



Pandemic Relief Funding Supported Georgia's Early Care and Education Workforce

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Key Findings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) used federal and state funding to support the early care and education (ECE) workforce. This report summarizes findings from Child Trends' evaluation of these support efforts.

- ▶ The largest workforce-focused pandemic relief project—Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition (POWER), which provided three rounds of \$1,000 unrestricted payments to ECE professionals—reached a broad and diverse group of teachers and staff. Teachers and staff were eligible for three rounds of funding, but only 44 percent of POWER recipients received all three. This may highlight issues with turnover or misunderstanding about eligibility criteria.
- ▶ There was higher participation in POWER in school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs and centers than in family child care learning homes (FCCLH), and in larger centers compared to smaller centers. Programs participating in Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS), and/or Quality Rated, Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System—especially higher-rated programs—also had higher participation rates than programs not participating in CAPS or lower-rated programs. This may be because these programs were more familiar with DECAL.
- ▶ Overall, teachers who took part in the interviews found the pandemic relief projects helpful and appreciated the support they received from DECAL during the pandemic. Teachers perceived POWER to be the most helpful support out of all pandemic relief projects. They also thought the processes for learning about and applying for pandemic relief supports were smooth and easy.
- ▶ Teachers reported using POWER funds for both personal expenses and classroom supplies. They also noted that POWER payments and Classroom Supply Grants—grants to purchase classroom materials and supplies—were helpful because teachers often used their own money to purchase classroom supplies. Additionally, teachers appreciated receiving grants directly and having the ability to decide what to purchase, rather than making requests to their director/administrator.
- ▶ Teachers reported challenges using ClassWallet, a software platform used to administer grants, to access the Classroom Supply Grants. These challenges might explain why individuals did not spend all the funds allotted in ClassWallet.
- ▶ There was a lot of variability in teachers' perceptions about how they would have fared without pandemic relief funding, or how they were faring now that funding has largely ended. Some teachers said the funding was a nice bonus, others felt they would have experienced financial strain and stress without the funding, and others still were experiencing financial strain and stress following the end of pandemic relief funding.
- ▶ Teachers noted how challenging it is to be an early childhood educator. They felt appreciated and supported by DECAL's relief efforts and indicated that ongoing supports (like classroom supply grants or bonuses) would be helpful moving forward.

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Introduction

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began, federal funding started flowing to state agencies to support young children, families, and the early care and education (ECE) workforce. From 2020 to 2023, there were three federal pandemic relief acts: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act; the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act; and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Altogether, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) received over two billion dollars in federal relief funds. The state also used funds from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER), which provided additional funds to support the state's ECE and other educational entities through an award from the U.S. Department of Education.

DECAL used federal pandemic relief funding to implement approximately 30 projects and initiatives designed to stabilize the ECE industry and support young children and families. Projects included 1) supporting families by covering family fees and increasing access to subsidized child care through expanded eligibility requirements for Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS), Georgia's subsidized child care program; and 2) stabilizing and supporting the ECE workforce by providing payments and bonuses, as well as launching pilot programs and trainings to increase ECE quality.

In 2023, DECAL partnered with Child Trends, a national nonprofit research organization, to examine how pandemic relief funding supported recipients of pandemic relief funding (i.e., Georgia's ECE providers, educators, and families). Additionally, the evaluation sought to examine the perceived effects of the funding on DECAL's operations and priorities.

This report focuses on pandemic relief funding efforts designed to support Georgia's ECE workforce. We focus primarily on the experiences of teachers, given that they comprise the largest proportion of the ECE workforce. We define teachers as ECE professionals working directly with children in a child care learning center (CCLC), family child care learning home (FCCLH), school-based Georgia's Pre-K program, or other ECE programs (e.g., Head Start/Early Head Start [HS/EHS], Department of Defense [DOD], and university-based ECE programs). Information about the experiences of providers (i.e., CCLC administrators, FCCLH providers, and directors of school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs), families, and DECAL staff appear in partner reports. However, because providers and non-teaching staff were also eligible for some of the workforce-focused pandemic relief projects described in this report, we include them here when discussing the reach of these projects among the ECE workforce more broadly. Table 1 describes the pandemic relief-funded projects DECAL implemented to support the ECE workforce.

This piece of the evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How many programs and teaching staff participated in workforce-focused pandemic relief funding initiatives?
2. What are the characteristics of those programs and individuals?
3. What are teachers' experiences with pandemic relief efforts, including how funds supported educational advancement, professional development, and well-being?
4. What are teachers' experiences with funds expiring?

Table 1. Pandemic Relief Funding Efforts to Support the Workforce

Pandemic Relief Project	Description	Eligibility Criteria
Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition (POWER)	Three one-time \$1000 unrestricted payments to ECE professionals in summer 2021, winter/spring 2022, and summer 2022	Teaching and non-teaching staff working a minimum number of hours in licensed programs or license-exempt programs monitored by DOD or HS/EHS whose employers submitted a POWER application; lead and assistant teachers in school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs
Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition for Educational Development (POWER-ED)	\$1000 wage supplements to ECE professionals as they pursued a credential or degree; payments began in February 2023	ECE professionals who were earning a credential or degree and were participating in DECAL Scholars
Classroom Supply Grants	Two rounds of one-time \$125 grants to be used to purchase classroom supplies for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years	Teaching staff who received POWER payments
Quality Rated Restoration Grant (QRRG) Staff Payments	One-time \$500 bonuses made to teaching staff after an on-site observation and rating was completed as part of Quality Rated, Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)	Teaching staff in Quality Rated programs whose employers submitted a QRRG application and whose programs achieved a star rating between July 1, 2022, and March 31, 2024
Workforce Entry (CDA Supports)	Projects to expand access to obtaining a CDA (e.g., embedding the CDA into an adult education program, free CDA through Teachstone, grants to trainers offering CDA trainings)	ECE professionals enrolled in the adult education program (for the embedded CDA program); ECE professionals at programs licensed by DECAL, DOD, or HS/EHS or at school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs (for the CDA through Teachstone or select trainers)
Pyramid Model Training	Pyramid Model training provided to the ECE workforce using online modules with support from DECAL specialists; staff in programs also received small grants to support implementation	ECE professionals at select early care and education programs
Mental Health Consultation (MHC) Pilot	Infant and early childhood mental health consultants to expand mental health supports; staff in programs also received small grants to support implementation	ECE professionals at select early care and education programs (up to five contracts)
Child Care Tuition Assistance Program for Early Educators	Pilot program for providers to cover child care tuition for their employees (whose children attend the same program as that at which the employee works)	ECE professionals at pilot programs who have children receiving care at their program

Note: "Teaching staff" above refers to teachers, assistant teachers, aides, and floaters in CCLCs, FCCLHs, DOD programs, exempt HS/EHS programs, and school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs, as well as FCCLH providers.

Methodology

Child Trends used a mixed methods approach for this evaluation of teachers, which included: 1) an analysis of administrative data, and 2) interviews with teachers based in CCLCs and school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs. Information collected from FCCLH providers can be found in the companion report, *Pandemic Relief Funding Supported Georgia's Center-Based Administrators, Family Child Care Providers, and Pre-K Administrators*.

Administrative data

Child Trends analyzed five main types of administrative data for this report.

- **POWER:** Data on teaching and non-teaching staff who received up to three one-time payments of \$1000 each.
- **POWER-ED:** Data on ECE professionals who received wage supplements while pursuing a credential or degree.
- **QRRG Staff Payments:** Data on teaching staff who received a bonus payment after their program earned a star rating through Quality Rated.
- **ClassWallet:** Data on the amount of money received and spent by ECE professionals via the ClassWallet platform, which administered grants for select pandemic relief projects, including Classroom Supply Grants, Pyramid Model training, and the MHC pilot.¹
- **Supplemental administrative data:** Information about program characteristics including licensing status, program type, size, and Quality Rated rating.

Teacher interviews

Child Trends interviewed 23 teachers for this evaluation. To identify eligible teachers, we sent an email to a random subset of 2400 teachers who received at least one round of POWER payments with a link to complete a form if they were interested in taking part in this evaluation. We focused on those who received POWER payments because that project had the broadest eligibility and reach. The interest form asked teachers about which pandemic relief funding or support they had received, along with questions about demographic characteristics and employment history. In total, 143 teachers completed the interest form and gave permission for us to follow up to schedule an interview.

