

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

Strategic Plan

SFY 2022 - SFY 2025



Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**
BRIGHT FROM THE START

Memorandum from the Commissioner

TO: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning Staff
Board of Early Care and Learning Members
Early Care and Education Stakeholders
Georgia Policy Makers

FROM: Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

DATE: September 1, 2021

SUBJECT: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Strategic Plan
State Fiscal Years 2022-2025



With this memorandum I am introducing the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's Strategic Plan for State Fiscal Years 2022-2025.

This important plan includes DECAL's mission and vision, the goals and objectives necessary to achieve our mission and vision, strategies to accomplish the goals and objectives, and how we will gauge our success.

This strategic plan will help us focus the next four years on the priorities we have identified; support the Governor's strategic goals for Georgia; streamline our operations for greater efficiency; and ensure that DECAL employees, child care providers, and other early care and education stakeholders are supported and working toward similar goals. We are especially excited that we have added priorities to focus on the mental health needs of Georgia's children from birth to age five and to approach services from a Two-Generation (2Gen) perspective.

DECAL leads the state's efforts to ensure that children are cared for in safe and healthy environments and are more prepared academically, social-emotionally, and physically for kindergarten. But we cannot implement this plan on our own.

We need the support of families, child care centers, family child care learning homes, public schools, other state agencies, child advocacy groups, and the business, philanthropic, and faith-based communities to serve children and families in our state optimally. Please read the plan carefully looking for areas where you can partner with us to help meet the early childhood care and education needs of Georgia's children and families.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we work together for the well-being of Georgia's youngest citizens.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy M. Jacobs". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in the bottom right corner of the page.

Vision and Mission Statements

Vision:

Every child in Georgia will have equal access to high quality early care and education.

Mission:

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning improves outcomes for children and families by strengthening early learning experiences in partnership with early education programs, professionals, stakeholders, families, and communities.



Executive Summary

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) strategic plan outlines the department's high-level priorities for the next four years. The plan does not capture all the projects or activities in which the department and early learning community are and will be involved but rather charts the course for improvement in select, highly strategic areas. DECAL began the planning process after reflecting on past work, submitting the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state plan, and carefully reviewing the Governor's strategic goals and the guidelines provided by the Office of Planning and Budget.

The process began with an environmental scan, or S.W.O.T. analysis, assessing the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. After that, the team revised the department's vision and mission statements and developed five strategic goals, determined measurable objectives, and identified strategies to help accomplish the goals and objectives. The five strategic goals for 2022-2025 are:

- I. Align, integrate, and coordinate programs to improve school readiness for children birth to five in Georgia.
- II. Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education for children birth through school age in Georgia.
- III. Develop, professionalize, and retain a highly skilled workforce for the early care and education industry.
- IV. Expand Two Generation (2Gen) approaches to better support children and families.
- V. Enhance the use of technology and data to better support our stakeholders.

These goals align with Governor Brian Kemp's direction and goals for the state. By working toward and ultimately achieving these goals, DECAL will contribute to a responsive, efficient, and fiscally sound state government; help lay a solid foundation for lifelong learning in the lives of Georgia's youngest citizens; help develop college and work ready students; and address the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families.

Introduction

Georgia's strategic plan for the early care and education of its youngest citizens builds on the state's significant experience in early childhood care and education over the past two decades. Long recognized as a pioneer in prekindergarten investment, Georgia was one of the first states to develop an executive-level department, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), to serve the early childhood care and education needs of the state's children and their families.

Since DECAL was created in 2004, the department's focus has evolved from administering various individual programs to creating a comprehensive system of early childhood programs and services that address the needs of the whole child and family. Approximately 800,000 children ages birth to age five live in Georgia, and many of them receive services from or participate in programs administered or monitored by DECAL.

