



SCALES

Supporting Community Agriculture  
& Local Education Systems

## Audio Transcript for Project SCALES Informational Webinar

December 6, 2023 at 2pm ET

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**Lindsey Turner:** Alright, everyone, it's 2 o'clock Eastern time. We're going to go ahead and get started with our webinar. Thank you so much for joining us. We are really excited to share more about Project SCALES today.

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We'll start off with a little housekeeping and accessibility. Information. Closed captioning is available by clicking the CC. Button on the bottom of your screen, and subtitles are available in English and in Spanish, and a Spanish webinar will be available next week as well. Both of the webinars will be recorded and posted on our website very soon.

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If you have questions for us today, or comments during the call. You can add them to the Q&A box throughout the meeting. We'll be keeping track of those.

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We'll have time to answer a few questions today at the end. And for any questions that we don't get to, we'll post answers very soon on our website.

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So next up, we are really frequent to have some remarks by USDA Administrator Cindy Long, and we're so grateful for her taking the time to make this video for us, and of course also very grateful to USDA for choosing us to do this work in partnership with them.

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**USDA Administrator Cindy Long:** Hey, everyone!

It's a real pleasure to be here today, to have the opportunity to talk about the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative, and particularly the project of the Center for School and Community Partnerships at Boise State University, called Supporting Community Agricultural and local education systems otherwise known as project SCALES.

USDA is so pleased that Project SCALES is going to be partnering with us, to foster innovation, to ensure a resilient, just, equitable, and nutritious school food system.

You know, I want to share with you that before becoming a FNS Administrator, I actually had a long career here at the Food Nutrition Service, primarily working on the Child Nutrition Program. So, I have profound affection and respect for how important these programs are.

You know, over 30 million children eat a school meal on any given day, and we know for research that schools are the healthiest place for children to receive a meal. That is why FNS, USDA, and the Biden-Harris administration are all in on supporting school nutrition.

But we know that it's not enough just to look at regulation, the legislation, and school meal standards as part of that support. We have to, we are committed to helping support the school nutrition professionals who do the hard work every single day of executing on that mission, of providing the helpers and tasted school meals possible.

That that is the reason why under Secretary Bill Vilsack's leadership, USDA has invested a hundred million dollars in the Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative to support transformation in the school food system.

This is the project with several phases. The first pieces of the project involved establishing a recognition award for school districts who are achieving outstanding things or making significant progress in key areas.

We also are able to provide a number of grants for small and rural school districts this past summer.

We're also going to be executing 3 Healthy Meal Summits to help share learning across school food programs. But today, we're going to focus on what we're calling Phase 2, the School Food System Transformation Challenge. We partnered with several organizations, including Boise State, to provide grants to collaborative projects between school districts, food producers, suppliers, distributors, and other community partners to stimulate the creation of a resilient, equitable, and nutritious school food system.

We are so excited to see what's going to come of Project SCALES.

Project SCALES is going to focus on working directly in schools and districts on a national scale. There are 2 cohorts planned. Project SCALES is going to be focusing on increasing the procurement of locally sourced foods by providing and funding to school districts and to schools, to focus on developing innovative partnerships, to focus on preparation, and to focus on promotion of school meals. Project SCALES is going to be leveraging innovative partnerships to increase this local procurement.

I so strongly encourage you all to put on your thinking caps, come up and break creative ideas and apply for these opportunities. We need to be your, we want to partner with you to continue to improve the nutritional quality of school meals through phone systems transformation. So, a big thank you to all of you here who are here today and thank you for the Center for School and Community Partnerships at Boise State University!

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**Lindsey Turner:** Alright, fantastic. So, as Administrator Long noted, we are part of the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative, an investment of 100 million dollars in the nation's food system. In the first phase of HMI there have been funding opportunities for small and rural school districts, the recognition awards and the healthy meals summit events which are all coordinated by Action for Healthy Kids.

