

# Families' Experiences With Georgia's Pandemic Relief Funding Efforts

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) used state and federal pandemic relief funding to implement approximately 30 initiatives to stabilize the early care and education (ECE) industry and support young children and their families.

**This brief summarizes findings from Child Trends' evaluation of DECAL's pandemic relief initiatives that relate to experiences with pandemic relief projects among families enrolled in CAPS, Georgia's child care subsidy program.** Throughout, we provide quotes from families to illustrate findings. Additional evaluation findings, along with details about the study design, can be found in companion briefs and reports on [DECAL's website](#).

Several pandemic relief initiatives were focused on reducing the financial burden of child care for families participating in CAPS. Through the ACCESS project, providers were paid their full published rate for care, including the family fee, so families did not have to cover those costs. The CAPS Expansion project broadened CAPS eligibility and the number of CAPS scholarships available so that more families could access care. We examined participation rates in CAPS during this time and spoke with families to understand their experiences with these initiatives.

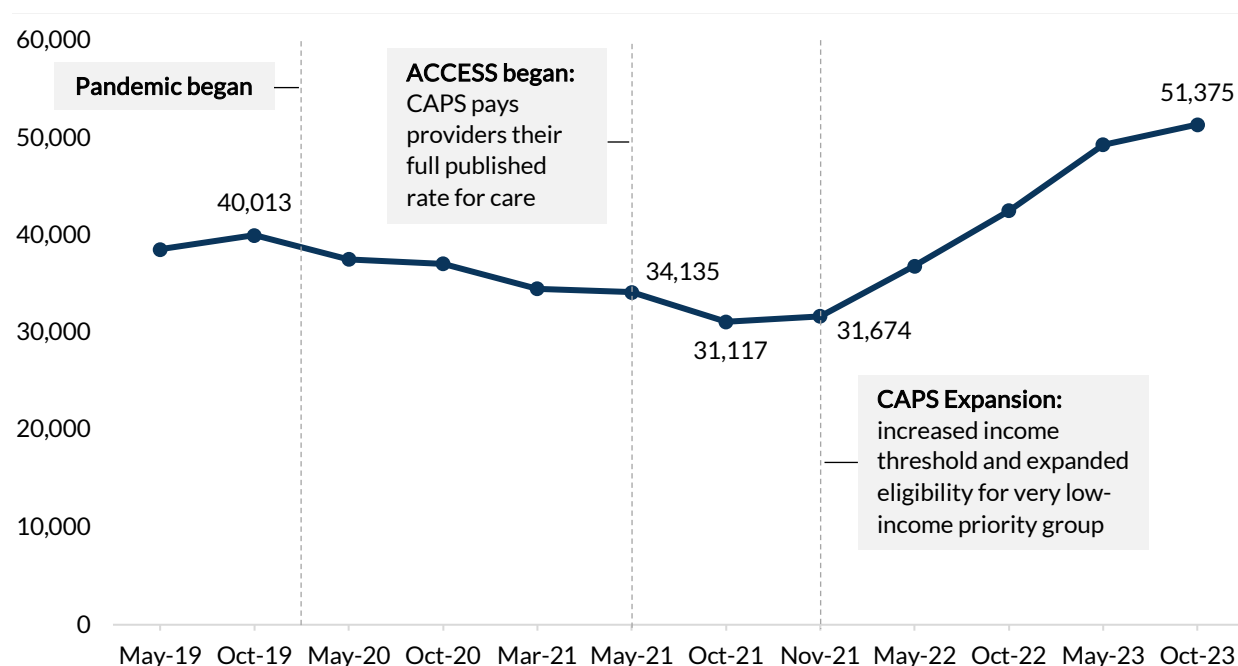
**Participation in CAPS slightly decreased from October 2019 to October 2021—despite the launch of ACCESS in May 2021, which removed family fees, increased reimbursement rates, and allowed providers to be paid based on enrollment versus attendance (see Figure 1).**

**CAPS participation increased 62 percent following the launch of the CAPS Expansion in November 2021, with more families taking advantage of the program.** CAPS Expansion broadened CAPS eligibility<sup>1</sup> and the number of CAPS scholarships available (see Figure 1).

- **ACCESS:** Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements
- **CAPS:** Childcare and Parent Services

<sup>1</sup> For CAPS, a family's income cannot exceed the initial eligibility threshold and they must qualify for one or more specific priority groups from DECAL's ranked list of priority designations (e.g., families of children with disabilities, families who lack stable housing, families with very low income) to be awarded a CAPS scholarship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DECAL expanded access by increasing the initial income eligibility threshold to participate in CAPS from 50 percent to 85 percent of the state median income (SMI). In addition, eligibility for the "very low income" priority group expanded from 50 percent of the federal poverty level to 150 percent of the federal poverty level. Prior to this, families from 50 percent to 150 percent of the federal poverty level had to also meet another priority group criteria to receive a scholarship. Lastly, DECAL created a new temporary priority group during the pandemic specifically for families who were considered essential workers and qualified for CAPS.

