



CASE STUDY

The AMOS Project and the Campaign for Universal Preschool

Can faith-based organizers garner enough support to win universal preschool in a racially divided city? How should a grassroots group manage a disagreement with its own powerful coalition partners?

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SNF Agora Case Studies

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

How to Use the Case

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora Case Studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: “What would we do?”

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life activists (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these activists, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these activists while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they *could have made*, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

This case study is appropriate for:

- College students
- Activists
- Civil society leaders

Keywords: coalitions, community organizing, education, faith-based organizing

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Introduction

IN CINCINNATI, OHIO, many organizations and leaders agreed on the importance of strengthening early childhood education. A campaign to provide preschool education for most of the city’s children accomplished its goal of obtaining 10,000 pledges of support from politicians, business leaders, and other supporters.

The City Council, however, took no action in response to this pledge drive. The campaign for preschool education then formed a partnership with the AMOS Project, a multiracial network of congregations and people of faith. AMOS’s grassroots efforts increased the political pressure to pay for the program, but, at one point, the whole effort seemed likely to fall apart.

How could a grassroots network of congregations manage a disagreement with allies in the business community and achieve its goals?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this case study, you should be able to:

1. Understand how a campaign organized by a grassroots network of religious congregations may differ from one led by businesses and well-resourced nonprofits.
2. Begin to think about how conflicts arise within coalitions and how to resolve them.

Case Narrative

Background

Like many American cities, Cincinnati has a long history of racial divisions and inequality. The city is about half white and a little less than half African American. Fifty-three percent of the city's Black children under the age of six live below the poverty line, according to the 2012 American Community Survey.

The city also has had long-standing and racialized police-civilian relations, particularly in its majority Black communities. Police brutality reached a boiling point in 2001, when a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager named Timothy Thomas. In the wake of that killing, the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood near downtown Cincinnati witnessed widespread unrest over four nights, the largest urban uprising in the United States since the 1992 Rodney King protests.

In response, business leaders and philanthropists came together in an attempt to address the root causes of the shooting and subsequent uprising. One of the proposals that came out of this study was greater private and charitable support for early childhood education. In 2003, the local United Way made early childhood education its highest priority and pledged to develop a private preschool program that would get 85 percent of Cincinnati's children ready for kindergarten by 2020.

The city's establishment got behind the effort, including the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, the Cincinnati Public Schools, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, and a nonprofit organization called the StrivePartnership, which was working with school administrators, college presidents, foundation heads, corporate executives, and nonprofit directors to improve education from "cradle to career." In the first phase of this effort, the coalition sought to make universal preschool for Cincinnati's children a reality as a privately funded, privately run program. For almost a decade, the United Way focused on raising millions of dollars from the private sector for preschool to develop private programs. Over time, however, fundraising and kindergarten readiness scores stalled and this initial set of leaders realized they could never have the impact they wanted through a patchwork of private programs.

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Phase I: Pledge Card Drive

In 2010, Greg Landsman, the son of teachers and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, became the executive director of StrivePartnership. Greg shepherded the effort to bring universal preschool to Cincinnati into its second phase, shifting the focus toward securing public dollars to fund universal pre-K. He built a campaign called Preschool Promise that aimed to provide two years of quality preschool for every child in Cincinnati through a publicly funded, publicly run program. The Preschool Promise campaign seemed to have all the elements of success, including politically connected supporters; high-level business and community leaders; a well-attended press conference at its launch and extensive media coverage; and politicians signing pledges of support.

The initial vision was to develop this program with funding support from the Cincinnati City Council. Before they signed on, councilmembers asked Greg to demonstrate public support for the program. Greg developed a pledge campaign to obtain 5,000 signatures from elected officials, community leaders, and members of the general public in support of universal pre-K. He doubled that goal, securing 10,000 pledges. And yet, when the time came, the Cincinnati City Council refused to allocate funding for preschool. The pledge card drive, Greg concluded, “had no teeth.”

Phase II: AMOS Gets Involved

After the failure of the pledge card campaign, Greg continued to toil on universal preschool without a clear sense of what direction to take next. He continued to hold community meetings to keep the issue alive, even as his political strategy remained unclear. At one of the meetings, he met Troy Jackson, a former University Christian Church pastor with a PhD in the history of the civil rights movement.

Troy had recently become executive director of the AMOS Project, a multi-racial coalition of faith communities committed to lifting up the voices of people of color. AMOS consists of more than 40 congregations in greater Cincinnati, and helps members of those communities develop their leadership skills and become active in civic life. During his first months on the job in 2014, Troy partnered with the University of Cincinnati to field a survey of more than 2,000 people living in Cincinnati’s African American neighborhoods to learn about their concerns.

In addition, he had more than 100 one-on-one meetings with AMOS members, clergy across the city, grassroots leaders, teachers’ union representatives, and other stakeholders. Through the survey and the one-on-one meetings, Troy learned that child poverty and preschool readiness were the top issues on people’s minds. At the time, Cincinnati had the second highest childhood poverty rate in the nation.

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Troy thus embarked on an effort to build community support for universal preschool. Building off of his one-on-one meetings, Troy identified community leaders who could begin to reach out to friends, family, and members of their churches to engage them around the issue. Over several months, Troy and AMOS organizers invited more and more constituents, communities, congregations, and clergy into the work.

In the fall of 2014, more than 150 people from over 30 congregations attended an AMOS Leadership Assembly to consider whether they would support the existing universal preschool efforts. They invited Greg to speak. At that meeting, they committed to organizing their constituencies to support the public funding effort. Through old-fashioned person-to-person conversations, they developed an understanding of issues around universal pre-K, support for it, and a constituency ready to act on its behalf. Over the course of 2015, more than 1,000 people attended gatherings held in people's homes and watched a documentary about the importance of early childhood education. Commitment to universal pre-K continued to grow among AMOS's membership as well as other groups and constituencies.

