

# CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

## Marcos Martinez

Founder & CEO,  
PONDER Academy Schools



I grew up in inner-city Denver and went to Catholic schools all my life. The schools I attended were called the S.U.N schools (Schools in Urban Neighborhoods). They catered to working class Chicana/Chicano and Mexicano/Mexicana students. After 8th grade, I received a scholarship to go to an elite college prep Catholic school. That was a great experience and a rough experience all in one. I learned a lot about academia and how to thrive in a Euro-centric atmosphere, which were great skills to learn, but it was a culture shock. I went from a school that was 95% Chicano/Chicana, Mexicano/Mexicana to a setting where I was one of the only ones. I was a Chicano male who didn't know any white people, except teachers.

After I graduated, I went to the University of Northern Colorado and double majored in Chicano/a studies and Sociology. I went on to receive my Master's in Sociology at UC Boulder, and I'm currently in a PhD program at the University of Wyoming.

I taught for a while after graduating from the University of Colorado, but I decided I wanted to do something different, so I went into community organizing. I represented parents in East Denver who for the first time, were given the option to turn their school into something other than a district school. No Child Left Behind had just come out and schools that weren't making the grade were being punished.

The school in the community where I worked had historically poor test scores, and it wasn't properly serving Black and Latino/Latina students. The district decided to turn the school into a charter school. Parents didn't know what a charter school was and didn't have any community representation with district, so it was my job to educate and represent them. I had to research the various types of charter schools, and how these schools were going to impact the community.

Then, I saw a fellowship offering for innovative educators, leaders and teachers, the training to start their own schools. I had always wanted to do that, so I applied. I started my first school in the Denver area, which won numerous awards. Then, I consulted and helped other schools, in Denver and in Ohio, achieve great test scores working with black and brown and poor students.

### EMBRACING EXCELLENCE

We opened PODER Academy in 2012; our second campus PODER Academy Secondary School (PASS), opened in 2016. Our schools are centrally located in Cheyenne, so anyone can get there. The majority of our students are from the south side, the working class part of town, but we're actually one of the most diverse schools in the state. Our population was 88% FRL, had a high percentage of students of color, and the majority of students who had not been

served well in traditional public schools. Our goal was to be the top school in the state in terms of academic performance by year two, and we made this a reality by having the highest proficiency/advanced rates out of all the public schools within the state of Wyoming. As soon as we became the #1 school in the state in test scores (we've never been out of the top five), middle- and upper-class parents started flocking, because now we were a proven entity.

College is the whole purpose for us being here. We want our students to be prepared, have opportunity, and graduate from college. Our standardized test results show that 80%-90% of our students are either proficient or advanced in the core subjects, indicating that they are on the path towards college. We partner with the local community college to offer students dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and AP classes. Our students do all their core classes by the end of their sophomore year, so they can take college classes during junior and senior years. The goal is to have our students graduate from high school with their Associates degrees.

We embrace competition. Our students are comfortable with competition, and they view testing as an important component of their education. We have a strong culture that's very structured with a focus on internal discipline. We put academics first, but we also believe in athletics. Our students specialize in tennis, soccer, and chess. They've won local and national tournaments. We partner with the local high school for varsity athletics, and many of our students play varsity in tennis and soccer as freshmen because they have had the proper training in our K-8 athletic program.

## OPPORTUNITY AND EMPATHY

Showing that charter leaders of color matter is something that I had thought about and was passionate about even before I opened my first school. It's important for people to understand that our backgrounds can provide opportunity and empathy for our students. When I first arrived in Wyoming, I had people of color come to me and say, "We didn't know Mexicans could start a school." They had never seen school leaders of color, especially successful ones.

Our society is changing, and as society progresses towards a more diverse population, power has to be shared with communities of color, or the dominant culture will see power taken from them. Providing that power to leaders of color gives the rest of the community awareness that quality leadership can come in any shape or form.



# POUNDER Academy Schools

## POUNDER Academy

Location	Cheyenne, WY
Year Opened	2012
Student enrollment	165
Grades served	K-5
Website	<a href="http://ponderacademy.com">ponderacademy.com</a>

## Student Demographics

Black/African-American	10%	Homeless Youth	1%
White/Caucasian	55%	Free or Reduced Meals (FRM)	10%
Hispanic/Latino	30%	Students with Disabilities	18%
Two or More Races	5%	ESL Students	45%

## POUNDER Academy Secondary School Student Demographics

Location	Cheyenne, WY
Year Opened	2016
Student enrollment	123
Grades served	6-11
Website	<a href="http://ponderacademy.com/pass">ponderacademy.com/pass</a>

## Student Demographics

Black/African-American	10%	Homeless Youth	3%
White/Caucasian	55%	Free or Reduced Meals (FRM)	60%
Hispanic/Latino	30%	Students with Disabilities	11%
Two or More Races	5%	ESL Students	10%