

**Subject Line:** Growing Together as a Network in 2020!

**Letter from the CEO:**



Dear CICS team,

Happy February! As we work diligently to go above and beyond for our students, I am thrilled to honor two phenomenal leaders within CICS who were recently recognized by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools for their outstanding contributions to our community. Congratulations to CICS Bucktown School Director Sarah O’Connell and CICS Ralph Ellison senior Jordan Hunt, whose profiles are below. I know they are just two of the thousands of individuals who make our network strong.

Over the last few weeks, we have unveiled our [draft three-year strategic plan](#) to ensure that we are providing an excellent education for each and every CICS student. Rooted in our core values of excellence, equity and innovation, this plan will guide our path as we build upon the success of the last two decades and innovate to bring the future of education to Chicago’s students.

Read on for how you can share your input on this plan and the future of CICS. Together, we can fulfill our mission of reaching every child, every day. Thank you for being a part of this important work.

Onward and Upward,

Elizabeth Shaw  
CEO, Chicago International Charter Schools

**Charting a Path to Success Together**

At CICS, we are dedicated to providing our students the consistently high-quality education they deserve by building a vibrant network of charter schools that enable students to thrive each day, putting them on a path to success in college and life. Three years ago, we embarked on a mission to accelerate student performance and incubate innovative educational approaches. Building upon this work, we’ve crafted a new three-year strategic plan to advance the consistency of student outcomes throughout the network.

To continue this work, the CICS network team, in partnership with network leaders and school directors, has developed a strategic plan to propel each CICS campus towards excellence through innovation and equity. A key component of this plan is our long-range outcome for **100% of CICS campuses to earn a Level 1 or 1+ on the School Quality Ratings Policy (SQRP)**, year-over-year by the end of the 2021-2022 school year. While we don’t believe that SQRP is the goal in and of itself, it is a meaningful measure for our families and communities. By achieving this ambitious outcome, we will uplift the entire CICS network and set up all of our students for success.

This work is made possible by the commitment of our talented CICS educators and families who work relentlessly to help each student reach their full potential. From now until **February 16**, we encourage all CICS community members to review the [strategic plan](#) and provide feedback through this [online form](#). CICS School Directors and Network Leads will have an additional in-person opportunity to share input with Elizabeth Shaw during 1:1s scheduled over the next month. Together, we can enable each student to thrive every day and put them on a path to success in college and life.

**Celebrating CICS’ Exceptional Staff**

We are proud of all the exceptional individuals in our network who are transforming the lives of students and inspiring them to achieve excellence. In December, two CICS community members were recognized by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) for their dedication and contributions to the continuing success of the state’s charter public school movement. In addition to honoring charter principals, teachers and staff members, INCS also recognizes outstanding charter students for their

leadership and excellence at their schools. The organization received a record-breaking 90 nominations for this year, and we are proud to announce that two of our own received these honors.

CICS Bucktown School Director Sarah O'Connell was recognized as a finalist for the 2019 Illinois Charter School Principal of the Year Award. This honor recognizes principals that inspire teachers and students through their leadership and demonstrate a track record of driving student achievement through innovative practices. A 15-year CICS Bucktown veteran, O'Connell said it's her love for the school community and passion for education that inspires her to continue this work.



"I'm shocked and grateful. These were people I used to look up to, and now I'm in the same category as them," said O'Connell. "This gives me more confidence that I am leading our school down the right path."



In addition, four charter school seniors, including CICS Ralph Ellison senior Jordan Hunt, received the Outstanding Illinois Charter School Senior award, along with a \$1,000 scholarship. Deeply involved in her school community, Hunt is Ralph Ellison's Student Ambassador president, cheerleading captain and a senior council member for events.

"She is a leader through and through," said CICS Ralph Ellison Director, Taquia Hylton. "That is what you see in Jordan Hunt."

### **Using Knowledge to Create Change**

Last month, CICS Lloyd Bond hosted a Project-Based Learning Showcase where students in grades K-6 displayed the solutions they created to combat issues impacting their community. Inspired to address Chicago's food deserts and unhealthy water quality in areas like Flint, Michigan, students constructed mini-greenhouses to increase produce options within the city and designed water filtration systems. Encouraging students to become lifelong learners and problem solvers, these projects equipped them with the tools and resources needed to make a positive change in the world.



Director of Instruction Amber Kirk was determined to bring meaningful project-based learning to Lloyd Bond after participating in CICS' Reimagine Cohort last year, where she witnessed the impact of student-led projects dedicated to addressing real-world problems firsthand.

"Hearing those students' passion and seeing the effect of those projects on student learning made me want to give my kids the same impactful experience," said Kirk. "This was an opportunity for the kids to see that what happens in the classroom is important and useful outside of class. It builds their self-motivation to continue this work in their communities."

## **Empowering Innovation Throughout the CICS Network**



For Michael Bota, entering the teaching profession didn't seem like the linear next step in his career path. A neuroscience major from Michigan, Bota joined Teach for America and was placed at CICS Wrightwood as an 8th-grade science teacher. Integrating quickly into the community, Bota loved Wrightwood and his teaching experience, but was frustrated by the education that students across Chicago were receiving.

After teaching at Wrightwood for three years, Bota applied to and was selected as a CICS Educational Entrepreneur Fellow for 2019. Determined to challenge the educational status quo, Michael was matched with Aiyeshia Wong, and together they developed the Global Leaders Initiative (GLI) Micro-Lab. Witnessing the disconnect between the skills that students currently learn at school and those needed in our modern society, Bota co-created a model rooted in a global perspective that helps students develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills they need to thrive in today's world.

Bota credits the critical coaching and administrative support he received from CICS in helping them get GLI off the ground. Through the fellowship program, Bota learned about diverse leadership styles and co-created the model that he and Wong built around inclusivity and the needs of the local community.

"CICS was like a catapult from idea to reality," said Bota. "The fellowship opened avenues to create an educational model from a seed of thought to a tangible program that strives to transform the lives of students."