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With support for preschool on the rise, AMOS leaders organized a series of discussions to talk about what values AMOS's members wanted to see enshrined in a publicly funded program. Attended by 400 to 500 people, these meetings—followed by dozens of draft statements—culminated in the development of the People's Platform, a document codifying the values and demands of AMOS's membership. Centering the city's racial disparities, the People's Platform stated that the program needed to prioritize children in the poorest families first (up to 200 percent of the poverty line), and had to guarantee wages of \$15 per hour, paid sick time, and affordable health insurance for preschool providers, many of whom are Black women who were chronically underpaid for their labor. The People's Platform did not, however, specify how preschool should be funded, even though most of AMOS's members favored an income (or earnings) tax.

In contrast to Greg's pledge card drive, which focused on the city's elites and one-off signatures by members of the public, AMOS asked clergy, parents, and other members of the community to commit to the Preschool Promise coalition and the People's Platform. AMOS is an affiliate of Faith in Action, the largest grassroots, faith-based organizing network in the United States. ("Faith-based organizing" refers to a tradition of community organizing that is rooted in organizing churches, temples, mosques, and other faith communities.) AMOS was known for being able to turn out hundreds of congregants for public meetings and actions, often on short notice. As a member of the business community put it, "I don't think any of these big companies would want [it] to be said about them that they were against the kids."

Phase III: A Challenge to AMOS's Power

The United Way, business leaders, school officials, teachers' unions, AMOS, and others had been working together to develop momentum for universal preschool. After AMOS's work organizing grassroots support for the campaign, they felt that they were finally ready for a ballot initiative for universal preschool.

In early 2016, however, a dispute broke out within the coalition about the funding mechanism. Troy and AMOS knew that there was strong support among their base and members of the community for an income tax to fund preschool. But the business community objected to an income tax—they wanted alternative measures that would have less of an effect on their bottom line.

The coalition, and the 15 years of work building up to this ballot initiative, threatened to crumble under the weight of this disagreement. Troy faced intense pressure from his coalition partners, including donors, school officials, and leaders from other nonprofit organizations, who were worried that a ballot initiative could not pass without the support of the business community. They were concerned that business leaders would abandon the ballot initiative if they did not get their way on the funding mechanism. Troy, on the other hand, was concerned that if AMOS compromised on the income tax, families would be expected to compromise on other core principles in the People's Platform. AMOS had a difficult decision to make.

What Would You Do?

- In Phase II, why wasn't Greg's pledge campaign successful in securing public funding for preschool? Why do you think a city council might choose not to fund preschools after they had received a petition with 10,000 signatures? What could Greg have done differently?
- Why do you think AMOS involved so many people in writing its platform? How else could an organization come up with a set of priorities? Do you see possible disadvantages to involving all those people? Also, do you think that all Cincinnati's opinions were reflected in the platform, or only some? Does that matter?
- When joining forces with the business community and established institutions like the United Way and the public schools, how could Troy make sure that the interests of the constituencies to whom he was accountable—namely, families living on low wages and people of color—were protected? Put another way, how could Troy ensure that the Preschool Promise campaign reflected a racial and economic justice agenda?
- In Phase III, when AMOS's power was challenged in the dispute over the funding mechanism, what were the range of choices Troy had?

- As Troy weighed the different strategic options he had, what sources of power, if any, did he have available to him to push back on the business community?
- As Troy considered his options in responding to the business community's challenge to AMOS's interests, what could Troy do to ensure that the People's Platform was taken seriously by the city's elites?

How It Turned Out

In response to pressure to acquiesce to the business community's demands for alternative funding mechanisms, Troy called together corporate and nonprofit leaders for a town hall meeting at the New Prospect Baptist Church. On a little over a week's notice, 300 AMOS constituents showed up and held some of the city's most prominent leaders' accountable by asking them questions rooted in the People's Platform. Those on the dais included the former Proctor & Gamble CEO; the director of the Cincinnati Business Committee; the CEO of Cincinnati's Children's Hospital; the chair of the school board; the city's biggest real estate developer; and others. For over two hours, AMOS's base "held their feet to the fire," as one coalition member put it. In this meeting, Troy hardly spoke, letting his constituents speak instead.

It was the first time AMOS's membership could imagine a shared effort with business leaders and the city's establishment. At the end, those in attendance voted 90 percent in favor of collaboration. AMOS was recognized as an entity that needed to be reckoned with and the People's Platform as an agenda that had to be taken seriously.

After the vote and community meeting, momentum grew for a ballot initiative, Issue 44, that funded K-12 education and universal pre-K with a property tax. In the fall of 2016, AMOS led the door-to-door and phone canvassing program to pass Issue 44. Together with partners, they registered almost 50,000 new voters, recruited over 750 volunteers, and knocked on more than 60,000 doors. While the rest of the country was debating the presidential race, the energy in Cincinnati was focused on Issue 44 and the chance to vote to improve the lives of the city's poorest children.

On Election Night 2016, Donald Trump won Ohio by eight points. That same night, Cincinnatians voted to raise their own property taxes by a total of \$48 million per year for education, \$15 million of which was earmarked for high-quality preschool targeted toward the children who needed it the most. The ballot measure passed by a stunning 24 percent margin, with 62 percent in favor and 38 percent opposed, making it the largest new tax levy for education in the city's history. Some political observers suggested that the organizing AMOS led in favor of Issue 44 boosted Democratic turnout in the region: Hillary Clinton won Hamilton County by a larger margin than President Obama had in 2012. While there is much more to do to address Cincinnati's racial disparities, Issue 44 is making the lives of the city's poorest children better.