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DECAL Announces Six Finalists for 2025–2026 Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year

Finalists represent Programs in Powder Springs, Union City, Milton, Woodstock, Lawrenceville, and Savannah

ATLANTA, GA (November 5, 2025) — The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named the six finalists for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2025–2026. The program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool.

Finalists are **Nahema Augustin** who works in a Family Child Care Learning Home in Powder Springs; **Kenyetta Robinson** of Lifetime Youth Learning Center in Union City; **Sharada Vandanam** of Montessori Scholars Academy in Milton; **Gloria Linley** of Towne Lake Academy, South Campus, in Woodstock; **Gleydis Estrada** who works in a Family Child Care Learning Home in Lawrenceville; and **Edwina Lovett** who works in a Family Child Care Learning Home in Savannah.

Each finalist will receive \$500 from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. The three ultimate winners, who will be announced in December, will each receive \$3,000 for their personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and up to \$2,500 for their school to cover travel costs and stipends for substitute teachers as the teacher fulfills their duties as Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year.

Winners serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year program through modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances.

Child care program directors from across the state nominate teachers through an online application. Winners are selected from six finalists based on a classroom observation and an interview with a panel of early childhood experts.

"Child care teachers working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are not babysitters," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "These early childhood educators are professionals who play a crucial role in building a strong foundation for children's academic, physical, and social growth. These Early Childhood Educators of the Year awards honor teachers who demonstrate excellence in caring for Georgia's youngest learners in child care settings. Their dedication to providing high-quality care and early education is shaping the future of our children, communities, and state."

Among other requirements, candidates for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year must have been employed as a lead teacher at a licensed 2- or 3-star Quality Rated child care program that is in good standing with all programs administered by DECAL. They also must have a minimum of three years of experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2025-2026 school year.

"We are excited to continue this special recognition of Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for the fifth consecutive year," said Laura Wagner, Executive Director of the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. "The care young children receive in their early years is critical in shaping their brain development and laying the groundwork for their overall health and wellbeing. Competent, qualified, professional early childhood educators are key in guiding them on a successful journey toward lifelong learning."

About Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)

Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning is responsible for meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families. It administers the nationally recognized Georgia's Pre-K Program, licenses child care centers and home-based child care, administers Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, federal nutrition programs, and manages Quality Rated, Georgia's community powered child care rating system.

The department also houses the Head Start State Collaboration Office, distributes federal funding to enhance the quality and availability of child care, and works collaboratively with Georgia child care resource and referral agencies and organizations throughout the state to enhance early care and education. For more information, go to www.decal.ga.gov.