

Our plan to achieve excellence for  
Chicago's students and their families.



**Chicago International**  
CHARTER SCHOOL

# 3-YEAR BLUEPRINT

# 2017-20



# LETTER FROM THE CEO

Dear CICS students, families, educators, supporters, and community members,

After more than 20 years serving Chicago families with quality school choices, Chicago International Charter School is at an inflection point. With a history of improving student academic performance, **we've provided better return on the public dollar, outperformed neighborhood schools, run an innovative portfolio model** that birthed new school models, and provided talented educators the opportunity to launch and manage new schools and organizations. Our portfolio network model is designed to deliver on the promises of the charter school movement: greater choice for families, autonomy and empowerment for educators, and space for innovations that fuel broader improvements. CICS creates the conditions for charter school leaders and educators to focus on what matters most: supporting students to thrive every day on their path to success in college and life. After two decades of serving Chicago's children and families, we are embarking on an aggressive three-year plan designed to accelerate student performance, provide consistent quality across our portfolio, incubate promising new school models, and fuel innovation among Chicago public schools.

**Success means achieving excellence for every child every day, and despite demonstrated gains, we know that we aren't there yet.** While school performance has improved steadily and continues to improve year after year, network-wide consistency and college readiness for every student must also improve.

Since 1997, when CICS became one of the first charter networks in the state of Illinois, the educational landscape and realities of our city and communities have changed. Chicago's charter community has grown to 130 campuses including a wide variety of school models and programs. Charter school enrollment has almost tripled over the past decade increasing from 23,000 in 2007 to nearly 60,000 in 2016. There have also been increased challenges, including the fiscal instability of the city and state and an increasingly contentious political climate. Despite these challenges, breakthroughs from the charter sector continue to produce tremendous results for students. Technological advancements have also supported innovative new models and practices that change the way students experience school. Yet **the innovations in Chicago charter schools are just the beginning** of what our educators can imagine and our students can achieve.

In my first months as CEO at CICS, I spent time in schools across our network to better understand our performance and role in Chicago. In more than a hundred classroom visits, I witnessed firsthand the **fierce dedication, unmitigated optimism, and get-it-done attitude** that has earned CICS the trust of students, their families, and our community partners. To reflect on how we can better fulfill our promise to students and their families, we met with parents, staff, and students; analyzed national and regional education organizations; and sought an unbiased understanding of our strengths and areas where we could improve. We took a hard look at our current approach and determined that our portfolio network model is more valuable than ever in the current Chicago education landscape. **Parents need choice, great educators need autonomy and empowerment, and students need the opportunities provided by innovative new models.** With two decades of experience, we are poised to reboot our organization and build on the strength of our portfolio model to develop an effective plan to further improve student performance. We are excited about embarking on the next evolution of CICS as we work together to deliver on the boundless potential of our model and our network.

**We've written a plan to achieve excellence for Chicago's students and their families.** Our new blueprint will shift our organization's structure, how we talk about and measure our work, and how we collaborate with our partners. We will continue to partner with high-performing school operators, become an incubator for Chicago, and sharpen our focus on innovation, creating the conditions to support talented education entrepreneurs to innovate inside our schools and classrooms—ultimately, better serving Chicago's public school students and their families. We embark on the next chapter of CICS with the belief that great things are possible for our students, our educators, our families and communities, our schools, partners, and our beloved city of Chicago. Together, we will face the fiscal, political, and strategic challenges ahead with one priority: the success of every single CICS public school student.

Onward and Upward,



**Elizabeth Shaw**  
Chief Executive Officer

# INTRODUCTION

## Our Unique Model

CICS is a pioneer—one of Illinois’ first charter networks to manage a portfolio of talented and autonomous school operators with a wide range of school models. Our schools are designed for our communities, with approaches as diverse as the communities we serve.

Charter schools began as an innovation lab for public education, and our structure allows us to pursue innovation at a scale that serves students across Chicago. CICS’ size, financial stability, and commitment to diverse student and educator experiences allows us to be creative, take more risks, and prioritize new ideas.

This strategy is new and yet rooted in our history. The CICS portfolio model allows us to tap into an incredible existing resource: talented and entrepreneurial educators who crave empowerment and leadership to do more for students. We partner with school operators—education entrepreneurs—who join our network for the opportunity to autonomously design, launch, and manage new schools, and want the support and resources of a large successful charter network. CICS provides them with effective back-office services, external engagement, actionable data and feedback, and a vibrant network of like-minded innovators they can collaborate with and learn from. With these supports in place, we can expect powerful breakthroughs and better results for our 8,600 students and for the Chicago public education ecosystem.



