Spark Award
Request for Applications

USDA | LAKE MICHIGAN SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEM INNOVATION HUB





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KEY DETAILS

Purpose
Spark Awards support one-year projects that need funds for school food system and school meal product improvements, such as planning, product testing, or enhancing skills, knowledge, and resource sharing. The overall goal of the awards is to improve children's health with school meals and introduce more American food products into school meals by improving the local and regional school food system. For project ideas, visit the "Inspiration for Projects" page at InnovateSchoolFood.org/inspiration-for-projects.

Application Deadline
January 22, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST

Award Range
$30,000 to $100,000

Cost-sharing or matching funds are not required!

Project Timeline
One year, 2027 - 2028

KEY DATES

- Request For Applications Released: October 30, 2026
- Grant Application Opens: October 30, 2026
- Informational Webinar (Live and Recorded): Live on November 4, 2026, from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. Central Standard Time (CST)
- Application Support Available: October 30, 2026, to February 12, 2027
- Final Application Deadline: January 22, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST
- Any Missing Materials Due: February 12, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST
- Award Notification: Summer 2027
- Awarded Application Project Start: Summer 2027

INTRODUCTION

Do you have an innovative, community-driven project idea that would improve the local or regional school food system or marketplace? Apply for a Spark Award by January 22, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST!

We want to hear from you!

The Lake Michigan School Food System Innovation Hub is a USDA-funded, grant-making initiative. We work across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin to fuel change for our region's school food system. We are administered by the Illinois Public Health Institute and include organizations in each state of the Lake Michigan region. We are committed to providing nutritious meals to our nation's children. We aim to build a resilient food supply chain through innovation, and we aim to create a food system that develops nutritious foods for schools through industry partnerships.

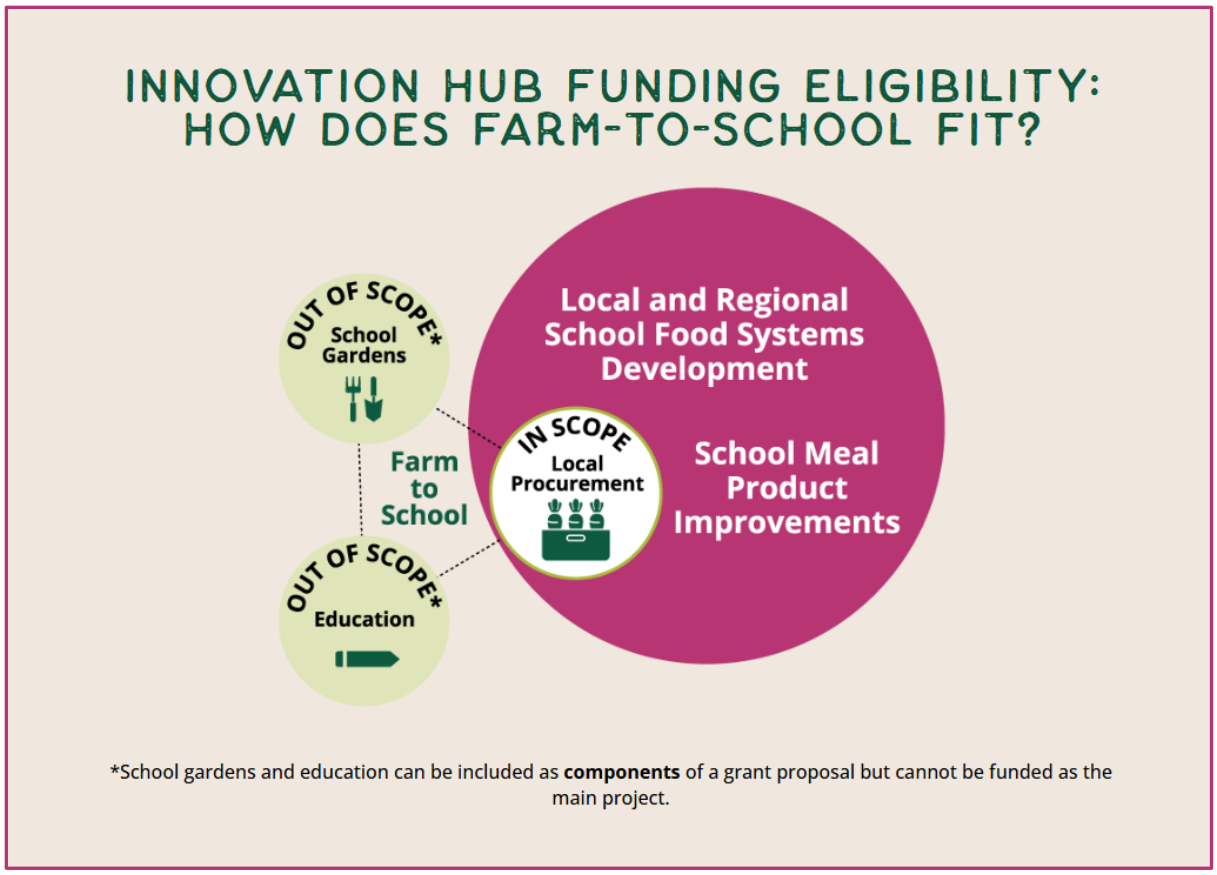
The Innovation Hub supports projects that reimagine school meals in ways that nourish students, connect to local farms and businesses, and celebrate the people and communities across our region. By strengthening the network between local farms, businesses, and schools, we're able to provide children in the Lake Michigan region with healthy foods. We offer funding, training, and other help to collectives of people who are transforming our school food system to better serve our communities. Spark Awards are awards that are designed to support one-year projects that support school food system and school meal product improvements, such as planning, product testing, or enhancing skill, knowledge, and resource sharing.

