

FFY2025-2027 Child Care and Development Fund State Plan

Section 7: Quality Improvement Activities

The quality of child care directly affects children’s safety and healthy development while in care settings, and high-quality child care can be foundational across the lifespan. Lead Agencies may use CCDF for quality improvement activities for all children in care, not just those receiving child care subsidies. OCC will collect the most detailed Lead Agency information about quality improvement activities in annual reports instead of this Plan. Lead Agencies must report on CCDF child care quality improvement investments in three ways:

1. In this Plan, Lead Agencies will describe the types of activities supported by quality investments over the 3-year period.
2. An annual expenditure report (the ACF-696). Lead Agencies will provide data on how much CCDF funding is spent on quality activities. This report will be used to determine compliance with the required quality and infant and toddler spending requirements.
3. An annual Quality Progress Report (the ACF-218). Lead Agencies will provide a description of activities funded by quality expenditures, the measures used to evaluate its progress in improving the quality of child care programs and services within the State/Territory, and progress or barriers encountered on those measures.

In this section of the Plan, Lead Agencies will describe their quality activities needs assessment and identify the types of quality improvement activities where CCDF investments are being made using quality set-aside funds.

7.1 Quality Activities Needs Assessment

7.1.1 Needs assessment process and findings

- a. Describe the Lead Agency needs assessment process for expending CCDF funds on activities to improve the quality of child care, including the frequency of assessment, how a diverse range of parents and providers were consulted, and how their views are incorporated: *The Lead Agency has a robust Research and Policy Analysis Unit that routinely oversees and conducts programmatic and system-level evaluations of early learning in the state. The state uses data from the components of Quality Rated, Georgia’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), to assess where additional quality activities are needed. For example, Georgia uses the workforce data submitted by child care programs as part of their portfolio to assess the credential levels of the early childhood workforce and plan for supports. In addition to the portfolio, programs also receive an unannounced observation using the ERS. The data from the indicators covered in these observations reveal additional areas where improvement is needed or where quality is already well supported. Most recently, the Lead Agency, in consultation with an external expert committee, reviewed ERS data to plan and develop a Quality Nutrition and Physical Activity Endorsement. The endorsement development is underway and will be*

piloted in late 2024 into 2025. Feedback from the provider participants will be incorporated into implementing a full-scale endorsement that will be incorporated into the revision of Quality Rated and available for all Quality Rated programs. The Lead Agency's assessment process is ongoing and includes mechanisms for feedback loops between the Research and Policy Analysis Unit and program leaders. The Research and Policy Analysis Unit regularly meets with Quality Rated leaders to review data and design needed evaluations. An example of this is the ongoing work currently focusing on needed revisions for the entire Quality Rated system. Throughout 2023, the Lead Agency conducted a comprehensive review to evaluate all aspects of the current system. The Lead Agency collaborated with external partners including Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS), Child Trends, and the Urban Institute. Extensive data gathering included surveys of licensed child care programs, including family child care providers, child care centers, and school-age only providers; multiple targeted focus group sessions held virtually and in-person with various stakeholders, including child care providers (QR participating and non-QR), families (including those requiring care during non-traditional hours), CCR&R technical assistance providers, DECAL QR staff, and other concerned advocates and stakeholder groups; virtual and in-person targeted data walks to discuss outcomes from the surveys and focus groups and seek feedback at a deeper level into the results of the initial data findings. Two statewide stakeholder convenings were held in March 2024 to present the results of the data gathering and propose recommended revisions to the system – followed by a public released webinar and comment period. Provider views will be incorporated into the revisions of the system. System revisions will also include plans for ongoing continuous quality improvement of quality feedback, including regularly collecting stakeholder feedback about the rating process and system as a whole. The Lead Agency has several mechanisms for evaluating other quality activities. These include: exploring the incorporation of school-age care in center-based child care programs for QR. The purpose of this exploratory evaluation with research partners at the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSANS) was to gain a better understanding of the levels of quality in the state's school-age classrooms within center-based child care programs and to develop initiatives to better support and incorporate school-age classrooms into the revision of Quality Rated. Evaluating the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement (QRLLE). After offering two rounds of the QRLLE to child care learning centers and one to family child care learning homes, DECAL has awarded QRLLEs to 23 center-based programs and nine family homes. Before offering another round of the QRLLEs, DECAL wanted to evaluate the degree to which the QRLLE helps programs improve their language and literacy practices. An evaluation is currently underway with researchers from the Frank Porter Graham Institute of Child Development at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Researchers are observing classrooms in 10 QRLLE and non-QRLLE programs using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)-Toddler, CLASS-Pre-K, and Early Language and Literacy Environment Observation (ELLCO). Results of the evaluation are expected in summer 2024 and will include recommendations on next steps for the QRLLE. Providers going through the Quality Rated rating process receive a survey after their ERS observation to collect feedback about their experience with the observation process. Provider feedback helps identify needed improvements to the observation

process.

