“...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
Who We Are

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.

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

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

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.

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

Artists-in-Residence outreach program serves 25 public schools and more than 3,000 students.
2017 marks Old Town School of Folk Music’s 60th Anniversary. It is fitting that we are launching Plan 2020 as we approach this landmark occasion. Since its inception, the School has provided Chicago and surrounding neighborhoods with extraordinary classroom offerings, varied and unique concert programming, outreach to communities and schools where music and arts education is lacking, and the tangible support of generations of Chicago artists and musicians. Cited as the national exemplar of “creative placemaking,” Old Town School’s success in creating a model that transforms neighborhoods into vibrant, economically sound communities is well established. Now we have the opportunity to expand the impact of that success story beyond the geographic boundaries of our immediate neighborhood.

Plan 2020 calls for a greater investment in our programs to ensure that everyone in the Chicago area has the opportunity and the resources to build their own creative lives. It has been repeatedly proven that art education is central to happiness and success in life. Our own history shows that the “face to face” teaching methodology of the School is adaptable to a broad audience and greatly varied disciplines. Focusing on access, engagement and passion for the arts that is at the core of our culture, this Plan strengthens and dramatically expands upon the School’s success.

A confluence of fiscal stewardship, developmental maturity, institutional capacity, programmatic innovation and an organizational dedication to cultural citizenship is offering an opportunity to significantly expand Old Town School’s collaborative operations in Chicago’s areas of greatest need. During the next few years, Old Town School will generate the resources to invest in participatory public arts across the city and beyond. To do anything less would be squandering an opportunity that few cultural institutions enjoy.
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.
Action Priorities

This plan articulates Plan 2020 action steps. While they are organized according to the planks of our strategic engine, 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.

Engaging Audiences

Depth. In five years, 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. From any point of entry or level of engagement with Old Town School’s programs, patrons will enjoy increasing opportunities to explore their creative potential. The School will deepen participation by:

- Generating new curricular options, engaging master teaching artists in multiple genres
- Revitalizing our suite of no cost/low cost participatory options; experimenting with class formats
- Creating media projects to amplify the experience of new and current audiences
- Rigorously assessing programs to ensure alignment with participant needs
- Vigorously pursuing international artist exchange opportunities

Increasing Access

Breadth. Old Town School strives to build an institution and audience that more fully reflects the diversity and wealth of community culture in our city. We will actively pursue new models to address impediments of distance, financial capacity and programmatic relevance that currently limit access to the arts for many communities by:

- Building partnerships with cultural and social service providers throughout Chicago to deliver programming to underserved constituencies
- Expanding Artist-In-Residence programs in Chicago Public Schools by 50%
- Doubling the number of students served through the School’s financial aid program, while devising flexible payment alternatives
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” by:

- Investing in presentation of high profile and cutting-edge performances
- Providing mentoring and performance opportunities for emerging artists
- Developing ambitious city-wide initiatives to introduce major folk artists to new audiences
- Allocating resources to the creative marketing of the dynamism of folk culture
- Promoting Old Town School’s unique position as a national leader in the field of traditional music and dance

Stability

Successful realization of our Plan rests on a solid foundation of the School’s successful business model: continuing to evolve high quality, accredited education curriculums; employing a productive, engaged and fairly compensated staff and faculty; implementing best current practices in nonprofit management and arts education, with a focus on innovation and assessment; managing robust earned, contributed and new revenue streams; investing in technology that supports growth; and maintenance of superb facilities.
This plan charts a bold path that represents a significant departure for Old Town School of Folk Music. In five years, we 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.

With this plan, Old Town School steps onto a larger, more complex and more dynamic stage. To accomplish our goals, we plan for greater investment in a suite of programs that set a new standard: expansively global, intimately local, totally participatory, deeply connected, constantly collaborative, creatively ambitious, and culturally humble.

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, and the help of our funders, valued members, customers and sponsors we aim to lead the city and the nation in 21st century cultural citizenship.

Join us, this is going to be exciting.

Bau Graves
Executive Director

Photos by Kevin VioI, Dan Kasberger, and Eric Futran