Fed Up is a documentary film about the obesity epidemic and the politics of big food in America. A class screening of the film may complement a civics or health curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about food culture in the United States and the relationship between corporate interest and government health policy. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as nutrition, health care and public messaging.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.
An emphasis on hot-button topics, including the obesity epidemic as well as a larger look at the obstacles to healthier lifestyles thrown up by the food industry, place cowriter/director Stephanie Soechtig’s *Fed Up* firmly in the subgenre of cautionary documentaries that includes *Food Inc.* and *Fat, Sick & Nearly Dead*. Soechtig and her creative team, including co-writer Mark Monroe and narrator and executive producer Katie Couric, trace the obesity crisis to 1977 when a new set of government dietary guidelines offered a flawed nutrition model based on calories in and calories out without taking other factors—such as the harm caused by sugar—into consideration. Using lively graphics, timely archival clips and multiple interviews, Soechtig charts how food industry politics, money and lobbying muscle have acted in concert to determine America’s nutritional choices. A pointed, issues-oriented documentary, *Fed Up* makes complex science and vague politics accessible and engaging as it answers big questions regarding the food industry and shows how its influence has expanded waistlines while compromising health. –Steve Ramos

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of *Fed Up*. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

### ABOUT THE FILM

### Recommended Subject Areas:
- Arts/Media
- Current Events
- Social Studies
- Civics
- Health

### Key concepts / buzzwords:
- Branding
- Children
- Corporations
- Economics
- Government
- Health
- Lobbyists
- Nutrition
- Obesity
- Politics
- Regulation
- Sugar
- Tobacco
- United States
PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

*Fed Up* is a film in which young people speak openly about their struggles with weight gain and food addiction. In order to create a safe environment for student viewers, preface the film with a discussion about respect. There may be some students who feel uncomfortable with the subject matter and try to make light of it by joking. Remind students to treat a film’s human subjects with respect and to listen carefully to their stories. You may want to set ground rules as a class to prevent teasing and bullying.

Questions to consider:
- If you were speaking openly about a subject that was embarrassing or made you feel vulnerable, how would you want your classmates to react?
- The subjects interviewed in *Fed Up* are often bullied in their own classrooms. How can you make this classroom a safe space for them to share their stories?

Once you have created space for students to focus on the film’s subject, ask them to think about their own health education. You might put more emphasis on the concept of health rather than thinness, since young people are particularly susceptible to media stereotypes of ideal body types.

Questions to consider:
- What do you think it means to be healthy?
- What is a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle?
- What challenges and pressures do young people today face when they try to create a healthy lifestyle?
- How can you find a balance between practicing good nutrition and loving your body the way that it is?

DO THESE KIDS STRUGGLE WITH BULLYING AND TEASING?

POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Characters and Story
1) Who are the kids and teenagers interviewed in *Fed Up*?
- Can you relate to these kids?
- What kinds of backgrounds do they come from?
- How did they become so overweight? Was it their fault?
- What steps are they taking to change their lifestyles and what challenges do they face along the way?

2) Describe the families that you meet in *Fed Up*.
- Are these caring parents?
- How are the parents in the film like or unlike your parents?
- What are the parents doing to try to help and support their children?
- Are these families successful at helping their children to be healthy?
- What additional support would make healthy eating easier for these families?

3) How does being overweight affect everyday life for the young people in the film?
- Do these kids struggle with bullying and teasing?
- How do they feel about themselves? Does weight affect their self-esteem?
- What is the impact of the message that weight loss is as simple as diet and exercise? Is that true, in the experience of the young people interviewed in this film?
- How are overweight kids treated in your school?
- What can you do to prevent bullying and raise awareness about the childhood obesity epidemic?
4) Did watching Fed Up make you think about your own school, family or community?
- Did the stories, anecdotes and information in the film connect with your own daily experience?
- Which scenes reminded you of your own life?
- Do you think you will make any changes to your daily habits now that you have watched Fed Up?

Context
1) What types of foods are making young people overweight?
- Why is a calorie not a calorie? Explain the difference between almonds and soda with respect to calories.
- What is processed food?
- What are the dangers of eating unhealthy foods besides becoming fat?
- What media and cultural messages are young people exposed to that work against healthy eating habits?
- How can you tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy foods in the grocery store or in a restaurant?