### CORE PURPOSE

Our core purpose is to offer Chicago families excellent and innovative school choices where their children thrive every day. Through a portfolio model of 14 schools managed by diverse operators, we serve 8,600 students and offer varied and high quality options to families across Chicago.

### VISION

CICS will be a hub of excellence, equity, and innovation in Chicago education: Every student will flourish, every school will meet the unique needs of its community, and every success will improve our city and our world.

### MISSION

Our vibrant network of diverse Chicago charter schools enables students to thrive every day, puts them on a path to success in college and life, and empowers entrepreneurial educators to pursue excellence through innovation.

CICS is raising the bar and committing to achieving excellence across our portfolio: employees, partners, programs, and schools. Over the next three years, we will stay true to the model CICS has used since its founding, while evolving to better serve students and their families. We will start by establishing and recommitting to a shared and ambitious vision of what is possible for our schools and students, and reorient our organization to deliver on that vision. We’ll reimagine how we support and share responsibilities with operators to optimize resources and performance, and offer high value and efficient back-office services. We will continue to support current operators that are succeeding, exploring opportunities for them to grow and replicate results while taking aggressive action to improve the performance of operators who have not met our expectations. Additionally, we will enhance our network by incubating single-site operators who offer families new and better innovative school models.

# OUR BLUEPRINT

## Our Bright Future

The three-year blueprint establishes a pathway for CICS to become a consistently high-performing network of academically-rigorous, pedagogically-diverse, forward-thinking schools that **help students thrive every day and puts them on a path to succeed in college and life, raising the bar for Chicago education.** CICS's transformation will occur on parallel paths:

Our first path is **core performance improvement.** CICS recently established a new, powerful, and shared vision for excellence at the network, operator, and school levels. In the coming years, we will continue to partner with school operators—education entrepreneurs—who join our network for the opportunity to autonomously design, launch, and manage new schools, and we will hold them accountable for results, including making changes

when necessary, but also with rewards, incentives, and interventions. The CICS network team will hold itself accountable for providing a level of high-quality shared services and resources only available through a large, successful charter network. Together, our network will collaborate and work together to improve and create a vibrant oasis for talented educators in Chicago education.

Our second path is **innovation, incubation, and ecosystem.** CICS will strive to be more creative, take more risks, and prioritize innovative new ideas. We will seed micro-innovations, redesign schools, and incubate new operators to stay within the current CICS portfolio or spin out as independent operators. Over the next three years, CICS will transform our schools and network by working with our operators to deliver on our Vision of Excellence.

## Our Priorities for CICS Network Team and Operators

To guide this work, we have established three-year priorities for our network: high-level anchors that define the core work of the network team and of our operating partners. Our three-year priorities guide our work, how we manage our existing portfolio of partners, and how we select new partners. Our success is dependent not only on achieving the network team's priorities, but also on our ability to retain, recruit, empower, support, and manage a portfolio of operators to achieve their priorities.



### Priorities for CICS Network Team

1. Set a powerful and unified **vision of excellent schools.**
2. Align **systems, accountability, and resources** to achieve excellence.
3. **Incubate, innovate, and transition** as needed.
4. Create a **vibrant oasis for Chicago education entrepreneurs** to thrive, collaborate, and share services.

### Priorities for CICS Operators

1. Design and implement **brilliant academic models and learning environments.**
2. Find and support **amazing talent.**
3. Pursue new **innovations.**
4. **Collaborate, learn, and share** within the network.
5. **Manage resources wisely** and responsibly.

### 3-Year Priorities and Strategies

Our plan is to build on our decades of performance and enable CICS to deliver innovative new school models and achieve excellence for our CICS students. We hold a replicating charter from CPS that we have maintained and renewed over the past twenty years, and we consistently meet and exceed requirements to keep our charter in good standing, including achieving the district threshold for high performance. We own five school buildings. Our financial performance has been strong despite the challenging fiscal climate, providing our partners with budgeting expertise and oversight, reliable

cash flow, capital funding for buildings, and consistently strong audits. Our advocacy efforts have helped defeat proposals in the state legislature to eliminate charter schools and maintain funding equity for public charter school students throughout the city. Enrollment continues to be strong across the network and we are outperforming schools in the neighborhoods we serve. By pursuing our priorities, we will improve our core performance and achieve breakthrough innovations for Chicago students and families. The plan below outlines how the CICS network team will accomplish our priorities.

#### Priority 1: Set a powerful and unified vision of excellent schools

- Raise performance expectations across the network by implementing a new Vision of Excellence for CICS schools.
- Create a framework aligned to our Vision of Excellence to measure our schools and SMOs.
- Unify the CICS community behind the new Vision of Excellence.
- Develop customized, robust data and feedback structures and cycles.
- Build more robust data systems.

