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**DECAL Announces Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year  
for the 2022-2023 School Year**

*Winners from Hawkinsville, Lawrenceville, and Smyrna*

**ATLANTA, Ga., (December 16, 2022)** – The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2022-2023. The winning infant educator is Mary Williams, with Kid's Express Learning Center, a 3-star Quality Rated child care learning center in Hawkinsville; the winning toddler educator is Elianne Aguilera with Eli's Academy, a 3-star Quality Rated family child care learning home in Lawrenceville; and the winning preschool educator is Tierra Falcon with Falcon Prep Academy, a 2-star Quality Rated family child care learning home in Smyrna.

As Educators of the Year, Barber, Aguilera, and Falcon will 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 by modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances throughout the state.

The Educators of the Year program 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).

Child care program directors nominated exemplary early childhood teachers for Georgia’s Early Childhood Educator of the Year through an online application. Winners were selected from six semi-finalists who each received a classroom observation and faced a panel during a personal interview.

“The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning could not fulfill our mission and vision without the partnership of committed, competent, and caring early childhood educators,” said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. “The dedicated professionals caring for Georgia’s infants, toddlers, and preschool age children in out-of-home child care are not just babysitting; they are imparting skills that children will need to become successful in school and in life. DECAL is honored to recognize and celebrate teachers who are helping to prepare Georgia’s children for the future.”

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 experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2022-2023 school year.

“It’s exciting and important to continue recognizing Georgia’s Early Childhood Educators of the Year,” said Laura Wagner, Executive Director for the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. “The experiences children have in their classrooms help enhance their brain development and their capacity to learn and to get along with others. We can’t say enough about the role these earliest teachers play in the life of a child, placing 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.al.ga.gov](http://www.dec.al.ga.gov).