LEADING

Innovation Out of Crisis

Nonprofits got creative to respond to the troubles of the past year. Now they're building on what they learned.

NEW OUTLOOK
Andrea Welsch, executive director of the Children's Museum of Fond Du Lac, negotiated a deal to host a charter school. Revenue from the school district covered most of the museum's facilities costs — and the experience has helped reshape its approach to education.

DARREN HAUCK FOR THE CHRONICLE

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FULL SPEED AHEAD
The extra space at the museum helped students socially distance, says Tiffany Dolan (left), now the principal of the Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind charter school.

A Children's Museum's Partnership With a Local School District Brings in Revenue — and New Ideas

By NICOLE WALLACE

A lot of nonprofits had to be creative to make it through the challenges of the pandemic. For the Children's Museum of Fond du Lac, that meant hosting a charter school for the 2020-21 academic year.

But what started out as a way for the museum to earn much needed revenue and for local students to return to in-person learning ended up being much more. Getting the chance to watch the school's teachers interact with students every day and learn about the school's approach to teaching has changed the way the museum thinks about education, says Andrea Welsch, its executive director.

"They definitely have helped us stretch our thinking on how we offer educational opportunities," she says.

The Children's Museum of Fond du Lac depends heavily on ticket revenue and membership income. In 2019, that made up 38 percent of its $600,000 annual budget. When it became clear that the Covid crisis was going to last more than a few weeks, Welsch began to worry whether the museum would survive. Early in the pandemic, the Association of Children's Museums estimated that as many as 30 percent of children's museums might have to close permanently.

"There were days when I thought we were smack dab in the middle of it and that we were going down," she says.

Let's Make a Deal

The association held weekly videoconferences to share information with member children's museums, arranging calls for specific job functions — one for financial and human-resources officials, another for facilities managers, etc. Welsch participated in the calls for CEOs faithfully. When an association official said federal relief money would be going to the schools, she called the heads of two local school districts. The first was at lunch. But she reached Aaron Sadoff, superintendent of the School District of North Fond du Lac, and asked him if the district had any space needs for the coming school year.

"First I said no," he says. "And then I'm like, 'Well, yes.'"

Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind is a public charter school that seeks to teach to children's individual strengths and emphasizes experiential learning, incorporating movement and other activities. Before the pandemic, it was housed with a traditional elementary school. More space would make it easier for students to social distance and allow the school to continue its active approach to learning.

At first, the children's museum only offered its space for the first semester. When discussions between the museum and the school district started last spring, Welsch and other children's museums in Wisconsin were envisioning December or January reopenings. But making the move didn't make sense for the charter school if the space would only be available for half of the school year.

"So we really had to just commit on both ends to making this be the entire school year," Welsch says.

The school used two existing classrooms at the museum and rearranged three museum exhibitions to create a third space. Students were virtual the first few weeks of the school year. Then until March, they were divided into two groups, each of which came to the museum for two days of in-person learning per week. For the last months of the school year, students were full-time at the museum.

The money that the school district paid for the use of the space covered most of the museum's facilities costs, including its mortgage and utilities. Welsch says the arrangement limited the number of staff members it had to layoff and allowed it to provide programs, such as educational fun kits, to support families during the pandemic.

That puts the Children's Museum of Fond du Lac in much better shape than many of its peers.

"The pandemic has been catastrophic for the field," says Laura Huerta Migus, executive director of the Association of Children's Museums.

She says the permanent closures the association feared largely didn't happen, in part because of emergency relief like the Paycheck Protection Program but often because of painful cost cutting, mostly in the form of layoffs.

Huerta Migus and her staff were thrilled when they heard the news about the Children's Museum of Fond du Lac's partnership with the school district.

"We did a round of virtual high fives," she says. "The partnership that happened in Fond du Lac was one of the first big wins for our community."

Creative Approaches

The teaching philosophy that guides Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind is designed with all students in mind, but it has been particularly beneficial for children with autism and other cognitive differences. That interested Welsch because just before the pandemic started, the Children's Museum of Fond du Lac started planning a campaign to raise money to improve its facilities, exhibits, and programs.