This plan has been greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. The pandemic dramatically affected the early care and education industry in the state and clearly demonstrated the critical significance of the early care and education industry to Georgia's economy. The pandemic also changed the ways DECAL served early care and education providers, children, and families. Many of the innovative strategies the department created to support providers and families were successful and will impact the ways DECAL continues to operate, particularly in using data and technology. These changes are reflected in this strategic plan.

This document details DECAL's strategic plan for state fiscal years 2022 through 2025. The plan, developed by a team representing each of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs, provides an overview of the department and articulates the goals, measurable objectives, and strategies that will drive the department's work the next four years.

DECAL's strategic plan exists within the context of and aligns with Governor Brian Kemp's Strategic Goals for Georgia. Governor Kemp's vision is to "Put hardworking Georgians first through streamlined, accessible, and fiscally responsible government." To support his vision, the Governor has identified the following strategic goals for the state:

- Make Georgia #1 for Small Business
- Reform State Government
- Strengthen Rural Georgia
- Put Georgians First

DECAL's strategic plan supports the Governor's vision and strategic goals for the state, which can be found in Appendix A.

Values and Principles

DECAL has embraced values that define its culture, guide the actions of staff as they work each day, and set the tone for interaction as an effective, cohesive team. In addition, DECAL's work embodies principles that characterize effective early childhood system building. Early childhood system building involves the ongoing process of adapting and developing the structures, behaviors, and connections that make the components of an early childhood system operate wholistically to benefit children and families.

DECAL Values

- **Customer Service:** We strive to always respond professionally, courteously, respectfully, and in a timely manner to all our customers: families, child care providers, teachers, stakeholders, and policy makers.
- **Integrity:** We are honest, transparent, and accountable in our work.
- **Excellence:** We strive for quality and excellence in all we do; we use data, research, and best practices in our decision making.
- **Innovation:** We are focused on continuous improvement and are willing to try new approaches to accomplish our vision and to achieve our goals.
- **Collaboration:** We engage stakeholders and partners and value input from people and groups with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
- **Equity:** We are committed to a culture of diversity and inclusion and recognize the complex and varying needs of families and children to access high quality early education opportunities.
- **Respect:** We maintain a professional work environment and value the contributions of our team members and partners in helping children and families succeed.

DECAL Principles for Early Childhood Systems Building

To build a comprehensive early childhood system for all Georgia children, DECAL will partner with others to:

- Reach all children (as early in their lives as possible) and their families with high quality services and supports
- Create policies and procedures that help Georgia children remain healthy and safe
- Include and effectively accommodate children with special and complex needs
- Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures, and communities of children and families
- Make it easier for families to access quality early care and education and for children to transition from early care and preschool to kindergarten
- Value parents as decision makers and leaders
- Promote and maximize investment and foster data driven innovation

Department Overview

DECAL is responsible for serving the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children ages birth through school age and their families. Georgia is one of the few states in the country with a separate education department dedicated to early learning.

DECAL is unique for several reasons. First, the focus of the agency is on children from birth to age five. By creating an independent education department to serve the needs of children from birth to age five, Georgia boldly stated in policy what research had been demonstrating for some time, i.e., that high quality early learning is an economic necessity that should be accessible to all children regardless of family income or location. Second, the services for which DECAL is responsible range from monitoring child care providers to ensure they are meeting basic health and safety regulations to creating and implementing innovative early education programs and services. Finally, DECAL's success depends on partnerships and funding from many federal, state, philanthropic, and business stakeholders.

Following are descriptions of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs that offer key services that foster highquality early education learning experiences for the state's youngest learners.

Key Divisions, Units, and Programs

Childcare and Parent Services

The Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program supports early education goals by providing access to high quality and affordable early learning environments for families who have lower incomes. Parents or guardians who are working, attending school, or in job training may qualify for subsidized child care through CAPS. CAPS provides scholarships to help eligible families with the cost of child care so parents can work or attend school and assists families with finding high quality early learning environments. By helping families navigate their children's early years and connecting families with resources to help them become self-sufficient, CAPS engages in two-generation strategies that support the whole family. The CAPS program serves approximately 50,000 children in Georgia.

