



**Chief Executive Officer  
Ascend Learning, Inc.**

**The Context**

New York-based charter management organization Ascend Learning works in close partnership with Ascend Public Charter Schools to operate the network and provide an intellectual journey for its 5,700 students in fifteen K-12 charter schools in the Central Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brownsville, Bushwick, Canarsie, Cypress Hills, East New York, East Flatbush, and Lefferts Gardens. Across its fifteen schools, 96% of Ascend students identify as Black and/or Latinx, 13.4% are designated as special ed, and 83% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. A highly diverse team of 845 staff work with dedication, passion and urgency to provide students with a rich liberal arts education in a warm, supportive, and carefully developed environment designed to equip each student with the knowledge, confidence, and character to succeed in college, as citizens and as leaders in their chosen fields.

Ascend's story is one of continuous learning and evolution. Following a decline in test scores after NYC's 2013 shift to the Common Core assessment, and the simultaneous recognition that many tenets of the No Excuses model were inconsistent with fostering Ascend's pedagogical hallmarks of critical thinking and independence of thought, Ascend redesigned its curriculum. Specifically, led by the network and principals and supported by teachers, Ascend revised both the approach to learning and the classroom culture by adopting a warm and supportive, dialogue-rich culture rooted in *Responsive Classroom*, including developing restorative practices in the high school. In the 19-20 school year, 96% of Ascend's high school senior class graduated on time, and 100 percent of its graduates were accepted to college. More broadly, since deploying the revised model in 2014, Ascend posted the highest proficiency gains in both ELA and mathematics on the New York State Common Core exams. And, proficiency in ELA and math among Ascend's Black students was higher than that of white students statewide, thereby reversing the achievement gap by race.

**The Opportunity**

In 2019, in acknowledgement of another opportunity to leverage meaningful change, the Ascend Learning Board made the decision to effect a CEO leadership transition and install an interim leader to drive an organizational audit and ready Ascend for a new, permanent CEO. Shortly thereafter, Lisa Margosian was appointed to the role of Interim Chief Executive Officer, to which she is committed until July 2021.

The next CEO will lead an organization of myriad strengths, including: 5700 students and families from the vibrant communities of central and east Brooklyn, areas of the city unserved by many other charters; dedicated teachers, many of whom come from the community and 70% of color; a cohort of high-performing principals (75% of color); a talented and deeply committed leadership team (67% of color); an active Equity Steering Committee; 15 custom-designed, independently-located school buildings (a facilities situation unique in the NYC charter sector); a revised leadership competency framework developed inclusively over the past year with an emphasis on diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism (DEIA) and conveying foundational behaviors, skills, and mindsets expected of leadership; Ascend's unique success amongst large NYC charters in creating a warm Responsive Classroom environment in contrast to the "No Excuses" culture; authentic conversations about what Ascend's role as an employer and community builder should be; the opportunity to build a team by filling a few key cabinet-level vacancies; a lean-but-strengthened financial position; one unused SUNY charter in case growth is prioritized; a relatively new board with members eager to engage and leverage their collective expertise; and steady, thoughtful preparation for a leadership transition by an interim CEO who has worked thoughtfully and intentionally to build upon the strength of Ascend's schools and serve as a bridge between the founding chapter and the leader who will succeed her.

The incoming CEO will also navigate substantive challenges and opportunities. For example: beyond the pandemic's impact, academic outcomes and student experience at Ascend's middle and high schools have room for improvement, as does the college access function; Ascend's distinct real estate model requires thoughtful consideration; the on-going DEIA work within Ascend, while central and robust, is not experienced consistently by people across the organization and must therefore be both embraced and enhanced by the next leader; translating *Responsive Classroom* methods to virtual learning could amplify Ascend's voice, shift its "well-kept secret" status, and allow Ascend to take a more prominent place among the city's large CMOs.

### **The Position**

The next Chief Executive Officer will join Ascend at a pivotal juncture in its history, and one with great potential. In collaboration with the Board of Directors, this leader will oversee all aspects of the organization and assume ultimate accountability for 15 schools, overall revenues of \$118M, and the performance of the 75-person network team. Further, this leader will navigate unprecedented complexity related to the myriad national crises, while attending to the dynamic tension at Ascend that some say is its "special sauce:" striving for students *and* ensuring support for the adults that educate them. Finally, there are three key areas of responsibility of particular importance for the next Chief Executive Officer:

