



THE ELIOT SCHOOL
OF FINE & APPLIED ARTS

STRATEGIC PLAN
January 2021 – March 2023

INTRODUCTION

The Eliot School's board and staff crafted this extension of our 2017-20 strategic plan at a time of great instability and uncertainty, both at home and around the globe. This extension is intended to guide our work in the period. By then, we hope the world will have settled enough for us to commit to our next full, multi-year plan.

In 2017, the Eliot School was ready to undertake research and planning to significantly expand its space. From then through the beginning of 2020, we conducted intensive research into our space needs, producing a model of what it might look like to double the size of our schoolhouse – or to move elsewhere, either wholly or in part. Planning centered around an optimistic vision in which our infrastructure and staff capacity would catch up to accommodate our programs.

In March 2020, Boston shut down public gatherings as COVID-19 cut its way through our city. As we write, the virus has felled nearly 380,000 Americans and infected 23 million more. While our Partnerships, Teen and Artists' Residency programs have held strong online, our physical spaces are closed to the public; we furloughed nearly 100 teachers and laid off our entire tuition-based program staff.

This period has also brought painful exposure of racial violence around the country, with murders recorded by phone, conducted in the public eye and condoned at the highest levels of government. Against these horrors, there is widespread reckoning with racial injustice and inequality. The Eliot School had already begun to forge a path toward racial equity in its programs and actions. We understand that injustice and inequality build upon behaviors small and large, from everyday microaggressions and language to hiring practices and program structure – and that equity requires change at all levels. We are fully committed to this path.

In the period covered by this plan extension, we will focus on the Eliot School's commitments to long-term sustainability, financial health, racial equity and artistic excellence. We hope to make our way through this time in ways that strengthen the school and allow it to flourish on the other side of the pandemic. We will do our best to turn elements of adversity into opportunities for positive change: improve our spaces while classes are closed, explore online engagement, lay groundwork for community partnerships serving adults, reformulate some staff positions, and further enhance our creative youth development and teacher training efforts.

Before COVID-19, we knew we would need to build strong organizational infrastructure to support our work; we were already short-staffed to maintain the school's ten-fold growth over the past decade and a half. It was time to elevate staffing, support, salaries and benefits to meet those needs. As we rebuild our capacity, we must not just replace what was lost during COVID-19, but remember our commitment to lay groundwork to build strong infrastructure that will sustain the school going forward.

Once COVID-19 is tamed and we are able to gather in person again, our physical spaces will again fill up, and the constraints of our limited spaces will again make themselves felt. The call for strong organizational infrastructure will take on added importance before the school is ready for major decisions on space expansion and the capital campaign that will entail. These challenges belong to the next strategic plan.

The Eliot School was a grammar school for 200 years. Since it shifted, in the 19th century, to teach manual arts, it has lived through two World Wars, the Great Depression and the Spanish flu. It persists strong in its mission: to inspire lifelong learning in craft and creativity for all.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

In 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the Board of Trustees decided to extend its current strategic plan by 18 months rather than embark on a comprehensive strategic planning process, given the instability of the time. In 2022, the Board voted to extend it a further 9 months.

Meanwhile, with support from the Barr-Klarman Massachusetts Arts Initiative, the Eliot School developed a three-year Theory of Change, focusing the school's attention on financial health, adaptive capacity, cultural competency, artistic excellence and community artmaking.

Additional resources in 2020 include:

- Community Study by consultant Fibile Nguyen
- Financial analysis of tuition-based programming by Advisory Council member Paul Spinale
- Business model for reopening tuition-based classes by CCT (Community Consulting Teams)
- Survey of donors and attendees
- Three-part Program Innovation Working Group process with selected trustees, advisors, staff, faculty, students, neighbors and others

The Eliot School convened board and core staff members for a three-part virtual retreat in June, July and September, during which it:

- Clarified and acknowledged the pandemic's impact on the school
- Recommitted to the school's mission, vision and values
- Reviewed and committed to the 3-year Theory of Change
- Participated in discussions on diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism
- Brainstormed and prioritized short- and long-term priorities for the school to consider in planning

Assisted by planning consultants from Claremont Consulting, and informed by the Mission & Strategy Committee, a subset of the board and core staff members developed the detailed plan that follows, which was reviewed and adopted by the Board of Trustees at its January 12, 2021 board meeting. At its June 8, 2022 board meeting, the Board of Trustees voted to extend this plan through March 2023.