We aim to fund school food system and school meal product improvements that work toward our primary goals of:

1. Increasing the number of small food producers and local food businesses engaged in the school food system and Lake Michigan region.
2. Improving the amount or quality of nutritious foods that align with the current USDA meal pattern requirements for school meals that are served in the Lake Michigan school food system (see definitions on page 18 for more information).
3. Increasing access to nourishing foods across the Lake Michigan region.

Please note:

This innovative funding opportunity is intended to expand beyond traditional farm-to-school and onsite school garden projects. The sub-grants will support collaborative projects between school districts, food producers, suppliers, distributors, and/or community partners to stimulate the creation of a strong, supportive, and nutritious local school food system. Videos with information about Innovation Hub application expectations are available on the website: InnovateSchoolFood.org/videos.



We are here to help!

Wonder if you have what it takes to go after this Spark Award funding? Don't hesitate! Your State Lead and the Innovation Hub team can support your application and help answer questions about eligibility, forming a partnership, financial procedures, and more. You can find state-specific contact information on page 8.

ELIGIBILITY

The following people and organizations involved in the school food system in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin are eligible to apply for Spark Awards:

- Farmers
- Food Producers
- Food Suppliers
- Food Distributors
- Other Food System and Industry Partners
- Schools and School Districts, including nonprofit private and charter schools, which operate the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and/or School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- Other organizations, including but not limited to community nonprofit organizations, state and local governmental agencies, Tribes, Native American Tribal Organizations, institutions of higher education and small businesses

Other eligibility considerations:

- Applicants may only submit one application per funding cycle with the Innovation Hub.
- Projects should address a school or school district's needs. All applications without a school partner on the project team should include a letter of support from a school, school district or group of schools within Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and/or Wisconsin that shows the school's (or schools') interest in the project and willingness to support efforts to respond to students' dietary needs and preferences.
- School applicants that use contracted food service must include a letter of support for their project from their contracted food service management company *OR* a letter of exemption explaining why no letter of support is included.
- Current Innovation Hub Innovation Collaborative and Spark Award leads as well as organizations that support administration of or receive funding as the primary lead from Project SCALES (Supporting Community Agriculture and Local Education Systems), PLANTS (Partnerships for Local Agriculture and Nutrition Transformation in Schools), or Full Plates Full Potential's School Food System Innovation Grant are not eligible to apply as the lead applicant for this Spark Award cycle. While they cannot serve as the lead applicant, these organizations may still participate as a funded partner on a Spark Award application.
- Organizations that receive multiple sources of USDA funding must be for different scopes of work.
- Entities previously suspended or debarred from participation in federal assistance programs or activities are ineligible to submit applications.

GRANT AND FISCAL COMPLIANCE

- All awardees must follow standard federal award financial practices and be in good financial standing. This is also known as compliance.
- All award finalists must participate in a financial assessment session with the Illinois Public Health Institute (IPHI) before an award is finalized. IPHI will evaluate each finalist to make sure that they comply with basic federal sub-grant standards and to understand how much financial monitoring and support they may need as a grantee.
- Lead applicants must be registered in the System for Award Management government contracting system (SAM.gov) and have a current Unique Entity ID number. Funded partners must have a current Unique Entity ID number. Registration may begin at the time of application and must be complete before an award is finalized, meaning registration must be completed by the time a contract is executed for awarded grantees. We can help you with this process.

If you have any questions about grant or fiscal compliance, please visit Mariela Medina's office hours, listed on page 9. You can also refer to the Lead Applicant Guidance on page 21.

AWARD EXPECTATIONS

If awarded, grantees can expect:

- Grant funding aligned with requirements outlined in this application, including the Grant and Fiscal Compliance section above and OMB CFR Cost Principles.
- Ongoing, one-on-one project support from the Innovation Hub, including help developing progress reports and connecting to resources, as needed.
- Joining a tailored, regional learning community to share best practices, expand regional market development and accelerate innovation.

