

Reimagining School Food Systems: Policy Pathways to Reduce Ultra-Processed Foods and Expand Scratch Cooking

About the Guest Speakers and Moderator

Introduces and Moderates:



Jennifer Cadenhead, PhD, RDN is Assistant Professor at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, Faculty Fellow at the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, and registered dietitian nutritionist. Dr. Cadenhead conducts behavioral nutrition science to advance health equity through food policy. Her work

focuses on diet patterns, particularly ultra-processed foods consumption, and health. She also studies school meal policies and dietary behaviors to promote nutrition security and mitigate chronic disease, with an emphasis on underserved communities. She seeks to provide critical insights through translating research for community members, advocates, educators and policy makers.

Opening Remarks:



Julia McCarthy, JD is a Senior Program Officer at the New York Health Foundation (NYHealth) and helps to lead the Foundation's Healthy Food, Healthy Lives priority area, the goal of which is to create a more equitable food system that connects all New Yorkers to the food they need to thrive. Prior to joining NYHealth, McCarthy

served as the deputy director of the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she oversaw operations, strategy, and project execution. McCarthy has held policy roles at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Food and Drug Administration. She is currently the co-chair of the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Alliance Policy Committee, a steering committee member for Food Policy Networks, and a member of the New York Council on Hunger and Food Policy. McCarthy holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Georgetown University and a Juris Doctor degree from New York University School of Law, where she was a Root-Tilden-Kern scholar. She is currently a Bloomberg American Health Initiative Fellow, pursuing a Masters in Public Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School.

Panelists:



Donna S. Martin, EdS, RDN, LD, SNS, FAND is the retired director of the Burke County (GA) school nutrition program and served as President of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in 2017-2018. Donna is a graduate of the University of Georgia and earned a master's degree from the University of Alabama –

Birmingham and an education specialist degree from Augusta University. In 2016, Donna's work in the Burke County Public Schools nutrition program gained national attention when Michelle Obama and Al Roker visited Burke County to help plant a school garden. Donna was then invited to speak at the White House for Michelle Obama's capstone event. Donna was also awarded the 2016 Golden Radish Award for the state of Georgia because of her efforts in the Farm to School Movement. Donna has been involved in numerous public policy initiatives,

including testifying before Congress about the new School Nutrition Standards and to the House of Representatives Staff on the Farm to School Bill. Donna got to speak at the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health on the importance of School Meals. Donna is on the GenYouth Board of Directors, is a National Dairy Ambassador, a No Kid Hungry Consultant and a trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.



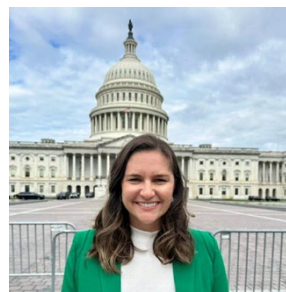
Stephen O'Brien, MPA is the Founder and President of SOBX2 (Strategic Operations & Business Consulting). After a 33-year career with New York City Public Schools, where he led major initiatives in school food, sustainability, and strategic partnerships, Stephen now works across the country advising school districts,

nonprofits, and industry partners. His work focuses on providing high quality food and supplies for schools, building stronger, more connected school nutrition programs through innovation, collaboration, and purpose-driven leadership.



Nancy Easton, MEd, is the Executive Director and Founder of Wellness in the Schools (WITS), a national nonprofit with the vision to ensure access to nourishing food and active play in public schools. Nancy has led the growth of WITS into an organization that has cooked more than 50 million

school meals and led more than 85,000 hours of active play. She is a regular commentator and speaker on school food and child wellness. Nancy was honored by First Lady Michelle Obama at the launch of Chefs Move! to Schools, named a Food Revolution Hero by acclaimed chef-food activist Jamie Oliver, and recognized by Ann Cooper, the "Renegade Lunch Lady," for her dedication to school lunch reform. She has received a Changemaker Award from the NYC Food Policy Center and a Spirit of the City Award from the NYC Mayor's Office in 2025, and was also named one of the Top Women in Metro New York Foodservice & Hospitality in 2020.



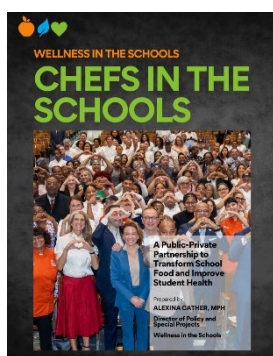
Meghan Maroney, MPH is a campaign manager at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, where she leads federal, state and local advocacy on child nutrition programs. Meghan's advocacy work focuses on improving access to and the nutritional quality of foods served in child nutrition

programs, and ensuring that programs are equipped with the tools and resources they need to succeed. Before coming to CSPI in 2019, Meghan worked at the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where she supported implementation of the NYC Food Standards on college campuses and private hospitals, and worked with food distributors to identify healthier products to their customers. Meghan has a BS in Health Science from the University of Miami and an MPH from George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. She lives in Maryland with her husband and two kids.