#### **1. Organizational Vision & Leadership**

- In collaboration with the both the Ascend Learning and Ascend Public Charter School Boards, develop a multi-year strategic plan with clear and annual academic, financial, operational, DEIA-related, and fundraising metrics and outcomes by 2022
- Execute effective accountability systems to meet and exceed goals, and ensure operations are financially sound, legally compliant, and safe and supportive of students
- In alignment with Ascend's values, commitment to DEIA, and its Responsive Classroom model and in close partnership with families, promote the innovation, testing, piloting, and scaling of new solutions that drive student development and achievement
- Foster collaboration, partnership, and communication at all levels within the network, between schools, and between the Ascend Learning and Ascend Public Charter School boards and maintain high-visibility and accessibility and foster relationships at every level of the Ascend community

#### **2. Talent**

- In collaboration with the Chief People Officer, develop and maintain a culture that celebrates and practices the core competencies captured in Ascend's five key framework domains: whole student focus, effective teaming, strategic leadership, functional competencies, and racial equity mindset
- Attract, support, and retain a strong and diverse leadership team
- Oversee a talent strategy that ensures that Ascend can retain and support its growing and incredible team, as well as recruit, retain, and develop high performers at every level
- Actively model, engage, drive, and lead conversations and efforts to develop and implement diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism goals for each function and level of the network (comprising 71% staff of color) and its schools to ensure that all constituencies have voice and opportunity to influence Ascend's work

#### **3. External Relationships and Presences**

- Convey and champion Ascend's vision and story in a manner that assures Ascend, its mission, programs and services are presented accurately and reflect care and commitment toward meeting the community's needs
- Attract and nurture new and existing philanthropic relationships while increasing Ascend's capacity for fundraising and development.
- Build on existing partnerships and relationships with key local and national leaders, community-based organizations, government and authorizing officials, and national charter organizations

### **Qualifications**

The next CEO will possess the following professional skills, experience and personal characteristics that validate their stated readiness to lead a complex, urban, ambitious educational organization:

The successful candidate will bring to the role the following *professional experience*:

- Achieving results as a senior leader in a large, complex and fast-paced organization, including substantive contributions to thinking strategically and developing a long term strategic plan
- Fostering an inclusive and equitable culture by holding and articulating an inspiring vision
- A track record of attracting, motivating and developing large, high-performing teams
- Consistent evidence of deep care and attention to modeling DEIA on teams and as a leader
- Activating and engaging a board collaboratively and productively
- Oversight of a multi-million dollar budget
- Effective community outreach and engagement resulting in productive relationships
- A bachelor's degree

Further, the successful candidate will possess the following *skills*:

- An adaptive leadership style and comfort with distributed leadership
- Seasoned people management skills, methods, and sensibilities, including the ability to develop team members alongside existing accountability and performance management structures
- The ability to drive the creation of a viable, long term financial plan and sustainable funding base from individuals, foundations, and corporations
- Excellent listening and communications skills
- The ability to develop and improve systems that support education-related program efficiency, effectiveness and performance management

Next, the successful candidate must possess these *personal characteristics*:

- Passion for Ascend's mission and impact and demonstrated alignment with Ascend's values
- Comfort and willingness to lead Ascend's community in diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism
- Demonstrable and evident professional maturity coupled with a reputation for having a high EQ
- A style that models inclusivity, collegiality, transparency, excellence, integrity, and innovation

*While not required, the following credentials would be highly attractive:*

- Executive or senior-level experience at a charter school network with 9 or more schools
- Executive experience at a nonprofit of comparable size, scope, and in service to a similar population
- Superintendent experience in a school district of similar size

### **Reporting Relationships**

The CEO will report to the Ascend Learning Board of Directors, and work in close collaboration with the Ascend Charter School Board which, in alignment with NY State law, holds the Ascend school charters. Seven Officers comprise Ascend's senior leadership team and report to the CEO, though not all of these roles are currently filled: Chief Operating Officer, Chief Curriculum & Instruction Officer, Chief People Officer, Chief Schools Officer, Chief Finance Officer, Legal Counsel, and Communications Manager.

### **Compensation**

The salary for the CEO role is highly competitive. Benefits include: medical/dental/vision insurance, a 403(b) plan, flexible spending accounts, and commuter benefits.

### **TO APPLY**

**The review** of applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. *For best consideration, please submit a cover letter and resume to [monisha@promise54.org](mailto:monisha@promise54.org) by Monday, November 30, 2020.*

*Ascend Learning, Inc. is an equal opportunity employer. We seek applicants of diverse backgrounds and hire without regard to color, gender, religion, national origin, citizenship, disability, age, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic protected by law.*