If awarded, grantees are expected to:

- Participate in regional and local trainings and other support offered by the Innovation Hub.
- Commit to connecting with students and families to better understand and respond to their dietary needs and preferences. You do not need a comprehensive plan for this to apply. We'll provide student and family engagement training and support.
- Budget for and have at least one person from the project team attend an Illinois Public Health Institute-hosted convening in one of the four Innovation Hub states in late 2027 or early 2028 to share and learn best practices.
- Check-in with State Leads at least monthly to report on progress, request any assistance, and provide information to inform reports and Stories of Innovation (e.g., success stories and case studies). At least one check-in may be in-person and attended by your State Lead, the USDA, and/or the Illinois Public Health Institute.
- Take pictures of your project in action and share them with your State Leads for inclusion in Innovation Hub updates, Stories of Innovation, and more.

- Submit an annual report that summarizes major successes and lessons learned and contributes to regional evaluation measurements, also known as metrics. Metrics may include but are not limited to schools' purchase and use of new or improved products and student satisfaction with new products.
- Ensure federal grant and fiscal compliance. Help is available to support you.
- Work to make progress on project goals as outlined in the application. In consultation with the Innovation Hub team, further develop and adhere to the project budget.

SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE!

The Innovation Hub offers grant applicants a variety of support in multiple languages. Here you'll find resources to help you submit a Spark Award grant application. You can also contact Innovation Hub leaders for one-on-one guidance.

Innovation Hub State Leads: One-on-One, Project-Specific Support

Contact your State Lead for help with project and application development.

Innovation Hub State Leads	
Illinois Organization: Seven Generations Ahead Contacts: Diane Chapeta: farmtoschool@sevengenerationsahead.org Colleen Feeny: colleen@sevengenerationsahead.org	**Indiana** Organization: Northwest Indiana Food Council Contacts: Virginia Pleasant: virginia@nwifoodcouncil.org Veronica Jalomo: veronica@nwifoodcouncil.org
Wisconsin Organizations: Kids Forward and HealthTIDE Network Contacts: Daithi Wolfe, Kids Forward: dwolfe@kidsforward.org Amy Meinen, HealthTIDE Network: ameinen@wisc.edu	**Michigan** Organization: Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems Contacts: Julie Lehman lehmanju@msu.edu Jazmin Bolan-Williamson bolanwil@msu.edu May Tsupros: tsupros1@msu.edu

Virtual Office Hours

Application Support:
Online help for questions about completing an application

Our team can help you understand the questions and requirements of the application. We will be hosting regular office hours to answer your questions or connect you with the right support. Visit the "How We Can Help" page at InnovateSchoolFood.org/support for more information.

From October 30, 2026, to February 12, 2027, office hours will be offered as outlined below. Help is available in both English and Spanish.

Compliance Support:
Online help with federal grant qualifications

Mariela Medina with the Illinois Public Health Institute can help you:

- Register with the System for Award Management government contracting system (SAM.gov).
- Understand federal grant compliance.
- Ensure proper financial management practices.
- Fulfill other grant requirements.

Mariela Medina's offices hours:

Wednesday, 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. CST
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. CST

To schedule a different time, please contact Mariela at mariela.medina@iphionline.org or schedule a 1:1 meeting.

Application Portal Support:
Online help with submitting a grant application

Elise Ramos with the Illinois Public Health Institute can help you navigate the online grant application portal.

Elise Ramos's office hours:

Tuesday and Thursday, 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. CST
Monday and Wednesday, 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. CST

Visit the "How We Can Help" page at InnovateSchoolFood.org/support for the links to join the virtual office hours.

Other Support

The Innovation Hub website includes more resources, including a frequently asked questions page, at InnovateSchoolFood.org/frequently-asked-questions. We also offer inspiration for potential grant projects InnovateSchoolFood.org/inspiration-for-projects and other ideas to consider InnovateSchoolFood.org/ideas-to-consider.

Videos with information about grant-writing and Innovation Hub application requirements are available on the website: InnovateSchoolFood.org/videos.



APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

To apply for a Spark Award, you must register for an account by visiting the “Apply” page at InnovateSchoolFood.org/apply and submit your application using our online tool. Please visit Elise Ramos’s office hours, listed on page 9, for help.

Our online application uses Salesforce software. You may review the Salesforce Privacy Policy that describes how data is stored, distributed, and managed.

For your application to be reviewed, it must be completed and received through the website on or before January 22, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST. Applicants will receive an email confirmation with the time and date of submission noted.

Late application submissions will not be reviewed. Revisions will not be accepted after the deadline. Only materials and supporting documents requested by the Innovation Hub team will be accepted after the deadline.

All applications will be screened for eligibility, completeness and allowable costs on a rolling basis in the order they are submitted. The Innovation Hub team will email the lead applicant to notify them of any missing materials or information and/or problems meeting eligibility criteria by February 5, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST. Any requested materials or information must be provided by February 12, 2027, at 5:00 p.m. CST, or the application will not be considered for funding. **To ensure sufficient time to submit any required documentation, the Innovation Hub team strongly encourages early submissions.** Application screening is limited to eligibility, completeness and allowable costs. For support submitting a strong application, please work with your State Lead! State Lead contact information is available on page 8.

