



Two Charter Schools Merge to Improve STEM-Education in South Los Angeles

The strategic merger of Crown Preparatory Academy (a middle school) and Math and Science College Prep (a high school), is meeting the need for parents to ensure their kids have a holistic education. These two public charter schools in South Los Angeles are part of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Preparatory Schools network.

Their tagline, featured on the network's website, is to "disrupt the status quo." For STEM Prep, that means providing high-quality and comprehensive education to prepare minority students with a working class background to take on some of the most challenging majors in the fields in which they are underrepresented.

Emilio Pack, STEM Prep's CEO and former executive director of Math and Science Prep, says, "If our students are going to compete in the job market, not of today but 20 or 30 years from now, and we don't prepare them for the future job market — what is going to happen to our minority students? The poor are going to become poorer and the people who can afford a better education are going to be the ones prepared for the higher paying jobs."

Even when the two schools were separate entities, both executive directors knew of each other because they served the same geographic community. Many of Crown Prep's 8th graders continued to 9th grade at Math and Science Prep. They began to collaborate by sharing data of the students they had in common and discussing how they could support each other with their under-performing students.

With their existing relationship, the executive directors wanted to explore the possibility of a more formal collaboration. Pack learned about the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative (NSI). The NSI is a funding collaborative that provides grants to help organizations form strategic partnerships to be more sustainable.

"We found that by merging and being able to address instructional educational gaps at younger grade levels, the more ready we can get them by the time they are seniors," says Pack. "There are some educational advantages starting with younger kids that really was one of, if not the most important, aspect of this merger."

But Pack didn't know a merger would be the right fit until the consultant, Roth Herrlinger, presented a plan to integrate their board of directors. Herrlinger, who is now a partner of Evolution Consulting Group, was chosen for his experience working with the charter sector.

Herrlinger starts by creating a case for how the staff from the two schools can come together to benefit the students, community, staff and donors. Then, he looks at financial statements, board minutes, property leases and other legal documents. The consultant works as a neutral party that researches what could represent a liability to either organization. He also spends time at each site getting to know the staff and leaders to assess if there could be a cultural fit in each organization. Once the two boards are satisfied with the amount of research, Herrlinger starts negotiating the details of what the new organization could look like, from human resources to finances, and program design to IT.

One of the challenges in the consulting process was the leadership transition. An interim executive director was brought on because the executive director of Crown Prep accepted a role in the California Charter Schools Association. In 2015 the merger took place and Pack took on the leadership role for both schools.

"Typically in a merger, you are trying to figure out if you have any redundancies across the leadership where you can save money or you can leverage someone who had extra bandwidth to do more. In this case, [Pack] was able to do more," says Herrlinger.

There were more changes implemented in Crown Prep (middle school) to make it as successful as the Math and Science (high school), which resulted in high turn over at the middle school.

"The personnel felt that the organization didn't look the same as the one they had signed up for. While it is hard to see people go, we knew that it was going to be a natural part of the process," says Pack.

It also created opportunities to hire staff with no association to either charter. The new staff brought a different perspective and started building bridges between the two schools.

Shortly after the merger, both schools were named California Gold Ribbon Schools. Currently about 80 percent of the students are going to a four-year university and about 66 percent of them chose a STEM major. Math and Science Prep also won the Los Angeles Business Journal's Nonprofit of the Year in 2016 at the Latino Business Awards.

Herrlinger says, "It's a great opportunity for executive directors and board members of nonprofits to undertake a multi-month self-inquiry and really get a sense of where they are at now versus

when they started, what are their strengths and weaknesses. Some will decide that a merger is a great idea and occasionally some will decide that it is not.”