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We're now in the second phase of Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative, and we are part of the school Food System Transformation Challenge Grants. Boise State is one of those 4 organizations leading this project. Ours is called SCALES.

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SCALES has many similarities to the PLANTS grant program led by the Chef Ann Foundation. Some of you may have attended their webinar last week, and might be wondering whether you can participate in both projects. The short answer is, yes, an SFA can apply for both projects.

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You can apply to project SCALES, and also apply to PLANTS, if you are a secondary partner, but not a lead partner on that, and I'll talk a little bit more about that later. But I know that both grants are open at the same time, and are quite similar, and I stay frequent contact with their project as well.

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We also are in contact with the other 2 project that are part of this challenge, led by the Illinois Public Health Institute, and by Full Plates, Full Potential. Those organizations will be opening their request for funding in a few months, in February of 202. The Lake Michigan Hub will be funding projects in the 4 States around Lake Michigan.

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And Full Plates, Full Potential will be funding projects in Maine. So if you're in one of those states, and are wondering whether you can apply for Project SCALES, yes, you can. However,

please be aware that if you're funded for Project SCALES you won't be apply able to apply for either of those 2 projects.

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So today we'll share some information so that you can decide whether scales is right for you. Our goals today are for attendees to understand who we are who's eligible to apply and what we'll do together over the grant period, and then we'll get into the nuts and bolts of how to apply. We'll talk about how we're going to review applications. And last, we'll answer a few questions.

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This is our team. Project SCALES is a collaborative project led by Boise State in close partnership with LunchAssist. I'm Lindsey Turner, and I'm a professor in the College of Education at Boise State University, and I'm Director of the Center for School and Community Partnerships here.

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I have the enormous privilege of overseeing project SCALES, and it combines so many things that are important to me and my work. That includes a focus on partnerships, supporting students and educators, and helping kids eat delicious and healthy foods.

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So a little about about me: I live in a rural and remote area in the mountains of Central Idaho, and there's a really short growing season. A lot of snow. But I love digging in the dirt, and when I used to live in Boise, where there was a longer growing season I had a backyard veggie garden which I really enjoyed. This work is really a passion for me.

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I'll be the main point of contact for our grantees, and we'll manage all the financial aspects of the project. Michaela Lowe is a project manager here at the Center, and we've worked together on school-based research for several years. She's from rural Idaho, and I know that she's really excited to do this work with rural school systems across the country. Also, part of the team are Professor Hannah Lane, who's at Duke University School of Medicine, and Professor Erin Hager, who's at the John Hopkins School of Public Health.

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We've worked together for many years, and they'll be leading the evaluation aims of the project. They'll be supporting our grantees and documenting outcomes. They'll be working on the parts of the project that involve sharing out best practices, so collecting information and success stories and writing reports to share out all of the exciting work that we know our

grantees will be doing over the next few years. So now I'll turn it over to Ally Mrachek at LunchAssist.

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**Ally Mrachek:** Hey there, everyone! I'm Ally Mrachek. I'm a school nutrition consultant with LunchAssist, and I'll be the technical assistance provider during the grant and offering just a little extra support for districts so they can reach the goals they've outlined in their grant proposals.

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I feel just so very honored to be doing this work with rural districts over the next few years. So I want to tell you a little bit about my background. I've worked in school nutrition for about 11 years now, and 7 of those, were as a child nutrition director. I just really geek out on kitchen operations and menu planning and just all things farm to school.

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I really love this work. So when I was a director, I grew my local procurement program to spend about 29% of my food budget annually on local foods, and most of that was through direct sourcing with my farmer friends in my community, so I really loved building those connections.

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I have a very special place in my heart for hardworking and rural child nutrition directors, because I was a school lunch eater in a rural school district in my younger years. I grew up in a farming family in a rural area of Washington State on my family's orchard. So I really understand how important these local markets are to farming families and front businesses.

