



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

Brian P. Kemp
Governor

Amy M. Jacobs
Commissioner

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Foundation Celebrates Finest of Georgia’s Early Childhood Professionals
at Chamber Event in Atlanta**

Educators represent programs in Atlanta, Lincolnton, Marietta, Smyrna, and Watkinsville

Atlanta, GA. (May 2, 2025) – Today the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning celebrated several categories of superlative early childhood professionals at a luncheon hosted by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by the Georgia Lottery Corporation, Primrose Schools Franchising Company LLC, MTX, and mavQ. The event recognized Georgia Educators of the Year (EoTY), Georgia’s Pre-K Teachers of the Year (ToTY), and the Early Childhood Champion of the Year.

“Today, we are honored to recognize some of our state’s very best early childhood educators,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “We applaud and commend their unwavering dedication, professionalism, and passion. These teachers are highly trained professionals whose contributions to the field of early childhood education are positively impacting the future of children, families, and our state.”

“Early childhood educators deserve to be uplifted and celebrated,” commented Laura Wagner, Executive Director of the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “These teachers lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning for the young children in their care. They support each child’s unique needs and facilitate developmentally appropriate classroom activities that spark a lifelong love of learning. They are focused on each child’s cognitive, social, and physical growth and prepare children to be successful as they enter Kindergarten.

Early Childhood EoTY and Georgia Pre-K ToTY Programs

The Georgia Early Childhood Education Educator of the Year 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).

This year’s Georgia Early Childhood Educators of the Year are:

- Zina Hadjaz from the Quadrilingual Academy in Smyrna (Infant)
- Laura Silva from My Little Geniuses in Marietta (Toddler)
- Samantha Mullins from Our House at Central in Atlanta (Preschool)

The Georgia Pre-K Teacher of the Year Program recognizes two educators of Pre-K students, one from a public school and one from a private program.

This year’s Georgia Pre-K Teachers of the Year are:

- Rachel Robertson from Oconee Preschool Academy in Watkinsville (Pre-K Private School)
- Elizabeth Arthur from Lincoln County Elementary School in Lincolnton (Pre-K Public School)

The winner of each category received funds for their personal use and for a classroom makeover. Their schools also received funds to cover travel costs and expenses for substitute teachers when the awardees fulfill their duties as Georgia’s EoTYs and Georgia Pre-K ToTYs.

The winners serve as ambassadors for their programs through activities related to modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances – such as today’s event.

Nominations for the next cycle of Early Childhood Educators of the Year are now open until June 30, 2025: <https://www.decal.ga.gov/BftS/GaECEoftheYear.aspx>.

Early Childhood Champion Award

The Foundation also awarded its second annual Early Childhood Champion Award to the Thomasville-Thomas County Chamber of Commerce (Chamber). Through its strategic initiatives and collaborative efforts, the Chamber has significantly contributed to expanding high-quality child care options in Thomasville, Georgia.

One of the Chamber's most impactful initiatives is Project Workforce, launched in 2023 in partnership with Imagine Thomasville, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (GPEE), and the Thomasville Community Resource Center (TCRC). This comprehensive workforce plan addresses critical areas in the birth-to-work pipeline, with a strong emphasis on early education and child care. By focusing on this foundational stage, the Chamber has laid the groundwork for a robust and sustainable workforce in the region.

The Chamber has also been instrumental in securing funding to expand child care services. The City of Thomasville Payroll Development Authority, in collaboration with the Chamber, received a DECAL EXPAND Grant to extend child care availability during non-traditional hours. This grant reflects the Chamber's proactive approach to addressing the evolving needs of families and businesses in the community.

About DECAL

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) 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.decals.ga.gov.

About the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning

Created by Governor Nathan Deal and the Georgia General Assembly in 2017, the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning is dedicated to making strategic investments in enhancing and broadening high-quality early education in Georgia. Its mission is to ensure that every child in Georgia is equipped for success upon entering Kindergarten, regardless of family income or geographic location. A 501c3 organization, the Foundation is committed to fostering educational excellence through collaborative partnerships with families, communities, the early care and education industry, and stakeholders. For more information, visit www.gaeearlyed.org.