Applications in Spanish will be accepted and reviewed in their original form. Audio files may be uploaded instead of written answers to application questions. Both written and audio files will be accepted and reviewed in their original form.



Application Checklist

Below is a checklist of the application process and materials, including details on how you can find additional support.

- ☐ **Contact Your State Lead for Support.** We are here to provide help tailored to your needs. Find state-specific contact information on page 8.
- ☐ **Gather Letter(s) of Support.** We encourage you to review the Letters of Support Templates and Guidance on page 23 for required and recommended letters. Please note: It takes time to gather letters of support, so we encourage applicants to get started reaching out early. You can find further guidance on letters of support in our video library or work with your State Leads for support.
- ☐ **Review and Answer the Application Questions.** Application questions are listed on page 13. We encourage you to review the Definitions of Key Terms (page 18), Selection Criteria (page 15), and Allowable Costs (page 19) to help you plan your project and successfully answer the application questions.
- ☐ **Develop Your Work Plan**. The link to download the ***required*** Work Plan template is available at InnovateSchoolFood.org/application-information/#docs. You will be asked to upload your Work Plan in the application
- ☐ **Develop Your Budget and Budget Narrative.** The link to download the ***required*** budget template is listed on page 23. You will be asked to upload your budget in the application.
- ☐ **Register for a Unique Entity ID** if you or any project partners who would receive funding do not have one. Visit the SAM.gov website to start this process before you submit your application. Join Mariela Medina's office hours, listed on page 9, for help.
- ☐ **Register for an Account on the Innovation Hub Website.** Visit InnovateSchoolFood.org/apply or work with your State Lead to create an account. Join Elise Ramos's office hours, listed on page 9, for help.
- ☐ **Submit Early to Help Ensure Your Application is Complete.** We encourage all applicants to submit their applications early, allowing additional time to confirm project eligibility and application completeness, as well as acquire any missing or outstanding components. Find Application and Submission Information on page 11.



APPLICATION QUESTIONS

You can download the full application questions list as a Word document or as a Google Doc at InnovateSchoolFood.org/application-information/#docs. Responses to the questions will be entered on our website through our portal to apply. Below is a list of application questions that require written or audio responses:

- Please provide a brief summary of your proposed project. This should explain the purpose of your proposed project and address how your work would contribute to broader school food system change and/or school food product improvements. *Suggested length: up to 3 sentences or 30 seconds of audio*.
    - Please note: Subsequent application questions will offer an opportunity to more fully explain your project. As such, subsequent answers should lead back to the project's summary and expand upon how the project will work toward achieving the objective(s) and activity(ies) outlined in the Work Plan.
- Please develop a **basic** Work Plan for your project by completing and uploading the required "Work Plan Template," included in the applications questions Word document and Google Doc. This Work Plan should be a brief overview to help reviewers understand how your proposed project could be achieved. Selected awardees will build out a complete plan. You can find further guidance on creating a Work Plan in our video library or work with your State Lead for support. Your Work Plan should include:
    - Objectives—Clearly and concisely state the project objectives. Objectives are actionable targets that must be met to achieve overall goals of the project. Objectives should lead to specific results and be measurable.
    - Activities—High-level summary of action items necessary to achieve project objectives.
    - Timeline—Projected, approximate dates and milestones set throughout the project.
    - Contributors/Partners—Entities on the project team with responsibility for the described activities.
    - Resources—Connect project activities to specific budget items.

- Describe how your project meets the Innovation Hub goals [listed on page 4] and impacts the local or regional food system. *Suggested length: 2 paragraphs or 2 minutes of audio.*
- Describe what your team views as the innovative aspects of your project. How would your innovation change the status quo in the school food system for the community you are serving? *Suggested length: 1-2 paragraphs or 1-2 minutes of audio.*
- How will the partnerships, systems and/or products that your project is working to develop be able to continue past the grant period, regardless of the outcome of your innovation? *Suggested length: 1 paragraph or 1 minute of audio.*
- Who is intended to benefit from this project? *Suggested length: 1 paragraph or 1 minute of audio.*
- Please explain how the people on your project team are representative of and connected with the people and place your project intends to benefit. This can include if any team members live, work or have previously worked with the community. *Suggested length: 1 paragraph or 1 minute of audio.*
- Provide the full name of the school(s) or school district(s) that your project intends to work with or benefit, as well as their address(es). If you are working with or intending to benefit a large number of schools, you may provide information for up to three schools or school districts that represent who you are impacting.
- Please describe any limitations in the area or school(s) your project seeks to serve. Why would the place and the people benefit from Innovation Hub funding? Some examples include if the community is missing needed resources, experiencing high rates of food-sensitive chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, etc. *Suggested length: 2 paragraphs or 2 minutes of audio.*
- Describe how your project helps to address an identified community need. How did you identify this need? *Suggested length: 2 paragraphs or 2 minutes of audio.*
- If awarded, one of the grant's required trainings is a student and family engagement training. It will cover ways to connect with students and families so you can be responsive to students' dietary needs and preferences. What ideas does your team have for students and families to inform your project? *Suggested length: 1 paragraph or 1 minute of audio.*
- How does your team structure encourage open dialogue and ensure that all members—including those who live, work and play in the school(s)'s community—are actively involved in the decision-making process? Please consider elements such as making sure everyone's voice is heard, maintaining communication, and integrating new ideas. *Suggested length: 2 paragraphs or 2 minutes of audio.*