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So that's a little bit about me. I also wanted to introduce Jen McNeil, the founder of LunchAssist.

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Like me, Jen is a former child nutrition director who has been working in child nutrition for many years, and during her time as director she won awards for her work in scratch cooking and farm to school and connecting school gardens to the cafeterias in her district. So she is also very passionate about this work and ready to support our grantees.

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She's especially passionate about the professional development aspect of child nutrition and has leadership roles in California in on several professional and development projects. So she's really here to support grantees.

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Jen founded LunchAssist 7 years ago, and during that time she's grown our team to 13 school food experts, including some former State agency reviewers. So that's just such a lovely skill set to have on our team that we can provide to our clients at LunchAssist, but then also to our grantees.

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We support about 400 districts nationwide. And really I wish I had LunchAssist when I was a director. There were just so many long days where I felt overwhelmed, or just very alone in this work, and it would have just been so nice to have someone to walk me through, you know confusing reports or help me research special projects, so I could focus on feeding kids or even just cheer me on just to be my cheerleader.

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I think I can speak for our whole team at LunchAssist when we say we're so thrilled to be working on this project with Boise State and working with rural districts in the next few years, so thank you.

And I want to turn the mic back over to Lindsey so she can introduce the rest of the team.

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**Lindsey Turner:** Great, thank you. Ally. I'm really excited for LunchAssist to be a partner with us on this work. The Center for School and Community Partnerships at Boise State is part of the College of Ed. Here. We were funded 28 years ago, and have worked with nearly every school in the state, in some way or another.

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We currently have 30 employees, and our portfolio includes about a dozen projects. Many of those are state-funded efforts to support Idaho's educators on a variety of topics, including special education, leadership, STEM-ED, and of course, my favorite... school nutrition. So we know the important role that schools play in healthy, thriving communities, and we bring that commitment to supporting our grantees and supporting educators in their work.

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We are also really fortunate to have an absolute rockstar Advisory Board with organizations that have deep and extensive expertise that's going to be really valuable as we build technical assistance and support our grantees.

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So next I'll move on to this second topic. What is Project SCALES? And who do we plan to fund?

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I'll break this into a couple areas. First is the purpose of the project, then the components of Project SCALES. and then I'll talk about who's eligible to apply.

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So the overall goal of the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative is to support local innovations and collaborations that improve the K-12 school food system. We see four parts to this overall goal.

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First is improving the supply chain by incentivizing innovation. We know that there are some really cool things happening around the country, and we also know-- and I've seen this-- that rural communities are so strong and collaborative and come up with some really creative and novel ways to get things done. We want to support those local innovators.

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Second, we want to help you strengthen important partnerships. There are some obvious players in the food system, and we think that there might also be some unique partnerships that we might not necessarily know about, that we can learn about and help you to support and build, and then learn from that, so this is where we're looking to you all to let us know what innovations you're working on, and with whom?

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Third, we want the school food system to provide access to nutritious foods and beverages. Of course, and we also want it to be sustainable, resilient, and equitable. That last part about equity is really important, because we know that school nutrition programs are huge, part of promoting nutrition, security and ensuring well, being among groups that are economically disadvantaged. So, in our work with grantees will be looking for ways to improve equitable outcomes so that all students can thrive.

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And fourth, a key goal for our project is to learn about what's working well and to share those successes so that other SFAs across the country can learn from our grantees. So as part of this project, you'll be playing an important role in big picture systems change.

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This is how we plan to do that work. SCALES will work with 35 SFAs or districts. In this first round of funding we want the work to include partners, but only SFAs or districts are eligible to be the lead applicant.

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Our first cohort will be working with rural SFAs, and then we expect to issue a second round of funding, which will be available to all districts, whether in urban or suburban areas or in towns.

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And this is what we mean by rural SFAs. Those that serve a district with a rural locale code as designated by the National Center for Education Statistics.

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And we have some information on our website about how to find out your locale code. But please don't hesitate to email us if you have any questions about your eligibility.

