

Turning Public Crisis into Program Change

By Susan Raymond, Ph.D.



In March of 2020, the bottom fell out. As COVID-19 spread, states locked down. Unemployment soared. Businesses and government offices shut down. Fear ruled families and communities. This was materially different from other crises, such as the Great Recession. In 2008, the plummeting S&P 500 could not kill you. In 2020, COVID-19 would and did. On a massive scale. As of this writing, 600,000 Americans have lost their lives. That would be akin to wiping out the entire city of Seattle in 12 months.

Nonprofits found themselves in the perfect storm of change blowing in from all four points of the programmatic compass: radically increased demand for basic needs services, such as food and income supplementation; new demand for new services never before provided; plummeting donations as economic uncertainty spread; and an inability to provide any of those services safely in person. This perfect storm blew especially intensely where poverty was deep and widespread.

Navigating that perfect storm, even as it buffeted from all four points of the compass, can, however, create knowledge and opportunity for institutional change that benefits the community. That is true particularly, perhaps only, if the nonprofit in question already deeply understands, and is trusted by, the community.

The case of Edmundite Missions in Selma, Alabama, illustrates the point. The storm of crisis can create program opportunity if strategy is the mediator.

THE SETTING

Selma, Alabama, is an icon of the civil rights movement. It is evidence that the voices of people can change inequity. It is also the poorest city in the poorest county in one of the poorest areas of the country. Some of the highest rates of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and disability in the nation mean particular vulnerability to widespread morbidity and mortality. With household incomes at 40% of the national average, unemployment consistently at double-digit levels, and nearly half the children living in poverty, economic challenges abound.

Edmundite Missions, a Catholic nonprofit founded by the Society of St. Edmund, has served Selma and the surrounding rural areas for over 80 years, providing food, social services, counseling and education to the poorest of the poor. With that long history in this

vulnerable community, the Missions is one of the most trusted organizations in Selma. It also reaches significant numbers of the poor, serving over 1,000 meals a day 365 days a year and providing social services support to one client every 15 minutes five days a week 52 weeks a year.

When the Selma education system went digital in March 2020 and then decided to remain digital for the 2020–2021 academic year, the question was how to harness that capacity to this new problem. And how to pay for it.

Comparison of Median Household Incomes 2020



Source: Bureau of the Census

THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

Nearly all students in the Selma public school system qualify for federal school meal programs. It was clear that access to the electronic capacity that would enable digital learning was going to be a problem. To put it mildly. It was also clear that most children would not have adequate support at home to engage in consistent, high-quality digital learning, even if internet access was available.

In response, and as the academic year opened, the Missions established an Academic Resource Center (ARC) at its Dr. Michael and Catherine Bullock Recreation and Community Center in the heart of one of the city's more impoverished areas. Computer access was provided across three large areas with full public health protocols. This bridged the digital divide.

The development office reached out to donors for help. Contributions and major gifts enabled the purchase of laptops, software to access the learning platforms, materials and supplies to supplement the platforms and operations costs. Crisis fundraising, as it often is in America, enabled action.

NEW KNOWLEDGE, NEW LESSONS

The learning curve of the Selma school system was not insignificant. Digital platforms did not work. Passwords changed and access was denied. Teachers struggled to master the new approach to teaching. Students stared at black screens rather than at humans, not a particularly engaging way to spend a morning for a 5th grader.

Things began to run more smoothly as August turned to December. The internet worked, platforms worked, passwords worked. But as the processes settled in, the deeper issues became more obvious.

Initially, in the summer of 2020, the Missions stepped forward because of the lack of digital access. But the "digital divide" was only part of the actual problem because solving the "digital divide" crisis did not solve the problem. The real problem was education. Computers and internet access would do little good if 3rd graders could not read to begin with. Digital platforms would do little good if children were too hungry to pay attention.

Computers without teachers meant access to video games, perhaps not the "access" that bridging the digital divide had in mind.