DECAL's Research and Policy Analysis Unit is developing a DECAL Research Agenda to direct agency research activities moving forward. This will include research questions and regular data tracking on the quality of child care in Georgia. Recognizing that business owners in the child care industry would need skills to help them become financially self-sustaining as federal coronavirus relief funds reached an end, the Lead Agency partnered with a national management consulting firm and a statewide small business development center in 2023 to create the Thriving Child Care Business Academy, an online platform of free training and resources to give owners and administrators of child care centers and family homes the knowledge and tools to enhance their financial management, leadership, marketing, and human resources management skills with the goal of making their facilities thriving businesses. The Academy's skills training includes webinars, small study groups, individual coaching, and self-study guides and videos covering dozens of business topics for which providers can receive state-approved training hours and stipends in some cases. The Lead Agency believes that the business skills training will help owners and administrators to bolster the financial strength and stability of their programs, which in turn will enhance their quality. The skills taught in the Academy are based on identified provider needs gleaned from surveys and assessments over the years by the Lead Agency, its partner organizations, and industry consultants. Most recently, the Lead Agency asked a national management consulting firm to conduct an assessment of child care providers' business training needs in 2023. It has also asked the firm to conduct an evaluation of the Thriving Child Care Business Academy at the end of its first year in fall 2024. The Lead Agency plans to use CCDF funds to continue the training program and expand its offerings during the next state plan period, including adding between three to five new trainings and associated resources. These future trainings will be informed by feedback from biannual surveys and interviews with child care business owners and stakeholders.

- b. Describe the findings of the assessment, including any findings related to needs of different populations and types of providers, and if any overarching goals for quality improvement were identified: *The Lead Agency is conducting a comprehensive review of its QRIS to inform the design and implementation of revisions to make the system more responsive to family and provider needs. DECAL contracted with the Urban Institute and Child Trends to conduct an array of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and data walks with providers, families, DECAL staff, child care resource and referral agency staff, and other stakeholders to get their perspectives on needed revisions to the system. Based on this extensive data gathering, the Urban Institute summarized six recommendations for DECAL to consider when revising Quality Rated: 1) Verify system goals and shape the system to meet them; 2) Simplify but tailor to match many strengths and diverse needs; 3) Reframe the system to reflect and support experiences; 4) Consider how and how often to verify the experiences; 5) Provide more education, more continuously about the system; and 6) Consider what feedback is for (and should be included in) Quality Rated, and where to strengthen links with other programs or systems. The review process is in the data-sharing phase where feedback from surveys, interviews, and focus groups are being presented to stakeholders for comment. In the next phase,*

those comments will be incorporated into the planning process and the Lead Agency will use the comments to draft QRIS revisions for further study and review. The needs assessment related to child care providers' business training revealed that the owners and administrators face acute financial challenges and exhibit low business acumen; the staffing crisis dominates their concerns; and a technology skills gap slows their advancement. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended that the Thriving Child Care Business Academy focus on providing resources and trainings that help providers increase revenue and decrease costs in the near- and long-term; help increase skills in recruitment and retention; and include training on technology ensuring that providers are equipped with the necessary tools and skills to optimize their operations. In September 2021, DECAL contracted with the Urban Institute to conduct stakeholder engagement with Georgia families, child care providers, the early care and education (ECE) workforce, DECAL staff, and other stakeholder groups about supports Georgia's ECE system needed. Based on the feedback, the Urban Institute shared nine recommendations with DECAL to improve Georgia's ECE system: 1) Provide support to encourage more people to become and remain early childhood educators; 2) Focus attention on and provide information about basic health and safety; 3) Reconsider group sizes and child-to-staff ratios; 4) Provide more accessible information to families about available early care and learning services; 5) Consider how to support more providers in offering care, providing longer hours, and participating in CAPS (the child care subsidy program); 6) Support providers in taking care of children's social-emotional and behavioral needs; 7) Consider new benchmarks for affordable care in Georgia and CAPS parent contributions; 8) Support CAPS program operations to increase responsiveness to parents; and 9) Offer more grants and supports for financial sustainability and business planning. DECAL used this feedback to inform how the agency allocated federal COVID-19 relief funding and continues to reference the results to inform needed improvements to Georgia's ECE system.