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In addition, SFAs must participate in the National School Lunch Program, and the strongest applications are likely to be from those that have self-operated programs.

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SFAs from anywhere across the 7 USDA regions are eligible to apply. And, again, a reminder that if you have any questions about your own eligibility, please just send us an email. We'll provide our contact information at the end of the presentation.

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So what will we do together over the next 2 years? Next up are the 2 components of Project SCALES.



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There are 2 pieces here: grant funding and implementation support. SCALES is more than just a grant program. Implementation support is a really unique part of this project, and one of the reasons that I'm so excited to lead this work with this team.

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We know that systems change can be challenging and having support along the way not only increases the odds of success, but also makes it less lonely to do that work. I'll come back later for some more details about how to use the grant funding and first start out with having Ally talk about the implementation support that she'll be providing to our grantees.

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**Ally Mrachek:** Great thanks, Lindsey, so participating in the one on one TA and the learning community is a crucial part of project SCALES, like Lindsey said. So, it's really what makes project SCALES unique.

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We're putting the final touches on the technical assistance program we're going to offer to our grantees. And just so you know upfront, all of the TA will be offered virtually, so it's easily accessible to our grantees.

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And just keep in mind that the TA from LunchAssist is already funded. So you don't need to allocate any of the \$150,000 to our support. However, we do encourage applicants to budget staff time for attending the meetings.

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There are several components to our TA program, and I wanted to describe each of them to you in a little bit of detail.

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During the one on one calls, we'll work through logistics and challenges of building a local procurement program. So during our discussions, we'll always keep in mind Federal compliance so that you can feel confident when you're building your local purchasing efforts that you know they align with Federal regulation. We'll also check in on state, specific or local procurement regulations to be sure that you're covered there.

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So, it's really part of my job over the next 2 years to be, you know, digging deeper with you on processes and partnerships and regulations, so we can feel good moving forward together.

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Next up are the facilitating learning community meetings. And I'm really excited about these because we're really going to learn a lot from our grantees.

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You'll be learning from each other, of course, but it's really a time for us to learn from others as well. These are group meetings, and there'll be time for guest speakers that are experts in school nutrition, and farm to school. But there's also going to be a time for open discussion, so that you can learn from other grantees. And we can really do some brainstorming and learning from each other.

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And we really want the community, the learning community topics, to be led by the the needs and the interest of our grantees. So, we'll be checking in with grantees over the the grant term to see what they want to learn about

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Another really valuable resource that we want to share with grantees is the LunchAssist PRO learning portal. And this is a resource that we typically provide to our pro members who participate in LunchAssist. I've personally loved having these resources easily accessible for my consulting calls.

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Grantees who are awarded the funds will be get a free District membership to LunchAssist PRO for the duration of the grant. And we have over 500 tools in the Resource Library, and all of our training videos are in both English and Spanish.

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We'll also send you a SCALES newsletter with monthly tips and tools, to be sure that you stay compliant with Federal rules while we're building out your local sourcing programs.

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We'll send out our monthly newsletters, and then I'll check in with you, probably during your one on one calls, to make sure that you feel prepared for any upcoming Federal deadlines, reports, or oversight tasks.

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And then, during our first summer together, the SCALES team will be hosting a virtual local sourcing summer camp for grantees. This is gonna be pretty fun and exciting.

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We'll host a series of short learning sessions that will provide some basic skill building early on in the grant term. But it's also a time to just build excitement and look ahead to the work we have together through project SCALES. There will be a time to gather virtually and focus on local procurement during a slower time of the year for most school nutrition professionals. So hopefully, we have lots of brain space to really dig deeper into local procurement together.

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We're really hoping that these TA offerings will help you establish a sustainable and successful program.

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TA offerings will help you establish a sustainable and successful program. But we're also help hoping that you'll build a network of peers that you can call upon if you ever get stuck. We'll also be discovering together lessons learned and best practices that we can share widely with districts just like yours in rural areas. And we're really excited to be learning from you as well.