What was lacking was far deeper than computer access. What was lacking was educational preparation. First graders could not read or write their names. Second graders could not add. No one could sit alone and concentrate successfully or consistently. Fourth graders could not multiply. No one did the assigned homework. And high schoolers did not show up at all. Ever.

So, ARC became a teaching site, not a digital site, with actual teachers teaching actual subject matter. With volunteers sitting next to children, side by side, as they logged on. In compliance with all public health protocols, but teaching and encouraging young students nonetheless.

That this was the necessary approach was not a matter of "fault." It was not the schools' "fault," although certainly educational improvements and change were desperately needed. It was not the families' "fault," although certainly greater family skills and attention were needed. It was definitely not the children's "fault," although certainly more attention to task and less attention to video games was needed. There were no fingers to be pointed, except perhaps at that specter of history and five generations of poverty. The question was not who to blame. The question was what to do.

A NEW STRATEGY

The immediate crisis then fed long-term strategy.

Before COVID-19, the Missions educational strategy embedded in its New Possibilities Youth Program a focus on middle school, ensuring that students are prepared to matriculate into high school not just with academic capacity but also with personal strength. The experience with COVID-19 threw into stark relief the need to completely reassess the Missions educational approach. If reading in 2nd grade fell behind, what possible outcome could middle school have?

The new strategy, fed by lessons from responding to an immediate crisis whose capacity was fed by successful crisis fundraising, focused on a consistent "arc" of support based on knowledge from the ARC. That strategy threw

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out the concept of “afterschool programs.” The problem was not after school, the problem was before school, during school, *and* afterschool. The problem was knowledge at its core and education as its embodiment. Without getting at the core and without supporting the embodiment, Missions programming was a band-aid. True, that band-aid did yield some positive performance metrics—ARC students did improve test scores—but what was the long-term outcome at the end of the day? How to increase the aperture of the Missions education programming that encompassed the entire educational process and did not separate student capacity from family capacity?

From crisis and strategy came program redesign. Missions education programs will now be a long-term partnership with families. Students and their families entering first grade will be part of the New Possibilities Youth Program through 12th grade. For students, the mode of educational interaction will change. The timing will change. The approach will change. For families, knowledge about the “how” and “what” of educational support will differ depending on circumstance. But the underlying goal is to support, encourage and enable students and families to acquire knowledge that will enable choices and opportunities in their lives.

Without that long-term, multi-level engagement, success in the classroom will be fleeting. This is not an afterschool program. It is an education program. This is new territory for the Missions. It is new territory for Selma’s children and families, but it is evidence-based and strategy-driven.

And this approach would not have been created—it would not have been adequately informed and shaped—if not for the experience of the COVID-19 crisis.

PHILANTHROPY AND PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS

Our advice for nonprofit managers is to never go into a crisis focused only on the crisis. Crises unpeel the onions of complex problems. They reveal approaches that can

look through a crisis for opportunities to address underlying issues. Doing so requires attention to performance, careful and constant communication within programs about findings, and humility about revisiting past assumptions and past decisions that have been made and embraced. And, after all the analysis and all the debate, doing so takes boldness. It takes managers willing to step away from the known and step with courage into the unknown.

Our advice for fundraising is equally holistic. When fundraising for crises, do not let the message of crisis blind the potential purpose for programs. Be part of program learning. Tie donors not to the crisis but to the underlying problem—the real underlying problem—so that when programmatic strategy emerges, when better knowledge and understanding are attained, donors are pre-positioned to understand the opportunity that their crisis funding has enabled. The crisis will end. The underlying problems are the true objective.

And for nonprofit C-suite executives, tear down the walls between programs and fundraising. Use crisis to tear down the walls between past approaches and future opportunities. Tear down the walls of assumptions. Use crisis to drive teamwork throughout the organization and wrap that teamwork in an ironclad armor of humility, which itself will make every crisis an opportunity to become better. 📍



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