Reimagining School Food Systems: Policy Pathways to Reduce Ultra-Processed Foods and Expand Scratch Cooking

About the forum: Join the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute for a timely conversation on how to improve the quality of school meals and advance health equity by reducing reliance on ultra-processed foods and expanding scratch cooking in public schools. This forum will highlight findings from the Chefs in the Schools (CITS) initiative, a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership with Wellness in the Schools, the NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy, and the NYC Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services that combines chef-led menu innovation, workforce training, and nutrition education. The program has demonstrated that it is possible to introduce plant-forward, culturally inclusive, scratch-cooked meals at scale, while building the skills and capacity of school food staff and engaging students in healthier eating habits. With growing evidence that ultra-processed foods contribute to diet-related disease and dominate children's diets, including in school settings, this conversation comes at a critical moment for rethinking school meals as a cornerstone of public health policy. The panel will inform broader efforts to transform school food systems nationwide.

Additional Resources:



Alexina Cather (2026). *Chefs in the Schools: A Public Private Partnership to Transform School Food and Improve Student Health*. Wellness in the Schools (WITS).

Available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qMj9GcEumf9SkKocC8AjdubJnoCaDPHI/view?usp=sharing>

Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), *Healthier school food*, <https://www.cspi.org/HealthySchools>

Food Tank. (2026). *Chefs in the schools: Equitable meals across New York City*.

<https://foodtank.com/news/2026/02/chefs-in-the-schools-equitable-meals-across-new-york-city/>

Godfrey, J. R. (2012). Fulfilling the highest nutrition standards in Burke County district schools. *Childhood Obesity*, 8(4), 400-403.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/chi.2012.0084.godf>

Going Zero Podcast. (2025) *How to Deliver Healthy Meals and Implement Sustainable Change To 1.1 Millions Students Per Day - A Conversation with Stephen O'Brien* <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-to-deliver-healthy-meals-and-and/id1728750646?i=1000729972976>

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2025) *The Mix Up podcast – Episode 31: Shaping student's relationship with food*. A conversation with Stephen O'Brien. <https://theicn.org/the-mix-up-podcast-episode-31-shaping-students-relationship-with-food/>

Koch, P. A., Greaves-Peters, N., & Cadenhead, J. W. (2023). Nourishing Knowledge: Food Education Joins the Core Subjects in Schools. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 55(9), 621-622. [https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046\(23\)00441-4/fulltext](https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(23)00441-4/fulltext)

Lane, Melissa M., et al. (2021) "Ultraprocessed food and chronic noncommunicable diseases: a systematic review and meta-analysis of 43 observational studies." *Obesity reviews* 22.3: e13146.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33167080/>

Lane, M. M., Gamage, E., Du, S., Ashtree, D. N., McGuinness, A. J., Gauci, S., Baker, P., Lawrence, M., Rebholz, C. M., Srouf, B., Touvier, M., Jacka, F. N., O'Neil, A., Segasby, T., & Marx, W. (2024). Ultra-processed food exposure and adverse health outcomes: Umbrella review of epidemiological meta-analyses. *BMJ*, 384, e077310.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-077310>

Lott ME, Taillie LS, Krieger J, Reed L, Ananthan S, D'Angelo Campos A, Story M. (2026) *Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies*. Executive Summary. Durham, NC: *Healthy Eating Research*, Available at

<https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/UPF-Expert-Panel-Executive-Summary-03.pdf>

Lott ME, Taillie LS, Krieger J, Reed L, Ananthan S, D'Angelo Campos A, Story M. (2026) *Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies*. Durham, NC: *Healthy Eating Research*, Technical Report.

Available at: <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/HER-UPF-Expert-Panel-Technical-Report-04-1.pdf> *MEL, LST, and JK are joint co-first authors.

Monteiro, C. A., Cannon, G., Levy, R. B., Moubarac, J. C., Louzada, M. L., Rauber, F., ... & Jaime, P. C. (2019). Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. *Public health nutrition*, 22(5), 936-941.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10260459/pdf/S1368980018003762a.pdf>

NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/foodpolicy/>

NYHealth, *Healthy Food, Healthy Lives*, <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/what-we-fund/healthy-food-healthy-lives/>

Stephen O'Brien (2026). *Building Intentional Partnerships in School Nutrition*. The Power of Us. Served Digizine. NxtGen Network.

<https://nxtgennetwork.serveddigizine.com/The-Power-of-Us-4-26/12/>

SOBx2, <https://sobx2.com/>

Wellness in the Schools (WITS), <https://www.wellnessintheschools.org>