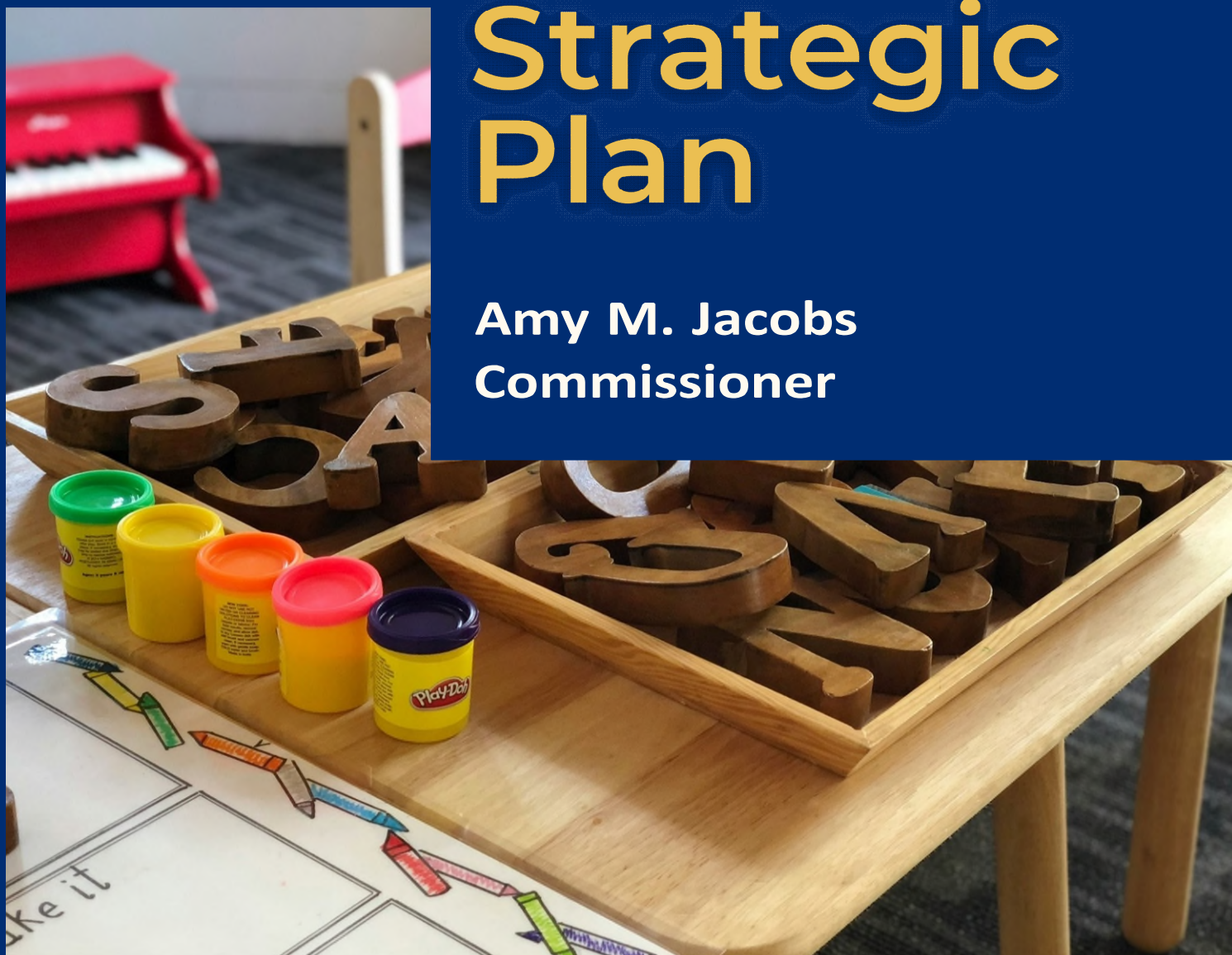


SFYs 2026-2029

# Strategic Plan

Amy M. Jacobs  
Commissioner



Georgia Dept  
of Early Care  
and Learning

BRIGHT FROM THE START

# Letter from the Commissioner

Dear Governor Kemp, Other Georgia Policy Makers, and Georgia Early Care and Education Stakeholders,

This document sets forth the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's (DECAL) Strategic Plan for State Fiscal Years 2026-2029. DECAL is the department of state government charged with ensuring that children are cared for in safe and healthy environments and are better prepared academically, social-emotionally, and physically for kindergarten.

