

Phil Vavra – Writing Samples

School Lunches Will Undergo Major Changes By 2025 (Blog post)

Your child's [school](#) lunches could soon taste very different, and it's probably for the better. According to [ABC News](#), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is calling for less sugar and salt in the food being served in America's school cafeterias.

This is the first time a USDA-mandated limit will be placed on added sugars in school lunches. The agency wants to cut sugars to less than 10 percent of daily calories. The USDA has also updated its guidelines to cut sodium by 15 percent, which is half of the 30-percent reduction that was proposed in 2023.

The rules also require more whole grains but won't ban chocolate milk or other flavored dairy products. These new restrictions will begin with the 2025-26 school year. Given the state of our nation's health, the changes are long overdue. Still, I can't help but wonder if the beloved and, dare I say, iconic rectangle [pizza](#) will survive.

School Lunches vs. Lunchables

Some health-conscious parents opt to send their kids off to school with a lunch they pack at home. But are they really any better than the school lunches being served in the cafeterias? Maybe if the lunch is actually homemade. Unfortunately, pre-packaged meal options, such as Lunchables, might be even worse than cafeteria food.

Lunchables have been around for decades because kids love them and, let's face it, they're convenient. However, some of the companies that makes them are now facing a class action lawsuit. Kraft Heinz and Maple Leaf Foods are being accused of deceptive advertising and packaging.

[Consumer Reports](#) tested 12 different pre-packaged lunch kits and found concerning levels of lead, cadmium, or both in all of them. They also found high levels of sodium in the lunch kits, ranging from 460 to 740 milligrams. That's nearly 25- to 50-percent of a child's daily recommended limit.

Lunch Kit Brands Respond

Kraft Heinz, the parent company of Oscar Mayer, Lunchables, and P3, said in a statement: "All our foods meet strict safety standards," and "lead and cadmium occur naturally in the environment and may be present in low levels in food products." Smithfield Foods, which makes Armour LunchMakers, said it follows "strict programs and policies that promote food safety and quality in every step of our value chain." Target, which sells Good & Gather products, did not respond to *Consumer Reports*.

One pre-packaged lunch kit brand is already working toward making changes. Maple Leaf Foods, the Canadian company behind Greenfield Natural Meat Co., says it hopes to offer a reduced-sodium product by the end of 2025. But aside from the sodium, most of the tested lunch kit products also contained highly processed meats, which have been linked to certain cancers. You can read more about the study [HERE](#).

North Carolina Is Home To America's Most Affordable Vacation Destination For 2024 (Blog post)

Every spring, as the school year winds down, families across America begin making their [summer travel](#) plans. Of course, cost is a big consideration, especially these days when just about everything comes with a higher price. That's why a list of affordable vacation destinations couldn't come at a better time.

With budget-conscious vacationers in mind, [Optimos Travel](#) analyzed over 100 well-known spots in the USA to find the best values. The travel site looked at daily meal expenses, cost of public transportation, accommodation rates, and fees for attractions to come up with lists of the [most and least expensive vacation destinations](#).

And The Most Affordable Vacation Destination Is...

Based on the data, Optimos Travel found that you can get the most bang for your buck right here in North Carolina. The beautiful beaches and family-friendly attractions of the Outer Banks come in at number 1 on the list of this year's least expensive destinations. The cost of a 7-day stay is about \$1,237 per person, but that's based on some rather cheap accommodations. You can easily spend a lot more if you rent one of the many large oceanfront houses on the OBX.

My family and I have been vacationing in the Outer Banks town of Avon for years. It's one of the quieter spots along the narrow stretch of barrier islands. However, it's a quick drive to the iconic Cape Hatteras lighthouse and a short ferry ride to historic [Ocracoke](#). Otherwise, people go there simply to enjoy the natural beauty of the beaches and Albemarle Sound, as well as the many recreational opportunities (fishing, surfing, kayak, jet ski) available there.

For families looking for more variety in their beach vacation, I recommend staying around Kitty Hawk and Kill Devil Hills. That's where you'll find more dining, shopping, and entertainment options. Farther up the coast, you can even see wild horses in Corolla. And no matter where you choose to stay along the Outer Banks, it's almost your duty as an American to visit the [Wright Brothers National Memorial](#).

The South boasts a few other affordable vacation destinations for 2024, so you don't have to travel too far to find fun and value for your family. You can see the rest of the top 10 below.

America's Most Affordable Vacation Destinations (*Optimos Travel*)

1. Outer Banks, North Carolina
2. Charleston, West Virginia
3. Helen, Georgia
4. Tybee Island, Georgia
5. Gatlinburg, Tennessee
6. Sedona, Arizona
7. Cape Cod, Massachusetts
8. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
9. Bend, Oregon
10. Monument Valley, Utah

SJBC Serves Charlotte's Homeless With 'Room in The Inn' (Newsletter article)

Many of us cherish these crisp days of fall and the coming of the holiday season. We look forward to seeing the leaves changing colors and smelling the rich aromas from our kitchens. But for others, this time of year presents daunting challenges. For Charlotte's homeless population, winter's approach heightens the urgency to find warm clothing, nourishing food, and safe shelter.