REVIEW PROCESS

The Innovation Hub team will review all eligible and complete applications submitted by the deadline. We will review applications in their original form (i.e., in English, in Spanish, or as audio files). Each application will be reviewed separately by three reviewers, including at least one from the Innovation Hub administrative team at IPHI and at least one external reviewer with relevant content expertise. Each application will be scored as described in the Selection Criteria Section below. Each review team will discuss the applications they reviewed and may change their scores from these discussions.

In addition to scores, reviewers will also consider geographic distribution when selecting finalists. The Innovation Hub partnership will decide on the proposed list of finalists. If scores between applicants are very close, State Leads may provide their insights on those applicants from their state to inform finalists. Prior to selection of grantees, a list of finalists and recommended grantees will be presented to USDA, Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) for review and discussion.

USDA, FNA will review the funding recommendations compiled by the Innovation Hub team, and they will make final decisions about grantee awards.

SELECTION CRITERIA

All applications will be reviewed according to the selection criteria below. Applications can receive a maximum of 50 points.

Alignment with Goals: *9 possible points*

- The project aligns with the goal of increasing the number of local food businesses engaged in the Lake Michigan region school food system (up to 2 points)
- The project aligns with the goal of increasing the number of small food producers engaged in the Lake Michigan region school food system (up to 2 points)
- The project works toward improving the amount or quality of nutritious foods that align with USDA meal pattern requirements for school meals that are served in the Lake Michigan school food system (up to 2 points)
- The project works toward increasing access to nourishing foods in the Lake Michigan region (up to 2 points)
- The project aligns with three or four of the above Innovation Hub goals (up to 1 bonus point)

Potential Impact: *6 possible points*

- This project demonstrates the potential to significantly impact the people and place it intends to serve (up to 6 points)

Innovation: *9 possible points*

- The project is innovative and demonstrates thoughtfulness and creativity in its conceptualization (up to 4 points)
- The project provides clear opportunities to build partnerships, systems and/or products that can be applied or used in the future, regardless of the outcome of the innovation (up to 3 points)
- The project involves more than one sector of the school food system (up to 2 points)

Responsiveness: *5 possible points*

- The project indicates a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of its community and their food system needs, for example, including grassroots or first-hand identification of community needs (up to 3 points)
- The project identifies ideas for engaging with its key community audience (students, families, etc.) in a meaningful way and incorporating their input regarding needs and wants throughout the project (up to 2 points)

Community Connection: *6 possible points*

- The project team has a vested interest in the community being served, including having executive-level team members who live in the community or will be directly impacted by this community project (up to 3 points)
- The project team represent the people and place the project intends to serve (up to 3 points)

Team Collaboration: *6 possible points*

- A compelling partnership that represents the unique challenges of the community and the perspectives of students, farmers, food producers, schools and other collaborating organizations (up to 2 points)
- The application describes efforts to ensure all partners are working together effectively (up to 2 points)
- The scope of work amongst the project team seems adequate to meet the project goals (up to 2 points)

Feasibility and Accountability: *9 possible points*

- The budget meets the following considerations: (up to 3 points)
    - The budget includes costs necessary to support the described plan for team collaboration
    - The budget adequately supports project goals
    - There are clear linkages between budget line items and activities or tasks needed to complete the project
- The project timeline and work plan show that the project is realistic and has a solid rationale (up to 4 points)
- The team's combined experience and connections will support the project's successful completion (up to 2 points)

FEDERAL AWARD INFORMATION

The following administrative information is required for all federal award opportunities:

Federal Awarding Agency Name: United States Department of Agriculture

Funding Opportunity Title: Healthy Meals Incentives for Schools—School Food System Transformation Challenge Sub-Grants

Announcement Type: Initial Announcement

Federal Domestic Assistance Number: 10.579

Terms and Conditions for Resulting Awards: You can download the Terms and Conditions at InnovateSchoolFood.org/application-information/#docs.



APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS

USDA Meal Pattern Requirements for School Meals: Established by the United States Department of Agriculture for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Current USDA Meal Pattern guidance is available here. The Final Rule for School Meal Standards may also be helpful.