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I'll turn it back to Lindsey, and she's going to go through some of the nuts and bolts of applying for this grant.

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**Lindsey Turner:** Great, thank you, Ally.

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So now I'll talk about what types of projects we will be funding with these grants. This is a quote here from our request for applications document on our website. And this is such a key part of writing a compelling application. We want applicants to be creative and innovative.

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We know that child nutrition directors are really resourceful, creative. We want to empower that! So, rather than being overly prescriptive about what we think you should do, we want you to tell us what you want to do and why it's innovative. That said, we do have 2 key strategies for grantees to use. Those are partnerships and preparation.

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We'll start with partnerships. Because the school food system involves many entities, there are a lot of likely partners that you might already have relationships with, or partnerships that you want to expand. This list is just a few potential partners. And the last bullet point here -- other agencies and businesses -- is where we think that there might be some really unique partnerships that we don't necessarily know about.

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We don't have requirements about who you need to include. But in your applications you'll want to talk about your partners and show how those partnerships hold promise for your local food system.

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We also know that change needs support from within, so we encourage you to include folks from your school systems. So... staff, students, and families.

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The second required strategy is preparation, which is also sometimes described as capacity, readiness. This is a list of a few ways to increase capacity, and there are many more in the request for applications documents.

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And again, we'll want to see the applicants describe how your project activities will promote innovations that will lead to readiness to improve local procurement.

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That leads me to the next slide, how we're going to measure that performance.

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A key objective of project SCALES and the USDA's Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative overall is to identify effective innovations and then share those out with a wider audience. So, both the grantees and the project SCALES team will have evaluation and reporting requirements.

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Some key indicators will be consistent across all grantees to monitor, while others might be unique, based on the specifics of each project. However, they will all be reported and relay back to us regularly.

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The Project SCALES team will conduct the overall project evaluation, and we expect our grantees to support that, so we may be asking grantees to assist in evaluation activities, such as doing interviews with us and providing us administrative data.

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Across all grantees we will be helping you to collect these first 4 shared outcome indicators. A couple of them are financial. And we know that average daily participation is something that you already collect for your programs.

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We think that there are probably some other metrics that might be appropriate for projects depending on what you propose to do.

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And your application doesn't need to go into a lot of detail about evaluation, as our team will work with each grantee to figure out these things at the beginning of the project. But this is an idea of how we'll be thinking about evaluation and measures of success.

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After grantees are selected our team will help each grantee to develop tools and methods for completing the evaluation aims and tracking building a logic model. And if you're new to data monitoring and tracking, that's totally okay. We're going to help you develop a tracking system that's simple and useful.

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So hopefully, now that we've talked about what we envision for this project, many of you watching the webinar, and decided that this is a great fit and want to apply. So now I'll get into

the nuts and bolts of how to actually do that. And again, please remember that we're just an email away. And we are more than happy to help you.

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The full request for applications document on our website has all of the elements of application. And there are also some smaller documents that have specific components of the application, including this one, which is an application template.

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This describes each question that you'll be asked to submit a response to in the application portal. At the end of this document there's a checklist so that you can make sure you have everything ready before you get onto the portal to apply.

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These are the 10 sections of the application where you'll prepare a response, and the word limits are given here.

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But you don't need to use all the words. If you can answer question well, in fewer words, that's great, too. We do suggest that you write your responses. In a word, Doc or Google Docs, so that you can keep track of the word count, and also run it through a spell checker.

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Then you'll cut and paste the text into the portal. I'll describe the portal next, but for now I'll just go through point by point, each of the sections of the application.

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First up is the Executive Summary. But we actually suggest that you do this last as an overview after you've written everything else. So once you've written your project description and the other pieces, then come back and summarize it briefly for us in no more than 300 words.

