

Statement for the Record
Before the
House Committee on Education and Workforce, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and
Secondary Education
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"Child Nutrition Assistance: Looking at the Cost of Compliance for States and Schools"

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Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Fudge, committee members, and my fellow distinguished panelists; I am honored to have the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Donna Martin and I am the Director of the School Nutrition Program for Burke County Public Schools in Georgia. Our program serves 5 schools, and offers breakfast in the classroom and grab-and-go breakfast, lunch, after school snack, supper, the fresh fruit and vegetable grant and the summer feeding program. Our district, located near Augusta, is mostly rural and has a free and reduced percentage rate of 100%. We operate under the Community Eligibility Provision.

I first entered the school nutrition field nearly 25 years ago, after becoming a registered dietitian and working in pediatrics. It is not simply serving meals and counting money. It is conducting nutrition education with students, faculty and parents, planning menus that meet federal nutrition guidelines, working with computer systems to master your point of sale programs, production records, training and supervising a staff, managing a 4 million dollar budget, writing specifications for equipment, and placing bids for food. It means essentially running a restaurant, a PR agency and a classroom all while under a tight budget with minimal time and resources. Being a food service director today is a *ton* of work and I think it is the best job on earth!

Burke County schools serve nearly 4,000 meals a day and have a lunch participation rate of 89 percent and a breakfast participation rate of 78%. We have not seen a decrease in our participation rates based on the new standards. We started moving to healthier foods in our district even before the new standards were required and you can bet that I was nervous, but we did it gradually by introducing rolls with 25% whole wheat flour. If you have ever been to Georgia, you know we take our fried chicken, biscuits and grits incredibly seriously. So we went to work and developed a delicious baked herb chicken and featured locally grown whole grain grits that are absolutely awesome. And yes – we have whole grain biscuits – and yes, our kids eat them! I'm also incredibly proud of our Farm to School Program that provides farm fresh produce to our students, including delicious Georgia peaches and blueberries that hopefully

you had the opportunity to enjoy today. Taste those and tell me if you think a student would throw any of those away! Instead they are always wishing they were getting more than a half cup serving of them. We found that when we started offering local fresh fruits and vegetables like collards, cabbage, corn on the cob, broccoli, carrots, berries, melons, peaches, our consumption rates doubled.

I'm also proud of how we have met the needs of our community. When our high school football coach came to me with concerns about his players not getting the fuel they need to be successful – we worked together to provide dinner after practices to make sure that they were nourished. As a registered dietitian, it brought me great joy to know that they weren't just filling up on empty calories, but nutritious foods that were good for them. I also think it's important to note that we started this program in 2010. The notion that high school athletes only started to get hungry after updated nutrition standards went into effect in 2012 is false. They were hungry because they did not have access to food after school – and that was the case before and after the standards.

When it comes to access to summer meals for kids – our rural community faced challenges in delivering meals – like many communities do around the country. Burke County is 836 square miles of land but only has 22,000 residents. Traditional feeding sites simply did not meet the needs of our community. I worked with my district and our community to find solutions and we now run 15 bus routes and over 100 stops all over the county feeding over 2,500 children for eight weeks during the summer. We are getting healthy foods to kids when they need it, and also providing employment for my staff during the summer. In communities like ours, that matters.

Now that I've shared some of the highlights of our program, you're probably wondering "what is the cost of running a successful program?" We are a fiscally sound program because we offer fresh fruits and vegetables that are in season, we work with our farmers to provide local fruits and vegetables at very competitive prices and coupled with the long shelf life of those products, we have very little spoilage. We use our commodity dollars very wisely to purchase food that helps stretch our food dollars. We also do a lot of scratch cooking which helps control the food cost and the sodium content of the food. I am not here today to tell you that it is easy, but I am here to tell you that it is possible to meet nutrition standards and be financially solvent. We could do better for our students if reimbursement was increased to accommodate rising food costs and if there was supplemental funding for equipment and training needs, but we would do worse for them if we lowered the bar to accommodate the costs by not serving them what they need to grow and achieve.

In closing, I thank each of you for taking the time to listen to our story from Burke County schools and for your commitment to students around the country through child nutrition programs. I respectfully ask each of you to keep our children's best interests in mind as you move forward with the reauthorization of child nutrition programs that impact so many children across the country. We demand the best of our schools and for our students in every other part of the campus – and our cafeteria should be no different. Thank you once again Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Fudge and committee members. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.