



Written Statement for the Record

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Before the

**United States Senate  Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry**

Good morning Chairman Stabenow, Ranking Member Cochran, and Members of the Committee. My name is Scott Clements and I am the Director of the Offices of Child Nutrition and Healthy Schools for the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). On behalf of State Superintendent Wright, the Mississippi State Board of Education, the Office of Child Nutrition, and the thousands of food service employees across our state, it is a pleasure to be here today and to have the opportunity to discuss a few Mississippi initiatives designed to improve school meals.

The first initiative I would like to present is our Statewide Purchasing Cooperative, the first Child Nutrition statewide purchasing entity in the nation. This project began in 1992 as an effort to both lower costs and simplify procurement for school districts.

The majority of school districts in Mississippi have only a small number of schools, with most in rural areas. As such, both product prices and delivery fees were high due to their limited buying power. However, by pooling the buying power of almost every school in the state, we are able to utilize the economies of scale inherent with large volume purchasing. This allows us to provide significant savings to participating organizations.

Our office issues bids for food and related supplies used in Child Nutrition programs across the state. We administer contracts in excess of \$130 million per year. Due to the high volume of purchases, we are able to negotiate prices directly with manufacturers for some items and reduce costs even further.

Currently, the Cooperative has 183 member organizations representing nearly 1,000 delivery sites. The majority of the participating organizations are public schools with all but two districts in the state participating. Additional members include a number of Head Start organizations, non-public schools, and government agencies that participate in the National School Lunch Program.

We are not allowed to use USDA State Administrative Expense Funds to support this program. Instead, the Cooperative is self-funded. We charge participants about half a penny (\$.0056) per lunch served to pay for staff, office space, equipment, and travel expenses.

Our office is also responsible for the ordering and distribution of over \$16 million in USDA donated foods. Through our Purchasing Cooperative, we have a statewide delivery system for food already in place. This allows us to distribute USDA Foods for a minimal fee, providing further cost savings for Mississippi schools.

We have also made use of both the buying power and distribution network of our Purchasing Cooperative to support Farm to School at the state level. Even though Mississippi is an agriculture-based state, schools face many challenges implementing Farm to School programs. Many of our state's most abundant crops, such as cotton and soybeans, simply cannot be used in school cafeterias. Further, the

harvest season for many crops is during the summer months, when school is not in session.

To assist both Mississippi schools and farmers we have worked with the DOD and the Mississippi Department of Agriculture since 2002 to bring locally grown products to schools throughout the state. During school year 2014-2015, over \$1,000,000 of locally grown produce will be delivered to Mississippi schools. Some of the items scheduled for delivery to schools include watermelons, tomatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, blueberries, and broccoli.

Another initiative of our office was to assist schools in meeting the new sodium requirements for school meals. When first announced, products simply were not available to allow schools to meet the new standards while serving appetizing meals and maintaining student participation.

The buying power of the Purchasing Cooperative allowed us to partner with a chef from the Culinary Institute of America and a national food manufacturer to reduce sodium in school meals. We created three no sodium spice blends (Creole, Southwest, and Italian) for use in recipes in child nutrition programs. These spice blends became available in 2013. We also developed 50 standardized low sodium recipes to assist schools in using these no-sodium alternatives. These spice blends are now available from the manufacturer to all schools in the United States.

I would like to discuss another initiative regarding school recipes and menus. In 1996, our office provided schools with a recipe and menu portfolio, MS Cycles. This portfolio assisted schools in meeting USDA nutrition standards for school meals through a system of standardized recipes and sample menus. An update, MS Cycles II, was completed in 2005 to incorporate new recipes and reflect changes in ingredients. However, the nutrition standards proposed in the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, made further revisions impractical. The complex menu planning requirements, multi-year implementation timelines, and implementation of weighted averages for nutritional analyses made further development of preplanned menus with multiple food choices, as provided by MS Cycles I and II, impossible.

It was the determination of the Office of Child Nutrition that many Mississippi schools would not have the ability and resources to perform the complex menu planning required by the new USDA regulations. Further, USDA had not provided any resources to assist with meeting the new requirements.

In response, a Mississippi taskforce was assembled in 2010 to create a new menu planning tool and recipes. The resulting product is *Mississippi Recipes for Success* (MRS), consisting of a six manual set and an online version of the program. Breakfast and lunch menu planning matrices were created for school districts to develop appealing, customized weekly menus for all age/grade groups in compliance with USDA nutrition standards. All MRS recipes use only ingredients

available from the Purchasing Cooperative, USDA Foods, and the DOD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. This guarantees menus are in compliance with nutrition standards while simplifying Administrative Reviews conducted by our office as required by USDA.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before this Committee. I would be pleased to answer any questions or provide additional information as needed.