

Rito Martinez

Vice President, National Programs, The Surge Institute

Rito Martinez is a giver whose own deep commitment to personal development through learning, self-reflection and an embrace of the process fueled his passion to support the development of others.

As Vice President of National Programs for the Surge Institute, Rito is responsible for setting the vision and direction for the content of the Surge Fellowship — the Institute's signature program — as well as the design of the Surge core curriculum.

Rito is a proud alumnus of Chicago Public Schools. Growing up in Little Village, a working-class neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, and the challenges stemming from poverty and urban dysfunction built character, grit and passion that led me to become an award-winning educator.



As a teacher, Rito constantly pushed his students to explore self, identity and culture and to find their purpose. He also helped students unpack the impact of low expectations and demanded that they form an intellectual identity. His work on creating culturally relevant curricula, as well as the relationships he formed with his students, led to his receiving the Golden Apple Award for Teaching Excellence.

After 12 years as a classroom teacher, Rito returned to his community to support a grass-roots movement to open a new high school in Little Village. In 2004, he was founding principal of Social Justice High School, an innovative small school that was birthed from a community grass-roots struggle that culminated in a 19-day hunger strike. Rito worked incessantly to create a powerful high school culture that would address the political and racial divisions of North and South Lawndale. Social Justice High School became a vibrant school where black and Latino students actively engaged in civic and social justice projects to address systemic issues of inequity in their community. By the time he left in 2009, he had forged significant and meaningful partnerships with community organizations, universities and foundations in order to implement successful school-wide programs.

As he transitioned from being a classroom teacher to being a principal, Rito made a critical realization: He had to transfer his love of teaching high school students to a love of teaching and developing adults. Rito's expertise in adult learning, design, leadership development and executive coaching has informed his work for the past five years. He has discovered that other African-American and Latino leaders had similar formative experiences as children.

Rito believes that every leadership journey features peaks and valleys that inform one's ever-evolving leadership identity. For leaders of color, that journey is oftentimes centered on self-doubt: a fear of failure and a fear of disappointing one's self or others. When left unexamined, these inner voices diminish a leader's effectiveness and impact. For black and brown leaders, it is imperative that they examine issues of identity, race and ethnicity as a means of understanding both their strengths and areas of development.

Rito is deeply committed to impacting African-American and Latino communities by supporting and developing the leaders who serve them.