We then sorted those 143 teachers into three groups based on their responses on the interest form to ensure we heard from teachers with a range of experiences: (1) those who reported receiving funding or support from a range of pandemic relief projects, (2) those who reported receiving funding or support from the more common pandemic relief projects only (i.e., POWER, Classroom Supply Grants, Quality Rated Restoration Grant Staff Payments), and (3) Spanish-speaking teachers who received any type of support. We included this last group to ensure we had representation of Spanish-speaking teachers in our sample, allowing us to learn about their potentially unique experiences accessing and using the supports. Next, we randomly selected teachers from each group (75 total) and invited them to schedule an interview.²

¹ ClassWallet was also used to distribute funds to providers. For more information, please see the companion report, *Pandemic Relief Funding Supported Georgia's Center-Based Administrators, Family Child Care Providers, and Pre-K Administrators*.

² Only two or school-based Georgia's Pre-K teachers and three Spanish-speaking teachers completed an interest form and were eligible to participate, so we invited all of these teachers to participate in interviews.

Ultimately, 23 teachers participated in interviews; 16 teachers reported receiving only the more common supports (14 English-speaking teachers and 2 Spanish-speaking teachers) and 7 teachers reported receiving a range of pandemic relief supports (all English-speaking). Interviewees received a \$40 gift card and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Dedoose qualitative software. While interviews were conducted with teachers with a range of experiences, it is important to remember that this is a small sample of teachers and may not be fully generalizable and representative of all teachers.

Findings

Reach of pandemic relief funding

We defined “reach” as the number of individuals (and the associated number of programs) who received grants or payments.³ We examined reach both at the individual level and at the program level, as several pandemic relief efforts required the provider or employer to act for teachers and other eligible staff within those programs to receive funding or support. Specifically:

- **POWER** payments were available to both teaching and non-teaching staff⁴ working a certain number of hours in CCLCs, FCCLHs, DOD programs, exempt HS/EHS programs, and university-based programs, as well as to lead and assistant teachers in school-based Georgia’s Pre-K programs. In all programs except school-based Georgia’s Pre-K programs, staff could receive payments if their employer first submitted, at each round, a POWER application and a list of POWER-eligible employees. Eligible roles included teachers, assistant teachers, aides, floaters, directors, assistant directors, owners, providers, and non-teaching staff (e.g., bus drivers, custodians, and cooks). After DECAL confirmed eligibility, each staff member had to confirm their information and opt in to receive a POWER payment. There were three rounds of POWER payments, and individuals who remained eligible (i.e., employed in an ECE program, their employer submitted the application at each round, and they confirmed their eligibility) could receive all three rounds of funding. In school-based Georgia’s Pre-K programs, payments to lead and assistant teachers were automatic (i.e., did not require the employer to submit an application or the individual to confirm their information) due to DECAL’s different tracking and payments systems for child care programs versus schools.
- **POWER-ED** was available to ECE professionals who were pursuing a credential or degree, receiving a scholarship through DECAL Scholars,⁵ and applied to receive POWER-ED wage supplements. Payments were made as ECE professionals worked their way toward earning a credential or degree. ECE professionals could pursue an academic degree (referred to as POWER-ED in the subsequent findings), or a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential (referred to as POWER-ED-CDA in the subsequent findings). POWER-ED does not require action on the part of a provider or employer for an ECE professional to participate.
- **Classroom Supply Grants** were available to ECE professionals in teaching roles who received POWER payments. Eligible roles included teachers, assistant teachers, aides, FCCLH providers, curriculum coordinators, and other roles providing direct services. Two rounds of \$125 grants were automatically

³ Our analyses focused on the reach of the most common financial supports to teachers. Later in the report, we also discuss teachers’ experiences with a broader range of supports, including those that were smaller in scope (e.g., training, CDA supports). Providers could use Short-Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities (STABLE) funds to cover or increase wages or benefits, but those findings are covered in the companion report focused on providers. STABLE provided four rounds of funding to licensed providers to support and stabilize the child care industry.

⁴ As noted previously, this report focuses on the experiences of teachers and the pandemic relief projects and initiatives aimed at supporting them. POWER was open to providers and non-teaching staff in addition to teachers. However, because the majority of POWER payments went to teaching staff, we included findings for all recipients in this report.

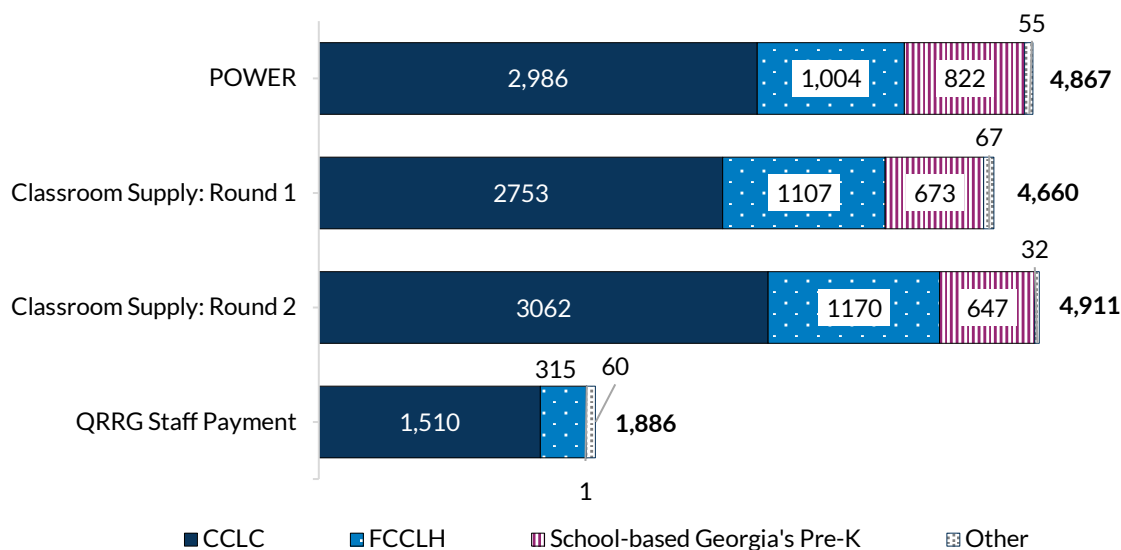
⁵ DECAL Scholars is a Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)-funded initiative that provides scholarships and incentives to ECE professionals in Georgia pursuing credentials or degrees.

available to teaching staff who had received POWER payments; teaching staff could access and spend funds via ClassWallet, an online platform used to distribute and spend funds. DECAL intended for teachers and providers to use the funds to purchase classroom materials and supplies.

- **QRRG Staff Payments** were available to ECE professionals in teaching roles in Quality Rated programs that were scheduled for an on-site observation between July 1, 2022, and March 31, 2024, and whose employers had submitted a QRRG application. Eligible roles included teachers, assistant teachers, aides, and FCCLH providers. These \$500 bonuses were paid to all teaching staff in the program after the program achieved a star rating.

Figure 1 shows the number of ECE programs by program type that participated in POWER, Classroom Supply Grants,⁶ and QRRG Staff Payment initiatives. POWER (n = 4,867) and Classroom Supply Grants (n = 4,600 in round 1 and n = 4,911 in round 2) reached the greatest number of programs, with the majority being CCLCs (see Figure 1). QRRG Staff Payments had the lowest reach (n = 1,886). This was expected given that only a limited group of programs were eligible.

Figure 1. Number of Programs Participating in Workforce-Focused Pandemic Relief Funding Projects



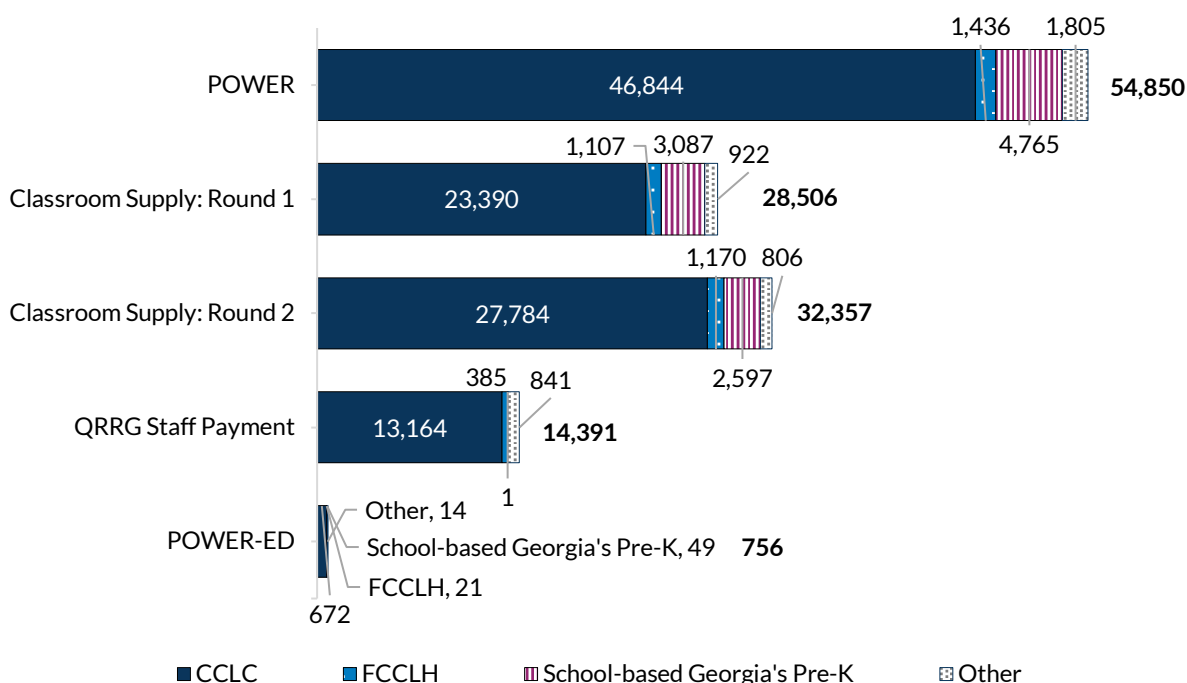
Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER, ClassWallet, and QRRG Staff Payment administrative data

