



**Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning**

BRIGHT FROM THE START

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Governor

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**DECAL Announces Three Winners for
2024-2025 Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year**

Winners Represent Programs in Atlanta, Marietta, and Smyrna

ATLANTA, Ga., (December 13, 2024) – The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning have named the three winners of Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for 2024-2025. The program recognizes outstanding early education teachers of children ages birth to preschool with an Infant Teacher of the Year (0-15 months), Toddler Teacher of the Year (15-36 months), and Preschool Teacher of the Year (36-48 months).

The winner in the infant category is Zina Hadjaz from The Quadrilingual Academy in Smyrna. In the toddler category, the winner is Laura Silva from My Little Geniuses Daycare in Marietta. The winner in the preschool category is Samantha Mullins from Our House at Central in Atlanta.

The Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning awards each winner \$3,000 for her personal use, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover, and up to \$2,500 for her 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 of the Year program through modeling effective classroom practices and public speaking appearances.

Childcare program directors from across the state nominate teachers through an online application. Winners are selected from six finalists based on a classroom observation and an interview with a panel of early childhood experts.

"Child care teachers working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are not babysitters," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "These early childhood educators are professionals who play a crucial role in building a strong foundation for children's academic, physical, and social growth. These Early Childhood Educators of the Year awards honor teachers who demonstrate excellence in caring for Georgia's youngest learners in child care settings. Their dedication to providing high-quality care and early education is shaping the future of our children, communities, and state."

Among other requirements, 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 program that is in good standing with all programs administered by DECAL. They also must have a minimum of three years of experience as a lead teacher and plan to continue as a lead teacher in the 2024-2025 school year.

"We are excited to continue this special recognition of Georgia's Early Childhood Educators of the Year for the fourth consecutive year," said Laura Wagner, Executive Director of the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning. "The care young children receive in their early years is critical in shaping their brain development and laying the groundwork for their overall health and wellbeing. Competent, qualified, professional early childhood educators are key in guiding them on a successful journey toward 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.decal.ga.gov.