

## **Strategy Brief & Talking Points**

**Response to the FED UP documentary and the Added Sugar issue**

**Version 2: Post-May 9<sup>th</sup> Release**

**May 14, 2014**

**What's new:** This version includes my thoughts after seeing the movie, news about the film's first weekend, and updated nutshell summary and talking points.

### **Nutshell Summary**

*Fed Up*, the new feature-length documentary about childhood obesity, added sugar, and the American processed food industry, opened at just 18 theaters in selected cities May 9; this week, the film's distributors announced more cities and screens where it will open through May and into June.

On its opening weekend, *Fed Up* generated somewhat better than hoped for ticket sales and largely positive critical reviews. For what it's worth, the theater where I saw it on Saturday, May 10 was completely full, and the audience reaction was very positive.

Please see my full "review" for my thoughts on how the film portrays school meals. While it's possible that you may need to react to a local story about the movie at any time, it's still too early to tell if the film will generate the kind of buzz nationally or locally that you would most likely need to respond to.

Our best advice right now:

- **Thoroughly read** this strategy brief and any updates we send out subsequently.
- **See the movie**, if it's playing near you.
- **Be ready to use the talking points** we're providing if called on to make a comment or do an interview.
- **Please let us know** if you have any ideas for making this prep even stronger!
- **Please let us know** if you are contacted about the movie or if it gets local coverage in your area.
- **Remember**, it's always acceptable to tell a reporter that you are busy at the moment and will get back to them right away (be polite!); then, reread the talking points and use them when commenting, or call us if you need further advice before speaking.

**Again, you may not need to respond at all, but better to be aware and prepared!**

## **Background**

The feature-length documentary *Fed Up* debuted to great acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2014. Here's how the movie is described on [the official Sundance page for the film](#):

"Upending the conventional wisdom of why we gain weight and how to lose it, *Fed Up* unearths a dirty secret of the American food industry—far more of us get sick from what we eat than anyone has previously realized. Filmmaker Stephanie Soechtig and TV journalist Katie Couric lead us through this potent exposé that uncovers why—despite media attention, the public's fascination with appearance, and government policies to combat childhood obesity—generations of American children will now live shorter lives than their parents did."

The film, which hit selected theaters on May 9, has come to be referred to as the "childhood obesity" movie and the "added sugar" movie, and indeed it does lay the blame for the epidemic of the former on the pervasiveness of the latter in our food supply.

***The biggest targets of the film are Big Agriculture (especially Big Sugar), the processed food industry, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, and the food policy makers in the U.S. Government, particularly the USDA. The School Nutrition programs (or, more accurately, the food that's available at schools) come in for some share of the scrutiny/criticism.***

The people involved in making the film gave it added visibility when it premiered at Sundance, and they continued to keep it in the news leading up to its theatrical release: well-known TV personality Katie Couric narrated the film, and some of the producers also helped make *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Al Gore climate change documentary and one of the most high-profile documentaries of the last decade.

*An Inconvenient Truth* debuted at Sundance in 2006, was purchased for distribution at the festival, and was released in New York and Los Angeles in May of that year. It became a critical and financial success, gaining wider release nationwide in the summer and going on to gross \$50 million worldwide and staying in the news for more than a year after its Sundance debut, finally winning the Academy Award for best documentary feature in March 2007.

I'm giving you this background on that older film, because when *Fed Up* first popped up on our radar screen in January, I suggested to our subscribers that this film could well follow the same trajectory as *An Inconvenient Truth*.

So far, that prediction has held true. *Fed Up* was purchased for distribution at the Sundance festival, and it is slated for release on Friday, May 9. The release will be wider than just New York and L. A., but it is still limited to certain cities and will be gradually rolled out to other areas in the weeks to come. As of week 2, every theater that opened the movie last week will still be showing it for at least one more week, and three dozen or so other theaters will begin showing the film on Friday, May 16. Please go [here](#) to see the current release schedule.

