Empower and Trust: Creating Conditions for Improvement

In an unprecedented year, introducing a new project is no easy feat. How STEM Prep ensured the right conditions for a multi-year continuous improvement effort.

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

It’s not easy introducing a new project into the workflows of an existing team. Harder still is when a team structure hasn’t existed before, and it’s up to you to bring together team members from across an organization, operating at different levels, in a variety of job functions. But when collaboration is in the best interests of students, it’s worth it.

So when STEM Preparatory Schools received the opportunity to join a multi-year Networked Improvement Community (NIC) with the goal of dramatically improving outcomes for Black, Latinx, and low-income students with disabilities, Special Educator Coordinator Mary Maher answered the call. With the backing of project sponsors Emilio Pack and Janette Rodriguez-Pack, Mary was empowered and trusted to connect the goal of the NIC with STEM Prep’s organizational mission—specifically, to disrupt the status quo of inequitable access into STEM fields for women and minorities. By articulating how the NIC’s goal to improve experiences and outcomes for diverse learners directly supported STEM Prep’s founding mission of inclusion, stakeholders across STEM Prep’s Improvement Team were able to rally around the work of the NIC. In one student interview, a Math and Science College Prep (MSCP) student shared his clear understanding of STEM Prep’s vision:

“We are STEM thinkers. We are family. We are agents of change.”

Moreover, a culture of inclusion was already in place for most of the day. In our site visit, we noted the use of Placement Assessments for all incoming freshmen, allowing STEM Prep to provide support classes to all students, and not just those with diagnosed learning disabilities. Instructional Assistants also checked in with all students, not only students with disabilities. Pre-existing organizational commitment to inclusion was key to aligning all stakeholders necessary to introduce the project at STEM Prep’s focal sites. By the time the team headed into its third kick-off meeting of the Summer, Mary, the project’s Improvement Lead, had gathered voices from across the team. Improvement Team members had also read the Revised Plan asynchronously. But the final kick-off meeting brought everyone into the same Zoom room to examine pieces that had been separately constructed throughout the Summer.

Examining milestones and deliverables in STEM Prep’s Revised Project Plan, Mary articulated a clear commitment from the Improvement Team, and a desire to build capacity for continuous improvement. The team was there, the team was eager to dive into the work, and—upon seeing the sheer number of milestones required to push the project through—team members at every level jumped to volunteer to lead the work.

Why? Every individual on the team recognized their work would make a difference for STEM Prep’s broader mission.

That was the ‘ah-a’ moment when things clicked: that because conditions were already there, and because mindsets were already aligned, Mary could count on the Improvement Team to distribute, delegate, and advocate for time and space to do this important work.

Marco Castaneda led the reporting of this story.

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