Note: "Other" programs include ECE programs such as DOD programs, exempt HS/EHS programs, and university-based programs. For Classroom Supply Grants, we included all cases in ClassWallet data with a \$125 allocation. Additionally, as shown in the figure above, the data indicated that a greater number of programs participated in Classroom Supply Grants Round 2 (4,911) compared to POWER (4,867). However, this would not be possible because Classroom Supply Grants were allocated only to programs/individuals that participated in POWER. This finding might be a result of an inconsistency in the ClassWallet data (e.g., inconsistencies in organization name or ID). Alternatively, for FCCLHs we used "User IDs" to identify unique programs, and if multiple individuals (with different User IDs) within the same FCCLH received Classroom Supply Grants, these analyses would count them as two distinct FCCLHs rather than being part of the same program.

⁶ We examined Classroom Supply Grants separately by round because we were not able to match individuals across round by name and date of birth, as we could with POWER.

Figure 2 shows the number of individuals that participated in POWER, Classroom Supply Grants, and QRRG Staff Payment initiatives. POWER served the largest number of individuals, with 54,850 participants receiving at least one payment of \$1000 (see Figure 2).⁷ The Classroom Supply Grants had the next greatest reach, with 28,506 teachers receiving \$125 grants in round 1 and 32,357 teachers in round 2. The QRRG Staff Payments project provided \$500 bonuses to 14,391 teachers and other staff. POWER-ED, which began in the spring of 2023 and provides bonuses to teachers participating in DECAL Scholars as they work toward a degree or credential, supported 756 teachers.

Figure 2. Number of Individuals Participating in Workforce-Focused Pandemic Relief Funding Projects



Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER, ClassWallet, QRRG Staff Payment, and POWER-ED administrative data

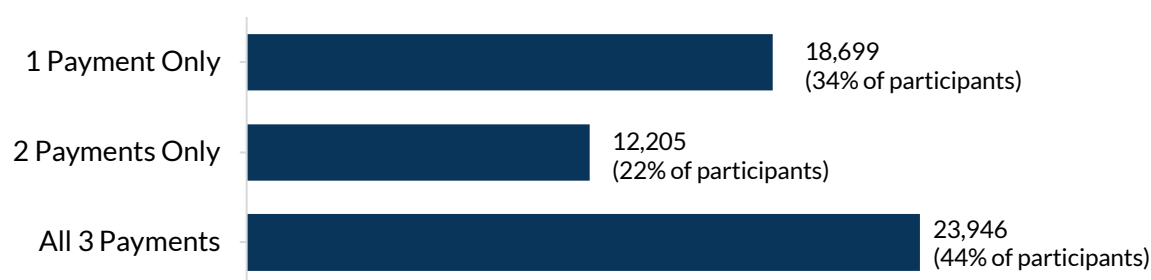
Note: "Other" programs include ECE programs such as DOD programs, exempt HS/EHS programs, and university-based programs. For Classroom Supply Grants, we included all cases in ClassWallet data with a \$125 allocation. Of the 756 teachers who participated in POWER-ED, 588 teachers were pursuing a degree (referred to simply as POWER-ED), 159 teachers were pursuing a CDA (referred to as POWER-ED-CDA), and 9 teachers were pursuing both.

A total of 54,850 individuals participated in POWER, although there was variation in participation rates between rounds. At each of the three rounds, POWER supported nearly 40,000 teachers, CCLC and FCCLH providers, and other staff, indicating that the majority of teachers participated in multiple rounds. Interestingly, although workforce members were eligible for all three rounds of POWER payments, our analyses indicate that under half (44 percent) of POWER recipients received payments for all three rounds (see Figure 3).⁸

⁷ These numbers reflect the total number of staff who received at least one POWER payment.

⁸ We used name and date of birth to match individuals across POWER rounds. Some of the non-matches across rounds may be due to spelling or other discrepancies across files, but we expect this would account for only a small percentage of cases. Thus, it is possible that more than 44 percent of staff received all three rounds of POWER, but it is highly likely that a large proportion of eligible staff did not receive all three rounds.

Figure 3. POWER Participants Receiving One, Two, or All Three Payments (n = 54,850).



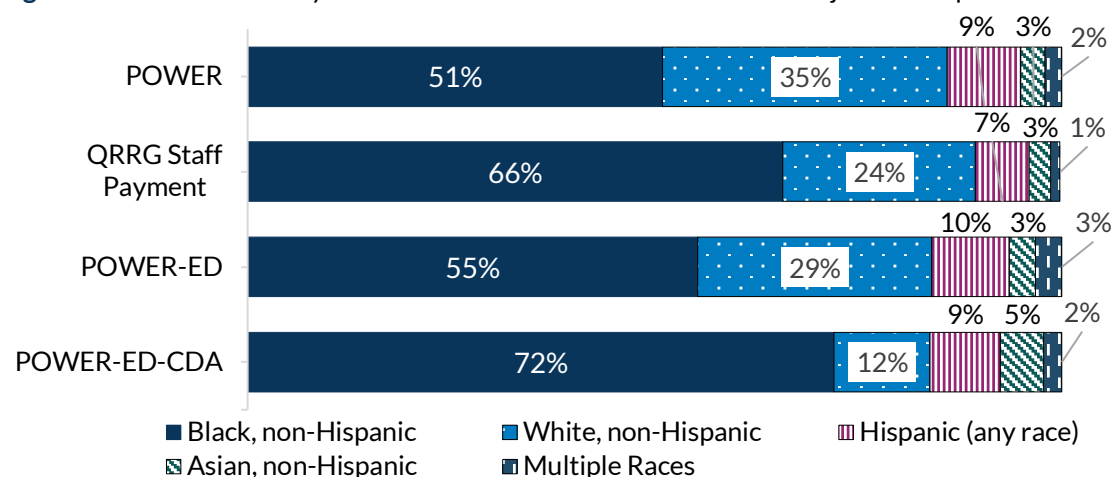
Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER administrative data

Participant characteristics

Child Trends analyzed three main administrative data sets (POWER, QRRG, and POWER-ED, which included POWER-ED-CDA) to examine participant characteristics. Across these projects, 85-95 percent of the individuals who participated worked in CCLCs, which generally reflects the composition of the ECE workforce in Georgia (i.e., the majority of ECE professionals in Georgia work in CCLCs).

