

Akin Gump supports schools client with pro bono service

By Steven Crighton
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Solid long-term legal partnerships aren't easy to come by — particularly when it comes to pro bono work.

But in Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, the nonprofit public charter school organization KIPP LA Public Schools discovered a reliable hand for pro bono services to support the school's academic program. And the firm found a regular client in turn.

Frank Reddick, a partner in the firm's Los Angeles office, said the firm's relationship with KIPP dates back more than 10 years to when he first introduced the organization's general counsel to Steven H. Schulman, partner-in-charge of the Akin Gump's worldwide pro bono practice. Since then, the firm has provided more than 20,000 pro bono hours to KIPP.

In the last two years or so, 63 state-based Akin Gump attorneys and six paralegals have worked on matters related to KIPP, more than half the attorneys in the firm's California offices.

Nolan Highbaugh, the nonprofit's chief legal officer, said he was initially doubtful about talks of a long-term pro bono partnership, a skepticism formed after several previous efforts left a lackluster impact.

"We'd engaged in some pro bono relationships before, and usually, there was an attitude of, 'Well, you get what you pay for,'" Highbaugh said.

With Akin Gump, he said, "we're treated like a blue chip client."

"Basically, they made a promise and they followed through on it. I hate to say it, but that might be a rare thing these days," Highbaugh commented.

Reddick said the partnership has significant benefits for both sides "that are not available in traditional one-engagement pro bono matters." Lawyers working with KIPP are able to develop an area of expertise that's useful not just as part of their ongoing matters with the organization, but to their practice as a whole.

"At the same time, KIPP obtains the benefit of lawyers who have developed a knowledge of the organization and its industry," Reddick said.

The firm's transactional attorneys, for example, don't usually have as many pro bono opportunities requiring their precise skill set compared



Skylar Dubelko / Daily Journal

KIPP LA Public Schools' Executive Director Marcia Aaron, left, and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP partner Frank Reddick

to their litigating colleagues. But the pro bono efforts done in partnership with KIPP include sophisticated corporate finance and other complex-to-navigate transactional work, allowing the attorneys to put their core practice skills to work in a way that has the most impact.

Real estate attorney Daniel Shlomi said he's worked regularly with KIPP since joining the firm six years ago, both in pro bono matters and as a regular firm client.

Shlomi said the matters he handles on behalf of KIPP usually involve the purchase agreement negotiations and zoning considerations that generally pop up in the matters he handles, but unique components that require some level of practical knowledge aren't uncommon.

Founded in 1994, KIPP is now serving 96,000 students in its 224 schools nationwide. The schools are open enrollment and tuition-free with classes from Pre-K through high school. The organization, its academic programs, and its individual schools have received multiple honors from the Department of Education and numerous awards from independent education programs.

In turn, KIPP honored Akin Gump in 2016 in

celebration of its 10-year partnership.

Marcia Aaron, the organization's executive director, said Akin Gump has been vital to KIPP's expansion plan, providing an estimated \$6 million worth of services nationwide over the years. In particular, she lauded pro bono efforts by the firm's financial and real estate teams that have aided recent development in California.

"The efforts they've made for our students have been truly appreciated," she said.

The bonds between the firm and the organization have grown more apparent over the years, Aaron said, notably with the addition of two firm members, Reddick and partner Carlos Bermudez, to the organization's Board of Directors.

Reddick says he usually puts in about 250 hours of pro bono work a year, the majority of it in support of KIPP's efforts.

"I guess it's kind of my thing, right?" Reddick said. "But, to me, these are schools where you feel that something very special is being done with an inviting culture and in an environment where kids will be able to find true opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have. They're saving lives as far as I'm concerned."