Child Care Services

Child Care Services is responsible for licensing, monitoring, and supporting approximately 4,300 child care learning centers and family child care learning homes in Georgia. A Child Care Services consultant visits each licensed child care learning center and family child care learning home twice a year to ensure that programs are maintaining healthy and safe environments. Child Care Services provides regular, customer-focused licensing orientation sessions for prospective child care programs and investigates (in partnership with local and state law enforcement agencies when necessary) all safety complaints related to licensed early education programs. Child Care Services also offers technical assistance and training on child development and other topics relevant to early childhood providers and parents.

Nutrition Services

Nutrition Services administers the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in Georgia. These federal nutrition programs funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) ensure that children and adults throughout Georgia have access to nutritious meals while they are in a day care setting and during the summer when school is not in session. These programs help alleviate hunger and malnutrition and address the negative effects hunger and malnutrition have on an individual's health, educational development, and growth. The CACFP and the SFSP help improve the overall nutritional status of many of Georgia's most vulnerable citizens.

Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Georgia's lottery-funded, voluntary, universal prekindergarten program is currently funded to serve 84,000 slots in more than 3,800 classes. Georgia's Pre-K Program is one of the largest in the nation and continues to be a model for other states. It continually ranks among the highest in percentage of children served and in established quality measures. Georgia's Pre-K Program is offered through a mixed delivery system of public private partnerships, i.e., in public school systems, private for-profit providers, private non-profit providers, Head Start programs, colleges and universities, and military bases.

The division also administers the Pre-K Summer Transition Program (STP). This six-week program serves children during the summer before or the summer after their Pre-K year.

The Instructional Supports Division includes two units, Practice & Support Services and Professional Learning, which build the capacity of early childhood educators to better serve children birth through five. The Practice & Support Services unit provides intensive coaching to increase teachers' and leaders' knowledge and skills around inclusive early learning, infant toddler care, and family engagement. It also promotes understanding of child development, developmental monitoring, and early intervention. The Professional Learning Unit develops systems and resources to implement professional development and movement along a career pathway for the workforce. The Professional Learning Unit also supports attainment of credentials and degrees through the DECAL Scholars program; ensures the quality of training through Georgia Training Approval; and oversees Georgia's workforce registry through the Georgia Professional Development System.

Quality Innovation and Partnerships

DECAL's Quality Innovation and Partnerships division is composed of programs and services that focus on early child care and education, quality improvement, and internal and external partnerships. The division administers Quality Rated, Georgia's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). Currently, more than 2,500 programs in Georgia are Quality Rated. The division also houses DECAL's Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership grant that provides high quality comprehensive early education services to more than 180 infants and toddlers. The division includes DECAL's Research and Policy Analysis unit that provides evaluation support to DECAL programs and oversees early education research in Georgia. Finally, the division administers a number of programs and initiatives devoted to community outreach and stakeholder engagement.

DECAL Support Units

The work of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs would not be possible without the support of the following other groups within the department:

- Finance and Administration
- Information Technology
- Communications
- Human Resources
- Legal Services
- Audits and Compliance
- Government Relations

Environmental Scan - SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis

DECAL leaders began creating the strategic plan by conducting a SWOT Analysis of the department's work. The discussion helped identify the needs of and priorities for the strategic plan.

