experience.

Fun Fact: I love being outdoors and one of my favorite places to go is the beach.



Zeniya Lukonde

School: Spelman College

Major: Psychology and Political Science, Pre-Law

Department: Legal

Favorite thing so far: My favorite thing so far has been working with the legal team to prepare trial materials and hearing requests. I love being involved in the trial preparation process and then getting to observe the cases we have worked on. I feel extremely blessed to be part of such a wonderful and supportive team!

Fun fact: I love music, and I play five instruments!



Kiersten Harris

School: Georgia Military State College

Major: Business Management

Department: Practice and Support Services

Favorite thing so far: My favorite part of the internship has been supporting community outreach initiatives and collaborating on projects that make a meaningful impact. I've enjoyed learning more about marketing and project management in a real-world setting, and I'm grateful to be part of a team that values service and connection.

Fun fact: I'm a proud Atlanta native who loves spending time with family and friends, being active in my church community, and exploring new opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Pre-K Week Highlights

The 15th annual Georgia Pre-K Week held October 6-10 was a resounding success. Participation in the event was greater than ever before, and 87,000 copies of this year's Pre-K book *Every Amazing Story*, by Coy Bowles and Malcolm Mitchell, were sent to every Georgia Pre-K classroom and student in the state.

Community leaders (state legislators and local government officials) visited and read to students in more than 120 classrooms, with a record 1,127+ classrooms registered to participate in the week's activities.

Following are some of the entries in this year's photo contest!



JonEri's Christian Academy – Submitted by *Ryan Thomas*: **Grammy-nominated artist** (who is currently on an international tour), **Durand Bernarr** visited and read to the class

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

Maria Franklin, Adairsville
Eleventh Congressional District

VACANT
Twelfth Congressional District

VACANT
Thirteenth Congressional District

Sylvia Washington, MD, Rome
Fourteenth Congressional District



Appling County Primary School Pre-K Program –
Submitted by *Tori White*: **Sheriff Mark Melton** visited to read with the students!



Smith Elementary School –
Submitted by *Ashley McKee*: The class created and wore **custom shirts** for Georgia Pre-K Week!

DECAL went on a media blitz as Commissioner Jacobs and Meghan McNail, Director of Pre-K Instruction and Regional Operations, appeared on TV with Coy and Malcolm to promote the week's efforts to instill a love of reading among Georgia's youngest learners. Reporters from TV stations across the state also interviewed the authors remotely from the GPB studios in Atlanta.

The two authors were featured on the DECAL Download podcast which you [can listen to at this link](#).

Several other promotional videos with Coy and Malcolm and DECAL staff are accessible at the following links:

Video shooting with Coy and Malcolm

Coy Bowles and DECAL's Meghan McNail were guests on ATL Live, on WANF-TV 46 in Atlanta. They discussed the book *Every Amazing Story* and Georgia Pre-K Week. Click the following link to watch the video: <https://www.atlantaneewsfirst.com/2025/09/25/new-childrens-book-ignites-imagination/>

Commissioner Jacobs joined Coy and Malcolm on Good Day Atlanta to promote Georgia Pre-K Week and the book: <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/video/1715574>

Later that day, the trio visited Atlanta's 11 Alive atl&co program: <https://www.11alive.com/video/entertainment/television/programs/atlanta-and-company/georgias-early-education-programs/85-4bebd15d-1fcf-4d89-ac19-5959a295698d>

CBS News Atlanta recorded an interview with Coy and Malcolm. Watch the interview by clicking here: <https://www.cbsnews.com/atlanta/video/coy-bowles-and-malcolm-mitchell-help-georgia-pre-k-students-learn-about-storytelling/#x>

DECAL's communication team recently completed this video of Commissioner Jacobs interviewing Malcolm and Coy about the new book:

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text messages by
texting DECAL to
474747**

**Employee
Suggestion Program**



**Visit the Virtual
Suggestion Box now!**

<https://youtu.be/1Ap-wz0IS2w>.

From News Channel WJBF in Augusta:

<https://www.wjbf.com/news/malcolm-mitchell-coy-bowles-co-author-book-georgia-pre-k-students-get-it-free/>

Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) LaQuillia Hosley, Xavier Williams, Alex Dagenhart, Antigone Honerbaum, and Eugenia Johnson.

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[Contact Us](#)



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BRIGHT FROM THE START



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