7.2 Use of Quality Set-Aside Funds

Lead Agencies must use a portion of their CCDF expenditures for activities designed to improve the quality of child care services and to increase parental options for and access to high-quality child care. They must use the quality set-aside funds on at least one of 10 activities described in CCDF and the quality activities must be aligned with a Statewide or Territory-wide assessment of the State's or Territory's need to carry out such services and care.

7.2.1 Quality Improvement Activities

- a. Describe how the Lead Agency will make its Quality Progress Report (ACF – 218) and expenditure reports, available to the public. Provide a link if available. <https://www.decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/GAQualityProgressReportFY2023.pdf>
- b. Identify Lead Agency plans, if any, to spend CCDF funds for each of the following quality improvement activities. If an activity is checked “yes”, describe the Lead Agency's current and/or future plans for this activity.

- i. Supporting the training and professional development of the child care workforce, including birth to five and school-age providers.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *The Georgia Training Approval (GTA) System oversees approval of all trainings offered to providers. When submitting trainings for approval, trainers must indicate the topic areas covered in each training, goals/objectives for the training, competencies that will be addressed, and a scope and sequence of content delivery. Trainers are also required to provide information about relevant research used to inform trainings in these areas. Additionally, GTA approves trainers with relevant experience and education in key “specialty areas” to offer trainings in those areas. Specialty areas include Health and Safety; Foods and Nutrition; School-Age Care; Special Needs and Inclusion; Administrative Management of Programs; and Social Work, Mental Health, and Family Services. Trainings in specialty areas are also reviewed to ensure alignment with state requirements specific to each area. Licensing regulations specify that all staff working in licensed programs must complete at least 10 hours of GTA approved training annually. Through GTA, the Lead Agency can ensure the quality and appropriateness of trainings provided to the workforce. The Lead Agency also maintains a strong relationship with GTA approved trainers providing support and technical assistance to trainers to continue to support quality of trainings. Through this network of support, the Lead Agency can also guide trainers to topic areas that are priorities for the agency. Moving forward, two focus areas for increasing the supply and quality of training will be school age and language/literacy. To increase the supply and quality of school-age trainings, the Lead Agency will work with state experts in school-age programming to support trainers to understand how to develop and deliver training specific to the needs of school-age programs. This work will include supporting trainers in understanding the Georgia After School and Youth Development Standards and aligning their trainings with the standards. Further, the Lead Agency will begin a comprehensive review of all language and literacy trainings approved through GTA to ensure they align with the latest knowledge on the science of reading. Updates to the Georgia Professional Development System will also be made to ensure users are able to easily locate and register for language and literacy trainings. Further, the Lead Agency will continue to expand its Online Learning Library Initiative (OLLI) to add three to five additional trainings on language and literacy as well as three to five additional trainings for school-age professionals. The Lead Agency’s Infant Toddler, Inclusion and Behavior Support, and Pre-K Specialists provide professional learning opportunities. There is a current focus on training on the Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social Emotional Competence of Infants and Young*

Children (Pyramid Model) to teachers and administrators in child care and Pre-K programs across the state. The Pyramid Model provides a research-based framework of practices that equip teachers with strategies to prevent challenging behaviors and focus on building children's social-emotional competence. By building these skills, educators have an increased capacity to appropriately manage persistent challenging behavior, thereby reducing the likelihood of preschool suspension and expulsion. Professional Learning Communities of directors and teachers are supported by a team of Infant Toddler, Pre-K, and Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialists. The Lead Agency also provides training to early learning technical college faculty on how to embed the Pyramid Model framework into their course curriculum to be taught to students and prospective early learning educators. These efforts have been funded with recovery act (ARPA) funding in the current year but will be funded with CCDF dollars moving forward. The Lead Agency plans to provide nine cohorts of the training series available for infant and toddler, preschool, Pre-K, and family child care providers over the next three years. As mentioned in section 4.54, the Lead Agency provides an inclusion training series for early learning professionals focusing on understanding the importance of inclusion, the laws that support children with disabilities, and strategies to implement inclusive practices in early learning environments. This series was designed to increase access to quality child care for children with disabilities and their families by increasing educators' understanding of inclusion and confidence in providing an inclusive environment for children with disabilities. The Lead Agency plans to train 500 educators across the next three years. The Inclusion and Behavior Support program provides a mini-grant to early learning professionals who would benefit from technical assistance to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in their care. Professionals receive coaching from an Inclusion and Behavior Support Specialist, who assists the professional in implementing inclusive practices, identifying materials, equipment, or training needed to support the child's development and inclusion in the program. The Lead Agency plans to fund at least 75 mini-grants over the next three years. As described in section 4.54, the Lead Agency's Infant and Toddler Program plans to fund three additional cohorts of the LITTLE (Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language Rich Environments) with center-based and family child care providers over the next three years. The Infant and Toddler Program will continue coaching Infant and Toddler Programs referred by the child care resource and referral agencies across the state to increase program quality as it relates to language development, literacy, responsive caregiving, and social emotional learning practices. The Infant and Toddler Program also plans to continue the activity training series to train 150 teachers a year for the next three years. The Lead Agency's Child and Family Development Program provides