One goal was to build a quiet, soothing room where children — especially those with autism — could go when the excitement of the museum led to sensory overload.

Now that the museum has weathered the worst of the crisis, it is again planning to expand. Through the partnership with the charter school, Welsch and her colleagues got to see a quiet room in action.

"They created one of those spaces in the museum," she says. "It's been really neat to see how they set that up so that that can help shape how we will set our quiet space up so that we can serve all children."

The charter school also set up sensory swings at the museum. The swings have multiple purposes, says Tiffany Dolan, who taught second to fifth graders this year and became Treffert's principal this month. Kids use the swings to soothe themselves, to take a movement break — or even as a place for imaginative play.

"My students would use that area if they were stressed or frustrated or overwhelmed with work," Dolan says. "Swinging while working just offers them a little bit of a distraction that they don't think as much about the work."

The swings are another idea Welsch plans to incorporate into the future plan for the museum.

"Our partnership has literally shaped the way some of those improvements will work," she says. "It's going to make us that much stronger of a resource and that much more effective of a tool for parents and our community."

Mentoring Nonprofit Helps Kids Thrive — by Adding Services for Caregivers

By EMILY HAYNES

The path to academic achievement is an obstacle course for the 124 students served by Friends of the Children – Boston. The kids attend more than 60 schools in Boston. By the time they reach second grade, it's not uncommon for them to have experienced chronic homelessness or watched a family member battle an opioid addiction. The nonprofit's full-time professional mentors help students navigate the education system, find enrichment through hobbies, and meet personal and academic goals.

The nonprofit is "the connective tissue" between each part of these students' lives, says executive director Yi-Chin Chen. When the pandemic broke out, that role got a lot more complicated.

Mentors kept up their relationships with students over video calls. For three to four hours each week, they'd see the reality of their students' lives through the screen. While mentors occasionally visited their students' homes before the pandemic, Chen knows from personal experience that they were probably seeing a glossy version of life at home. She says whenever teachers visited her childhood home to discuss Chen's poor grades with her parents, "my mother would spend an entire day making the house look like we had no challenges."

It's natural for adults and students to want to put up a positive facade for Friends of the Children's mentors, Chen says. But they couldn't keep it up under the strains of the pandemic. It made Chen realize that students are most likely to succeed when the adults who care for them do, too. And that realization is shaping how Friends of the Children is thinking about its work going forward.

'How Do We Show Up for You?'

During the pandemic, many of the students' usual avenues for support — outings with their mentors, medical check-ups, meetings with social workers, check-ins with teachers — went virtual or were even canceled. Parents and other caregivers were suddenly on their own.

But they needed support, too. Many worked in the hospitality or food-service industries and lost jobs as hotels, offices, and restaurants shuttered. Others saw their work hours scaled back. It was harder for families to pay for groceries. And it was risky for them to go to the store: Upwards of 70 percent of the students live with someone whose pre-existing health conditions put them at high risk of suffering a severe case of Covid-19.

As mentors checked in with their students on video calls, they saw the full picture of their students' home lives — the chaos of lockdown in a small apartment, how they bickered with siblings, how caregivers handled a child's temper tantrum.

"It definitely gives a more intimate picture of what things look like at home, which I think we can use going forward," says Mary Kate Sullivan, who manages the charity's elementary school program. She mentors eight students from second to seventh grade. With this wider window into her students' home lives, Sullivan says, she was able to ask caregivers how she could help them address the behavior she saw through the screen and offer them specific strategies.

"It pushes us to ask different questions," Chen says.

Parents, grandparents, and other adults needed help navigating a new normal that was at times almost unbearable. Caregivers have always been involved with Friends of the Children – Boston's programming, but the main focus of its mission is the one-on-one relationship between the student and the mentor. Chen wondered how the nonprofit could support caregivers in a way that empowered them to manage their families' lives.

So she asked them: "How do we show up for you, knowing that you have to do it all?"