#### Priority 2: Align systems, accountability, and resources to achieve excellence

- Demonstrate and hold ourselves accountable for success at the network level.
- Hold operators accountable for delivering excellence.
- Simplify and clarify our structure to internal and external stakeholders.
- Enhance the focus on our talent and refine our organizational culture.
- Establish a differentiated approach to portfolio management.
- Launch a comprehensive fundraising strategy to fuel transformation and growth.

#### Priority 3: Incubate, innovate, and transition as needed

- Design a model for incubation of innovative new approaches.
- Source and support outstanding entrepreneurial educators.
- Expand pathways to innovation: Incubate, introduce, and grow classroom and school models.
- Deliberately build a culture of creativity at CICS.
- Determine our growth strategy in partnership with CICS, SMOs, districts, and communities.
- Establish pathways for operators to exit the portfolio.

#### Priority 4: Create a vibrant oasis for Chicago education entrepreneurs to thrive, collaborate, and share services

- Build strong relationships in the communities we serve and across all stakeholders: students, families, community partners, educators, government officials, and politicians.
- Engage our stakeholders by communicating frequently, transparently, and openly.
- Expand collaborative tools and venues, prioritizing feedback and knowledge-sharing.
- Deepen the network's value-add by increasing the effectiveness of operational functions, in finance and facilities.

# A VISION OF EXCELLENCE

## What does Excellence look like at CICS schools?

Our transformation starts with our shared vision of excellent schools, a network-wide commitment to deliver, and a clear plan to orient our organization to deliver according to these expectations. While we continue to empower our educators and partners with freedom over how they design and manage schools, we will also set an ambitious vision for excellence that is consistent across our campuses. Excellence is enabling all students to nurture their curiosity, creativity, intellect, and self-confidence so they can realize their full potential. Our Vision of Excellence defines what it takes to ensure every student thrives every day. It sets a clear roadmap for what every student and their family can expect from a CICS school, regardless of operator, leader, location, or grade level. At CICS:

- **We're spreading the joy of learning every day:** Every school promotes a safe, thriving culture filled with joy, a love of learning, and a relentless focus on results.
- **Our schools offer rigorous content for every child:** All students tackle complex, culturally-responsive, standards-aligned content, ideas, and tasks to sequentially build knowledge and experiences that support active, informed civic engagement and college success.
- **We're all in for our students:** The whole CICS community is invested in the success of all our students, cares deeply about them, believes they have the potential to be successful in any life path they choose, expects them to persevere through challenges, and is fully committed to providing learning environments for students to learn and experience the world.
- **We're all in for our adults too:** In our schools, educators are empowered to grow and lead. They are given the opportunity to succeed individually while supporting better student outcomes.
- **Our schools are designed for our students:** CICS's portfolio of schools provides a rich mix of school models and learning environments that together meet the unique interests, preferences, and needs of families in the communities they serve.
- **Our schools are hubs of excellence and equity:** CICS uses its scale to push every possible resource to schools so they are thriving learning spaces that promote equity.
- **When families speak, we listen:** All students and parents have a meaningful voice in their education experience.
- **Our schools are diverse and culturally-sensitive:** Our schools reflect the diversity of our beloved city. We value and expect cross-cultural competence and know that this requires a continuous commitment to self-reflection and self-awareness. Through policies, practices, and attitudes, we nurture a culture that prepares staff and students to thrive in a cross-cultural world.
- **We're taking calculated risks that pay off for students long-term:** Every school and provider is encouraged to implement evidence-based innovations to meet student needs, with long-term student success as their North Star.
- **We create a vibrant oasis for Chicago education entrepreneurs:** CICS's vibrant, thriving network attracts bold, ambitious, outstanding, creative talent that is willing to take risks and is committed to lifelong learning.
- **We're nurturing mind and body:** All students receive individualized support and access to enrichment activities that nurture the social and emotional competencies they'll need to become happy, healthy, mature, and aware adults.

# OUR BLUEPRINT GOALS

- 1** Schools and SMOs will improve academic outcomes.
- 2** Our network, schools, and partners will work towards a powerful and shared Vision of Excellence.
- 3** CICS will become a successful incubator of innovative new models.
- 4** CICS will engage stakeholders in our work.
- 5** Talent, culture, and collaboration will improve across CICS staff and schools.
- 6** Improve quality and transparency of CICS back office functions.
- 7** We will be on track to raise \$5 million in cumulative philanthropic investments within 5 years.
- 8** We will improve the quality of services we provide to our schools and partners.



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