



**For Immediate Release**

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## **State Farm<sup>®</sup> Contributes \$1.5 Million to Mississippi's Dropout Prevention Effort**

*Includes youth and community summits in January and public awareness campaign*

JACKSON, Miss., October 25, 2007 – The Public Education Forum of Mississippi today announced a \$1.5 million grant from State Farm Insurance Companies that will fund a statewide awareness campaign to support the Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE) dropout prevention initiatives.

“Nearly a third of our high school students drop out every year. With this effort, we seek to not only raise awareness but drive the necessary change to improve graduation rates,” said State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds, who underscored the state's goal of reducing the dropout rate by 50 percent by 2011-2012.

“Given the Superintendent's leadership and the Public Education Forum's support, our hope is to not only produce more graduates, but have them better prepared to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. For Mississippi, it can mean an even stronger workforce and a more vibrant economy for years to come,” said Mike Fernandez, vice president of public affairs for State Farm.

“Dire statistics about dropouts translate into real problems for all Mississippians,” said Blake Wilson, president of the Mississippi Economic Council and the Public Education Forum, which is a partnering organization with MEC. “As early as 2004, Mississippi business leaders began to consider the consequences to our economy. State Farm's outstanding leadership enables this important program to leap from concept to reality.”

“This campaign will help everyone better understand that we pay a high price in terms of lost potential. An educated workforce is the first building block of economic development and is essential to our long-term prosperity,” added Cynthia McMillian, vice president of Foundation Programs for the Public Education Forum.

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As part of the effort announced today, the MDE will host two statewide summits devoted to the issue of reducing high school dropouts, one that will gather input directly from students and another that will seek advice and support from educators, community leaders and business. The effort also will include a public education media campaign to create awareness of the challenges associated with high dropout rates.

Bounds said that all of the state's school districts are developing their own localized dropout prevention plans and will coordinate their efforts with the education department's Office of Dropout Prevention. Studies show that the dropout problem impacts every part of society, with dropouts being almost four times more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed and five times more likely to be on welfare. Experts say that dropouts are more likely than their peers to live in poverty, go to prison, be on death row and be single parents whose own children drop out of high school.

"State Farm has long been an advocate of public education, and our company's leadership is engaged in supporting efforts to improve student achievement," said Fernandez. "What makes this Mississippi effort important and special is the collaboration between educators, community leaders and business, and the focus on achieving a very specific aim: improving graduation rates."

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**Public Education Forum of Mississippi** began in 1989 with the belief that Mississippi's economic future depended on a solid foundation of a strong viable public education system. It provides non-partisan support for the development of long-term education policies and has a strong commitment to excellence for Mississippi's public schools. The Forum is a cooperating partner of the Mississippi Economic Council, which is the state's Chamber of Commerce, and is comprised of business leaders and community leaders committed to education.

**Mississippi Department of Education (MDE)** Office of Drop-Out Prevention is the organization responsible for the administration of Mississippi's statewide dropout prevention program. MDE's goal is to reduce the state dropout rate by 50% by 2011-2012.

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