This plan identifies our 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 plan will help us accomplish the following: 1. Prioritize our efforts over the next four years; 2. Support the Governor's strategic goals for Georgia; 3. Streamline our operations for greater efficiency; and 4. Ensure that DECAL employees, child care providers, and other early care and education stakeholders are supported and working toward similar goals. This plan also continues to focus on the mental health needs of Georgia's children from birth to age five and to approach services using a Two-Generation (2Gen) perspective.

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. I hope you will read the plan carefully and identify areas where you can partner with us to help meet the early 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.



**Amy M. Jacobs**  
Commissioner



# Introduction

This strategic plan impacting Georgia's youngest citizens builds on the state's significant experience in early childhood care and education over the past two decades. Georgia was one of the first states to develop an executive-level, stand-alone 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's creation 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic early in the decade 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 during the pandemic were successful and have impacted 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 2026 through 2029. The plan, developed by a team representing each of DECAL's divisions, units, and programs, provides an overview of the department and identifies the goals, measurable objectives, and strategies that will drive the department's work in 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

The Governor's vision and strategic goals for the state can be found in Appendix A



# 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, stand-alone 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.



## OUR VISION

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



## OUR 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 identify all the projects or activities in which the department and early learning community are and will be involved but instead charts the course for improvement in select, highly strategic areas. DECAL began the planning process by 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 first step was conducting an environmental scan, or S.W.O.T. analysis, assessing the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. After that, the team developed five strategic goals, determined measurable objectives, and identified strategies to help accomplish the goals and objectives. The five strategic goals for 2026-2029 are:

## **Goal 1: Aligned Delivery**

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

## **Goal 2: Access and Quality**

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

## **Goal 3: Workforce**

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

## **Goal 4: Multigenerational and Family Centered**

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

## **Goal 5: Technology and Data**

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.



# DECAL Values

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.



## 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 a variety of backgrounds and perspectives.



## 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

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.



# Division Descriptions

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



## 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. 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 51,000 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. Child Care Services 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 also monitors license-exempt and informal programs. Furthermore, Child Care Services provides regular, customer-focused licensing orientation sessions for prospective child care programs. Child Care Services investigates allegations of non-compliance with health and safety rules and standards in licensed, licensed-exempt, and unlicensed programs in partnership with local and state law enforcement agencies when necessary. Child Care Services offers technical assistance and training on child development and other topics relevant to early childhood providers and parents. Additionally, when licensed child care programs fail to comply with rules and regulations, Child Care Services implements the department's enforcement policy to help bring these programs into full compliance.





# Division Descriptions



## Nutrition Services

Nutrition Services administers the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program 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 Happy Helpings help improve the overall nutritional status of many of Georgia's most vulnerable citizens.



## Quality Innovation and Partnerships

Quality Innovations and Partnerships (QIP) has four functional units: Quality Rated, Institutional Research and Data Quality, Research Partnerships and Business Supports, and Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach. Quality Rated (QR) is Georgia's child care quality rating and improvement system that recognizes providers who achieve a 1-, 2-, or 3-star rating for their early care and education practices. The QR team rates or re-rates several hundred child care programs every year and administers the Commitment to Quality (C2Q) and Quality Rated Workforce Bonus (QRWB) payments. The Institutional Research and Data Quality team provides comprehensive data, research, and policy supports to DECAL divisions and oversees Georgia's Cross Agency Child Data System (CACDS). The Research Partnerships and Business Supports team partners with some of the country's top research institutions to evaluate DECAL programs, manages the Thriving Child Care Business Academy, and runs an in-house call center to support families seeking child care. Finally, the Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach team collaborates with community partners to coordinate the delivery of state and local services for young children and families. This unit also administers DECAL's Community Impact Grants to enhance the well-being of families with children from birth to 8 years old.