GUIDE TO READING THE PLAN

This is explicitly designed as a short-term extension to the Eliot School's 2017-20 Strategic Plan. This extension is designed to carry the organization through the closed-down phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate aftermath. It aims to keep aspirations in the realm of the feasible, given limits on financial and human resources during this time.

The Objectives, Goals and Activities are not listed in order of priority. Indeed, they are iterative and overlapping. Two columns reflect the human resource and financial implications of each activity, noting high (H), medium (M) or Low (L) impact. Full financial implications of this plan will play out in board conversations about internal investments and in annual budget planning.

The Executive Director uses the Strategic Plan (and this extension) as a guide to the organization's work. The Board Chair and Committee Chairs use it as a guide for board responsibilities. Together, they provide a progress report to the board every 6 to 12 months.

Starting in 2022, the Eliot School's board will map a process for embarking on a full-fledged strategic planning process to cover the period starting in mid-2023.

MISSION

The Eliot School inspires lifelong learning in craft and creativity for all.

VISION

We cultivate welcoming environments where people convene across a continuum of age, economic means and backgrounds to build skills, craftsmanship and community. Our offerings satisfy the human desires to create, engage in self-expression and learn by doing, and its vision builds upon the school's historic role in shaping education in fine and applied arts.

CORE VALUES

Learning and Enjoyment

- We provide opportunities to imagine, create and build with head, hands and heart.
- We help students learn for personal fulfillment and enjoyment.
- We embrace students of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.

Integrity and Excellence

- We hold ourselves accountable to the highest standards of excellence.
- We conduct ourselves with honesty, fairness and integrity.

Community and Inclusion

- We value and promote inclusivity, diversity and equity.
- We maintain an open and welcoming environment, where all who enter are treated with dignity and respect.
- We are interconnected through high regard for each other as colleagues, partners, teachers, learners and neighbors.

Continuity and Change

- We are respectful stewards of our historical role in shaping education.
- We adapt our mission and programs over time, keeping our work relevant and contemporary.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE EXTENSION

Since its founding in 1676, the Eliot School has flourished by continually adapting to the times, embracing change while maintaining continuity in its mission to educate students from all backgrounds. It is this dual commitment to mission and adaptation that will preserve and pilot both the school's work and its sustainability through the next 18 months (plus an extension of an additional 9 months).

We recognize that resources are extraordinarily constrained short-term during the pandemic, while earned revenue is deeply gouged and staff severely cut back. At the same time, this period also offers opportunities and incentives to invest in our future excellence and strength.

Specifically, the following principles will guide the activities outlined in this strategic plan extension:

Acknowledge Impact of COVID-19

- Recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic will likely continue to significantly disrupt the school's finances, operations, and programming in this period.
- Prioritize the health and safety of our community, while exploring ways to serve participants.
- Recognize and pursue opportunities created by the pandemic, when appropriate, in pursuit of our strategic goals.
- Commit to re-open in-person programming when it is safe to do so.

Pursue Organizational Strength

- Steward and deploy financial resources to begin to build sustainable infrastructure that will support long-term organizational strength.
- Understand that, during this period, the board may decide to draw on reserves intentionally in order to invest in the school's long-term professional capacity and sustainability.
- Organize our program staff in a Youth/Adult program structure in order to enable greater internal collaboration, enhance revenue potential and expand external partnerships.
- Recognize that in order to cultivate programmatic excellence and welcoming environments, we require excellent leadership, staff and faculty who can draw upon a variety of lived experiences rooted in craft, art and community.

