



**Brian P. Kemp**  
Governor

**Amy M. Jacobs**  
Commissioner

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Media Contact: Reg Griffin

404-656-0239

[reg.griffin@dec.al.ga.gov](mailto:reg.griffin@dec.al.ga.gov)



**DECAL Announces Finalists for 2025-2026  
Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year**

***Recognition of Excellence in Early Childhood Education***

**ATLANTA, Ga., (May 14, 2025)** – The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is thrilled to announce the six finalists for the 2025-2026 Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year. This prestigious recognition celebrates outstanding educators who have shown exceptional dedication and innovation in early childhood education, representing high-quality programs across Cochran, Valdosta, Statham, Hoschton, Union City, and Marietta.

DECAL is proud to introduce the finalists:

- Erica Mimbs from Bleckley County Primary School in Cochran
- Katonia Williams from Sallas Mahone Elementary School in Valdosta
- Shawwna Butler from Castial Academy in Statham
- Teresa Swaim from West Jackson Elementary School in Hoschton
- Sheba Hill from Gems Learning Academy in Union City
- Autumn Hart from Bundle of Joy Academy in Marietta

These educators have demonstrated exceptional contributions to early childhood education by creating nurturing environments that foster the development and growth of young children.

Recognition and Next Steps

"Each finalist has been awarded a \$500 cash prize from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning, acknowledging their hard work and dedication. Their applications underwent thorough review and scoring by a panel of impartial judges," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "As part of the next phase of evaluation, the finalists will receive classroom observations this fall, submit small group videos to be scored by external judges, and face a panel for personal interviews. These comprehensive assessments will ensure that the winners are selected based on their teaching methods and interactions with students."

In September, DECAL will select two winners: one from a local public school system and another from a private child care center. This dual selection recognizes the diverse environments in which high-quality early childhood education is provided.

The candidates for Georgia's Pre-K Teacher of the Year must meet specific requirements:

Employment as a Georgia's Pre-K lead teacher during the 2024-2025 school year

A minimum of three years of experience teaching as a lead teacher in a Georgia's Pre-K classroom

Plans to continue as a lead teacher in a Georgia's Pre-K classroom during the 2025-2026 school year

These criteria ensure that the finalists have substantial experience and are committed to continuing their work in early childhood education.

The winners will serve as ambassadors for Georgia's Pre-K Program. Their responsibilities will include public speaking engagements, representing Georgia's Pre-K at various meetings, and modeling effective classroom practices. By sharing their expertise and experiences, the winners will contribute to the ongoing improvement and recognition of early childhood education in Georgia.

The announcement of the finalists for the 2025-2026 Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year highlights the dedication and excellence of educators in the field of early childhood education. As the finalists undergo the final steps of the selection process, DECAL celebrates their achievements and looks forward to the continued impact they will have on Georgia's Pre-K Program.

### **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.decal.ga.gov](http://www.decal.ga.gov).