We examined the racial-ethnic identities of participants within each of the workforce-focused pandemic relief projects to understand the characteristics of the people served by each. As shown in Figure 4, most participants across projects (51-72%) identified as Black. The next largest racial-ethnic group was White (12-35% across projects), followed by Hispanic (7-10%), Asian (3-5%), and people identifying with multiple races (1-3 percent). For context, a 2016 report indicated that, among center-based ECE staff in Georgia, approximately 41-58 percent identified as Black, 33-52 percent as White, 2-7 percent as Hispanic, 1-2 percent as Asian, and 1-6 percent as multiracial.⁹

Figure 4. Race and Ethnicity of Workforce-Focused Pandemic Relief Project Participants



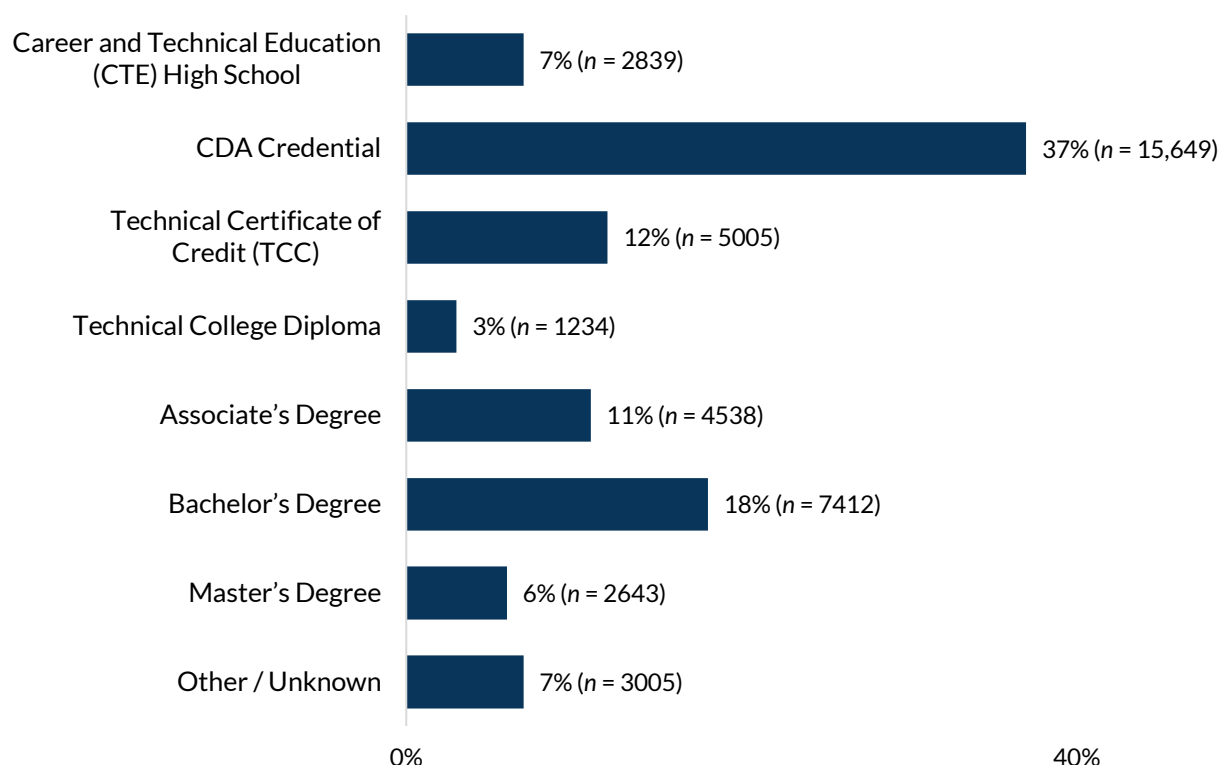
Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER, QRRG Staff Payment, and POWER-ED administrative data

Note: The percentage of recipients with other racial-ethnic identities was below 1 percent. Teachers in school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs received POWER payments automatically and were not asked to report their race-ethnicity at the time of payment; these teachers therefore are not represented in bar for POWER in this figure. School-based Georgia's Pre-K programs do not participate in Quality Rated and were therefore not eligible for the QRRG Staff Payment initiative. POWER-ED and POWER-ED-CDA bars exclude 9 cases that participated in both projects.

⁹ <https://www.dec.state.ga.us/documents/attachments/EconImpactReport.pdf>

We also examined the roles and educational backgrounds of individuals who received POWER payments. About 80 percent of individuals who received POWER payments were teachers, 10 percent were center administrators, 2 percent were FCCLH providers, and 8 percent were non-teaching staff. Education levels were highly variable across POWER participants (see Figure 5). Across rounds, participants most commonly reported that their highest levels of education were CDA credentials (37%) and bachelor's degrees (18%).

Figure 5. Highest Reported Level of Education Among POWER Participants



Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER administrative data

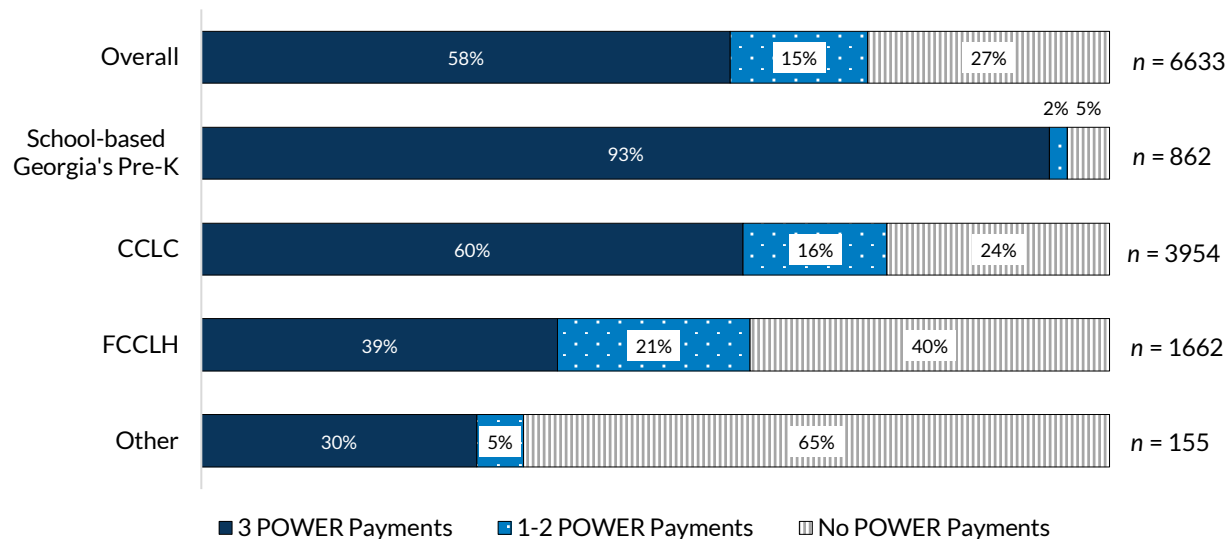
Note: Education level was not collected from school-based Georgia's Pre-K teachers, so the numbers and percentages above only reflect the education level breakdown among teachers, providers, and non-teaching staff in CCLCs, FCCLHs, Head Start/Early Head Start, and DOD programs. About 15 percent of these POWER participants were missing highest level of education in the POWER data (coded as N/A in the data we received), so these estimates should be interpreted with caution. We combined the administrative data categories "Infant/Toddler," "Preschool," "Home Visitor," and "Family Child Care" to create the "CDA Credential" group above, as these categories refer to CDA pathways. To calculate overall highest level of education across the three rounds of POWER, we took the last known highest level of education in the POWER data.

Characteristics of programs that participated in POWER compared to programs that did not

We examined additional characteristics of programs participating in POWER, including how POWER participants compared to those programs that did not participate, because POWER had the broadest eligibility and largest reach. As noted previously, to receive a POWER payment, employers in CCLCs, FCCLHs, and other centers first needed to apply and add eligible employees to their roster at each POWER round. Then, eligible employees needed to opt in to receive a POWER payment. Payments to teachers in school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs were automatic due to DECAL's different tracking and payments systems for child care programs versus schools.

As shown in Figure 6, 58 percent of programs¹⁰ participated in all three rounds of POWER, 15 percent of programs participated in one or two rounds of POWER, and 27 percent of programs did not participate in any rounds of POWER. Participation in all three rounds was highest among school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs (93 percent)¹¹ and CCLCs (60 percent) and lower among FCCLHs (39 percent) and other programs, which included license-exempt Head Start/Early Head Start, DOD, and university-based programs (30 percent).

Figure 6. Percentage of Programs Receiving POWER Payments Overall and by Program Type



Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER, licensing, and school-based Georgia's Pre-K program administrative data

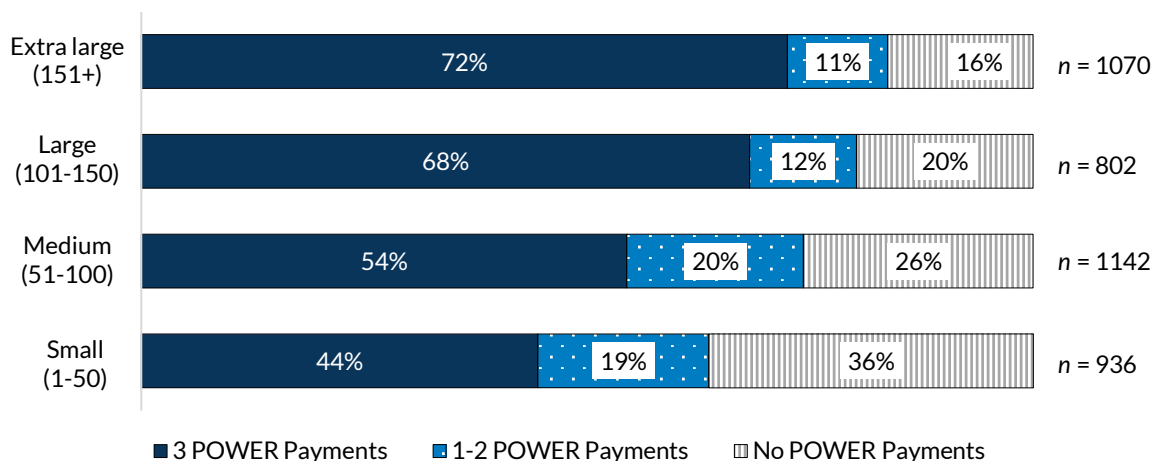
Note: Payments to school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs were automatic, but in our analyses, only 93 percent of the universe of school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs received all three rounds of POWER. This may be because programs were not open or operating at all three rounds, or because of errors or changes in school ID over time.