training and resources on developmental milestones and developmental monitoring for child care professionals using the CDC's Learn the Signs, Act Early initiative and works with a team of Family Peer Ambassadors to provide information and resources on child development to families and child care providers within their community. The Lead Agency plans to recruit and train 20 Family Peer Ambassadors per year across the next three years. The Lead Agency plans to use CCDF funds to continue the Thriving Child Care Business Academy online training platform for child care business owners and administrators and expand its offerings during the next state plan period, including adding between three and five new trainings and associated resources. These future trainings will be informed by feedback from biannual surveys and interviews with child care business owners and stakeholders.

- ii. Developing, maintaining, or implementing early learning and developmental guidelines.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *As described in Section 6.3, the Lead Agency provides a training series and resources for using the GELDS to inform instruction. Moving forward, the Lead Agency will have two key priority areas for continued use of the GELDS. First, the GELDS trainings will be expanded. Existing trainings are currently being revised, and training topics related to the GELDS will be increased. Second, based on recommendations from the previously described Workforce Taskforce, the Lead Agency will begin reviewing the existing standards to determine if revisions are needed, especially in supporting dual language learners, the science of reading, supporting children with disabilities, and supporting school age children.*

- iii. Developing, implementing, or enhancing a quality improvement system.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *Georgia's primary mechanism for measuring quality is Quality Rated, the state's quality rating and improvement system, which launched in 2012. Programs are assigned a one-, two-, or three-star rating based on five standards submitted via an electronic portfolio and an independent observation using the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) family of instruments. The portfolio measures structural quality, including standards for teacher and director qualifications, family engagement, nutrition and health, intentional teaching practices, and ratios. A team of assessors conducts the ERS observations and another team scores portfolios and assigns ratings. Ratings are valid for three years, at which time the rating process*

is repeated. Currently, more than 2,800 providers are Quality Rated including 72% of licensed child care centers and 47% of family child care homes. CCDF providers who are eligible for a rating are required to be rated or in the process of earning a rating.

DECAL has contracted with external research partners at Child Trends and the Urban Institute to engage in the comprehensive review of Quality Rated. Extensive data-gathering activities occurred during 2023 with data analysis and stakeholder convenings planned for 2024, leading to proposed revisions to the entire QR system. Anticipated new system development will occur in 2025 with an anticipated launch date of January 2026 for providers to begin participating in the new system. Current investment costs also include developing a new IT application that will be fully integrated with other Lead Agency programs in the ongoing upgrade of DECAL's Child Care Solution. To improve customer service and response time, the Lead Agency has contracted with IT partners to enhance the functionality of the Quality Rated HelpDesk into a fully functional ticketing Call Contact Center with automated response and AI generated knowledge base.

- iv. Improving the supply and quality of child care services for infants and toddlers.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *To help improve the quality of child care services for infants and toddlers, Quality Rated has revised the on-site assessment component of the rating to specify that all centers offering infant and toddler care will automatically have at least one infant and one toddler room assessed rather than following the author's guidelines of assessing 1/3 of each ITERS (infant/toddler environment rating scale) age group. This change will allow providers to receive feedback on the quality of their environment for infants and toddlers instead of having just one ITERS assessment conducted on the randomly selected infant or toddler classroom. As described in section 4.5.4 b, the Lead Agency provides coaching and training to infant and toddler teachers, administrators, and family child care learning home providers serving infants and toddlers on topics including responsive caregiving, early literacy and developmentally appropriate practices, developmental milestones and monitoring, family engagement, and promoting strong social emotional development in infants and toddlers across several initiatives. Through our partnership with the child care resource and referral agencies, infant and toddler teachers will continue to receive coaching on responsive caregiving, early language and literacy development, and social-emotional development from Infant Toddler Specialists across the next three years. The Lead Agency plans to continue to provide professional development for early learning professionals caring for infants and toddlers through our LITTLE grant by funding three new child care learning center cohorts of 15 programs each and three new family child care learning home provider cohorts of 10 providers for the LITTLE grant over the next three years. The agency plans to continue*

