



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

Brian P. Kemp
Governor

Amy M. Jacobs
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**DECAL Announces Six Finalists for
2023-2024 Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year**

Finalists represent Programs in Monroe, Roswell, Woodstock, Evans, Savannah, Valdosta

ATLANTA, Ga., (December 6, 2023) – The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named their six finalists for Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2023-2024. The program, which started two years ago, recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-18 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months).

Finalists in the Infant Category are Olivia Silvers from Lemon Tree Academy Monroe and Noel Weimer from Water Oak Family Child Care Learning Home in Roswell; finalists in the Toddler Category are Donna Humphries, a Family Child Care Learning Home provider in Woodstock, and Bianca Brown from the Greenbriar School in Evans; and finalists in the Preschool Category are Chantelle Hester from Smart Starters Academy Family Child Care Learning Home in Savannah and Riquella Preston from Bright Start Preschool in Valdosta.

Each finalist will receive \$500 from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. Three winners will be announced mid- to late December. They 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 activities related to modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances.

Program directors working with early childhood teachers dedicated to making a difference in the lives of young children were asked to nominate applicants for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educator of the Year through an online application. Winners are selected from six semi-finalists who each received a classroom observation and faced a panel during a personal interview.

“Child care teachers in infant, toddler, and preschool classes are our champions in the classroom,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “These early childhood educators are laying a solid foundation for children’s academic, physical, and social development. This program rewards professionals who exemplify excellence in caring for Georgia’s youngest learners in child care. Their dedication and commitment to providing high quality care and early education is impacting the future of our children, our communities, and our state. We are so proud to celebrate and recognize these educators.”

Among other requirements, candidates for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year must have been employed as a lead teacher in the age group for which they were nominated at a licensed 2 or 3-star Quality Rated child care provider that is in good standing with all programs administered by DECAL. They also had to have a minimum of three years of experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2021-2022 school year.

“We are thrilled to continue this special recognition for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year for the third year in a row,” said Laura Wagner, Executive Director for the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “The experiences that young children have in their early years help shape the brain and establish the foundation for their health and wellbeing. High quality Early Childhood Educators play a significant role in supporting them on a successful path to lifelong learning.”

About DECAL

The 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 and 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.dec.state.ga.us.