Strengths:

- Staff dedication and adaptability, which is at the heart of DECAL's operations
- The use of evidenced-based research to make informed programmatic decisions
- Recognizing and valuing all DECAL stakeholders
- Strong financial position that allows DECAL to maximize resources to best support children and families
- Strong, consistent support of Georgia's Pre-K Program and Quality Rated by the Governor, legislature, and other key stakeholders
- Solid reputation among stakeholders and communities reflecting DECAL's dedication and commitment to its mission to serve children and families

Weaknesses:

- More diversity needed across the agency (including multi-lingual employees) and among agency leadership
- Succession planning and development needed to build bench-strength throughout the agency
- Continue improving customer service while balancing the need for greater efficiency in internal processes with staff workload capacity
- Implementing new federal regulations without sacrificing existing critical initiatives
- Keeping staff trained and engaged with relevant resources to help them provide a high level of customer service

Opportunities:

- Change the work culture to modernize workflow to improve technology, readiness, and provide more efficient online services
- Elevate focus on serving families by training and supporting providers to shift their focus to families
- Maximize one-time funding to ensure that early care and education remains a priority and to continue Georgia's role of demonstrating best practices
- Focus on workforce development and strategies by raising salaries, professionalizing the workforce, and increasing morale and recruitment
- Raising the quality of early care and education and addressing equity and access by strengthening 2Gen approaches

Threats:

- Attracting and retaining talent
- Burnout among DECAL staff
- Managing public expectations of time-limited federal funding
- Expectations created by DECAL's pandemic response as the agency transitions to a new normal

Strategic Goals, Measurable Objectives, and Strategies

To help ensure that every child in Georgia will have access to high quality early care and education regardless of family income or location, DECAL will focus on the following five strategic goals in the 2022-2025 strategic planning cycle:

1. Align, integrate, and coordinate programs to improve school readiness for children birth to five in Georgia
2. Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education programs for children birth through school age in Georgia
3. Develop, professionalize, and retain a highly skilled workforce for the early care and education industry
4. Expand Two Generation (2Gen) approaches to better support children and families
5. Enhance the use of technology and data to better support our stakeholders

Goal 1

Align, integrate, and coordinate programs to improve school readiness for children birth to five in Georgia

Strategies

- 1.1 Develop a "One DECAL" approach to align DECAL policy, data collection, and provider engagement where appropriate
- 1.2 Research which, how, and why DECAL programs are underutilized in specific geographic areas or by specific populations
- 1.3 Increase the total capacity of high-quality early education programs and services in Georgia

Measurable Objectives

- 1) Implement a cross-functional team and develop a plan to more closely align and coordinate programs by 2023
- 2) Identify specific regions or populations of low utilization by DECAL program by 2024
- 3) Increase the number of meals served in targeted counties by 2023
- 4) Increase the number of dual language learners served annually in the Summer Transition Program by 2024
- 5) Increase the number of eligible early care and education programs that will be Quality Rated to 90% by 2024

Goal 2

Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education programs for children birth through school age in Georgia

Strategies

- 2.1 Collect and analyze financial and utilization data for the early childhood education system to improve quality and access
- 2.2 Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K Program and Quality Rated to reflect current research and the diverse needs of families and children
- 2.3 Promote the social emotional development and mental health of children birth through school age in Georgia

Measurable Objectives

- 1) Develop a process to collect and analyze child care economic and utilization data regularly by 2024
- 2) 100% of eligible CAPS child care providers will be Quality Rated by 2023
- 3) Use additional federal funds to pay a greater share of a family's child care cost by 2023
- 4) Sustain at least 80% of child serving state agency participation in the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) task force meetings and develop at least two strategic recommendations to implement by 2023

Goal 3

Develop, professionalize, and retain a highly skilled workforce for the early care and education industry

Strategies

- 3.1 Improve DECAL staff retention and develop and increase the diversity of DECAL leaders
- 3.2 Develop a system to promote employment in the early care and education industry as a professional career
- 3.3 Expand opportunities for innovative and effective professional development for the early care and education industry

Measurable Objectives

- 1) Thirty people complete the DECAL leadership program by 2024
- 2) Complete updates to the Workforce Knowledge and Competencies by 2025
- 3) Evaluate and redesign the DECAL Scholars program by 2025

- 4) Train 500 child care staff in trauma responsive care by 2025
- 5) Implement the early education coach designation by 2025

