DECAL KOALA
Kids Online Administrative Licensing Application

QUALITY™ RATED CHILD CARE

NASCIO 2018 State IT Recognition Awards

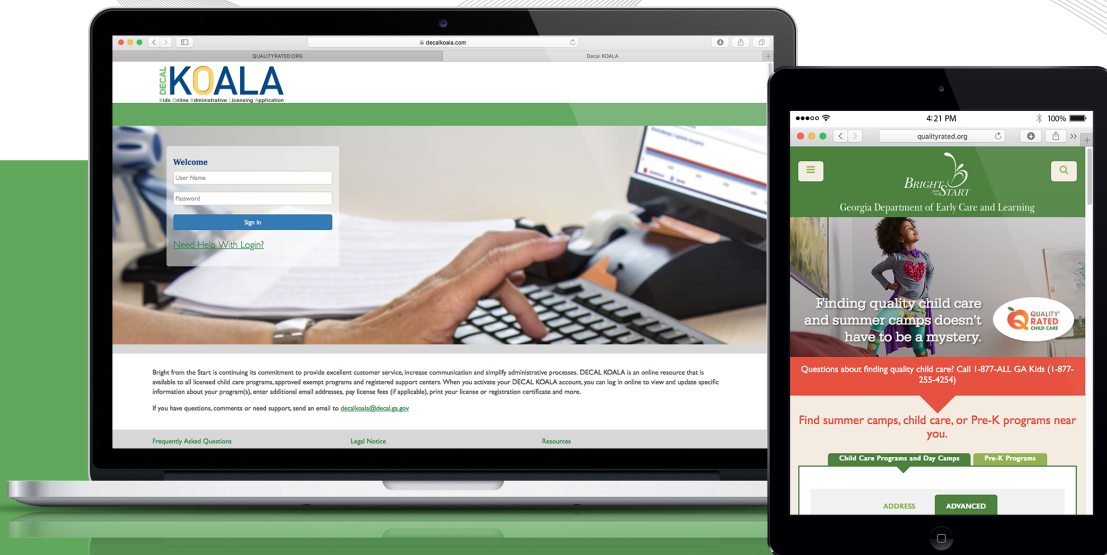**Title:** KOALA Provider Self-Service and QualityRated.org

Category: Digital Government – Government to Business

State: Georgia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the state agency responsible for meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families, the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) relies on an integrated suite of custom apps, known as KOALA, to manage its various operations. The most recent enhancement, KOALA Provider Self-Service, is a web-based, mobile-ready app allowing child care providers to perform many self-service functions. Online self-service options make it easier for child care providers to comply with statutory and regulatory requirements. They also automate and streamline workloads for DECAL workers.

The accompanying Quality Rated website at **http://qualityrated.org** immediately displays operational data that child care providers update themselves using the KOALA Provider Self-Service app. The website makes it quick and easy for parents to search for providers near them, compare service offerings from multiple providers and access licensing information about providers.

KOALA Provider Self-Service has significantly streamlined provider interactions with DECAL. With 98 percent of providers now paying their license fees online or with their mobile devices, collections through the app totaled $672,000 in 2017. Providers also use the app to submit and track their Comprehensive Background Check applications and to print license certificates. Offering providers a self-service option for criminal background checks not only makes the process easier for them, it has helped DECAL avoid $690,000 in administrative costs.
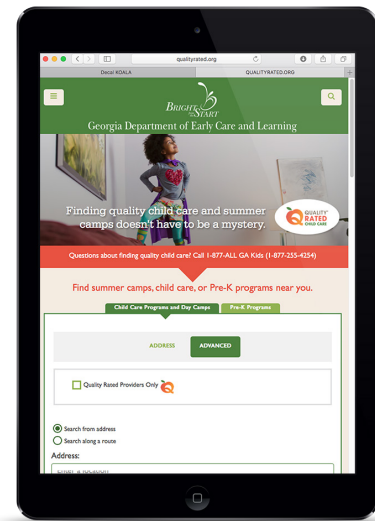
The app keeps providers informed about the status of their interactions with DECAL in real-time through online updates and automated emails. The app generated over 325,000 emails to providers in 2017.

DECAL has been recognized by one of the nation's leading experts in early childhood development for its use of research data to inform program and policy decisions, and DECAL relies on its suite of KOALA apps to collect and analyze data relating to child care and early education needs.

PROJECT NARRATIVE: CONCEPT

The Department of Early Care and Learning **(DECAL, www.decal.ga.gov)** is responsible for meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families. It administers Georgia's nationally recognized Pre-K Program, licenses child care centers and home-based child care, administers child care and development funds and oversees federal nutrition programs in Georgia. The department houses the Head Start State Collaboration Office, distributes federal funding to enhance the quality and availability of child care and works collaboratively with child care resource and referral agencies and organizations throughout Georgia.

To fulfill its responsibilities, DECAL:

- Processes over 39,000 criminal background checks annually.

- Collects annual license fees from over 4,700 child care providers.

- Processes over 400 enforcement actions annually.

- Maintains operational data for over 12,000 licensed and exempt child care providers.

DECAL implemented an integrated suite of custom apps, known as KOALA (Kids Online Administrative Licensing Application), to manage its various operations and successfully meet its legislative mandates. The most recent enhancement, KOALA Provider Self-Service, is a web-based, mobile-ready app allowing child care providers to perform many self-service functions. The app makes it easier for providers to comply with statutory and regulatory requirements while automating and streamlining workloads for DECAL workers.

