

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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## Trial attorney balances his work with state charter school system

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An award-winning Chicago trial lawyer with the law firm of Goldberg, Kohn Ltd. is also the recently elected president of the largest charter school system in Illinois.

Asked how he manages to be a trial lawyer and the president of a school system, [David J. Chizewer](#) said, "I don't sleep a lot."

Chizewer also co-founded the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, an advocacy group that tries to educate people about charter schools.

When he's balancing a career as a trial lawyer, plus the school involvement, plus being a husband and a father of two elementary school boys, he said, "I think it imposes a discipline on you that you might not otherwise have that really seems to make everything work."

Chizewer, 44, was elected in February as president of The Chicago International Charter School. CICS operates 13 campuses that serve more than 8,000 students from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade.

He said that, in addition to his regular law practice, he puts in about 500 hours a year leading CICS and working for the Illinois Network of Charter Schools.

"I personally have never billed an hour of my time to this charter school or to any other charter school that I frequently get calls and questions for," he said. "I get called all the time because I've been doing this work so long, and I'm a lawyer. I probably know more than any other lawyer in the city about the Illinois charter school law."

Chizewer said his firm also does pro bono legal work for CICS and billable work.

"The president's is a volunteer position, but one that will eat up many hours of his time," said Elizabeth D. Purvis, executive director of CICS. She said Chizewer has already lent significant time to the school for 14 years as the board's vice president.

"David's phenomenal to work with," Purvis said. "He's really level-headed, very responsive. In the seven years I have worked with David ... he's never taken more than 24 hours to answer a phone call. E-mail he answers in about 20 minutes."

She said this sets an example for her. "When you have a board like that, you really have to live up to it," she said.

Chizewer is an expert in charter school law, Purvis said, and "has become quite knowledgeable in student performance and how to measure student growth over time. ... He makes sure that the staff and the schools are meeting the vision of the school by providing what we call value-added student growth."

The Chicago International Charter School, and Chizewer's role in it, had its start in a small scholarship program for inner-city students.

Chizewer grew up in Highland Park and went to Pomona College, a liberal arts school in California. There he was assigned a roommate, Derek Mitchell, who happened to be from Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes public housing project.

As a teenager, Mitchell had been given an opportunity by a group called A Better Chance, then run out of Princeton, N.J., to go to an Eastern prep school and eventually to Pomona College, Chizewer said.

"I thought, 'Gee, I wonder if there is an organization in Chicago that does the same thing?'"

He said his father and grandfather had been very active in Jewish civic life. He wanted to be civic-minded, too, but in a way no one in the family had done before.

After law school at the University of Chicago, he joined Goldberg, Kohn. He also linked up with [Jim Murphy](#), a trader for the Chicago Board Options Exchange who had started a small scholarship program for inner-city children.

Chizewer was then 25.

He said he helped Murphy and Murphy's friends "grow the organization," so that by the mid-1990s they were giving scholarships to 200 students.

Then in 1996, the Illinois legislature enacted the Illinois Charter School Law. It allows private individuals — who get the approval of their local school district — to set up charter schools funded by public dollars through the school district that are free and open to all children.

Chizewer and some people involved in Murphy's scholarship program decided to set up a charter school modeled after Chicago's top private schools, such as Francis W. Parker School, the Latin School of Chicago and St. Ignatius College Prep.

But their charter school would be open to any child — and free.

"I helped us do a lot of the legal work to get it up and running," he said.

CICS entered into contracts with Sabis, a charter school management firm, and the Chicago Public Schools.

Murphy became the first president of CICS. Other founders were Craig Henderson, who runs the investment firm C.W. Henderson & Associates, and Catherine H. Gottfred, founder of Leap Learning Systems.

Meanwhile, Chizewer's career as a trial lawyer blossomed.

In 2004, he was co-lead counsel for a class of 600,000 children on Medicaid in a federal lawsuit against Illinois, *Memisovski, et al. v. Patla*, which led to "sweeping reforms" of the state Medicaid program, according to his law firm. For that, he received the Excellence in Pro Bono Award from the U.S. district court here in 2006.

In October, 2006, Chizewer was co-lead counsel for the plaintiffs and obtained the largest verdict in the history of the federal False Claim Act in *United States of America ex. rel Tyson, et al. v. Amerigroup Corp. et al.*, according to his firm.

He also does significant defense work representing private companies.

Since the founding of CICS, until this year, Chizewer was vice president of the board. In February, the board elected him president.

Today all 13 CICS campuses are in Chicago. The organization says 86 percent of its children are low-income and 96 percent are minority. In August, CICS plans to expand to 15 campuses in Chicago and Rockford.

Chizewer said one of his goals is to find a way to measure what skills and habits the students need to acquire in grade school and high school so they will stay and succeed in college.

"I never thought of reducing my commitment," he said. "My wife is very civic-minded as well."

Because Chizewer and his wife enjoy their various civic involvement, "in that way, it's selfish," he said. "But it also satisfies what we think is an important commitment to our community" and creates a role model "for our children in how to live their lives."

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