If you would like support to make sure your project aligns with these meal pattern requirements, contact your State Lead (contact information can be found on page 8).

School Meal: A federally reimbursable meal that meets the meal pattern requirements for meals served in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

Nutritious Food: Foods that provide vitamins, minerals and other health-promoting components and have no or little added sugars, saturated fat and sodium. These foods include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy.

Local Food Business: A commercial business that is based in and handles food produced in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and/or Wisconsin. Local food businesses may include but are not limited to food producers, aggregators, processors, distributors, and suppliers.

Small Food Producers: A farmer, rancher, fisher, or other food producer with gross cash farm income under $250,000. (Source)

APPENDIX B: ALLOWABLE COSTS

USDA Innovation Hub Grant Allowable Costs

Allowable costs are charges related to your project that can be covered with your grant award. Unallowable costs are charges related to your project that cannot be covered or reimbursed by your grant award.

All requested costs must be allowable, allocable, necessary, and reasonable in accordance with the OMB CFR Cost Principles including *2 CFR Part 200* and *2 CFR Part 400*.

Questions about allowable costs? Refer to the frequently asked questions at InnovateSchoolFood.org/frequently-asked-questions or visit Mariela Medina's office hours, listed on page 9.

Allowable Costs

- **Improving Food Quality and Nutrition**: Activities that aim to improve the quality, safety, and nutritional value of food products. These may include but are not limited to product development, taste-testing events, food safety training and nutrition education.
- **Spending for Supplies**: Materials needed to support the project, such as meeting and office supplies (paper, notepads, easels, etc.), printed materials, food storage units, small kitchen and cafeteria supplies (such as educational posters, cookware and cutlery), and small equipment less than $10,000.
- **Personnel Costs**: Salary and benefits for key staff directly supporting the project for the percentage of time that the staff will be supporting the project.
- **Rental Costs**: This includes rental costs for space, utilities and facilities directly used for the project. Rental agreements should be reviewed regularly to make sure they are still the most cost-effective and efficient choices.
- **Leasing**: Leasing office space, equipment, vehicles or facilities needed for the project.
- **Technology**: The purchasing of technology, such as hardware (like computers, laptops, or tablets) and/or software (like accounting systems or antivirus software), is allowed if it is specified and essential to the project.
- **Promotion Expenses**: Printing, duplication and distribution of materials to promote projects; development and distribution of materials and social media; and costs for developing and translating materials or adapting them to different formats.
- **Capacity Building**: Costs associated with activities that enhance the skills, knowledge and resources to better meet the objectives of a project. These activities are allowable if they directly support and are necessary to the project's goals. This includes costs associated with providing training, technical assistance (such as consultations and technology), and planning (such as adapting materials to other languages and for Section 508 accessibility standards, honorariums for guest speakers, etc.).
- **Travel**: As needed and justified.

Allowable Costs with Prior Approval From USDA

- **Equipment**: Equipment is defined as tangible, durable, personal property having a continual useful life of more than one year and a cost of $10,000 or more per unit.
    - Any large equipment purchases (over $10,000 per unit) will need to have prior approval by the USDA before they are allowed. Equipment must be essential to your project, meaning that it is directly related to the project's outcomes. If any equipment over $10,000 is included in your proposed budget, please explain why it is necessary and how you will ensure that it is cost effective. In order to demonstrate cost effectiveness, you will need to provide 3-4 estimates for the equipment you wish to purchase. You will be able to upload these estimates when you submit your application. Review and approval of your proposed equipment by the USDA will occur through review of your application. Please note that all equipment over $10,000 has additional reporting and disposition requirements.
- **Improvements**: Costs related to fixing, improving, or updating an existing building or space to make it better, look nicer, and work properly will need prior approval by USDA before they are allowed. The work should directly contribute to the project's goals. For example, a drip structure for a moveable greenhouse is allowable with prior approval by the USDA.

Unallowable Costs

- **Food**: Funds used to purchase food intended primarily for consumption, such as for events, lunch or meal services, are not allowable.
- **Advertising/Public Relations Costs**: Using funds for general promotional activities or general public relations, which primarily serve a grantee's public image rather than the specific goals of the grant, are not allowable.
- **Marketing Items**: Promotional "swag" and "door prize" items. For example, blankets, candy, clothing, keychains, and other items are not allowable.
- **Prizes**: Gift cards, cash and other monetary awards are not allowable. This includes vacations, spa packages, hotel stays, or other, similar prizes.
- **Vehicles**: Grant funds may not be used to purchase motor vehicles, including cars, trucks, vans, buses, or other transportation equipment.
- **Monetary Expenses**: Loans, cash, etc., are not allowable.
- **Capital Expenditures/Improvements**: Money spent to make significant, long-lasting enhancements or additions to property, equipment, or facilities, such as permanent structure building (foundation, plumbing, electrical, etc.), is not allowable.
- **Lobbying**: Costs associated with seeking to influence government policies, actions, or decisions are not allowable.
- **Costs Unrelated to the Project**: Any costs for personal items or services not related to the project's objectives, or expenses unnecessary for successful project implementation, are not allowable.

