

# Emilio Pack, STEM Preparatory Schools

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

STEM Preparatory Schools, Los Angeles, charter schools, public education, community roots, Alliance College Ready Schools, California Charter School of the Year, STEM focused, workforce preparation, problem-solving, leaders of color, board of directors, co-located school, Los Angeles Unified School District, educational experience.

## SPEAKERS

Emilio Pack



Emilio Pack 00:01

I really if you look at the genesis of math and science, college prep and crown prep, which is now stem prep schools here in Los Angeles, I think I can trace it back to my childhood experiences. I was conceived in Cuba, but born in the United States. My mom came six months pregnant, a single Cuban mother, and when we got here, we were extremely poor. My first vivid memory was of her of hearing screaming in the apartment, and as a curious child, I said, What is going on? Is something wrong? And it was her actually doing black market dentistry. She was a dentist in Cuba, but lost everything. So I came in and I see her foot propped up on the toilet, and she's got some used equipment, and she's pulling teeth, and this is how we made do. My mom relied on the education she had in Cuba. Came here, scrimped and saved by charging five or \$10 to the community to do dental work, and finally got enough money to say, where is the best public school for my son? And she moved us from the lowest performing schools in LA at that time in the Legion Park, and found this suburb called San Marino. All of a sudden, I found myself thrust into an extremely white and extremely privileged community, but they had a school system that was second to none, and San Marino unified created a el program for me because I didn't speak English, despite being born in the country, and when I look at what we're doing with STEM prep, I realized that I had to leave my community to find a great public School. I want to bring those same quality public schools to the communities to service the kids who need it most. I no longer want kids to leave their community and lose their community roots to find quality education. We need to come to them, and that's what we're attempting to do with STEM prep, a high quality stem preparation school in the communities that need it most. The reason I'm so interested in charter schools and become so have chosen that as my career route is that my career started as a traditional public school principal. And I like to say I was a charter school principal before I was in charter schools. And that doesn't always work out real well, because when you want to disrupt the status quo, when you want to make changes in the best interest of kids, regardless of politics or bureaucracy, that usually does not work well in a traditional public school system. So by sheer luck, I went to barbecue and ran into Judy Burton and Howard Lapin, who were instrumental in creating Alliance college ready schools, and they started describing what it would be like to open a school within a charter school system. It just was music to my ears. The autonomy to hire whoever I wanted,

the autonomy regarding curriculum, not to have categorical funding, but to have a block funding where I could use money in the best way I saw fit to service students to the best of my ability, I was in and I was able to open up a school with Alliance college ready schools. College ready High School Number four, which later became Dr Olga Mohan, eventually winning the California Charter School of the Year award, I believe, in 2011 or 12. And that really inspired me to open up my own smaller cmo network, and that's where the seeds for STEM prep were planted. As I saw the Alliance growing, I still saw kid after kid on a wait list. And even at the last school we opened, Dr Olga Mohan, their wait list is 500 and I just said, I have to do my part, but this time I want to do it stem focused, because I think that that's the future of great jobs for students. So it was very important to me that the organization I opened up be a stem preparatory school, so the normal student that we draw have has no idea even what an engineer is. So if we're going to take the students with the highest levels of poverty and we want to expose them to a career field that's going to break that cycle of poverty, how can we, in good conscious, not expose them to the highest paying jobs of the future. Not only that, even if they don't become an engineer or biochemist, the way that we educate kids does not prepare them for the workforce, traditionally, and I'm guilty of it. I've been in education for over 25 years now, education has been the teacher giving information to students, students memorizing and regurgitating it, and we test them on that what we have not done a good job is teaching kids how to think, and that's what a STEM program does. It allows kids to explore content. It allows kids to make mistake and learn from those mistakes, and allow kids to problem solve. I can tell you that about. 95% of my job is problem solving, and if we're not teaching that skill, whether they end up in STEM or not, they're not going to be prepared for the workforce of the future. If someone came to visit our school, the first thing I do is I'd grab them by the arm, and we would walk into our engineering lab, and what they would see is the same exact lab that they would see during a freshman year college engineering course, and that means you're going to see kids talking you're going to see on computers working on design concepts. You're going to see those design concepts coming to life through 3d modeling. You're going to see kids working collaboratively in groups, making mistakes, challenging each other and showing the resiliency that it takes to problem solve an extremely complex and difficult problem. You're what you're not going to see is a teacher doing 20, 3040, minutes of lecturing with kids writing down notes getting ready to take a multiple choice test. This is really about kids exploring content with their hands, with their minds, and the teacher facilitating them, giving them hints, but letting the kids do the cognitive lifting, not thinking for the kids. We know the teachers know this content. That's why we hired them. How can you impart that knowledge without doing it for the child? And that's what I think you would see. That's what I know you'd see when you come to a stem prep school. Even with the charter school movement being around as long as it has, we still, at least for Los Angeles, see a large discrepancy in the number of leaders of color that are servicing communities of color. So I see this two fold. I need to serve as a role model for my students who look like me and have a similar background to me. Second, I want to inspire the next generation of leaders of color and let them know that if I broke off and did it on my own, that they can do it too. I think the unseen leader of color that we often forget to count is the board member. So for me, it's very important that leadership with leaders of color from the communities that we serve are also represented on our board of directors. And I think if you look at our board of directors, while it's not 100% leaders of color or board members of color, it is mandatory for me, in good conscience, to operate my school with the majority of our board members being leaders of color as well. I was very inspired by a young man who, just like me was, was coming from an immigrant family. He was from El Salvador, my my family's from Cuba, and he, like me, was, was raised by a single mom, and when I was in high school, I played football, and on football Fridays, you had to wear a tie. And I remember for years and years and years, because I was raised by a single mom and there wasn't a man in the family, I would wear a clip on, and people would make fun of me for having

a clip on. So this young man, I think he was doing a mock interview, and he came to me and said, Dr pack, I don't know how to tie a tie. I don't have a dad. And that was kind of the moment where, like, that kid is me, and I had no one to fill that role, and I had to wear that clip on symbolically. Let me show this kid how to tie a tie. And I think in a way, that's kind of symbolic of what we're trying to do. Right? As a leader of color, I'm trying to give back to that community and fill the voids that other people haven't in the past. There's no doubt that if you were to talk to charter leaders in Los Angeles right now, they would tell you that the relationship with the district is extremely strained. The Los Angeles Unified School District has lost many students over the course of the last 10 years, when the charter as the charter movement has really blossomed. Now, not all of those students have gone to gone to charter schools, but the charter schools are taking the brunt of the of the anger and of the blame for the district being in some financial strain, to say the least. I think one way I see this on a daily basis is being a co located school at a Los Angeles unified district school. So our middle school is co located with an LAUSD Elementary School. And every year we negotiate a new agreement, and every year this process just becomes more burdensome. I'll give you a concrete example. School for us starts in seven days. We don't have a signed use agreement, and having that signed use agreement early and working along with the parents and the stakeholders and both schools coming together is so crucial. So we have a parent meeting tonight. I can't tell parents what classroom their students are going to be in, or give them a schedule, and it's all because everything has become a constant tug of war. We need a room back. No, we need a room back. You can't do PE during the other schools, lunch and recess, and we get so bogged down in these little wins or losses that we lose the big picture. How can we make decisions that impact all of the students in that campus, regardless of the color of the uniform, have the best educational experience possible, and until we put all students first, I think that I don't know how we're going to fix this, because I think adult issues are still getting in the way of what is best for all kids, regardless of charter or district you