Critical Importance of Racial Equity

- As equity is a fundamental component of the school's mission, consider the groundwork needed to make the school's programs as accessible as possible across age, physical ability, identity, and socioeconomic means, and to all racial and immigrant backgrounds.
- Recognize that while the Eliot School broadly serves a diverse demographic that reflects that of Greater Boston, its bifurcated in-house and community programs have mirrored the historic racial and socioeconomic segregation of the city.
- To address our own institutional disparities, commit to building racial equity within the school's programming and across its constituents. We understand that it is vital to the long-term sustainability of the school to render demographically inclusive, accessible programming—while maintaining our commitment to craft.
- Building on the concerted efforts we have made over the past decade, commit to further developing organizational structures and practices that promote racial equity across all aspects of the organization.

FOCUS AREAS AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Aligned with the guiding principles, during the 18-month strategic plan extension, the Eliot school will aim to achieve the following objectives in four focus areas:

Pandemic Sustainability

- Ensure organizational survival during the pandemic, positioning the Eliot School for long-term sustainability and strength while prioritizing the health and safety of participants.

Capacity Building

- Begin to build the infrastructure and professional capacity needed for the school to succeed in the future – financially, operationally and programmatically.

Programmatic Repositioning

- Adapt programming to current needs, prioritizing artistic excellence and financial health, in order to serve our communities.

Racial Equity

- Commit to a deliberate path to pursue racial equity in leadership, staffing, programming and student engagement, in order to fulfill the school's commitment to serving "all."

OBJECTIVES AND GOALS:

OBJECTIVE #1: Pandemic Sustainability
Ensure organizational survival during the pandemic, positioning the Eliot School for long-term sustainability and strength, prioritizing the health and safety of participants.

Goal 1A: Sustain and grow contributed revenue, including grants, donations and sponsorships, framing relationships and opportunities in support of our mission.

Goal 1B: Lay groundwork to rebuild earned revenue, including partnership contracts and class tuition.

Goal 1C: Define and deploy reserves to both survive the pandemic period and position the school for post-pandemic financial, operational and programmatic strength.

OBJECTIVE #2: Capacity Building
Begin to build the infrastructure and professional capacity needed for the school to succeed in the future – financially, operationally and programmatically.

Goal 2A: Create and begin to implement a multi-year, organization-wide budget and staffing plan that codifies the long-term financial and human resources required to build the school’s capacity and professionalize its operations.

Goal 2B: Support a Board of Trustees that is fully populated and effectively deployed in the work of its committees to steward the organization's mission, financial strength and strategic priorities.

Goal 2C: Prioritize short-term space improvements that ensure participants’ safety and that contemplate and complement the school’s long-term space needs while keeping the community informed.

OBJECTIVE #3: Programmatic Repositioning
Adapt programming to current needs, prioritizing artistic excellence and financial health, in order to serve our communities.

Goal 3A: Realign the planning and management of programs from an internal/external structure (In house/Partnerships) to a Youth/Adult (demographic) structure, in order to pursue revenue potential, integrate the Eliot community racially and socio-economically, and reflect the interconnectedness of our constituencies.

Goal 3B: Evolve Teen Bridge, connecting participants with high quality art experiences and supporting them as they move through high school graduation and beyond.

Goal 3C: Enhance professional development and support for teachers and staff to increase the effectiveness of our programs, create welcoming environments for learning, and build positive connections with community.

OBJECTIVE #4: Racial Equity

Commit to a deliberate path to pursue racial equity in leadership, staffing, programming, and student engagement, in order to fulfill the school's commitment to serving "all."

Goal 4A: Move to match demographics of leadership, staff and faculty to match Boston's racial demographic profile.

Goal 4B: Train staff and faculty in practices that promote racial equity.

Goal 4C: Build organizational practices, tools and resources that promote racial equity.