2) What did you think of the statement: “Sugar is poison”?
- Which organs process sugar in the body and what do they do with it?
- Explain the biological process that occurs when a person eats too much sugar.
- What are the side effects of a sugar-heavy diet?
- Were you surprised by the sugar content in any of the foods listed in the film?
- What is the difference between corn syrup, cane sugar, brown sugar, honey, and the various other types of sugar that we consume?

3) How are corporate interests in conflict with public health?
- What is the “big food” industry, and what are its goals?
- What tactics does the food industry use to market and sell their products, especially to young people?
- What has the food industry done to promote healthy eating habits? Have these efforts been successful?
- What do you think would have to happen for a corporation to put public interest over profit?

4) What do you believe is the role of the government in creating a healthier America?
- What is regulation? What would it mean to regulate “big food”?
- What is a lobbyist and what is their role in this issue?
- Describe the relationship between junk food corporations, lobbyists, politicians, and public health policy: why is pizza called a vegetable when it’s served in school cafeterias?
- Do you agree with the film’s argument that the junk food industry should be regulated the way that the tobacco industry was regulated?
- What is the argument against regulating the junk food industry? What is a “nanny state”?

5) Describe the history of the food industry in America.
- When did we first learn that overconsumption of sugars, fats and empty carbohydrates was unhealthy?
- What conflict did the USDA face when studies showed that Americans should eat less, and particularly less fatty foods?
- How did the US government and the food industry
work together in the 1980s to promote a low fat diet while still promoting the consumption of processed food products?

• What happened to Michelle Obama’s campaign for healthier young people?
• What is our current public health message, and how does it connect to a history of corporate and government collaboration?

6) What needs to change to make American kids healthier?
• What are the human costs of childhood obesity?
• What are the long-term economic costs of a sick, young population?
• How can we change our culture and our public policy to make healthy living possible and easy?
• What can you do in your own life and your own community to promote awareness of public health?

• In what instances did the graphics help to illustrate complex ideas?
• Did the graphics help you to better understand the film’s arguments?
• What types of media content specifically benefit from informational graphics?

4) Do you think it was brave of these young people to appear in a film like Fed Up?
• If a filmmaker wanted to interview you about a sensitive subject, would you agree to appear in a film?
• Why do you think these kids wanted to be in the movie?
• What effect do you think their participation has on the overall impact of the film?
• Why do personal stories make social problems seem more urgent?

Style and Message/Reading the Film For Media Literacy
1) How did you feel after watching Fed Up?
• Why do you think the filmmakers thought it was important to make this film?
• Does the film have an argument, a thesis or a concrete message?
• How do you think the filmmakers want you to feel after watching?
• What is a call to action, and how is it used in Fed Up?
• Are you moved to act? What will you do?

2) How does the soundtrack for the film emphasize the points that the filmmakers are making?
• What are some of the songs that you heard in Fed Up?
• Why do you think the filmmakers chose those particular songs?

3) What did you think of the graphics in the film?

POST VIEWING ACTIVITIES:
1) Start an education campaign to promote healthy eating in your school. Make sure that your campaign is inclusive and positive in its message.
• Check the food at your school cafeteria: are there healthy options? Is junk food pervasive? Let your principal and student body leaders know that healthy food is important!
• Make flyers and posters about healthy eating habits and hang them around your campus. Use facts that you learned in the film, and supplement your learning with research.
• Interview staff at your school cafeteria to hear their views about student nutrition. Do they think students are eating healthy foods?
2) Make a short animated film to let your peers know how to make healthy food choices.
   - Stop-motion animation works well with small everyday objects like fruits and vegetables.
   - There are several free apps for tablets and smart phones that make stop motion animation easy.
   - For more information about classroom animation projects, visit FilmEd.sffs.org.

3) Create a healthy cookbook as a class.
   - Ask each student to name a favorite food (avoid duplicates—if your favorite food is already on the list, choose a different one).
   - Using resources in the school library, online, or by asking parents and grandparents, find a nutritious recipe that uses whole ingredients for each item on the favorite foods list. Even foods like pizza can be prepared from scratch, using fresh ingredients. Encourage students to adjust their recipes to include extra fruits and vegetables.
   - At home with parents or in a school kitchen, empower students to prepare their recipes!
   - Before eating, take a photo of the finished dish. This will be included in the final cookbook.
   - Ask each student to write a brief description of their finished dish—what’s good about it, when would you eat/serve it, what variations can you make, etc.
   - Compile the recipes, descriptions and photos into a complete cookbook. You might choose to create the cookbook online, in a blog format, or to print, staple or bind it.
   - You might even want to use an online book binding service like Blurb or Lulu to make finished copies that you can sell at a school fundraising event.
California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 5**: Standard 1.7 Identify, analyze, and critique persuasive techniques (e.g., promises, dares, flattery, glittering generalities); identify logical fallacies used in oral presentations and media messages; Standard 1.8 Analyze media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture.