## ***At the Movies: My “Review” of Fed Up***

On Saturday night, May 10, I made the drive to downtown Washington, D.C. to see *Fed Up* on its opening weekend at the E Street Cinema. I opted to forego the Goobers and/or Raisinets!

I wasn't expecting a big crowd, so I lingered in the lobby until it was almost show time.

*Mistake!*

I never sit in front at the movies, but the smallish theater was packed, and I had to shoehorn into a seat in the exact middle of the back row in the front section. Luckily, I was alone – there were only a few single seats open.

Apparently, my experience wasn't unusual: the film “opened to a pleasing \$130,000 from 18 theaters for an average of \$7,200,” according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Fed Up*'s distributor called those numbers “a solid opening across our core art markets, performing at the top of practically all engagements. Reviews are top notch and the film is a hot button issue on Capitol Hill as food industry lobbyists have come out swinging. We're extremely encouraged and looking forward to expanding *Fed Up* into the heartland over the next couple weeks as well as launching a specially created Spanish language version targeted to Latino audiences.”

E Street, where I saw the film, has already extended *Fed Up* for another week, and a quick check of the other theaters where it opened last weekend indicates that it will play at least another week everywhere, as well as opening at a few dozen more movie houses on May 16, and more still in the weeks to follow. It may even follow the pattern of *An Inconvenient Truth* and open much wider over the summer.

So get ready to welcome *Fed Up* to a theater near you – and, when it gets to your neck of the woods, I urge you to go see it. It's entertaining, looks good, and moves very quickly, and I basically agree with its core message: that processed food – and particularly the sugar in all its myriad guises that's added copiously to processed food to make it palatable – is primarily responsible for the epidemic of childhood (and adulthood) obesity in our country. According to *Fed Up*, we're literally addicted to sugar. And our addiction is enabled by the processed food industry, Big Agriculture, Big Sugar, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, and the U.S. Government (via USDA), all in the name of imponderable profits and fat campaign donations.

You may or may not agree with this thesis, or you may fall somewhere in between, but the key issues for child nutrition professionals are (1) to what degree does the film implicate school meals in the crisis it identifies and examines; and (2) how should you respond to any potential fallout directed your way? I'll deal with the second of these points in the “Best Advice” and “Talking Points” sections of this Strategy Brief, but here let me talk about the content of the film as it relates to School Meals. (I'll leave the full-scale critical reviews to the professionals -- go [here](#) to see all of the critical reviews in a single web site.)

The film's direct examination of food served at schools is a very small portion of the film – just a few minutes really. But in that short time, the filmmakers and writers manage to interject several misleading (and possibly false?) premises. They claim that 50% of public schools serve commercial fast food; they intone that 80% of schools have a deal with Coke or Pepsi; and they vilify the typical public school as a “7-11 with books.”

All of these assertions are made while showing clips of kids in cafeterias and food being dished up on school serving lines (keep an eye out for our “DON'T4GET!” new regs banner, which, much to my shock and surprise, shows up twice in this section of the movie -- looking colorful and fantastic, I might add!). The basic dishonesty here is the conflation of School Meals with *food that's available at schools*. Child Nutrition Programs that are on the NSLP can't and don't have deals with soft drink companies – school principals do. Some programs might occasionally menu commercial fast food, but not as many as when I started in the business 20+ years ago, and NOWHERE NEAR 80%. And the offerings on a typical school lunch line look nothing like the junk food gauntlet kids and families run at convenience stores like 7-11.

OK, so what the film really means is that kids can get fast food and some form of soft drink products at some schools. But when the filmmakers make this claim while showing school cafeterias, the visual image strongly suggests that this is happening in your lines. This is misleading at best, and downright false at worst.

Beyond the brief section that deals directly with School Meals, however, there is an undercurrent throughout the film that business and government are killing our kids with sugar and schools are part of this unholy partnership. The movie follows several very overweight young teens as they try to lose weight, and food at school is mentioned more than once as one of their problems. Importantly for us and our response, since added sugar is the prime dietary villain here, the most recent changes to school meal requirements only address the villain indirectly (the new regs lower calories in the meals, so added sugar can't help but be reduced, but added sugar is not specifically addressed or limited by the new regs).