the Infant and Toddler Activity Training Series to 150 teachers a year for the next three years. The agency provides mental health training and technical assistance to increase the quality of care, early identification of, and response to infants and toddlers who have experienced trauma through the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health pilot.

- v. Establishing or expanding a statewide system of CCR&R services.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *The Lead Agency currently has a CCR&R network composed of six regional CCR&Rs across the state. During the next state plan period, the CCR&Rs will continue their work of supporting providers to meet quality standards. Additionally, the Lead Agency will explore avenues for leveraging CCR&Rs as regional hubs to support key focus areas, including workforce development, credential attainment, and increasing the supply of high-quality care for target audiences, such as infants and toddlers or children with disabilities. See Section 8.3 for additional information.*

- vi. Facilitating compliance with Lead Agency child care licensing, monitoring, inspection and health and safety standards.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *The Lead Agency has child care licensing consultants that help facilitate compliance with child care licensing, monitoring, inspection and health and safety standards. These staff are regionally based and work in supporting these initiatives through a variety of capacities Regionally, child care licensing consultants are conducting annual unannounced licensing and monitoring visits to assess for compliance. In addition, DECAL also has specialized staff in identified units that also support in various roles. The Special Investigations Unit staff are responsible for the extreme incident investigations and monitoring of compliance for child care programs around rule violations as a result of those. The Applicant Services Unit staff are responsible for the initial licensing of child care programs to ensure compliance with health and safety standards and licensing requirements, prior to being given a license to operate., The Technical Assistance Unit staff are responsible for assisting licensed programs in areas of technical assistance to help support compliance around rules and regulations, health and safety standards, training, and proven best practices for program operation. The Exemption Unit staff are responsible for the inspection and oversight of exempt and informal child care programs receiving CCDF funds, ensuring compliance with health and safety standards.*

- vii. Evaluating and assessing the quality and effectiveness of child care services within the State/Territory.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *DECAL assesses child care quality through Quality Rated, the state's quality rating and improvement system, which assigns ratings up to three stars based on observations using the ERS family of instruments and scoring a portfolio made up of five standards.*

viii. Accreditation support.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments.

Supporting State/Territory or local efforts to develop high-quality program standards relating to health, mental health, nutrition, physical activity, and physical development.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *Using \$87,500 from the United Way of Greater Atlanta, the Lead Agency will explore developing a Nutrition and Physical Activity Endorsement to Quality Rated. Pilot development is under way and includes a pre- and post-training assessment using Go NAPSACC (Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care), conducted with providers as an interview by DECAL Nutrition and Quality Rated staff. Nutrition and physical activity tool-kit materials and participation stipends will be made available to pilot participants. Participants will engage in self-assessment to identify specific goals and draft an action plan focused on three areas of improvement. They will attend training workshops and receive targeted TA tailored to each participant. The pilot will help determine the scalability of a Nutrition and Physical Activity Endorsement and the role this may play in the revision of Quality Rated.*

ix. Other activities determined by the Lead Agency to improve the quality of child care services and the measurement of outcomes related to improved provider preparedness, child safety, child well-being, or kindergarten entry.

No plans to spend in this category of activities at this time.

Yes. If yes, describe current and future investments. *The Lead Agency will continue to provide a Pre-K Summer Transition Program focused on language and literacy, math, and social-emotional development to support school readiness. The program is designed to support students who need additional academic support over the summer. The Pre-K Summer Transition Program will continue to run for five weeks during June and July and is a full-day instructional program. Currently, there are 324 Rising Kindergarten classes that support more than 4,500 students and is offered in 62 counties in Georgia. The Lead Agency is currently supporting an Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) pilot project to increase child care programs, staff, and family access to mental health resources and services through funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Currently, CCDF funding supports 12 child care sites receiving IECMHC services in the Macon,*

Savannah, and metro Atlanta areas and will cover the evaluation of the project. The project evaluation will inform whether the IECMHC pilot will be expanded.