POWER participation also varied by other program characteristics. As shown in Figure 7, larger programs had higher participation rates. Conversely, just over one-third (36%) of small programs (1-50 children) did not participate in any rounds of POWER.

¹⁰ The universe of programs included any licensed child care program or school-based Georgia's Pre-K program that was open at any point between 2020 and 2024. For each program, we used the most recent data available (e.g., size and rating from their most recent licensing file). Therefore, programs in the "1-2 POWER Payments" and "No POWER Payments" groups may not have received all three POWER payments because (a) they chose not to participate or (b) they were not open or eligible at all three rounds.

¹¹ Payments to school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs were automatic, but in our analyses, only 93 percent of the universe of school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs received all three rounds of POWER. This may be because programs were not open or operating at all three rounds, or because of errors or changes in school ID over time.

Figure 7. Percentage of Centers Receiving POWER Payments by Program Size

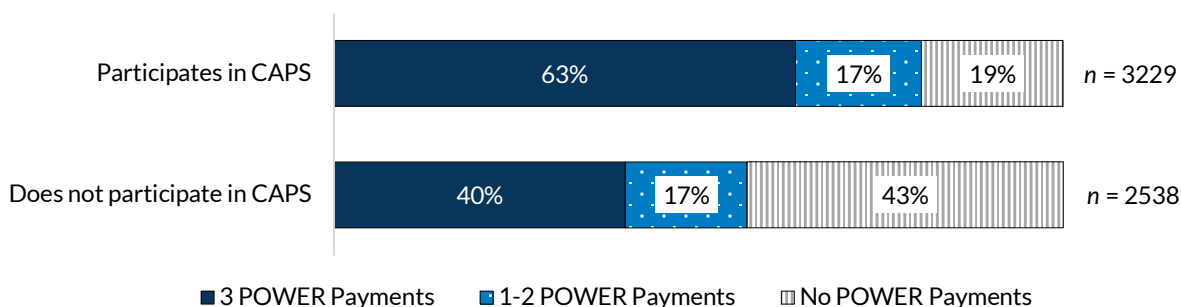


Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER and licensing administrative data

Note: FCCLHs were excluded from these analyses rather than categorized as small programs as we did not want to conflate size with program type (presented in Figure 6). School-based Georgia's Pre-K programs also were excluded from these analyses because program size information was missing.

Participation in all three rounds of POWER was greater among programs participating in CAPS (Figure 8) and higher-rated Quality Rated programs (Figure 9). These programs might have had an easier time participating because participants were more familiar with DECAL, and/or they had greater capacity or fewer barriers to obtaining information about available supports and completing the required applications. Because POWER (and other workforce-focused pandemic relief projects) required that the employer apply before eligible staff within those programs could receive funding, these differences in participation at the program level indicate that access to supports at the individual level also varied by type of program.

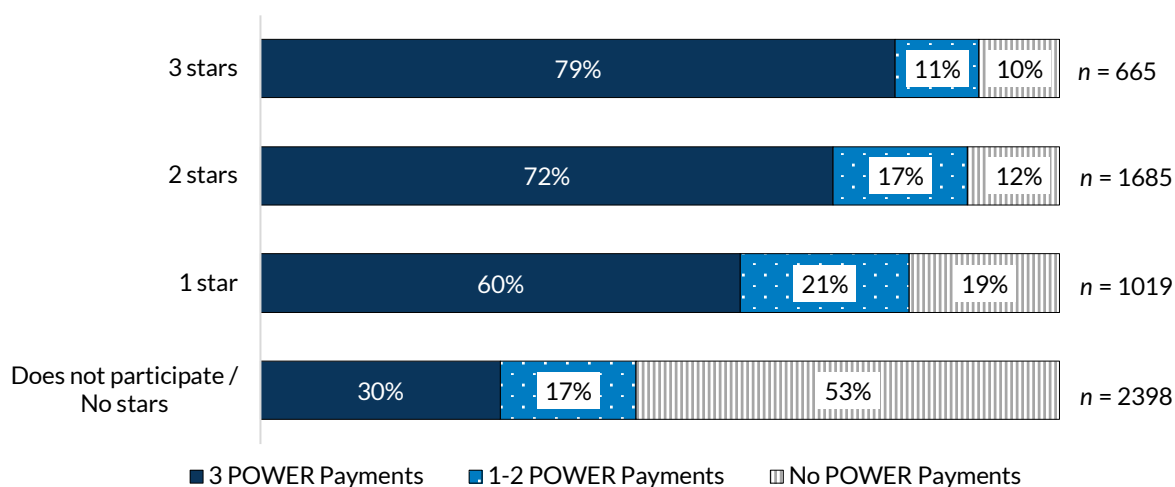
Figure 8. Percentage of Programs Receiving POWER Payments by CAPS Participation



Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER and licensing administrative data

Note: School-based Georgia's Pre-K programs were excluded from these analyses because they do not participate in CAPS.

Figure 9. Percentage of Programs Receiving POWER Payments by Quality Rated Participation and Rating



Source: Child Trends' analysis of POWER and licensing administrative data

Note: School-based Georgia's Pre-K programs were excluded from these analyses because they do not participate in Quality Rated. "0 stars" means a program went through the Quality Rated process but did not score highly enough to earn a rating.

Teachers' experiences with pandemic relief projects and initiatives

As noted above, Child Trends interviewed 23 teachers, all of whom received at least one round of POWER payments. Fourteen of the 23 interviewees were lead teachers, and 19 of the 23 teachers served preschool-aged children (36 months to 5 years). On average, teachers had been in their current job for four years (range: 1-19 years) and in the field of early learning for almost 11 years (range: 3-41 years). Almost all interviewees were female (96%) and spoke English as their primary language (87%). See Appendix A for more information about the demographic characteristics of the interview participants.

In interviews, Child Trends asked teachers about their experiences with pandemic relief projects focused on wage supplements (i.e., POWER, QRRG Staff Payments), funds for classroom materials (i.e., Classroom Supply Grants and Pre-K Classroom Grants), increased wages or benefits, and educational advancement and training incentives and supports (i.e., POWER-ED, workforce entry or CDA supports, Pyramid Model Training, and MHC). Table 2 shows how many of the teachers we interviewed received each type of pandemic relief support.

Table 2. Pandemic Relief Support Received by Interview Participants (n = 23)

Pandemic Relief Support	Teachers Who Reported Receiving Each Support	
	N	%
POWER	23	100%
Classroom Supply Grant	15	65%
QRRG Staff Payments	13	57%
Increased wages/benefits through STABLE ^a	7	30%
CDA Support	4	17%
Pyramid Model	4	17%
POWER-ED	3	13%
Pre-K Classroom Grant (through their program)	3	13%
MHC Pilot	2	9%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of teacher interviews.

Note: Teachers reported all pandemic relief supports they received or in which they participated, so these numbers are not mutually exclusive.

^aThis category includes all teachers who reported increased wages or benefits during this time, but it is possible those increases were not through STABLE. Teachers generally did not know if their increased wages or benefits were made possible with STABLE funding.

Experiences with payment initiatives: POWER and QRRG Staff Payments

All 23 teachers reported that they had received one or more rounds of POWER payments, and 13 reported also receiving a QRRG Staff Payment. Both types of payments were intended to serve as recognition and appreciation for teachers and were unrestricted in how funds could be used. During the interviews, teachers most commonly reported using the funds for basic living essentials (e.g., rent, groceries, bills), followed by classroom supplies, other personal expenses, and items for their own children such as school supplies, clothing, and treats. A few teachers reported putting at least some of the money into savings. **The majority of teachers reported that the most helpful aspect of the POWER payments was being able to use the funds for necessities such as rent, bills, groceries, and clothing.** A couple of teachers noted that they were living paycheck to paycheck, so the funds provided some relief:

Over half of teachers reported using POWER payments for necessities such as rent, bills, groceries, and clothing.

