**Letter of Intent: Improving School Food Procurement in the US**

Food security programs and nutrition assistance programs are integral to the U.S. social safety net. A critical role is played by public K-12 schools providing breakfasts and lunches to ensure that students have access to balanced, nutritious food, which can be critical in supporting physical health and cognitive development. For many students, particularly those from low-income families, school meals may be the most consistent source of nutrition they receive. Studies link adequate nutrition to improved concentration, behavior, and energy levels in the classroom, all of which contribute to better academic outcomes.

Despite their importance, the school food procurement decisions remain poorly understood. This research seeks to better understand school food procurement decisions and to identify best practices that allow schools to source their products at significantly lower costs. The research engages in two steps. The first is to build a centralized procurement website that collects data on school’s procurement processes and their contracts with food vendors. The second, and building on the data, is an information intervention that informs schools about the procurement decisions and contracts of neighboring school districts. We use a randomized control trial to document how the information intervention affects procurement process, prices, quantities as well as cognitive and physical student outcomes.

**Policy relevance:** The policy relevance of this research cannot be overstated. As stipulated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), school meals need to meet reasonable nutrition standards, should be accessible to low-income students, ideally by sourced from local foods. At the same time school food procurement is expensive, **absorbing X$** in federal and state funding per year. To meet these important goals amidst funding shortfalls and growing budget deficits across jurisdiction, creative solutions need to be found to lower the costs. Our data platform provides this opportunity by allowing schools to effectively price-shop over vendors in their local market.

We believe there are significant cost savings from price shopping**. In Figure 1** below, we show a distribution of food prices over time and also across school districts based on first collected data.

**Study design:** To quantify the impact of access to the price comparison platform on procurement outcomes and student outcomes, we envision to adopt a randomization. We will collect school food procurement data through freedom of information acts. We have started this process in California in the Los Angeles Area and continue to do that for several other metropolitan statistical areas in California. This provides a way to collect procurement data for treatment and control groups. We will also collect data on student outcomes through the department of education. We are interested in cognitive outcomes, measured through test scores, but also fitness outcomes.

Our intervention is random exposure of schools to procurement decisions of neighboring schools. We offer access to the website and additional consultation to schools in the treatment group. School food procurement is done at the school district level and we hence randomize school districts into treatment arm (access to procurement decisions of neighboring school districts) ad a control arm (no access to procurement decisions of neighboring school districts).

**Implementation Feasibility + Funding:**

I plan to hire 1 full-time RAs and one half-time RA to collect the data and prepare the website.

One RA will help with the data collection through freedom of information acts. This has to be done at the school district level. We will collect data at least for school years 2024-2025, 2025-2026 and 2026-2027. We have started the data collection process but the full time-time RA will help us collect data for further schools and more current years once the person is onboard. We will develop an explicit protocol on how to collect the data but the execution will be time-consuming requiring multiple follow-up emails, phone calls, and potential in-person visits. The RA will also collect other data from the department of education and support the analysis of the results.

The second RA will be trained in software development and will help with the digitization of the records and the setup of the price comparison website. This will be a half time position. We plan on relying on artificial intelligence as much as possible in the processing of the files but we expect that the RA will be very helpful in integrating the AI features in the website.

The study period is 3 years 2025-2028. I budget about $100k per student (full-time) and $50k for the half-time position and year for a total budget of $450k.

**Figure 1:**