



Supporting Georgia's Early Care and Learning System with CRRSA and ARP Funding

Executive Summary

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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 families. DECAL administers Georgia's Pre-K Program; licenses child care centers and home-based child care; administers Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program that helps families pay for child care; manages federal nutrition programs; and manages Quality Rated, Georgia's child care quality rating and improvement system. The department also houses the Head Start Collaboration Office, distributes federal funding to enhance child care quality and availability, and works to ensure families know about their child care options in Georgia. In response to COVID-19, DECAL began using the federally provided Coronavirus Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds to administer special pandemic-relief programs and service modifications to help children, parents, and early care and learning providers meet these new challenges.

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning contracted with the Urban Institute in September 2021 to lead a study to learn more about DECAL's stakeholders' perspectives on what Georgia's early care and learning system needs to strengthen its supports for children from birth through age 13 years. In addition to the information solicited from stakeholders across the state, DECAL wanted to bring the voices and perspectives of a wider range of voices into their consideration

as they determined how to allocate their remaining CRRSA and ARP funds. Urban sought three types of voices to broaden the perspectives DECAL was hearing: people working in and operating early care and learning programs, families whose children need early care and learning services, and DECAL staff members delivering the services.

To reach a diverse and wide range of stakeholder perspectives on Georgia's early care and learning system, Urban collected data through three channels: a survey of the early care and learning workforce, a survey of DECAL staff members, and focus groups of parents and early care and learning providers. Data collection occurred between October and November 2021. In total, 6,597 people who work in or operate Georgia's early care and learning programs responded to the online workforce survey, 416 DECAL employees responded to the online DECAL staff member survey, and 83 Georgia parents or legal guardians of children from birth through age 13 in early care and learning participated in 21 focus groups.

Nine Recommendations to Support Children and Families and Strengthen Early Care and Learning in Georgia

The nine recommendations summarized below reflect what the stakeholders said. In some cases, they answered a direct question: "How should DECAL spend the extra federal dollars they received to support child care and early learning needs in Georgia?" In other cases, they responded to questions about resources they would or would not find helpful, or they told us about concerns in their experiences that we shaped into recommendations. In other words, we used our expertise to ask questions, reflect back the responses, and gather information from a wide range of people from all parts of the state, including rural communities, metropolitan Atlanta counties, and other urban counties.

Each experience and concern shared is important for DECAL to consider as it allocates resources from CRRSA, ARP, and any other child care system dollars. The pandemic, the child care crisis it exacerbated, and the additional federal funds provided to address the issues create an important opportunity to reflect on how short-term funds can address immediate needs and build a foundation for longer-term solutions. The nine recommendations summarized below reflect what the stakeholders said and are followed by specific strategies and approaches identified by stakeholders to address the needs.

1. Provide Support to Encourage More People to Become and Remain Early Childhood Educators

Parents discussed the importance of building relationships with early childhood educators¹ so they can meet their children's needs together. They noted it is hard for them and their children to adjust to repeated changes in caregivers. Parents also talked about the importance of having people who are gentle with and responsive to their children's needs. Both parents and child care providers had

suggestions for how to attract and keep early childhood educators and support them in becoming better teachers:

- Support strategies that will **improve early childhood educator pay**, such as providing supplemental pay (e.g., bonuses) and offsetting work-related expenses and time (e.g., commuting costs, lesson planning).
- Help create **more career pipelines** that will assist child care programs with finding qualified staff members, such as high school dual enrollment, child care apprenticeships that offer on-the-job training, coursework, and mentorship; and compensating early learning educators for time devoted to mentoring and overseeing volunteers participating in on-the-job learning.
- Help programs ensure **staff members are properly trained** to improve child safety by providing funding to support workers pursuing education or training; making training and professional development opportunities more accessible; paying early childhood educators for their time in professional development; and helping them earn more when they increase their knowledge or skills.

2. Focus Attention on and Provide Information about Basic Health and Safety

Parents want to know more about child care programs' health and safety practices, want more observation of child care programs, and want to know where to report concerns. They suggested the following:

- Provide more information that is easier to find about child care inspections and violations.
- Provide funds for cameras that allow parents and supervisors to see what is going on, as well as more *unannounced* DECAL visits to observe routine, rather than prepared, program practices.
- Provide a place that parents can call when their children are injured or disciplined inappropriately in a child care program.

3. Reconsider Group Sizes and Child-to-Staff Ratios

Parents, child care operators, and early childhood educators tended to offer different perspectives on group sizes and child-to-staff ratios depending on whether they were in center-based care, home-based care, or Georgia's Pre-K program. Parents tended to talk about the amount of attention their children received, and those in center-based programs tended to express the most concern about lack of attention. Suggestions for center-based programs tended to focus on reducing the number of children per educator (child-to-teacher ratios), and suggestions for Georgia's Pre-K program tended to focus on smaller class sizes. Family learning home providers, however, were more likely to suggest they could take care of more children.