- **Grade 6**: Standard 1.9 Identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in television and identify false and misleading information.

- **Grade 7**: Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.

- **Grade 8**: Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.

- **Grades 9 & 10**: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare’s Henry V with Kenneth Branagh’s 1990 film version).

- **Grades 9 & 10**: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.

- **Grades 11 & 12**: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. [http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm](http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm)

- Frank W Baker’s guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

**Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:**

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 5-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3** Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

(1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
(2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
(3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
(4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
(5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM
All Media Is Constructed.
How is the message delivered and in what format?
What technologies are used to present the message?
What visual and auditory elements are used?
What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

AUTHOR
All Media Is Constructed by Someone.
Who is delivering the message?
Who originally constructed the message?
What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

CONTENT
All Media Is A Language.
What is the subject of the media message?
What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

AUDIENCE
All Media Messages Reach an Audience.
Who receives the message?
For whom is the message intended?
What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

PURPOSE
All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.
Why was the message constructed?
Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?
The Non-Fiction Film

What is a Documentary?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone’s idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term “documentary” in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl’s propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a “fly on the wall” watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.
THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film’s construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you’ve captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film’s message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover, an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what’s the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.
SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

The film’s official website: http://fedupmovie.com/

Journalism Relating to Health, Sugar and Obesity:

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/13/is-fruit-juice-bad-for-you-health-sugar_n_4587666.html
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-bellatti/healthwashing_b_4101450.html
http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/04/24/us-diabetes-drinks-idINBRE93N1DL20130424?feedType=RSS&feedName=health&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&dlvrit=309303
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/08/sugar-in-food_n_3023046.html

Politics and “Big Food”:

http://www.cnbc.com/id/100549948
http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/27/us-usa-foodlobby-idUSBRE83Q0ED20120427
http://healthjournalism.org/blog/2012/05/reuters-explains-big-foods-remarkable-lobbying-success/

Websites for Healthy Recipes:

http://www.wholeliving.com/145336/recipes
http://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/ingredients-guide/
Stephanie Soechtig’s documentary effectively gets the message out about America’s addiction to unhealthy food.

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Accessibility trumps artistry in “Fed Up,” a formulaic and functional documentary that nevertheless proves effective at getting the message out about America’s addiction to unhealthy food. Focusing specifically on childhood obesity, the insidious practices of big food companies and the lack of political will to address the problems, Stephanie Soechtig’s film is the latest in a long line of call-to-action docs following in the footsteps of “An Inconvenient Truth” (and boasts that film’s executive producer, Laurie David to boot). Slick execution and big-name participants, including narrator Katie Couric and an interview with former President Bill Clinton, puts the pic in prime position to become one of the year’s highest-profile commercial docs.

Couric opens the film with alarmist voiceover — turning her years of reporting stories about the obesity epidemic into a mark of authority on the subject — accompanied by clips from the likes of YouTube and “Here Comes Honey Boo Boo.” But the facts quickly pile up: It doesn’t take much convincing to connect the dots between Americans doubling their sugar intake since 1977 and the explosion of Type 2 diabetes in the past 30 years. At the same time, the food and weight-loss industries continue to emphasize the concept of “calorie in, calorie out” (you can eat whatever you want, as long as you exercise enough to burn it off) — a fallacy effectively debunked here.

“Fed Up” leans heavily on emotional video diaries from a variety of kids struggling with weight issues to give the subject context. They range from 14-year-old Joe, who decides to get lap band surgery, to 12-year-old Maggie, who exercises regularly but can’t lose weight. Meanwhile, 15-year-old Brady struggles to change his eating habits and 16-year-old Nashwah admits she just loves food and sneaks out to buy snacks if her mother doesn’t have them in the house (it can’t help that ever since she was young, teachers would reward good behavior and learning with candy). The prognosis isn’t good: This is the first generation of kids in two centuries expected to live shorter lives than their parents.