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Then tell us about your SFA Director. We expect that most applications will be written by the SFA Director, but if it's that's not the case, then it's important for you to let us know who runs your meal programs and how they'll be engaged in this project.

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Then tell us about the project team. Who else at the SFA or district will be involved? And who are your partners? Describe how you've worked together and what you've done collaboratively already.

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And then this one's exciting... a description about your community. This is so fun for us to get to know more about rural areas across the country. We want to know about the resources and strengths of your community as well as some areas of need that includes telling us about the students and families in your school system as well as the organizations, businesses and community leadership that could be engaged for large scale systems change.

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Next, please tell us about challenges for your school meal program. We know that lots of really innovative work happened during the pandemic, and that child nutrition programs stepped up in such a huge way to meet the needs of their communities. So it's over 3 years ago now, but we remember that early on in the spring of 2020 there was so much hunger, and also a long overdue recognition of the crucial role that school meal programs play in the hunger safety net nationwide. We saw a lot of innovation and meal, delivery strategies and flexibility to all of the USDA operations waivers. And then, later on in the pandemic, there were widespread supply chain issues, too, and program operators have had to be creative for a number of years. So please let us know how you innovated and what you learned over the past few years.

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Next step, description of the project. This part's really important. Let us know what you propose to do with the funding, who will do what activities and when? And how will you know if it's creating changes?

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And then innovation and significance. There's more on this section in the application template. In the innovation and significant section, you'll talk about how your project is innovative, and what you believe the impact will be.

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Change management is the section where you can talk about the project director's approach to implementing new initiatives and any structures in your school system that might be helpful for promoting changes in policies and practices.

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And here, for sustainability, we'd like you to tell us about the likelihood of sustaining changes after the grant ends. So, although funds could be used for materials and supplies. What we're really looking for with this funding is to increase human capital. So that is empowering people with the knowledge and skills and partnerships to get important work done, and then to keep those positive changes in place after our time together ends.

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And last, is this section on TA and the learning community. Tell us how much you expect to be able to engage in the community that Ally will be building. We know that program operators have a lot of demands on their time. We want to be sure that we'll be able to work together as you implement your projects.

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And these are the additional documents that you'll need to actually submit the application. Some letters of support from your partners and from your district leader. An optional timeline to accompany the project description, and then all of the budget documents.

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When we're talking about budgeting... there's some information about that on our website. There are also some templates and materials that are relevant here. One is a worksheet where you can fill in the budget amounts, and this is modifiable. You can add or remove lines. And it has the 3 budget periods that you'll be completing. And then the other is an instruction document which provides some information on how to do the budgeting and how to write a narrative that accompanies the worksheet, and it explains what each piece of funding will be used for.

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What can and can't you purchase with these funds? These are some pretty standard budgeting categories for Federal programs.

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And we've given some examples here of things that might be purchased with funding in the other expenses category. First off... personnel. We want to encourage you to allocate enough funding to personnel time so that your project director can really fully engage in the implementation supports provided by Ally to do your project activities and then also to work with our team on evaluation and reporting.



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You can also request funding or consultants, and definitely include contracts to pay your partners for their time and travel and other expenses.

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So last up here on this list is travel, and I'll make an additional note here about what that includes. In addition to local mileage for meetings with partners, please also budget for at least one team member to attend the Healthy Meals Initiative Summit, and that will be in October 2025, and we suggest allocating \$3,000 per person for this trip. We also suggest budgeting the same amount for trip to visit appear in the cohort, and then we don't know yet where those will be. We suggest another \$3,000 there. And that will help you to see how other programs operate and what type of work they're doing with their grants. And someone from the SCALES team will come to visit you at some point during the project as well, and that will come out of our budgets, not yours.

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There are a few types of costs that are not allowed. These include large pieces of equipment. food and beverage purchases, promotional swag and gift cards. And, of course, no lobbying is allowed with Federal funds. So please feel free to contact us if you have questions on your budget. And again, we're happy to help with that.