"Well, it's definitely the extra security because as early educators, we don't really get paid that much so we basically live paycheck to paycheck. So when we got that extra like \$1000, it was helpful because I'm like well, I don't have to worry about waiting until Friday to get paid. I can put gas in my car now."

Other teachers either caught up or got ahead on their bills, as one teacher discussed:

"It was, I mean it was helpful. You know, COVID was a crazy time for some people, so I know that that came in handy for a lot of people. Like I said, helped us out a lot. We paid some bills, got caught up or even got ahead, and maybe it was able to treat the kids a little here and there for, like, an ice cream or take them out to eat. But mainly was just pay things off."

Some teachers noted that the funds came in handy when their work hours or their wages were reduced, as it helped to fill in the gap in their pay. A few teachers reported spending the money on non-necessities for themselves, such as a vacation or eating out.

Several teachers reported using POWER funds to purchase classroom supplies, such as art supplies, a learning center, supplies for a class graduation ceremony, toys, books, and personal protective equipment. **Teachers said the POWER funds were helpful because it meant they did not have to pay for classroom supplies using their own money.** One teacher implied that she had experienced some pressure from her program to spend some of the money that was intended for personal use on classroom supplies instead. As another teacher observed:

“As a teacher, sometimes you have to use some of your personal money to spend money for your classroom; everything you are not getting support from your school. If you want to do something like the ‘Leprechaun Week,’..., you have to spend some money from your personal side.”

One teacher described how the funds allowed her to provide her children with an additional activity, as she was able to purchase books, and noted that her children now, *“had something else to do besides just like sitting there or playing games.”*

When we asked teachers about their experiences overall across all the funding and support they received, most teachers said that POWER was the most helpful pandemic relief support.

Most teachers we interviewed reported that POWER was the most helpful pandemic relief support they received.

Experiences with grants for classroom materials: Classroom Supply Grants and Pre-K Classroom Grants

Fifteen of the teachers we interviewed reported receiving one or more rounds of \$125 Classroom Supply Grants via ClassWallet, and three teachers in school-based Georgia’s Pre-K programs reported that their program received a Pre-K Classroom Grant. These grants were intended to be used toward supplies and materials for classrooms; teachers received these grants through ClassWallet. The most common supplies that teachers reported purchasing included art supplies, writing materials, games and toys, books, manipulatives, and other learning materials. A few teachers noted that they appreciated being able to purchase materials their programs wouldn’t otherwise purchase for them (e.g., a laminating machine). **Several teachers noted that one of the things they liked most about these supply grants was that they allowed teachers to purchase supplies themselves, without having to go through their director or another administrator.** This allowed teachers to purchase supplies that were most needed and most appropriate for their classroom. As one teacher noted:

“As much as I don’t like having to do the ordering, it’s always better when I can, because then I know I’m gonna get what I want. Sometimes when I make a list and send it to somebody else, I don’t always get everything that I wanted, [because] either it wasn’t available or... they just make a decision for replacement themselves. Or they just don’t understand what I’m asking for and order the wrong thing.”

Teachers also highlighted the connection between purchasing supplies directly and meeting the needs of children in their classroom:

“Being able to pick the items ourselves, that’s going to benefit our class because we as teachers know our students, and we know what they need.”

"I feel that with ClassWallet, the teachers can shop because we know what the children like, what they dislike... I feel that the ClassWallet not only benefits the teachers, but also the children, and the children [are] who we need to uphold."

Teachers reported several benefits of receiving funds for classroom supplies or materials. Several teachers described being able to purchase new supplies or “extras” they wouldn’t have been able to purchase otherwise. A few of these teachers specifically mentioned that purchasing new supplies helped keep children in their classrooms interested and excited and kept children from getting bored with older materials. A couple of teachers mentioned that the funds allowed them to replace old or broken materials. **Finally, a common theme was that teachers found the funds helpful because they allowed them to purchase supplies without having to use their own money, something they often reported having to do.**

Interestingly, analyses of ClassWallet data indicated that teachers spent only a portion of the \$125 Classroom Supply Grants they received. As shown in Table 3, on average, individuals spent \$57-73 of the \$125 for each round. In the first round, less than two-thirds of individuals spent 75 percent or more of the funding they had been allocated in ClassWallet, and less than half spent 95 percent or more. In the second round, under half of individuals spent at least 75 percent of the funding they had been allocated, and just over one-third spent 95 percent or more. This resulted in a lot of grant funding being unspent and DECAL needing to reallocate funds to different projects and initiatives. Teachers discussed several challenges with ClassWallet (e.g., the website being difficult to navigate, supplies being more expensive on this platform) which might partly explain the relatively low percentage of individuals who spent most or all of the funds that had been allocated to them.

Table 3. Allocations and Expenses of ClassWallet Funds: Classroom Supply Grants

ClassWallet Project	N	Average Allocation per User	Average Spending per User	Average Percentage of Allocation Spent	Individuals Who Spent 75 Percent or More of Allocated Funds	Individuals Who Spent 95 Percent or More of Allocated Funds
DECAL Classroom Grants – Round 1	24,531	\$125	\$73	58%	59%	45%
DECAL Classroom Grants – Round 2	28,999	\$125	\$57	45%	46%	34%

Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ClassWallet administrative data.

Note: ClassWallet data included allocations and expenses through April 29, 2024. Our analyses indicate that an additional 3,975 individuals were allocated \$125 in Round 1 and an additional 3,358 individuals were allocated \$125 in Round 2 (see Figure 2). However, they are not included in this table because of anomalies in IDs or spending data that prevented us from being able to accurately calculate spending for those individuals.

Wage and benefit supports

Seven teachers we interviewed reported that they received increased wages or benefits during the pandemic, though it was not clear if these increases were through the pandemic relief funding efforts such as STABLE. One teacher reported that she could not work full time, and so the increased wages helped fill in the gap. Another teacher reported that she used the additional money from her wage increase for bills and could sign her child up for more activities:

"I was able to help my husband out more with stuff around the house, bills around the house, able to do more things with my kids and let them start doing more activities and everything because we had the extra money to spare for them to start doing things."

Two teachers also discussed how the raise was helpful as inflation was rising. However, one teacher noted that prices have increased again, and therefore she's now in the same position as she was prior to the raise:

"It helped a lot. I've been able to do a bit more, but then prices just kind of went way up, so it's kind of like back in the same boat. But it did help out a lot and I do compare what I get paid here now to other daycares and they're not really paying much in the area."

Educational advancement and training incentives and supports

Three out of the 23 teachers we interviewed reported receiving POWER-ED. Four of the teachers we interviewed reported participating in one of the pandemic relief projects focused on CDAs (e.g., through Teachstone or a technical college), four talked about the Pyramid Model training, and two talked about the Mental Health Consultation (MHC) pilot. **Teachers who received POWER-ED bonuses reported putting those payments toward bills or classroom materials, mirroring what we heard about how teachers used the original POWER payments.** Teachers who received support for their CDA appreciated the assistance while completing their credential. One teacher referred to the support as a "reward," while another found it helpful because it gave them the tools they needed.

Teachers who reported participating in the Pyramid Model training or MHC pilot generally found these supports helpful in building knowledge, improving their interactions with children in their classrooms, and/or in improving children's behavior. For example, one teacher noted when reflecting on the MHC she received:

"For me it worked great because we thought we had come up with a lot of different ideas to kind of like channel those behaviors that we had in the classroom, but speaking with them, they gave us a lot of insight on different things that can be done within our classroom as well. Different things that we can model. They gave us a lot of tips and tricks so that that was really helpful."

One teacher noted that applying Pyramid Model techniques in her classroom was a "game changer," while another noted:

"Learning that foundation is stuck in my brain, the foundational block of the Pyramid Model... Yes, the kids are behaving better. For example, we have a new student and she has a lot of issues at home, and so my coworker and myself [are] coming together and know that we do have to build that relationship first before we can set the boundaries and the expectations. It helps when we come together with building that trust and that comfort, and so we can kind of steer, we can really redirect her a lot better now that she has a good relationship with [us]."

As noted previously, staff in programs participating in Pyramid Model training or the MHC pilot received funds via ClassWallet to support implementation. We analyzed Pyramid Model and MHC allocations and expenditures using ClassWallet data (see Table 4) to examine how funds were spent.¹² Overall, spending for each of these projects is low at the time of this report,¹³ apart from Pyramid Model for FCCLH providers, where over two-thirds have already spent at least 75 percent of the allocated funds. Spending is ongoing for some of these projects, which may account for the low spending (see note).

