

## Chess in the Classroom

“The passion for playing chess is one of the most unaccountable in the world. It slaps the theory of natural selection in the face. It is the most absorbing of occupations. The least satisfying of desires. A nameless excrescence upon life. It annihilates a man. You have, let us say, a promising politician, a rising artist that you wish to destroy. Dagger or bomb are archaic and unreliable – but teach him, inoculate him with chess.”  
-H.G. Wells, *Certain Personal Matters*, 1898

“You know, Comrade Pachman, I don’t enjoy being a Minister, I would rather play chess like you, or make a revolution in Venezuela.”  
-Ernesto “Che” Guevara, as quoted by Grandmaster Ludek Pachman, *Checkmate in Prague*, 1975

“Chess is life.”  
-Bobby Fischer, Fourteenth World Chess Champion

### I: Why Chess?

Chess teaches an array of higher-order thinking skills that have real world applications. Ask a chess player to solve a problem and he/she is likely to use a methodology different from that of someone who does not have these skills. Anecdotally, chess has been seen to teach and improve skills such as cause-and-effect, choosing amongst alternatives, spatial reasoning, rationality over emotion, sportsmanship, and can even be said to produce creativity in the problem-solving process. The argument of whether the game is sport, science, or art, is open to debate, and largely semantic, but if a game can embody all of these attributes, surely children can benefit.

If you are a teacher and are trying to sell a chess program to your administration, focus on these ideas but also mention the results of scientific chess studies, which have proven that chess improves *both* math and reading standardized test scores. The public has a misconception that only chess and mathematical ability are linked, but an early 1990s study by Dr. Stuart Margulies in the New York City schools posited chess players are better readers, too. Administrators like to hear that. For copies of these studies, contact the U.S. Chess Federation, Attn: Scholastic Department, P.O. Box 3967, Crossville, TN 38557. (931) 787-1234, Ext. 148.

### II: Varieties and Breadth of Program

Most schools with a chess program are solely teaching the game in an after school setting. While this allows for longer lessons and is a necessary outfit for dedicated adherents to the game, an in-school curriculum is a big advantage for many reasons.

Teaching chess during the school day invites everyone to learn the game. After school programs, like any extra-curricular activity, are self-selecting endeavors. Schools that bring chess into the classroom tend to have after school programs that are more racially and gender mixed. Children that have preconceived notions about who plays chess can see the game is easily learned and is fun. At Chess-in-the-Schools in New York City, the pilot program for chess in the classroom, their success has resulted in expansion from one small school in the Bronx to 160 schools (and a waiting list) in all five boroughs.

### III: Growth of Program

After possibly convincing your principal that chess during the school day leads to all-around academic success, and your after school chess club is flourishing, you may start thinking, what next?

Hiring an outside chess teacher can often help, unless you or one of the parents in the club is an experienced chess player. Taking your students to tournaments is another logical follow-up. In my experience, students who challenge themselves to compete are the ones who reap the most benefit from the game. Only in this setting is a child required to assimilate all of what he/she has learned (playing against a friend in the chess club doesn't always translate into an exigent need to focus one's thinking).

### IV: Funding

This is where things can get tricky. Chess-in-the-Schools flourishes due to its \$4 million budget, which is 100 percent privately funded and has U.S. senators on its board of advisors. This is not the reality of most chess programs.

In Charlotte, the CMS school system budgets about \$100,000 annually to chess instruction, which gets spread out over almost 200 schools. The money pays for outside instruction and sending students to the national tournament. This is a hard sell to a school board, but depending on your town or city, you might be able to convince them of the same. The Charlotte funding began back in 1984 and has continued in perpetuity ever since. I don't really have any guidelines for how to sell a school board (I was four when the Charlotte program began), but it can be done.

The most realistic types of funding come from your PTA and from small businesses. Have a local business sponsor chess club t-shirts for your students to wear to competitions. In Winston-Salem, the newspaper paid for chess sets and printed their logo on the boards. Monies raised will help pay for instructors and out-of-town tournaments.