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Once you've got all your documents ready, it's time to apply. On our website, you can go to the portal. This link will take you to the application portal and the first step is setting up a password protected account.

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This is the Login page and the portal defaults to English but by clicking that globe icon on the upper right it can be changed to Spanish as shown here.

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If you'd like to complete the application in a language other than English or Spanish please, just email us for assistance.

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Once you've logged in, you'll create a profile and you can go back to that profile and update at any time using the edit button.

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And then, after you've got that profile going, you'll be able to get started so you'll click that blue box at the bottom to upload materials.

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Lindsey Turner: You can save your work and come back to it at any time up right up until the application deadline.

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After you click, get started here, your organizational information from your profile will auto populate.

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And we expect that most applications will be submitted by child nutrition directors, but if that's not the case, then also fill in some information about the SFA director and other district contacts.

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Here's the main part of the application with the boxes where you'll upload all of your text responses. And then on second image here over on the right, at the end of the application, there are 4 boxes where you'll upload those PDF documents, such as letters of support, a timeline and your budget documents.

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Once all of that is done you will click the bottom button here to mark the application is complete. But it's important... you're not done yet! You will go back to the homepage on the portal where you'll see this green button, and that will actually submit the application. So, until you click this, it's completed, but it's not submitted, and we can't accept it. Once you click that button, then you'll see this success message. So please look for this, and you will also immediately get a confirmation email. If you want to save a copy of your application, you can click on the view button on this page and then print it

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Now that your application is submitted, it's our turn to swing into action with reviews. We have 7 weeks to do this because we want to get started in April. We want to be able to notify grantees by mid-March.

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Each application will be reviewed by 3 people including at least one from our team, and then a panel of external experts who we've lined up. All of the materials are confidential, and we won't share applications other than anyone who's with our review team.

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We'll be using this scoring system here, and over on the right you can see a screenshot of the full scoring rubric, which is also available for download on our website.

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Once we've scored those applications, we'll sort them by region. And these are the 7 USDA regions. Ideally, we're going to be able to fund 5 projects in each region because we really want a nationwide scope for this project.

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We'll make the final decisions after discussing applications and finalists with the USDA team.

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This is the overall timeline here with some key dates. Because we want to be quick and efficient in reviewing grants we'd like to make sure that we line up enough reviewers. If you're planning to apply, please go onto our website and click the button to submit a notice of interest. Michaela's going to drop that link in the chat here.

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It's really quick to do, and you can change your mind and not submit. But it would be really helpful for us to ensure we have capacity for reviews.

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Applications are due before midnight Eastern Time on Friday, January 26th. and then we'll notify applicants of funding decisions in March. and then kick off in April. SCALES grants, and the project, will run from April of next year until June of 2026.

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So that brings us to our last section... questions.

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We have time to answer a few questions today, and we'll be posting other answers on our website very soon.

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First up is a question about whether organizations can apply to multiple HMI opportunities. I mentioned a bit about this earlier, and the answer is yes, but with some limitations. We're looking to fund SFAs, and our project is very similar to the PLANTS grants that are open now. If you're applying to PLANTS as a lead, as an SFA, you aren't eligible for SCALES, but you could be a supporting partner on a PLANTS grant, and also apply to SCALES. If you're selected for SCALES, you won't be able to apply to either of the 2 projects that are launching next spring.

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Question number 2, can we buy local foods with this funding? And what about equipment?

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Unfortunately, equipment with a value of over \$5,000 large things like ovens and refrigerators aren't allowable in this project. Earlier phases of the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative had some equipment grants. And while we know that this equipment is very important than necessary for kitchen upgrades, the goal for our project really is to focus on those innovative partnerships. What we are able to fund is some of the smaller supplies that districts need...storage knives, small appliances, and you can write those into your budgets: storage, knives, small appliances, and you can write those into your budgets. But again, our focus really, ideally, is on human capital and those partnerships.

