

Cafeteria Chronicles: Northeast Vernon County School District R1

Northeast Vernon County School District R1, located in rural Walker, MO, is making impressive strides in school nutrition with the support of the USDA and Action for Healthy Kids' Healthy Meals Incentives Grant. The district plans to use grant funds to transition from heat-and-serve meals to more scratch cooking, focusing on fresh, locally sourced ingredients. This shift is not just about improving the quality of the food served but also about teaching students where their food comes from and the importance of making healthy choices. The district's dedication to providing healthier meals and educating students on food and nutrition also earned them the Innovation in Nutrition Education Award for their efforts with hydroponic gardening.

With the guidance of an expert in hydroponics, students at Northeast Vernon County are learning to grow their own vegetables in the school's greenhouse. This hands-on approach not only provides fresh produce for school meals but also instills a sense of responsibility and awareness about the benefits of sustainable agriculture. The hydroponic gardens have become a cornerstone of the district's nutrition education efforts, with students actively involved in every step of the process, from planting seeds to harvesting crops.

See Northeast Vernon County School District R1's efforts in this [video](#).

The district's commitment to nutrition education extends beyond the classroom. Northeast Vernon County School District has partnered with local nonprofit Healthy Nevada to conduct monthly taste tests, allowing students to try the fresh produce grown in their gardens. These taste tests, along with educational activities led by their local Future Farmers of America chapter and agriculture science teacher, have helped students understand the hydroponic process and the health benefits of eating fresh, locally grown foods. The district has even sent seedlings home with elementary students, along with care instructions and nutritional information, so families can continue the learning experience at home.

Future plans include partnering with local farmers to procure fresh produce and meats and purchasing menu planning software to help with menu planning, recipe development, and compliance with the USDA's updated school nutrition standards.

Through these initiatives, Northeast Vernon County School District is not only enhancing the quality of meals served in their cafeterias but also fostering a culture of health and sustainability that will benefit their students for years to come. Their innovative approach to nutrition education demonstrates how schools can positively impact student health and well-being.

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Administration. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.