It's a movie worth seeing for anyone, and a must see for everyone in our industry. You can't respond to misleading attacks unless you know what they are!

## ***Our best current advice – May 14***

Whether or not *Fed Up* will (like *An Inconvenient Truth* before it) go on to achieve wide national release, tons of publicity, and a run in the public eye that lasts until next year's Oscars, rest assured that we're keeping an eye on it for you, and making sure that you're ready to respond if necessary.

Now that I've actually seen the movie, I can make a few tweaks to this advice and the talking points.

The movie was fairly heavily promoted, especially by Katie Couric in various appearances, in the days leading up to its initial release last week. It continues to generate more buzz – just this morning (May 14), the movie was on my local NPR station as a sponsor, and the film isn't even playing yet in my area, so that must indicate a national sponsorship on NPR. Also, today's New York Times ran an opinion piece on the movie by their well-known food writer Mark Bittman – headlined ["An Inconvenient Truth About Our Food."](#)

But at least so far, *Fed Up* has not seemed to spark a lot of local interest as far as I can tell – I could be missing some of the action (please let me know what, if anything, you've seen), but right now it only seems to have fired up folks who already probably subscribe to its thesis. *Preaching to the choir.*

I think we benefit from this story coming at the end of the school year and at a time when everyone's thoughts are turning more and more to summer and vacations. Of course, this could turn around at any time, so we'll remain vigilant for you, but for now the film's largely negative view of school meals does not seem to have created much negative publicity that our subscribers have had to deal with. Nonetheless, I believe the issue of added sugar will be the next big controversy affecting your programs, so we'll stay on top of it, and you should, too.

But, for now, no action is really required unless you are asked to respond/comment. We've laid a little pro-active groundwork for you by including a big piece on the April menus about the study finding that kids were eating more fruits and vegetables at school, as well as by our emphasis on added sugar on the May menu and in the May newsletter. If you've already used those pieces, you're at least in position to point out that you are aware of the added sugar issue and have taken steps to inform your communities about the problem of added sugar even before you knew about the movie. That's what we call "getting in front of the issue."

One weakness in our position is that USDA regulations don't control specifically for added sugar in our meals. Therefore, you would benefit by looking at typical meals you serve and identifying where the added sugar is -- and how much -- so you can intelligently talk about added sugar in your meals.

Read over the talking points below, and be aware that these have changed somewhat since I've seen the movie, and may well change further as circumstances develop and dictate. We will be monitoring the situation carefully and listening to your concerns, so don't hesitate to ask for a full press release if you feel you need one.

Should you be asked to respond, keep in mind that it is always acceptable, when a reporter calls, to tell him or her that you are taking care of something right now and to please give you a number to call back in just a few minutes. Then, gather your thoughts and composure look over the talking points again, call us if you feel you need to, and call back promptly.

It's also acceptable to use the talking points when addressing the media as a group or individually. Get to know the material and try not to simply read, but use the points to refer to and keep yourself on track.

Finally, don't feel pressured to say more than you know or can accurately say. Stay "on message" and stick to the points below, even if you have to repeat key phrases, and resist the all-too-human urge to blather on. Say what you have to say and then stop – it's up to them to frame a new question, so don't let them use "the roaring silence" to get you to keep going kind of aimlessly.

Try to come off as accommodating and eager to help, rather than defensive or trying to hide something.

AND PLEASE – call or contact us if you need more extensive or specific help or preparation.