# Division Descriptions



## Pre-K and Instructional Supports

Georgia's lottery-funded, voluntary prekindergarten program serves four-year-olds across the state in approximately 3,800 classes. Georgia's Pre-K Program, one of the largest in the nation, is used as a model by other states and ranks high in percentage of children served and established quality measures. Georgia's Pre-K Program is offered through a mixed delivery system involving 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), a five-week program that 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 Workforce Supports & Learning, which build the capacity of early childhood educators to better serve children birth to five. Practice & Support Services provides training and coaching to enhance high quality learning environments with an emphasis on supporting children with disabilities, infant toddler care, and family engagement. It also promotes understanding of child development, developmental monitoring, and early intervention. Workforce Supports & Learning develops systems and resources for professional development and career pathways for educators; supports attaining 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.



## DECAL Support Units

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

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



# Environmental Scan – SWOT 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.

- Staff dedication and adaptability, which is at the heart of DECAL's operations
- The use of evidenced-based research to make informed decisions about programs
- 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 DECAL programs and initiatives 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

## Strengths

- 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

## Weaknesses

- 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
- Focus on workforce development and strategies by raising salaries, professionalizing the workforce, and increasing morale and recruitment
- Raising the quality of, and access to, early care and education by strengthening 2Gen approaches

## Opportunities

- Attracting and retaining talent
- Burnout among DECAL staff

## Threats

# Strategic Goals, Strategies, and Measurable Objectives

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 2026-2029 strategic planning cycle:

## Goal 1

### **Aligned Delivery**

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

## Goal 2

### **Access and Quality**

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

## Goal 3

### **Workforce**

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

## Goal 4

### **Multi-generational and Family Centered**

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

## Goal 5

### **Technology and Data**

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



## Goal 1: Aligned Delivery

**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	Develop and implement a data model to estimate child care enrollment and capacity by age group and region by June 2027
2	Launch a public-facing data dashboard and map focused on DECAL providers, services, and population demographic data by June 2027
3	Identify counties not currently participating in Happy Helpings through the Summer Food Service Program and offer start-up grants to eligible organizations, thereby establishing at least five new feeding sites in underserved counties by June 2028
4	Fully implement and monitor revised licensing rules to require two hours of language and literacy training annually for all child care providers in alignment with House Bill 538 by June 2026
5	Establish a cross-collaboration initiative that aligns technical assistance and training staff across DECAL, resulting in a shared guidance framework focused on aligning provider support strategies by June 2027
6	Establish a statewide nontraditional hour child care advisory committee with at least 15 cross-sector members by June 2026



## Goal 2: Access and Quality

Continue to increase the quality and accessibility of early care and education 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 varying 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	Begin implementation of Quality Rated revisions by June 2028
2	Increase access to birth to five mental health training through 500 early care professionals completing the <i>Introduction to Infant Early Childhood Mental Health</i> training annually by June 2029
3	Update the Child Care Services Rules and Regulations Indicator Manual to align with national best practices for providers to support quality by June 2027
4	Identify new outreach initiatives to increase the percentage of eligible programs participating in Quality Rated from approximately 66% to 75% by June 2029
5	Improve the quality of and increase access to Georgia's Pre-K Program by decreasing the class size to 20 students per class through funding an additional 400 classrooms by the 2028 school year
6	Expand Pyramid Model training and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to reach at least 1,000 new participants by June 2029





### Goal 3: Workforce

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

#### Strategies

3.1	Improve DECAL staff retention and support the development of future 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	Launch the new Workforce Career Levels in GaPDS by June 2028
2	Align DECAL workforce data systems with the National Workforce Registry Alliance's 10 core elements and begin comprehensive data collection by June 2029
3	Develop the capacity to deliver STEAM-focused, Infant-Toddler Activity Training to 300 educators each year by June 2029
4	Expand the use of leadership Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and develop succession plan templates for all DECAL departments by June 2028
5	Implement a DECAL Manager Training Program to onboard new DECAL managers by June 2027
6	Develop and implement a formal career pathway for DECAL divisions by June 2029