¹² While this report focuses on teachers, Pyramid Model and MHC projects provided funds to teachers as well as providers (i.e., center administrators and FCCLH providers). Given that the focus of these pandemic relief projects was the workforce, we include Pyramid Model and MHC funds to providers in this memo.

¹³ Several of these projects were ongoing as of April 29, 2024 (noted in the table), when the data were obtained, so the proportion of funds spent was not expected to be 100 percent.

Table 4. Allocations and Expenses of ClassWallet Funds: Pyramid Model and MHC

ClassWallet Project	N	Average Allocation per User	Average Spending per User	Average Percentage of Allocation Spent	Individuals Who Spent 75 Percent or More of Allocated Funds	Individuals Who Spent 95 Percent or More of Allocated Funds
Pyramid Model Training Series Pilot ^a	31	\$265	\$169	62%	61%	48%
Pyramid Model FCCLH ^a	13	\$175	\$118	68%	69%	62%
Pyramid Model Teachers ^a	251	\$175	\$77	44%	46%	32%
Pyramid Model Admin R2 ^{a, b}	99	\$175	\$99	57%	59%	45%
MHC Pilot ^b	56	\$295	\$71	24%	23%	20%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ClassWallet administrative data.

Note: ClassWallet data included allocations and expenses through April 29, 2024.

^aPyramid Model trainings have been rolled out over time. Each row in the table represents a different phase of the roll-out, and each phase was associated with different participants and wallets.

^bPyramid Model Admin R2 and MHC Pilot wallets were still open as of April 29, 2024, when Child Trends received the data, which means that individuals are still spending these funds. Before conducting analyses, we excluded anomalies in the data (e.g., cases where the total allocation was 3 standard deviations above or below the mean) that may have been due to glitches in the ClassWallet system and/or errors in user IDs.

Perceptions of impact of pandemic relief funding overall

When discussing their experiences with pandemic relief funding and support overall, **several teachers shared their appreciation for DECAL's willingness to support teachers during the pandemic.** Two teachers expressed feeling recognized as a front-line essential worker, like doctors, and appreciated the support they were getting from DECAL. They shared that these supports helped them get through the pandemic. **Several teachers mentioned that in particular, POWER made them feel appreciated, that someone was looking out for them, and that they had not been forgotten.**

"It made me feel appreciated. I guess it was like someone was kind of looking out for us."

"I felt appreciated for what we put into for the classroom coming in and working during the pandemic with the hours being cut, the classroom sizes decreasing. Things became overwhelming. So I felt appreciated with those and then it just helped financially for myself in the household for finances."

Teachers' responses were quite varied when asked how things would have been different for them had they not received any funding and support from DECAL (see Figure 10). Several teachers indicated that, while the funding was a nice bonus, things would not have been different for them without the funding. For example, one teacher noted:

"I don't think it would have been too much different... It was just a nice surprise because that wasn't something we were expecting."

Other teachers indicated that they would have experienced some challenges without the funding or support, but they would have been able to manage. For example:

"Funds probably would have been a little bit tighter, but it would have been fine. I mean, we were making do without. It was just an extra nice little bonus to have had. I would have had to maybe work a few extra hours or take on [another] shift."

Other teachers noted they would have experienced greater challenges without the funding and support from DECAL. Several teachers noted that they would have experienced stress or financial strain, and a few teachers said that they would have left their jobs or considered leaving had they not received the funding and support from DECAL.

"It definitely would have been a struggle because finances was hard, things were tight. So it definitely would have been a struggle for myself."

One teacher also noted that without the funding or support from DECAL, the cost of supplies would have shifted to her personal finances, a theme that was echoed by several other teachers throughout the interviews.

"I think a lot of that would have fallen back on me, and I would have been doing a lot of that myself. Teachers do that a lot. I know I do it quite often in my class, so I believe [if] we didn't have a ClassWallet or POWER funds... I would be taking care of it myself."

Responses were evenly split when we asked teachers whether the pandemic relief funding and support they received from DECAL influenced whether they stayed in their jobs or in early childhood education more broadly. Some teachers said the funding and support had encouraged them to continue teaching in early childhood, while others said it did not influence their decision to stay and referenced their love of teaching and children. Interestingly, several of them linked this to feeling appreciated because of the funding and support.

"I knew that it was difficult for the administration to support us in some ways, so it was nice to see that DECAL came through when we really needed them, not just for the children, but also for the teachers. And to remember that, okay, we do matter. They do care about us."

We asked teachers about what additional supports or resources would have been helpful. **Most teachers indicated that additional distributions of existing projects like POWER or the Classroom Supply Grants would have been helpful.** A few teachers suggested additional supports their program could offer them—for instance, increased wages or better benefits—and that they would have liked more support from their program throughout the pandemic, particularly regarding relationships with parents. As one teacher said:

"Upper management being more understanding and caring about employees and keeping to their word making schedules and keeping you to your schedules, and not having staff be in a room by themselves with like five crying babies just because it is in ratio."

Implementation successes

Overall, teachers thought that the processes for learning about and applying for pandemic relief supports were smooth and easy, and few teachers reported experiencing challenges. Many teachers described how their directors helped them during this process by alerting them to available pandemic relief supports,

helping with paperwork, and facilitating the overall process for receiving and using funds. Coworkers were also useful resources in navigating processes for applying or using the funds. As one teacher said:

“From what I remember, they made it pretty easy because our school pretty much got everything together. So all we basically had to do was present our ID to the notary and sign. They had basically filled out [everything and] had taken care of all of that.”

Of those who reported experiencing challenges with applying for support or funding, several reported that they were able to resolve the issues fairly quickly. For instance, one teacher who struggled with an application called the DECAL support line and had a staff member walk her through the application process.

Implementation challenges

Many teachers discussed challenges related to the Classroom Supply Grants via ClassWallet, in contrast to their experiences with applying for other types of funding and supports, which were seen as fairly smooth. Challenges with ClassWallet might partly explain the relatively low percentage of individuals who spent most or all of the funds that had been allocated to them (as seen in the analyses of ClassWallet data described previously). Teachers noted that the website was difficult to navigate when ordering supplies and materials. This in turn led to frustration for teachers and their coworkers, and some coworkers chose not to use the money to avoid the frustration. Several teachers also noted that supplies were more expensive through ClassWallet, and that they would have been able to purchase more supplies (for the same amount of money) if they had been allowed to use the money outside ClassWallet (e.g., via Amazon or local stores).

“The [ClassWallet] website for that was hard to navigate and I guess the hardest part was being limited to where you could use it at. Some stuff was really cute, but you could obviously get it cheaper or more of it if we're able to use it outside of [ClassWallet].”

Teachers also noted that it was challenging to spend the money they had been allocated without going over, which meant they either did not use all the funds or they had to use some of their own money (if the purchase exceeded \$125). Some teachers also said that the amount of money (\$125) was too small, though other teachers appreciated the amount and sometimes coordinated with other teachers to pool resources and/or coordinate purchases to ensure they got a variety of different items.

Other challenges revolved primarily around qualifying for support and/or issues with the online application process. For example, two participants mentioned that although they personally did not experience challenges, new employees at their programs had issues with verifying their employment or did not receive funds because they had not worked at the center long enough. One teacher reported that people at her center had issues accessing the link for the online application, and another teacher said her information had been linked incorrectly with a different employee.

Teachers expressed frustration about not understanding eligibility criteria and emphasized the need for more detailed explanations and guidance from DECAL on how to meet the requirements for each support. Some teachers we interviewed reported confusion about the requirements for the supports provided. One teacher expressed uncertainty about why they did not qualify for the support for which they applied. Another teacher mentioned that, despite receiving POWER payments, their coworkers, who followed the same application process, did not. They speculated that this discrepancy might be related to their coworkers not meeting the requirement of being in the program for a specific length of time.

Reflections on pandemic relief funding ending

We asked teachers to reflect on the funding and projects ending given that several of DECAL's pandemic relief funding and supports for teachers had ended by the time these interviews were conducted.

Responses were mixed, but many teachers indicated that the funding ending had very little or no impact on them. Many teachers indicated that they had not been expecting the money in the first place, and therefore they had not expected the funds to continue long-term. Most of the teachers in this group were referencing POWER payments and supply grants.

Many teachers interviewed said the expiration of pandemic relief funding had little to no impact on their day-to-day lives, while others expressed the loss of funding as having an impact on them.

"Personally, I'm not quite sure [it had an impact]. I didn't know that I would be getting those grants going into the job, so I don't know that I was expecting them ever. They just kind [of] happened. I think it would be nice to continue receiving them, but I don't know that not receiving them has really affected me because I wasn't counting on them for anything."