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And as for foods: we know that activities like taste tests can be helpful for increasing student interest. Grant funds can be used for the personnel to do those activities, and promoting those activities, but not for purchasing the food for such events.

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We know that there are a lot of ways that school food programs need support, and although equipment and food aren't allowable, we've seen that program operators can do amazing things with a little bit more time and staffing capacity. And those are definitely great ways to use your budget fund. We're excited to see what you all propose for innovations in your programs.

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Okay, Question 3. And Ally will take this one.

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**Ally Mrachek:** Can institutions other than SFAs apply?

The short answer is, SFAs must be the project lead. But other institutions can join your project as a partner. We really want to be working directly with the child nutrition program operator for the district. If you lead a program for a Charter school or a nonprofit non-public private organization, maybe like a Catholic school system, you're definitely eligible to apply as long as you operate the National School Lunch Program.

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You might be wondering, if you're an SFA and you use a vendor like a food service management company, or maybe a vended meal company, can you apply?

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Just be very clear in your application of how you'll make systems change and increase your local procurement in partnership with that vendor or that company. It's really important that they know that you've applied, that they're agreeable to help you make these changes in your program. So if that is the scenario that fits you, you have to include a letter of support from that vendor or the company along with your application, so you can upload that as one of your letters of support.

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If you have additional questions about that, just reach out to us via our email address. And we're happy to answer specifics.

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Okay, so there's a question about technical assistance. What is the time commitment for grantees, and who will be participating in the technical assistance component of this project?

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Okay, this is a great question. So, districts can expect to devote about 1 hour per month of the school year to the one-on-one support calls, or the learning community meetings. And you'll also want to set aside a little time to prepare for those meetings, and then we may have some shorter follow up meetings on specific topics if you'd need that. And so, budget time for that, if you think you're going to need some follow up.

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But as far as time, as far as time you spend using the LunchAssist PRO portal, that is totally up to you. It's an on-demand resource. And you can use it as you need. And I might actually send you a few materials from it as well to help guide us in in your work.

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You also want to set some time aside for the kickoff meetings when we launch the grants, and that will be this coming spring, so there'll be one or 2 kickoff meetings.

And then you'll also want to set aside some time this coming summer for our virtual local sourcing summer camp. So that will be one to 2 h sessions. And they'll be scheduled for June and July of 2024. We're hoping that these sessions that we're going to do 4 sessions. And so 4 sessions, one to 2 h each time. Just please plan accordingly for that

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But as far as technical assistance with me, it's generally a few hours a month.

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You'll want to keep in mind that throughout the grant term there will be other non-TA related meetings related to the grant, probably related to financial tasks, or, you know, grant metrics and reporting. At the end of the grant we'll have have some special meetings for collecting your success stories and best practices, there'll be a little extra time for that.

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As far as who should attend the meetings in your district, we really do expect the child nutrition operator for the district to be the most active participant with us in the technical assistance and throughout the grant.

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You know, they're the decision and change makers for their program. And so we'd really like them to be present and active. But you can invite other team members or partners to attend the meetings with you. That's very welcomed, and the more the merrier on that one.

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Okay? Well, those were great questions. Feel free to send us any others to the email address on the slide here.

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We'll collect them, answer them and then post them on our website, on the Project SCALES website. So just use the email or the website posted on this slide.

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And that's a wrap for us today. Thank you for sticking in with us through all the nuts and bolts of the grant opportunity. We know it was a little bit dry, but we're excited to get to the fun part and do this work with you.

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There's just such amazing work happening in rural areas all over the country!

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**Lindsey Turner:** Great and thanks, Ally, and thanks all of you for being on the call. We know a lot of questions came in on the chat, and we're going to be working to write up answers and post those on our website as soon as possible.

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We are really looking forward to reading your grant proposals and to working with you on this important and exciting work and transforming local food systems. Thank you so much for your time, and goodbye for today!