4. Provide More Accessible Information to Families about Available Early Care and Learning Services

Families suggested that more of the pandemic relief funds could be used to ensure more families know about the services they qualify for (e.g., support paying for child care and services for children with disabilities) and the resources available to help them find the care they need. Parents suggested the following:

- Make information more accessible by providing information in places parents regularly visit, such as churches, public schools, farmer’s markets, and grocery stores; and reach out to expectant and new parents through OB-GYN doctor offices and hospital maternity wards.
- Improve DECAL’s messaging by using person-first, nonstigmatizing language, providing clear eligibility requirements, including fathers as a target audience, and improving information on existing websites.

5. Consider How to Support More Providers in Offering Care, Providing Longer Hours, and Participating in CAPS

Parents discussed waiting lists for care in their communities. Of the care available, they talked about how limitations in the hours offered were impacting their ability to work, and some noted providers were closing earlier since the pandemic started. Families who were receiving support paying for child care (CAPS) noted that their options are limited by which providers participate. They suggested the following:

- Incentivize providers to stay open longer; offer care on evenings, weekends, and holidays; and offer payments to transport children.
- Support providers to increase participation in CAPS.

6. Support Providers in Taking Care of Children’s Social-Emotional and Behavioral Needs

Many child care operators and educators shared concerns about how the pandemic was negatively impacting children. In focus groups, parents shared several concerns about their children’s social-emotional and behavioral needs, including many who felt that some educators do not have an understanding of developmentally appropriate child behavior and others who noticed regressions in terms of potty training and acting out because educators did not sufficiently attend to diapering and toileting. Providers shared that they want to help families and children, they need more support to do so, and access to supports to help early childhood educators remain in or return to the workforce. When asked what resources would help them, the majority of center-based providers and Georgia’s Pre-K

providers said additional classroom support with managing challenging behaviors and supporting children’s social-emotional development.

7. Consider New Benchmarks for Affordable Care in Georgia and CAPS Parent Contributions

Both parents who do and do not receive child care subsidy support from the CAPS program said it is hard to pay for child care. Everyone noted that costs in their lives were going up and affording child care was getting harder even if child care prices did not go up. Parents receiving CAPS said the program changes during the pandemic have been a “lifeline.” Families tended not to have specific suggestions, but their comments and concerns indicated the following:

- Parents with multiple children in care were struggling to pay their assessed parent contributions (before the pandemic program waived these).
- Some families not receiving CAPS were making trade-offs, including giving up work opportunities because they could not pay for child care (one family noted that the mother had been a police officer, but the cost of child care would exceed her pay so she decided to stay home).

8. Support CAPS Program Operations to Increase Responsiveness to Parents

Parents and DECAL staff members noted that the responsiveness of communications for DECAL’s subsidy program for parents with low incomes (CAPS) could be improved. Both staff members and parents understood that recent pandemic changes to serve more parents and provide higher levels of financial support to parents were straining staff members’ ability to communicate with parents as quickly as anyone would like. Parent remarks indicate that their experiences varied across the state and that prepandemic experiences were also mixed. Suggested strategies to decrease the numbers of times parents are reaching out include the following:

- Provide clearer information on the website about CAPS eligibility and the CAPS application process, including how soon to expect responses.
- Provide more information about why an application is denied.
- Mail notices sooner (some said mailings arrived after they were supposed to take a certain action).
- Improve training for application reviewers about how to interpret eligibility requirements for complex family situations.
- Understand that some parents cannot take work breaks during standard business hours to discuss their applications.

9. Offer More Grants and Supports for Financial Sustainability and Business Planning

Programs report that additional financial supports are among their greatest needs currently; they are also concerned about their sustainability and financial viability once pandemic-response funding winds down. Early care and education workers suggested that the following would be most helpful as they recuperate during the pandemic:

- Provide additional grants for programmatic opportunities.
- Help with sustainability planning.
- Help child care providers obtain nutritious food.
- Consider offering facility grants, loans, or bulk purchasing.

As DECAL considers these recommendations, they must also think about equity in distributing funds. This includes equity of distribution across the types of groups and needs and geographic equity between rural and urban areas and among metropolitan Atlanta and other urban areas. The various perspectives showed that what is best for one group is not necessarily best for all groups. In the full report, we present findings by types of child care providers, types of workforce positions, information about parents who do and do not receive subsidies, and parents who do and do not have children with disabilities. DECAL will need to consider the information provided in this study in conjunction with the data they have to determine an equitable distribution of the funds. Finally, recommendations are not the same as specific strategies. So DECAL will have to seek out their staff members' expertise and draw on existing research to determine the most effective strategies to enhance the services they already offer in supporting the needs of children, families, and early care and learning in Georgia.

Note

- ¹ Parents typically used the words “teachers” or “caregivers” to talk about the people who were directly caring for and teaching their children.

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