Goal 4

Expand Two Generation (2Gen) approaches to better support children and families

Strategies

- 4.1 Expand supports and resources for families seeking additional education and/or work experience
- 4.2 Increase community-based 2Gen initiatives
- 4.3 Strengthen family resiliency by engaging families in their children's care and education

Measurable Objectives

- 1) Implement the family centered coaching project by 2025
- 2) Implement the resource and referral portal project by 2025
- 3) Increase the number of families receiving 2Gen services in CAPS by 20% before 2025
- 4) Translate the Developmental Milestones website into at least four languages by 2023

Goal 5

Enhance the use of technology and data to better support our stakeholders

Strategies

- 5.1 Improve and align DECAL's program applications
- 5.2 Improve the use of administrative data and research to strengthen DECAL's decision-making process
- 5.3 Implement tools and processes to improve customer service

Measurable Objectives

- 1) Increase the number of virtual provider engagement visits conducted by DECAL programs each year
- 2) Implement a new CAPS payment and attendance tracking system by 2025
- 3) Develop a PDS strategic plan with short-term and long-term goals by 2025
- 4) Implement a paperless process for CCS applications, services, and supports by 2025

Conclusion

DECAL's Strategic Plan for SFYs 2022-2025 highlights the department's commitment to continually improve its programs, services, and processes to achieve its mission and vision to ensure that every child in Georgia has access to high quality early care and education regardless of family income or location.

DECAL will continue to create and implement innovative, high quality, state supported early childhood programs. The department will continue to focus on and improve customer satisfaction and enhance support for Georgia's children and families by more efficiently aligning DECAL's services and programs and by continuing to cultivate and strengthen partnerships with external stakeholders to maximize efficiencies as good stewards of limited public funds.

DECAL helps ensure families that their children are safe while they are working or pursuing education. DECAL helps ensure that Georgia businesses have an engaged and qualified workforce by laying a foundation for lifelong learning during children's most critical developmental years. And DECAL's work ensures that Georgia is actively preparing its citizens to meet the demands and expectations of a 21st century economy.

Appendix A: Governor's Strategic Goals for Georgia

Vision:	Put hardworking Georgians first through streamlined, accessible, and fiscally responsible government
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Governor's Strategic Goals for Georgia

- **Make Georgia #1 for Small Business**
 - Cut obsolete, unnecessarily burdensome, and bureaucratic hurdles for small business
 - Maintain Georgia's competitive tax environment
 - Develop a skilled workforce to meet current and future needs across the industry spectrum
 - Expand Georgia's role as a world-renowned hub for global commerce
 - Ensure taxpayers can easily navigate and find necessary information through government interfaces
- **Reform State Government**
 - Maintain Georgia's AAA bond rating
 - Maximize taxpayer value with conservative budgeting
 - Expand public-private partnerships and leverage technology to best utilize limited state resources
 - Improve agency call centers and similar constituent services to be courteous and helpful
- **Strengthen Rural Georgia**
 - Increase rural broadband access for economic growth, educational opportunity, and healthcare access
 - Deploy regional strike teams to areas with economic challenges or lessening populations to collaborate with local leaders and seek opportunities for growth
 - Address Georgia's teacher shortage by removing barriers to professional entry and increasing pay
 - Dismantle Common Core and reduce high-stakes testing for a more student-centric approach to learning
 - Improve literacy rates for students in third through twelfth grades
- **Put Georgians First**
 - Crack down on gang activity and human trafficking affecting every community across Georgia
 - Lower costs, improve quality, and increase access to quality healthcare in every region
 - Continue efforts to keep students, teachers, and personnel safe on campus
 - Expand access to mental health resources in schools for children and young adults