KOALA Provider Self-Service makes it possible for providers to:

- Pay license fees and fines online.

- Print license certificates.

- Submit, track and process Comprehensive Background Check applications.

- Update their own operational data.

KOALA also includes:

- **QualityRated.org –** a web-based, mobile-ready website at **http://qualityrated.org** that provides licensing information to families through innovative search features.

- **KOALA Time –** a scheduling and time-tracking client app that runs on laptops and is used by child care licensing consultants to schedule provider visits.

- **KOALA Visits –** a client app that runs on laptops and allows child care licensing consultants to perform monitoring visits and create reports.

- **KOALA Outback –** an internal web app for managing child care licensing functions and those of other DECAL programs.

KOALA Time and KOALA Visits can run asynchronously in the field and update DECAL's licensing database whenever a secure internet connection is available.

PROJECT NARRATIVE: SIGNIFICANCE

As a web-based, mobile-ready app for child care providers that also incorporates responsive design technology, KOALA Provider Self-Service facilitates the exchange of data between providers and DECAL through uniform data collection and ease of data entry. KOALA Provider Self-Service tightly integrates with DECAL's SQL Server licensing database and other DECAL programs and resources, including QualityRated.org, Georgia's Pre-K Program and the Georgia Professional Development System, which allows early childhood educators to search and register for professional development training.

Providers receive real-time status updates through the app about criminal background checks, license fees and enforcement fines.

Using the app, providers can also update their operational data themselves, and the changes are immediately available to parents on the Quality Rated website at **http://qualityrated.org**. The website offers several innovative features, such as the ability to:

- Search for child care providers along a specific route.

- Compare up to six child care providers at a time.

- Export the entire licensing database to an Excel file using various filters.

Operating efficiencies have been significantly improved through streamlined business processes.

Annual planning – It previously took DECAL consultants at least two weeks using large Excel spreadsheets to plan visits for the year. KOALA has automated the process, which now takes less than one day.

Licensing visit metric reports – Numerous metric reports can be generated, thereby allowing consultants and their managers to better understand how their time in the field is spent. This functionality has greatly assisted in balancing workloads across the state.

Table-driven rules – Before KOALA Visits was developed, over 900 licensing rules had to be hardcoded into a visit tool that was used by field consultants. Rules are now table-driven and include effective dates. A tool on DECAL's website makes it easy for providers to look up licensing rules.

Criminal background checks – This entire business process has been streamlined through online applications, with web services connecting the Georgia Child Abuse Registry to email notifications and workflow automation.

Affirmation/verification of lawful presence – KOALA Outback has centralized this function for the Pre-K, Quality Rated and Licensing programs. Providers select their residency status online, and a series of workflow processes are automatically triggered to determine if they are eligible for a public benefit.

Enforcement action generation and processing – Enforcement actions are triggered through repeat violations in KOALA Visits. This workflow has been automated, and providers can pay fines online.

KOALA Provider Self-Service has significantly streamlined provider interactions with DECAL. Annual license fees can be processed online, and providers can print their licenses rather than wait for licenses to be delivered through the U.S. Postal Service. The payment of license fees online or with mobile devices has steadily increased to over 98 percent of providers since the launch of KOALA Provider Self-Service. Enforcement fines can also be processed online rather than through traditional mail, and over 90 percent of criminal background checks are now processed online.

By updating their operating data through DECAL's self-service app, providers can immediately display to the public such details as services offered, vacancies, rates and other information about their center or home on the Quality Rated website.

One of the most important benefits of KOALA Provider Self-Service is keeping providers informed about the status of their interactions with DECAL through online updates and automated emails. In 2017, over 325,000 emails were generated through the app, greatly reducing telephone and traditional mail usage.

DECAL collected $672,000 in license fees and enforcement fines through KOALA Provider Self-Service in 2017. In addition, DECAL estimates the financial savings from automating criminal background checks at $690,000, which is the amount it would have cost staff to manually process criminal background checks and keep providers and prospective child care employees informed about their status.

By automating many of DECAL's business processes, staff with the Child Care Licensing Division have been able to focus greater attention on higher quality visits in support of their core mission to ensure children are in a healthy and safe environment.

Kelly Maxwell, Ph.D., offered the following statement about DECAL's use of innovative technologies to better serve Georgia's children and child care service providers. Dr. Maxwell is the senior research scientist and co-director for early childhood development at Child Trends in Chapel Hill, N.C.

"As someone who has worked with the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning for over 10 years, I have been impressed by the way DECAL intentionally uses research and data for program and policy decisions. I have worked with states throughout my 20-plus years as an early childhood researcher and know that DECAL is special in the quality and quantity of data it has. By having an internal IT development staff that works closely with program staff, they are able not only to design data systems that meet the agency's needs but also revise the systems in a timely manner to meet changing agency priorities. As part of a recent collaborative research project with DECAL, our Child Trends team utilized KOALA data as part of a broader evaluation. We were impressed with the quality of data and the skill with which DECAL team members were able to access and analyze it. As external research partners, we rely on DECAL's data, like KOALA, to help address the agency's questions, and we rely on the exceptional expertise of program staff, research staff and IT/data system staff to help ensure that we have the appropriate data, understand what it means and accurately interpret findings. I know that DECAL staff rely on data – and the agency's IT/data system staff – even more than we do."