So why isn’t anything being done about it? “Fed Up” aims to get viewers fired up enough to start a revolution, pointing to the collusion between government and big food as the biggest hurdle. Soechtig asserts that in the conflict between promoting health and promoting industry, the clear winner is industry. Processed food remains cheap and accessible, school nutrition budgets have been slashed while fast food is served in more than half of U.S. schools, and companies dump so much sugar (in so many different forms) into food labeled non-fat or low fat that “healthier” options are often anything
but. Attempts to crack down on practices that are clearly harmful to kids are inevitably met with “nanny state” talking points from right-wing commentators and politicians.

But “Fed Up” acknowledges the problem crosses party lines, targeting Michelle Obama’s “Get Moving” campaign as a massive failure for only addressing half the problem: advocating for exercise while doing next to nothing to encourage healthier eating habits (due to the political risk of taking on deep-pocketed food companies). Couric also presses Clinton, who became an advocate for healthy eating after leaving office, on whether he thinks his administration did enough to address the problem. He admits they might have “missed it.”

The activist documentary “Fed Up” relays its message with the directness of a well-thrown dart: There is a public menace that threatens the children, threatens the future prosperity of the country and threatens you. The target of these accusations is sugar — specifically its pervasiveness in our food.

Three years in the making, with the celebrity journalist Katie Couric serving as producer and narrator, “Fed Up” chronicles the lives of several young people who struggle with obesity while intercutting an impressive roster of talking heads — all of whom support the argument that the food industry is knowingly endangering the American people. There have been several documentaries over the past decade that have addressed the obesity issue, but few have cast the net of conspiracy this wide, going so far as to assert that the United States government is complicit in the process. It’s a serious accusation that requires a comprehensive, compelling argument, and on that count “Fed Up” is a master debater.

Things get off to a shaky start with an over-the-top opening montage of garish footage showing floppy bellies. Things quickly recover with the introduction of the kids the filmmakers followed for several years: None of them are particularly healthy: Fifteen-year-old Brady and 12-year-old Maggie weigh 215 and 212 pounds, respectively, while 13-year-old Wesley is nearing 180 pounds and showing the warning signs of type 2 diabetes.

All three recognize that they need to drastically lose the weight for their health. They practice the regular mantra as they’re told: eat in moderation and exercise. However, none have anything to show for it, appearing confused and defeated, while some even gain more weight. But their plight effectively services the movie’s focus.

With the testimony of pediatricians, scholars, politicians, and even Bill Clinton, “Fed Up” lays out how the common perception about how people become obese has unfolded as a mess of misinformation, how diet and exercise fail to curb the problem and why the food industries have been battling to keep this information secret for years. In 1977, with the implementation of recommendations from the McGovern Report, and investigation into the causes of obesity that had been heavily revised by food industry lobbyists, manufacturer Big Food had to put less fat into its products (thus sacrificing flavor), which it happily countered by unloading a massive influx of sugar into its products.
The experts Soechtig and Couric have assembled provide crisp explanations of the problems with having so much sugar in our food: mainly, that it’s virtually impossible to burn off the calories in sugar and that it’s a flat-out addictive substance. “You can’t have just one line of cocaine,” one of the interviewees remarks. Seeing just how much sugar creeps into soft drinks and various types of food makes for a terrifying viewing experience, especially once you factor in the dozens of artificial syrups found all over the place.

The film is strongest in its takedown of how Big Food markets to kids. (You don’t see any cartoon tigers talking about how the merits of grapes.) The PR sector of the food industries come off especially bad in footage of them shamelessly defending their focus on children as young as infants, the most outrageous being a McDonald’s spokeswoman arguing to Congress about the magic and wonder of Ronald McDonald as if he were Santa Claus.

Utilizing visual effects to deliver an infographic whiz-bang, “Fed Up” is a slick presentation. However, Couric’s narration suffers from a stilted quality not unlike the mechanical patter of the evening news. “Fed Up” may not provide anything new for savvier consumers, but it will certainly be revelatory for average Americans who have no idea just what they’re putting into their bodies. Above all, the film is a call to action: watching Big Food lobbyists fight, sabotage and misdirect any attempts to provide our kids with better food while being reminded that there are kids younger than ten dropping dead from heart attacks creates a significant condemnation of our current system. “Fed Up” is a glossy package that gets its warnings across loud and clear: we need to change what we eat.