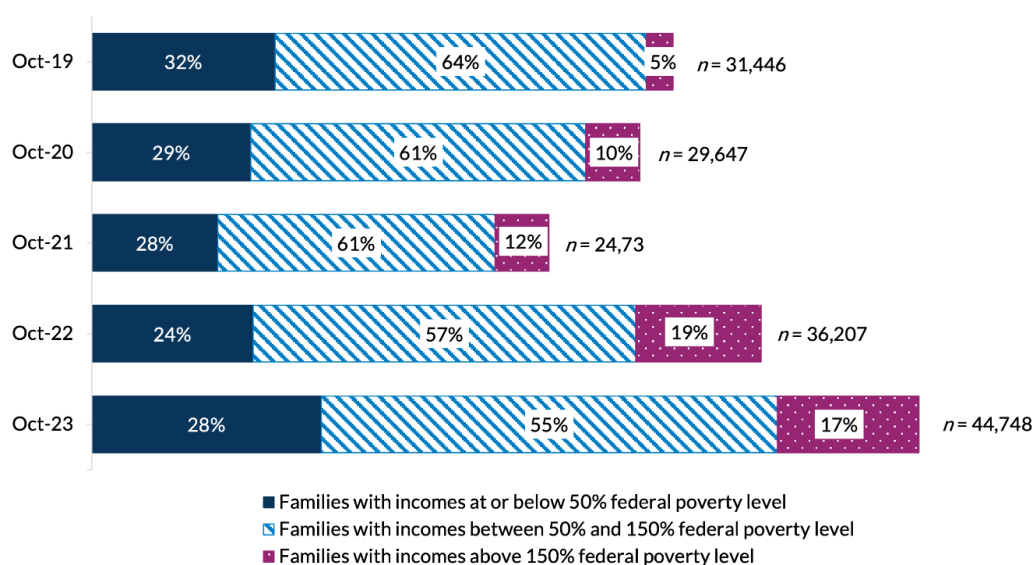
**Figure 1.** Total number of families using a CAPS scholarship from May 2019 to October 2023



**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019-2023

The proportion of families receiving CAPS who had incomes above 150 percent of the federal poverty level increased over time, particularly after CAPS Expansion began (November 2021); this expansion, in part, raised the maximum income families could earn to be eligible (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Number and percentage of families receiving CAPS, by income (May 2019-October 2023)



**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019-2023

**Note:** This analysis included only families with complete income and family size information. In addition, cases where children were in the custody of the state were excluded from this analysis due to data inconsistencies related to their family size.

Families shared how ACCESS and CAPS Expansion increased their access to affordable child care, supported their employment, decreased financial stress, and improved their well-being and the well-being of their children.

**Families reported that they would not have been able to afford child care if not for ACCESS, which removed family fees for children with CAPS scholarships.** Families expressed appreciation for the support and relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.



“My kids probably wouldn't have went [to child care]. I would have had to try [to] find something else to do, maybe having to work less, because I couldn't afford for them to go during the pandemic and have to pay it all.”

**Families also reported that access to free child care allowed them to keep their job, purchase household essentials and equipment for remote learning, and contribute to their savings.** Access to child care also increased socialization for their children.



“It may seem like a few dollars to some people, but some people don't have that few dollars to just give up ... We had car payments, we had [a] mortgage, we had food problems. We used to go to the food banks for food because we didn't have it. We didn't have it ... And then I had a parent fee to pay. Like I don't have money to pay everything else, but now I got a parent fee to pay. But when my daycare told me CAPS paid all, we got some food. We went grocery shopping. We took the little \$30 and went grocery shopping. It helped a lot.”



“In my case, I probably would have lost my job if I didn't have the assistance because I don't have family in the state and because of how many kids I have, it was hard for me. So, CAPS did come through for me.”



“That was a big thing for me as well, with the socialization, having my kids socialize with other kids. Because in the beginning, my kid wasn't going anywhere, and then it helped him a lot because speech-wise, he wasn't really talking at one point at all, so yeah, it helped a lot with my child I would say for sure.”

**Challenges related to CAPS participation included using the online application process, changes to families' eligibility when there were gaps in employment, and the need to switch care to a CAPS provider for newly eligible families.** Several parents also requested more communication or clarity around all the supports for which they may be eligible.



“I didn't know my child qualified for free or reduced lunch because of CAPS until the schools told me, and I was like ‘Oh, that's nice to know because that saves me a couple hundred dollars a month just in food [and] now I don't have to worry about that.’ So it would be nice to have more of a one-stop shop place to have resources available or to see what resources are available.”

Some families reported needing to make significant changes when pandemic relief funding ended, while others did not feel as much of an impact.



“I had to stop using the child care because the family fee was expensive for me.”



“I mean, you gotta take away something. Like some of the things that we used to do, we can't do. Like even now, it's time to buy school clothes. It's like, ok, you can't get all of this right now.”

The pandemic relief efforts intended for families participating in CAPS provided access to needed child care. Families reported they would not have been able to afford child care during this time if not for ACCESS. Following a slight decrease in participation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, participation greatly increased after CAPS Expansion began in November 2021, with more families taking advantage of the program.

## Acknowledgments

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