

NCEA Momentum Article

“Lessons Learned from the Camp Fire”

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A disaster as destructive as the Camp Fire, which consumed the city of Paradise, California, this past November, generates big numbers: 153,336 acres burned, 18,804 structures damaged, and 85 lives lost. The number that called me to action, however, was 4,000 – that many children were displaced from their schools. The fire and its aftermath offer us valuable lessons about Catholic schools’ role in supporting our communities in times of peril.

The scale and the fury of the Camp Fire left everyone scrambling, but I am blessed with a team that moved quickly to respond to those in need. Individual principals began to offer to take in students, and we realized that we had a chance to turn that desire into a broader effort. We offered open seats in our Catholic schools to those displaced public schoolchildren, providing hot lunches, uniforms, school supplies, and other material support, and asking no money of those families.

As of December 2018, we are blessed to have some 30 children displaced by the Camp Fire in our schools, with more continuing to enroll. Yet even as this effort continues, I know I need to prepare for the next disruption. Different circumstances offer different challenges, but here are some of my thoughts on what one should consider when reviewing one’s own plans for responding to catastrophe.

Remember the Black Swan. As fortune would have it, the book I was reading at the time of the Camp Fire was Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s *The Black Swan* (2007). Taleb posits that Black Swans – unexpected events of significant magnitude which are only predictable in retrospect – play an outside role in human history. Taleb argues that rather than try to predict Black Swans that by definition can’t be predicted, we should instead focus on building systems that are robust. The Camp Fire, like the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Santa Rosa, is a Black Swan. One can’t plan for every contingency that may disrupt school for a single site, a district, or an entire county, but one can think about what one can do to manage when and if that happens.

Talk to people who have been there before you. Dr. Jan Lancaster, superintendent emeritus of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, walked me through all the steps she and her fellow Catholic educators took to accommodate tens of thousands of displaced schoolchildren following Hurricane Katrina. Just this past October, the Diocese of Santa Rosa superintendent Linda Norman presented to a leadership group in my diocese on her response to the Tubbs Fire. Both were generous with their input, time, and prayer, and I am proud to call them colleagues and friends.

Create expectations of behavior in the face of disaster. You don’t have to predict what your exact response will be to know the spirit of your response. Dr. Lancaster shared with me the “two schools, one campus” approach the Archdiocese of New Orleans took following the loss of so many campuses in Katrina. The school isn’t the building – it’s the community. And so, at our diocese’s

October 2017 principals' retreat, we made a pledge to be our Brother's Keeper. Each principal committed their school to being the alternate site for another school – and then shook on it with the other principal, and communicated that expectation. For example, if St. Charles Borromeo School, Sacramento, is a loss, the community will start school the following Monday after lunch as the afternoon shift at the neighboring St. Patrick Academy campus, and vice-versa. This is not the playbook we used following the Camp Fire, but those handshakes did create an expectation of quick and generous response in the face of need.

Be prepared to do what's right despite potential downside. When we announced that we would accept public school kids into our Catholic schools without charging those families a dime, we knew that there were risks. We could have faced demand we couldn't accommodate; faced paying customers upset with the advertised price of zero; or flooded fragile budgets with unpredicted costs. Still, I suffered absolutely no anxiety in moving decisively, trusting that others would stand beside us in offering to help – and they did.

Doing the right thing as Church makes us antifragile. Taleb also offered the observation that the antonym of "fragile" is not "robust." Though fragile things break under stress, robust ones are merely impervious to stress. The antonym, then, would be "antifragile," things that grow stronger under stress. If there is anything that makes the Church antifragile, it is our charitable response to those in crisis – be it physical, mental, or spiritual. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and when we heed that commandment, we serve loving witness to His grace. Catholic schools themselves were born out of adversity. Schools, like all communities, can be fragile things. If Church history has taught us anything, it is that we come back from crises stronger than ever when we do what is right.