In 1996, the Urban Ministry Center began leading a coalition of area faith congregations, colleges, and YMCA branches to serve local homeless men, women, and children through the cold weather months with Room in the Inn. St. John's Baptist Church has been a stalwart partner in this initiative since its inception by offering beds and meals to more than 200 men in need on Friday nights every December through March.

Serving so many people each year requires considerable effort on the part of St. John's members. Approximately 80 volunteers take turns transporting weekly guests to and from the church; preparing supper, breakfast, and sack lunches; and transforming the gym into sleeping quarters. Typically, at least two volunteers will spend the night in the church lounge to ensure that overnight guests are comfortable and have what they need, including t-shirts, underwear, socks, and toiletries, when available.

While the homeless men who come to St. John's receive basic provisions and respite from the elements, another meaningful transaction occurs through the sharing of meals, conversation, and fellowship. Room in the Inn liaison Alice Wirz says, "Personally, [Room in the Inn] blends my political, spiritual, and personal beliefs in a program that helps 'the least of these' in our city. It makes us see these individuals as people who have more in common with us than many people think. The neighbors we serve deserve a warm meal, a warm bed, and the warmth our members share during their short stay. It gives our church a soul. It's not perfect, but it's been satisfying to partner with the Urban Ministry who work with the homeless every single day."

Some of those neighbors arrive on St. John's doorsteps with histories of substance abuse and mental health issues, but as Room in the Inn coordinator Dale Johnson says, "Room in the Inn levels the field. A homeless man might be looked down upon elsewhere but, while he's at St. John's, he's treated as a peer and valued as a human being. There's no difference between us and them except maybe the issues that put them in their situation."

Volunteers, meal preparation, and donations (t-shirts, underwear, socks, toiletries) for Room in the Inn are always welcome. Dale and Alice have an immediate need for another person to drive the church van between St. John's and the Urban Ministry Center once a month. To learn more, please contact Dale Johnson (email address) or Alice Wirz (email address).

Radio Ad Copy

401 Par Golf

“Common Ground” :30

Parents and kids. You’ll have your ups and downs. Sometimes the best place to find common ground is between the first tee and the last hole. Maybe that’s why they’re called “the links.” Find your common ground at 401 Par Golf, Raleigh’s friendliest golf facility. Generations of area families have bonded over a bucket of balls on the lighted driving range, lessons and practice on the par-3 course, and even a round of mini-golf. 401 Par Golf, 5715 Fayetteville Road. Accessible. Affordable. Memorable. 401 Par Golf-dot-com.

“Share The Game” :30

(SFX: Club swing) It has spanned generations and closed the gaps between them. *(SFX: Ball in cup)* Share the game with *your* next generation at 401 Par Golf. Registration is now open for youth and adult instruction. The par-3 course is the perfect classroom for the novice golfer. Tune up your swing on the lighted driving range. And explore the Player Development Program, the best practice membership in Raleigh. 401 Par Golf, 5715 Fayetteville Road. Accessible. Affordable. Memorable. 401 Par Golf-dot-com.

Gaston County Police Department

“Recruitment” :30

What are you doing at work today? Clock in, clock out, go home? Is that how you thought it would be when you graduated from college? It’s time to raise the standard. If you’d rather have a truly rewarding career, where you’re doing something for the community and earning a competitive salary, join the Green and Grey. The Gaston County Police Department is looking for new officers. If you have a four-year degree, visit gastoncountypolice.org or call 704-866-3320. Raise the standard with the Gaston County Police Department.

Dickey's Barbecue Pit

"Dinner" :15

Long day at work. Long lines at the market. You know what to do. Dickey's for dinner! Bring home one of their mouth-watering Big Barbecue Packs and save yourself from a *long night* in the kitchen. Locally owned and operated in downtown Raleigh, Cary, and celebrating five years in Durham. Dickey's Barbecue Pit. Dickey's-dot-com.

Whitewater Springs

"Country Estate Living" :60

First, it was that tiny studio apartment after graduation. The next place was a little bigger. A few years with the company and you could afford to move into a small house. Well, your dues have been paid and it's time to graduate again. Imagine your very own home built on an idyllic one- to seven-acre country estate home-site in Whitewater Springs. Set atop twelve magnificent hills with over four hundred feet of changing elevation, Whitewater Springs is the Hill Country's most unique development. Crystal-clear streams cascade down the hillside and gently flow through the valleys. Scenic nature trails provide miles of hiking and riding routes, adding to your lifelong enjoyment. Why wait any longer? During the preview showing, you'll save 25% on a one- to seven-acre home-site at Whitewater Springs. Begin your visit at suntex-dash-fuller-dot-com. Suntex-dash-fuller-dot-com. Experience country estate living at beautiful Whitewater Springs...where life is better.