After listening to the caregivers, the nonprof-

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Virtual meetings during the pandemic gave mentors an unvarnished look at the challenges that students' families were facing.

YI-CHIN CHEN, FRIENDS-BOSTON

FACE TO FACE
Mentors at Friends of the Children – Boston are meeting with students outdoors. The outings give caregivers a break and encourage students to leave their screens behind.

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it started a new food-delivery service. Grocery store gift cards alone wouldn't cut it, given the number of household members at risk for severe Covid. When caregivers talked about how loud their homes were with multiple children learning remotely, Friends of the Children provided headphones. When teachers couldn't reach the grandmother who cared for three of their students, a mentor helped her create and use an email account.

Shané Lewis, who manages the nonprofit's adolescent program, says she's talking to caregivers more than before the pandemic. Lewis mentors nine students from eighth to 12th grade. She says the frequent check-ins helped the adults in the children's lives feel more supported by the program.

Two-Generation Approach

Many mentoring organizations had to transform their approaches during the pandemic because they generally rely on in-person activities to build strong one-on-one relationships, says David Shapiro, chief executive of Mentor, a national umbrella group for mentoring nonprofits. But it was unusual to make these changes so quickly.

"Normally, this is a decision: You go through a strategic plan," Shapiro says. "In this case, it was sort of the old adage: Necessity is the mother of invention."

A Mentor survey of 137 organizations found that since the pandemic began, 108 said they have offered programs to provide students and families with food, internet access, mental-health services, and other support.

Friends of the Children delivered food, technology, and other essentials thanks to a $70,000 grant from the Boston Resiliency Fund. Another $87,000 from that fund went toward vouchers for families to use at local bodegas and grocery stores. Nine grant makers also lessened restrictions on their gifts — by waiving spending restrictions, offering general operating support, speeding up grant timelines, or supplementing their grants with emergency, unrestricted grants. Because students were no longer visiting the office, the group put its budget for after-school snacks toward training for its staff on navigating children's mental-health crises and encouraging teachers to honor individualized education programs the students had created during remote classes.

In their role as go-betweens for schools, families, health services, and other resources, mentors across the country held together systems that were struggling to function during the pandemic.

"Our focus during the pandemic and outside of the pandemic should be: What are the barriers that disrupt learning and disrupt the optimal conditions for thriving and striving?" Shapiro says. "Are you going to remove the barriers, or are you going to wait for someone else?"

He doesn't see that approach stopping any time soon. Neither does Chen, who is developing a new two-generation approach to mentoring for Friends of the Children – Boston. The new approach will continue to support students' academic and social-emotional development while also advancing caregivers' career development and fostering connections between caregivers and their communities.

Chen will soon hire a staff member to oversee the programs serving caregivers, which are set to begin before the next school year. She and her staff are also selecting a group of caregivers to advise them as they create more programs for adults. The GreenLight Fund, which established Friends of the Children – Boston, helped get the new approach off the ground with a $50,000 grant. The nonprofit will also draw on the $94,000 raised at its gala to support two-generation programing.

Mentors are excited about this new approach. "There are often times where I have youth that may be a little reluctant to do things," Lewis says. "But having their caregiver being really invested in it, in modeling at home, I think it's going to help the success rate of getting kids to do certain things and feeling really confident."

Student achievement will still be at the heart of Friends of the Children's mission, Chen says, and the new programs for parents have resonated with donors — many of whom know the challenges of remote learning first-hand. Before the pandemic, some individual donors didn't immediately understand how instability at home affected a student's grades. But with $150,000 left to raise to meet its fundraising goal for its new approach, Chen is feeling confident donors will respond to her appeals. More donors now understand the spillover effect of stress at home. "It's almost like you're sharing the same vocabulary," Chen says.

Looking ahead, she says it would be foolish for Friends of the Children to go back to the way things were before March 2020.

"Caregivers have to be a really critical part of the equation in more ways than we have done before," she says. "We have to proactively engage them, and also we have to proactively build on what their own hopes and dreams are for this next phase." ▫