"I think when we were getting those supports, we were really looking at them as one- or two-time things. We didn't have an expectation that it would continue long term, so it was kind of 'get it while we can.' So we didn't really feel it so much when they ended. Certainly we would love to keep getting it, but it just kind of feels like business as usual right now."

Some teachers indicated that the loss of pandemic relief funding and support that they had been receiving did have an impact on them. These teachers talked about their personal finances becoming tight, the need to budget or cut back on expenses, and having to work overtime, with one teacher mentioning the coupling of loss of support with inflation. Several (but not all) of the teachers in this group were referencing wage increases they had received which were then taken away.

"It's definitely caused me and my husband to look at the current positions we have now. It's caused us to work on budgeting and seeing what we really need and what's important and what we could cut back on or cut down on."

"Yeah, we took a pay decrease... It impacted me drastically for my home because I'm a single mother with children. It's [been a] check-to-check basis thing for me, so the decrease was a hardship for me."

Sustainability

Classroom supply grants were the support teachers most often thought should be sustained, followed by POWER or another type of bonus, wage increase, and support for earning a CDA or other credential support. A few teachers discussed how multiple supports would be helpful and/or that they thought all supports should continue.

Several teachers noted that supports like the Classroom Supply Grants would reduce the need for them to use their own money to buy supplies and materials for their classrooms. Teachers also recognized that continuing POWER might not be feasible for DECAL, but they thought that even small bonuses would help teachers, both in terms of their finances and in feeling appreciated. A few teachers noted that early childhood teachers are paid very little, and there is a need to increase wages in Georgia and across the country.

"I guess even the POWER bonus, even if it's not multiple times a year, maybe just something like once a year... It doesn't even have to be as big a bonus as it was. But even now and then, it feels like a nice little [message] like, 'Thank you. We see your hard work, your dedication. We realize all the work that you're putting in.'"

"I feel like teachers just lack support overall. We have to deal with a lot—the parents, the kids, and then you got the admin and your fellow coworkers as well... We just need a support system that's going to stand in our corner and be like, 'Hey, here's a small bonus.' It doesn't have to be as big as the \$1000, even if it's like half of that, or even if they overloaded us with books or materials. It doesn't even have to always be monetary support. Like if we had the supplies all the time."

Many teachers shared challenges with job satisfaction and career longevity. Teachers reported the physically demanding nature of working with young children and the overall strain on the body contribute to the perception that the job has an "expiration date." Many educators shared their desire to move on from early childhood education to roles with better working conditions or more opportunities, such as working in schools with structured hours and time off.

"Raises... I just think for what we do, we do a lot and even [in] the best schools, they don't get paid enough. I think that is a national thing. That we're teaching these little kids, and we don't get paid."

Conclusion

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DECAL implemented projects and initiatives aimed at stabilizing child care and supporting the ECE workforce, children, and families. For teachers, this primarily included projects aimed at providing financial recognition and support such as grants and bonuses tied to their role or their efforts in seeking educational advancement and training. This evaluation sought to understand teachers' experiences with pandemic relief efforts, including how funds supported educational advancement, professional development, and well-being through both analysis of administrative data as well as interviews. It is important to note that while interviews were conducted with teachers with a range of experiences, it was still a small sample and may not be fully generalizable to all teachers.

POWER, the largest workforce-focused pandemic relief project, had the greatest reach and extended to a broad and diverse group of teachers and staff. However, only 44 percent of staff received all three rounds of payments. Program administrators and directors were responsible for applying for their program and confirming POWER-eligible employees in order for staff to participate. Therefore, the low percentage that received all three rounds may highlight issues with misunderstanding eligibility criteria. Additionally, some may not have received all three rounds due to turnover and/or other changes in employment or eligibility during the project's timeframe. Perhaps related to this, several teachers we interviewed noted that they and their colleagues were sometimes confused about why they were not eligible for POWER payments or other funding.

There was higher participation in POWER in school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs and CCLCs than in FCCLHs. There was also higher participation in POWER in larger centers compared to smaller centers. Programs participating in CAPS and/or Quality Rated, especially higher-rated programs, also had higher participation rates in POWER compared to programs not participating in CAPS or lower-rated programs. This might be because these types of programs had greater capacity to navigate administrative burdens, or because programs that participated in CAPS or Quality Rated were more familiar with DECAL processes. Because POWER (and other workforce-focused pandemic relief projects) required that the employer apply first before individuals within those programs could receive funding, these differences in participation at the

program level suggest that teachers in certain types of programs (i.e., school-based Georgia's Pre-K programs, CCLCs, larger centers, CAPS programs, Quality Rated programs, and higher-rated programs) had greater access to pandemic relief support than other teachers.

Overall, teachers we interviewed found the pandemic relief supports helpful and appreciated the support they received from DECAL during the COVID-19 pandemic. **The teachers we interviewed saw POWER payments as the most helpful pandemic relief support.**

Additionally, teachers appreciated the pandemic relief projects where funds came to them directly (e.g., Classroom Supply Grants), which meant they could decide what to purchase for their classroom instead of having someone else decide for them or having to go through their director/administrator for approval. Teachers reported that this gave them the ability to purchase things they thought were most aligned with the needs and interests of children in their classroom.

It was surprising that many teachers we interviewed spoke about using POWER payments for both classroom supplies and personal expenses, given that these funds were intended for teachers' personal use and that other funding (e.g., Classroom Supply Grants, program-level funding such as STABLE) might be available to teachers to purchase supplies. **Teachers talked about how they often use their own money to buy materials for their classrooms.**

Challenges using ClassWallet for the Classroom Supply Grants were a common theme across teachers we interviewed. For example, teachers spoke about challenges with the ClassWallet platform and website, staying within the \$125 allotment, and the high cost of materials sold by ClassWallet vendors. Analyses of ClassWallet data also indicated that under two-thirds of teachers used at least 75 percent of their funds in round 1 and under half used at least 75 percent of their funds in round 2. The challenges teachers experienced may explain why they did not use all the funds available to them.

Teachers we interviewed were evenly split when we asked whether the pandemic relief supports they received influenced their decision to stay in the early childhood field. Among those who said it encouraged them to stay in the field, several noted the funding made them feel appreciated. In addition, **teachers had different perspectives on how they would have fared without the pandemic relief funding, or how they were faring now that they were no longer receiving funding or other supports.** Some teachers said the funding was a nice bonus, but that they would have been okay without it and/or were managing now without funding like POWER payments and Classroom Supply Grants. Others felt differently—they thought they would have experienced financial strain and stress without the funding, and/or they were experiencing financial strain and stress now that the pandemic relief funding had ended. This variation in perceptions about the impact of the funding may be a result of differences in individual circumstances (e.g., some teachers were single parents; some were receiving support from family while others were not).

Lastly, teachers noted how challenging it is to be an early childhood teacher, given the exhausting nature of the work, the lack of appreciation and support, and the low pay (especially considering inflation over the last few years). **Many reported feeling appreciated and supported by DECAL's pandemic relief efforts and stated that ongoing supports, like classroom supply grants or appreciation bonuses, would be helpful moving forward,** even if the funding was less than what was possible during the pandemic.

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Appendix A

Table A.1. Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

Characteristic	N	%
Program type during the COVID-19 pandemic		
Child care center classroom (not school-based Georgia's Pre-K or Head Start)	9	39%
School-based Georgia's Pre-K classroom in a child care center	8	35%
Head Start classroom	2	9%
Other ^a	4	17%
Current Role		
Lead teacher	14	61%
Co-teacher	2	9%
Assistant teacher	1	4%
Not currently employed in a child care program, but previously an early care and education teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic	7	30%
Age groups served in classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic		
Infants (0-11 months)	5	22%
Toddlers (12-35 months)	6	26%
Preschoolers, not in school-based Georgia's Pre-K (36 months to 5 years)	11	48%
Preschoolers in school-based Georgia's Pre-K	8	35%
School age (kindergarten and above)	1	4%
Education		
High school diploma or GED	3	13%
Some college	5	22%
Associate degree (AA, AS)	6	26%
Bachelor's degree or equivalent (BA, BS)	6	26%
Graduate degree (MA, M.Ed., Ph.D., Ed.D.)	2	9%
Age		
Under 25	2	9%
26-34	8	35%
35-44	7	30%
45-54	3	13%
Over 55	2	9%
Prefer not to answer	1	4%

Characteristic	N	%
Race/ethnicity		
Black or African American	12	52%
White	4	18%
Hispanic, Latino, or other Spanish origin	3	13%
More than one race	2	9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	4%
A race, ethnicity, or origin not listed here	1	4%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of Educator Focus Group Interest Form (2024).

Note: ^a "Other" primarily included former teachers who were no longer employed in an ECE program.