Plan 2020

“...the Lincoln Square neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago completely turned around when the Old Town School of Folk Music moved in nearby, bringing the community to life both economically and culturally — just as it brings to life the creativity and potential of so many talented Chicagoans.”

– Rahm Emanuel
Mayor of Chicago

4544 N. Lincoln Ave, Chicago, IL 60625
773.728.6000
oldtownschool.org
Founded in 1957, the Old Town School is the most prominent school of traditional music, dance, and folk culture in the United States.

By any measure — scope of programs, number of patrons, budget size, and number of artists employed — the Old Town School is the largest folk arts organization in the country.

We present 300 concerts and events per year to an audience of 100,000.

25% of students are under the age of three. 40% are under 18.

We are the nation’s largest nonprofit community arts school, with 800 weekly classes and over 39,000 class registrations from more than 16,000 students of all ages and abilities annually.

317 staff and faculty, 400 volunteers, 3,500 members and a 30-member board.

Wiggleworms®-in-Residence outreach program serves 400 children in Lawndale.

The Resource Center holds 25,000 recordings and books and other archived collections.

Artists-in-Residence outreach program serves 15 public schools and more than 2,400 students.
Our Mission

The Old Town School of Folk Music teaches and celebrates music and cultural expressions rooted in the traditions of diverse American and global communities.

Our Values

Teaching and learning in the folk tradition.

Folk is a way: a way of living, creating and being that universally connects communities. We value education and performance in this face-to-face, participatory method passed down through the generations.

Community.

The Old Town School strives to create a community that consciously fosters a sense of belonging and freedom as it celebrates hand-made culture in welcoming, spontaneous and collaborative spaces.

Inclusiveness and diversity.

Old Town School is committed to diversity in the full range of its many meanings, thriving on differences.

Service and citizenship.

Through its programs and in all of its interactions, Old Town School models responsible and progressive institutional engagement with contemporary social concerns.
Our Vision

Old Town School envisions the renewal of our community through expanded practical opportunities for anyone to build their own creative life through participatory engagement in the arts.

Old Town School of Folk Music intends to achieve this vision through commitment to A) engaging audiences and expanding participation through the creation of innovative, relevant programs; B) increasing access to more fully include the diverse populations of our city; and C) inspiring passion for folk music and traditional culture.

Engaging Audiences

Depth. Old Town School’s students and audience members will be active participants in a renewed range of programs designed to progressively deepen their level of creative engagement.

Increasing Access

Breadth. Old Town School strives to build an institution and audience that more fully reflects the diversity and wealth of community cultures across our city.

Inspiring Passion

Substance. Old Town School intends to deliberately ignite new attitudes and approaches to broadly conceived folk and traditional arts, promoting the value, excitement and currency of “folk.”
Action Priorities

This plan articulates Plan 2020 action steps. While they are organized according to the planks of the Strategic Engine — Engagement, Access, Inspiration — the action priorities all directly connect with each other in a continuous cycle of organizational innovation, incubation and reflection, and rest upon the foundation of our strong business model. Specific programmatic initiatives flow from each enumerated action step. Each initiative will require an investment of both human and financial resources. The organization will plan for, and monitor initiatives during the annual 3-year budgeting process.

Engaging Audiences

Increasing Access

Inspiring Passion

Sustaining a strong business model
In Conclusion: Our Plan

This plan charts a bold path that represents a significant departure for Old Town School of Folk Music. During the years of growth in Lincoln Square and the construction of our new facility, our School was preoccupied with developing its facilities, audiences and suite of high quality programs. With the final payoff of the construction bonds, Old Town School is poised to emerge as an important cultural force, not just at home but throughout the city of Chicago and beyond. With this plan, we lift our sights and imagine our School as far more engaged in other neighborhoods, with many other communities, and with a range of programs that help to re-define public perception of what constitutes “folk music.” We intend to do this through programs that offer positive alternatives to some of the city’s well-documented social problems. Great music is an agent of social change that is impervious to violence and hopelessness.

In five years, we will have realized some of the goals enumerated in this plan; some will be ongoing works-in-progress; and others will have fallen short of expectations. But Old Town School will more fully inhabit our city — and this global city will more fully inform everything we do. We will offer educational and presentational programs that are unavailable elsewhere; create unique opportunities for young musicians and dancers to pursue their art; deliver substantive arts education to students throughout the city; and reach beyond with a variety of media projects and communicative strategies. Old Town School will begin to define what it means to be an institutional 21st century cultural citizen.

What does 21st century cultural citizenship look like? Expansively global, intimately local, totally participatory, deeply connected, constantly collaborative, creatively ambitious, culturally humble. It is cultural democracy in practice: art of the people, by the people, and for the people. The first fifty-nine years were just a warm-up for what our School can accomplish now in creating something new: a cultural institution adapted to the demands of today. With this plan, Old Town School steps onto a larger, more complex and more dynamic stage.

This is going to be exciting.

Bau Graves
Executive Director

Photos by Eric Futran, Kevin Viol, and Dan Kasberger