## ***Other important links/resources***

**Updated May 14**

[The official web site of the movie](#)

[The film's trailer](#)

[The Fed Up Facebook page](#) -- lots of discussion and links here

[A letter from \*Fed Up\* Director Stephanie Soechtig](#) -- added May 14

Selected news stories and video about the film:

New York Times Opinion Piece -- ["An Inconvenient Truth About Our Food"](#) -- added May 14

[CBS News, May 8](#)

[USA Today, May 8](#)

[ABC News, May 8](#)

[Katie Couric on CNN, May 8](#)

[Katie Couric on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart](#)

Selected reviews of the film:

[New York Times](#)

[LA Times - May 8](#)

[Austin Chronicle - May 9](#)

[Village Voice - May 6](#)

[Variety](#)

[Metacritic](#) is a site that aggregates film reviews. You can find links to 18 different reviews written so far at this link.

***Talking points (revised May 14, post-release):***

1. As always, ***our primary job in (Name of your department) is to make sure that our students have access to healthy, balanced meals so they can learn well in school and live healthy lives.***

2. *Fed Up's* main point -- that added sugar in our diets is a health issue for Americans -- is not really new or controversial, but the movie does a good job of putting a lot of information together in a slick and entertaining package typical of Hollywood "issue" documentaries.

3. Here on the front lines of teaching kids to eat better, we certainly AGREE that added sugar in our diets is a health issue for Americans. That's why we devoted a good part of a recent menu to raising awareness about the dangers of added sugar, and an entire recent issue of our Wellness Newsletter was also on this topic. So this is not something that is new to us here in the trenches either -- ***it's part of our job to be informed about nutrition issues and research and to pass that information along to our families.*** That's exactly what we've been doing on the added sugar issue for some time. [PROVIDE COPIES OF YOUR MAY MENU AND WELLNESS NEWSLETTER]

4. One part of the film that we do take issue with is the way the movie makers show pictures of school meals being served while giving statistics about the prevalence of commercial fast food and soda contracts in schools. This implies that fast food and soda are served as parts of school meals, but the truth is that all of the complete breakfasts and lunches we serve have to meet strict nutrition guidelines. We're not allowed to serve soda at all, ever, on our serving lines, but ***we don't always have control over foods sold at schools*** by other groups and for fund raisers from which our programs do not benefit. We're happy to provide healthier alternatives in our facilities for kids while they're at school.

5. The film also shows unidentified school cafeterias from other parts of the country which do not reflect our practices. ***We do not serve any commercial fast food and we source local foods and avoid processed foods when possible.*** The examples of school meals shown in the film are, as you might expect, chosen for maximum negative impact and don't reflect the reality here at [DISTRICT].

6. School meals in (DISTRICT) have been in the forefront of encouraging our kids and families to make healthier food choices -- both in what we serve and in the nutrition



education we provide on our menus and in our monthly Wellness Newsletter. For example, ***we've spent the last two years implementing comprehensive new USDA rules for calorie maximums which have had the effect of reducing added sugar to meet the goals.*** It's an on-going effort, and we're committed to it.

7. We now ***require students to take at least one fruit or vegetable serving with every lunch***, and we provide additional fruit and vegetable options and encourage them to choose more. As you know, fresh fruits and vegetables contain zero added sugar.

8. [IT WOULD BE GREAT IF YOU COULD POINT TO ANY SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF REDUCED ADDED SUGAR IN YOUR MENUS OR GIVE A SPECIFIC MENU WITH ADDED SUGAR TOTALS – ***PLEASE SHARE ANY SUCH EXAMPLES WITH US SO WE CAN SHARE THEM WITH OTHERS!!***]

9. ***Healthy foods are more expensive.*** We do the best we can within the budget we have and the prices we're allowed to charge for paying students, and we're proud of the job we do. But we would certainly welcome more funding for healthy foods and/or a change in national policy to support healthier foods rather than production of sugar and other sweeteners.

9. ***We see ourselves as partners in the effort to teach our kids and families to eat healthier,*** and that includes educating people about the dangers of too much added sugar and reducing added sugar in our offerings. We're not doing this as a reaction to a movie, but because there is sound science in favor of such a reduction ***so kids can be as healthy as possible and learn to the best of their abilities. That's always our bottom line.***