Appendix B: DECAL Goals, Strategies and Action Items

Goal	Strategy	Action Item	
Goal 1: Align, integrate, and coordinate programs to improve school readiness for children birth to five in Georgia	1.1 Develop a "One DECAL" approach to align DECAL policy, data collection, and provider engagement where appropriate	<i>1.1.1</i> Develop an internal cross-functional team to identify and implement policy and process changes to create a "one agency" approach to school readiness efforts	
		<i>1.1.2</i> Determine how to leverage the licensing process to streamline data collection efforts and align school readiness incentives (e.g., CAPS, QR, instructional support, teacher training, other programs)	
		<i>1.2.1</i> Develop and implement a method to identify specific regions or populations with low program utilization for targeted interventions and pilot projects	
	1.2 Research which, how and why DECAL programs are underutilized in specific geographic areas or by specific populations	<i>1.2.2</i> Address food insecurity by making nutrition education resources and nutritious meals available to families and early childhood programs especially focusing on counties with high obesity rates and high food insecurity rates	
		1.3 Increase the total capacity of high-quality early education programs and services in Georgia	
	1.3.1 Develop resources and services to enhance the school readiness of dual language learners	1.3.2 Expand access to the Summer Transition Programs	
		Goal 2: Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education programs for children birth through school age in Georgia	2.1 Collect and analyze financial and utilization data for the early childhood education system to improve quality and access
	<i>2.1.2</i> Develop a process to collect and analyze child care rates on an annual basis to determine if adjustments to CAPS rates are needed		
	<i>2.1.3</i> Increase access for children and families through the CAPS ACCESS Initiative		
2.2 Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K Program and Quality Rated to reflect current research and the diverse needs of families and children	2.2.1 Conduct a comprehensive review of Quality Rated and implement changes to the program		
	2.2.2 Continue to evaluate the effectiveness of Georgia's Pre-K Program through rigorous research and evaluation.		
2.3 Promote the social emotional development and mental health of children birth through school age in Georgia	2.3.1 Establish the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Taskforce to expand access to mental health services for children 0-5		

Goal	Strategy	Action Item	
Goal 3: Develop, professionalize, and retain a highly skilled workforce for the early care and education industry	3.1 Improve DECAL staff retention and develop and increase the diversity of DECAL leaders	3.1.1 Create a leadership development program that promotes a diverse and inclusive work environment at DECAL	
		3.1.2 Develop career ladders for DECAL staff	
		3.2.1 Develop methods to incentivize higher compensation and benefits for child care educators	
	3.2 Develop a system to promote employment in the early care and education industry as a professional career	3.2.2 Develop and promote career pathways to support, recruit, and retain a highly skilled workforce	
		3.3.1 Increase the number of trainers and trainings in critical areas of early childhood education	
		3.3.2 Expand the number of trainings using a virtual or hybrid format to increase access and cost effectiveness	
	3.3 Expand opportunities for innovative and effective professional development for the early care and education industry	3.3.3 Expand the number of professional learning communities and early learning coaches	
		4.1 Expand supports and resources for families seeking additional education and/or work experience	4.1.1 Increase the number of family engagement activities provided by DECAL programs
			4.2 Increase community-based 2Gen initiatives
4.3 Strengthen family resiliency by engaging families in their children’s care and education	4.2.2 Partner with other state agencies to align policies and programs with 2Gen approaches		
		4.3.1 Enhance and promote the use of the Developmental Milestones website	
		4.3.2 Expand the family ambassador program	
Goal 5: Enhance the use of technology and data to better support our stakeholders.	5.1 Improve and align DECAL's program applications	5.1.1 Establish processes for project management and data use and governance	
		5.1.2 Implement new payment and attendance tracking system for the CAPS program	
	5.2 Improve the use of administrative data and research to strengthen DECAL's decision-making process	5.2.1 Improve the data used to inform the child care cost model	
		5.2.2 Conduct studies related to the economics of the child care industry	
	5.3 Implement tools and processes to improve customer service	5.3.1 Identify and convert paper intensive processes to electronic, online processes	
		5.3.2 Implement a CAPS Virtual Lobby to serve CAPS applicants, participants, and CAPS providers more efficiently and safely	