## Goal 4: Multi-generational and Family Centered

### 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	Develop and conduct a CAPS family outreach campaign to ensure student parents are informed about the availability and eligibility criteria for this CAPS priority group by June 2027
2	Train 100% of CAPS staff working with families in Family Centered Coaching and expand the number of families receiving family centered coaching to the minor parent priority group by June 2027
3	Identify and increase the number of established community-based organizations that provide resources to Georgia families available on Find Help GA <a href="https://findhelpga.org/">https://findhelpga.org/</a> by 20% by June 2029
4	Convene the internal DECAL 2Gen Academy Alumni group quarterly to ensure agency initiatives support a 2Gen approach by June 2026
5	Convene, through DECAL's Community Coordinator regions, 12 or more regional community engagements each year by June 2029



## Goal 5: Technology and Data

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	Fully automate the payment processes for the Quality Rated Workforce Bonus and Commitment to Quality Payment by June of 2027
2	Launch the redesigned DECAL website with artificial intelligence chatbot assistance by June 2028
3	Fully develop and implement the DECAL Family Portal with access to all agency programs by June 2029
4	Integrate the CAPS provider enrollment process into the child care licensing online application process to streamline CAPS provider enrollment by June 2027
5	Enhance the child care licensing system to provide families easy access to full inspection reports and ensure the interface clearly shows areas of compliance and non-compliance by June 2026



# Conclusion

DECAL's Strategic Plan for SFYs 2026-2029 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 that children are safe while their families 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 helps ensure that Georgia is actively preparing its citizens to meet the demands and expectations of a 21st century economy.



# Appendix A

**Vision: Put hardworking Georgians first through streamlined, accessible, and fiscally responsible government.**

## 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



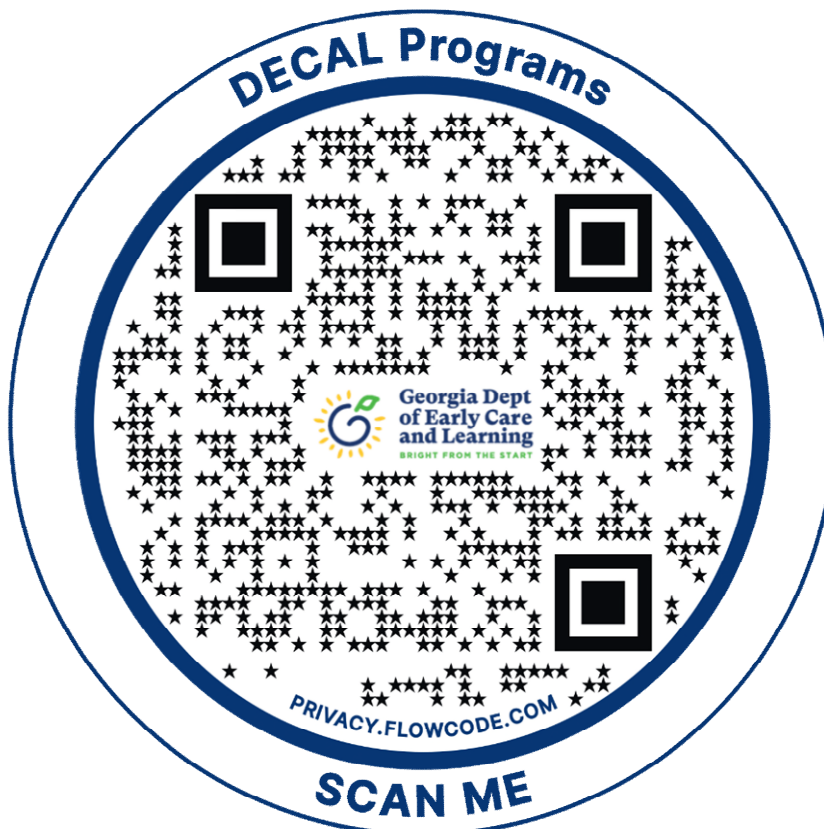
# DECAL Values

## DECAL PROVIDER RESOURCES



**SCAN ME**

## DECAL Programs



**SCAN ME**