- **Fines and Penalties**: Costs arising from violations of laws and regulations, such as fines and penalties, are typically not allowable.
- **Equipment Fixes**: Costs for maintenance and repair of equipment are not allowable.

APPENDIX C: LEAD APPLICANT GUIDANCE

Lead Applicant Guidance

The information below is meant to help project teams select a lead applicant, who can meet financial and other requirements of a federal grant. (This is also known as compliance.) The Innovation Hub team can help project teams decide which partner is best suited to this role. We can also help lead applicants through unfamiliar processes. Visit Mariela Medina's office hours, listed on page 9, for help.

Grant Requirements for Lead Applicants

Fiscal Responsibility: These are the financial requirements of a lead applicant.

- Budget Planning:
    - Thoroughly plan your budget, ensuring all expenses and budget items specifically align with the grant's objectives and are in accordance with 2 CFR 200. Please note: all budgeted expenses and items must be clearly connected to your project work.
    - Include all eligible costs and adhere to cost principles such as allowable, allocable, and reasonable expenses.

- Expense Tracking:
    - Implement robust financial tracking systems to monitor grant-related expenses.
    - Keep records of all financial transactions, invoices, and receipts.

- Procurement (Acquiring Goods or Services):
    - Follow procurement procedures outlined in 2 CFR 200 when acquiring goods or services with grant funds.
        - Individual transactions must be $15,000 or less under the micro-purchase threshold outlined in 2 CFR 200.320. Procurement under this threshold may be conducted without obtaining competitive quotations, provided that the price is reasonable and consistent with federal guidelines.
        - Transactions exceeding the micro-purchase threshold, but not exceeding $50,000, are subject to simplified acquisition threshold procedures.

Applicants must obtain price or rate quotations from an adequate number of qualified sources.
        - Awards or subawards issued under this RFA cannot exceed $50,000 per individual transaction under the simplified acquisition threshold. Exceptions to this limit will require prior written approval from USDA.
    - Maintain transparency and competitiveness in procurement; proper documentation must be maintained when justifying procurement decisions to ensure compliance with federal regulations.

- Compliance Documentation:
    - Maintain documentation of compliance with federal grant regulations, including procurement records and financial reports.

Reporting Requirements: These are documentation and communication expectations of a lead applicant.

- Timely Reporting:
    - Submit all required financial and programmatic reports according to the grant agreement and USDA guidelines.
    - Ensure reports are accurate, complete, and submitted by the specified deadlines.

- Narrative Progress Reports:
    - Create a clear and concise annual report that highlights significant achievements and lessons learned. This report should also help track your progress in achieving grant objectives, which may involve metrics such as evaluating how well new products are used in schools and how satisfied students are with them.
    - Check-in with State Leads at least monthly to share your accomplishments, any obstacles you've faced, your upcoming goals for the next reporting period, and more. This information helps inform reports and Stories of Innovation.

- Financial Reports:
    - Prepare financial reports that detail the use of grant funds and expenses.
    - Comply with format and content requirements as per USDA and 2 CFR 200.

Grant Deliverables: Here is what is expected of all grantees throughout and by the end of the grant period.

- Project Implementation:
    - Execute the project in a way that follows the approved proposal and grant guidelines.
    - Monitor progress and adjust as needed to achieve project goals.

- Recordkeeping:

    - Maintain organized records of project activities, accomplishments and any necessary supporting documentation.

- Evaluation and Documentation:
    - Evaluate the project's outcomes and ensure they align with the grant's objectives.
    - Document the impact of the grant funds on your organization and the community.

- Compliance with the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Guidelines:
    - Understand and follow IPHI's rules and expectations, which are aligned with the CFR. Make sure that all activities are conducted in accordance with IPHI's instructions to fulfill the grant's requirements.

APPENDIX D: BUDGET TEMPLATE

A budget template is available as a Microsoft Excel document and in Google Sheets. This template is sufficient for project application. The Innovation Hub team will work with selected applicants to further develop their budgets.

Download a Budget Template in Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets at InnovateSchoolFood.org/application-information/#docs.

APPENDIX E: LETTERS OF SUPPORT TEMPLATES AND GUIDANCE

Letters of support are required for most Innovation Hub applications. The purpose of a letter of support is to show that partners are committed to and invested in your project.

Some letters of support are required for your application and others are recommended. Please reach out to your State Lead with questions. Here's what you need to know:

Required IF the lead applicant is not a school:

- **School Letter of Support.** All projects must benefit a school, school district, or group of schools, so applications require at least one letter of support from a school or district within Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and/or Wisconsin. Please note, at least one school letter of support ***must*** be from one of the school(s) your project lists in your application as intending to impact.

