

Cafeteria Chronicles: Midwest Central Community Unit District 191

At Midwest Central Community Unit School District #191 in Manito, IL, change is on the menu. As a Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) grantee and recipient of the Small and/or Rural School Food Authority Lunch Trailblazer Award, Midwest Central has transformed its school nutrition program to prioritize fresh, healthy meals for its students. One of the district's most impactful achievements has been utilizing grant funds to bring food service in-house – a move that required an investment in staff training, procuring new kitchen equipment, and establishing partnerships with local farmers. District leaders were confident that the self-operated food service model would offer more flexibility to embrace scratch cooking, incorporate local produce, and meet student preferences.

The district's scratch cooking journey began with a switch to fresh, unprocessed meats, such as fresh ground beef, beef patties, pork chops, and chicken. The switch from pre-packaged, processed meat to fresh meat significantly reduced the sodium content in school meals. To enhance flavors, recipes now utilize herbs and spices like Italian seasoning, onion powder, garlic powder, cumin, and paprika instead of salt.

Beyond fresh meats, Midwest Central focused on incorporating more fresh fruits and vegetables in place of canned options. A daily fresh fruit and vegetable bar is offered in addition to a hot vegetable option. Steamed broccoli with herbs and baked zucchini with a hint of parmesan cheese became unexpected hits, especially among primary school students. In addition to working with local farmers, the district makes use of USDA commodities whenever possible, which provides them with access to a wide range of fresh produce and helps keep the program cost effective. Exposing students to more fresh fruits and vegetables not only improved the nutritional value of school meals, but also helped shift their palates toward healthier choices.

Learn how the team at Midwest Central utilized HMI funds to reduce sodium in school meals by switching to scratch cooking in this [video](#)!

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Looking ahead, Midwest Central plans to keep engaging students and parents through taste tests and feedback, fostering a lasting culture of healthy eating. By continuing to invest in staff training and offering students a variety of fresh, delicious meals, Midwest Central is setting a new standard for school meals.

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