Required IF you have one or more project partners in addition to the lead applicant that would receive funding:

- **Project Team Letter of Support.** A letter of support is required from every organization listed in the Project Team Information section of the application (schools will complete the School Letter of Support, page 25) **who would receive funding from the project, if awarded**. We recommend a letter of support from any other unfunded collaborators—though it is not required. The Project Team Letter of Support template found on page 26 encompasses all necessary details.

Required IF the school or district the project intends to impact uses a contracted food service management company:

- **Food Service Management Company Letter of Support.** A letter of support from the food service management company, which indicates they are willing to cooperate with the project's food service goals, is required when working with schools that use contracted food service. The Food Service Management Company Letter of Support template on page 27 includes all information required.
- **Letter of Exemption.** If you are **unable** to receive a letter of support from the food service management company of your project's school or district that uses contract food services, applicants must provide a letter in their place explaining why not. The reason for the exemption should be related to the project goals (e.g., letters of exemption related to running out of time will not be accepted).

Recommended Letters of Support:

- **General Project Letter of Support**. Grant applications should promote systems-change in your school food system. Systems-change efforts are most successful with broad support from key organizations, legislators, school boards, superintendents, and/or community members. Letters of support from representatives whose support is important for the success of your project are recommended. Additionally, letters of support from community partners who can speak to the applicants and projects' integration into the community are also recommended. The General Project Support template on page 28 can be completed by key supporters who are not on your project team.

Other Tips

- **It takes time to gather letters of support, so we encourage applicants to get started reaching out early**. Further guidance on letters of support can be found in our video library or work with your State Leads for support.
- You can pre-fill in much of the information, like your applicant organization name, project title, etc. before sending the template for partners to complete and sign.
- In the Project Team letter of support, the list of work the partner will perform for the project should match what is written in your application.
- General Project Support letters of support are recommended to demonstrate broad support for and confidence in project implementation by key supporters.

TEMPLATE: School Letter of Support

[DATE]

[ADDRESS]

Dear Innovation Hub Team,

[School/District name] is pleased to submit this letter of support for the [lead applicant organization's] grant application for the Innovation Hub Spark Award, [Project Title].

This project aligns with our goals of [list a few ways this aligns with your efforts].

We are excited to participate in this innovative work to improve our school food system and marketplace. We commit to [list the work you will perform for this project].

[INCLUDE THIS SECTION HIGHLIGHTED IN BLUE ONLY IF THE SCHOOL OR DISTRICT IS ONE OF THE SCHOOLS OR DISTRICTS LISTED IN YOUR APPLICATION AS INTENDING TO IMPACT:

- We use [self-operated food service OR contracted food service]. *Note: if the school uses contracted food service, a letter of support from their food service management company or a letter of exemption related to the project goals must also be included in your application].*

If [lead applicant organization] is awarded this grant, we look forward to supporting the project's efforts to respond to students' dietary needs and preferences and learning from the project's innovations to improve our school food system and marketplace. [optional: list any ways the school/district can support this (e.g., hosting taste-testing events, focus groups)].

Sincerely,

[Signature]
School Administrator Name
School Administrator Title
Phone Number
Email

School Food Authority Number: _____

TEMPLATE: Project Team Letter of Support

[DATE]

[ADDRESS]

Dear Innovation Hub Team,

[Organization name] is pleased to submit this letter of support for the [lead applicant organization's] grant application for the Innovation Hub Spark Award, [Project Title].

[Organization's] mission is to […]. This project aligns well with our other efforts to [list a few relevant efforts].

We are excited to participate in this innovative work to improve our school food system and products. We commit to [list the work you will perform for this project].

We look forward to this partnership if [lead applicant organization] is awarded this grant.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Name
Title
Phone Number
Email

TEMPLATE: Food Service Management Company Letter of Support

[DATE]

[ADDRESS]

Dear Innovation Hub Team,

[Company name] is pleased to submit this letter of support for the [lead applicant organization's] grant application for the Innovation Hub Spark Award, [Project Title].

We commit to cooperating with this project's food service goals and we look forward to learning about how our company can support innovations to improve the food system and products for [school/school district name].

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Name
Title
Phone Number
Email

TEMPLATE: General Project Support Letter of Support

[DATE]

[ADDRESS]

Dear Innovation Hub Team,

[I/Organization] [am/is] pleased to submit this letter of support for the [lead applicant organization's] grant application for the Innovation Hub Spark Award, [Project Title].

[Please briefly describe your role in your local school food system and why it is important to you] OR [Please briefly describe your role as a community partner, how you can speak to the community impact of the applicant(s) and their project, and why it is important to you].

[I/We] think this project is important to fund because [describe a few ways you feel this project will benefit your local school food system and/or community].

[I/We] look forward to following this project if [lead applicant organization] is awarded this grant and supporting it as needed [add any ways your organization would support this project if awarded].

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Name
Title
Phone Number
Email