

Coordinating the Five Communities:

Strategies to Introduce Chess as an Educational Tool

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Introduction

No matter how it is measured, scholastic chess has seen a dramatic increase within the last twenty years. In 1988, the United States Chess Federation's youth and scholastic members totaled approximately 7000. By 2002, the two age groups combined for over 53,000 members. Even with a recent decline, the memberships remain over 43,000. This scholastic membership (which includes the USCF's Youth and Collegiate categories) represents approximately fifty percent of the total membership of the USCF and scholastic-related revenues represent almost fifty percent of total annual revenues. This indicates that not only is scholastic chess the future of the organization, it would seem to be the present as well!

But USCF memberships alone do not tell the entire story of the growth of chess in American education. The USCF's three spring national scholastic tournaments – elementary, middle, and high school – are consistently drawing a total of five to six thousand players. In April of 2005, the SuperNationals (the combination of the three events into one held every four years) registered over 5300 students!

These statistics do not reflect, however, the enormous number of students participating in their school's chess programs who are not members of the USCF and who have never played in a USCF-rated tournament even at the local level. But whether by memberships, tournament participation, or even by the number of scholastic programs and organizations created to advance

scholastic chess, the growth of chess among youth has been amazing, especially considering that chess typically receives almost no funding by schools.

The current state of chess in education may be characterized by its status as two types of programs: after-school programs and chess instruction within the school's curriculum. By far the majority of scholastic chess programs fall within the after-school category. The group meets as a school club and has a teacher who serves as club sponsor. The teacher may also serve as the chess instructor but more often an outside chess coach comes to the school. The expertise of this coach may range from that of a parent volunteer all the way to a titled player being paid for his or her time. In addition, some areas have chess organizations which train and provide full time coaches to schools.

A few school systems allow chess to be taught as an optional curriculum subject and this tends to be in larger cities. Even then the chess instruction is often done by an outside chess coach/teacher rather than a teacher who is already part of the school's faculty. In several areas of the country, non-profit organizations or other businesses have created their own curriculum and training programs and provide chess teachers for area schools. Instances do occur where a classroom teacher incorporates chess into the subject curriculum (for example a math class or physical education class) but this is most often entirely dependant on the teacher's initiative and knowledge of chess.

Efforts in the expansion of chess in the schools are being made at every level. Local work is started by interested parents or teachers or by a local chess player who is willing to volunteer time and even financial resources. Clubs affiliated with the United States Chess Federation often sponsor local and state scholastic tournaments. Tournaments organized by the USCF provide opportunities for schools to compete at a national level. The tournaments can in

turn provide national publicity for a local program. The USCF also provides some direction and training for individuals and organizations interested in making chess available in their school systems.

While the education community clamors for the teaching of math skills and critical thinking skills (both of which chess addresses), it has been slow to accept or adopt chess as a valid teaching tool to achieve those ends. Numerous challenges remain for chess to move into the mainstream of American education. Inadequate funding, especially for a program that has yet to be recognized at the national level, is a major obstacle for the development of chess programs in schools. Up to date research provided by university studies is needed. Teacher training (as well as instruction for university students studying to become teachers) is essential to add new programs and to provide consistency for established ones. A chess curriculum which incorporates the national standards and benchmarks across content areas such as math, reading, geography, and history is critical for teacher training. Meeting the challenges of inadequate funding, accepted research, and teacher curriculum and training will not be easy and will require the best efforts of many from both within and outside the educational community.

The coordination of four communities – educational, civic, business, and political communities – along with the chess community is critical for the development of opportunities to demonstrate the value of chess for instruction. Convincing the various communities of the value of chess will require the ability to communicate with each of these constituencies. If these five groups do not work in concert, the grass-roots efforts that currently predominate will not achieve the educational impact that is the inherent potential in the game.

The Five Communities

While the components of the larger society are broken down into five constituencies for the purposes of this paper, in reality their interrelation is complicated and overlapping in nature. An individual may assume roles in more than one of these settings. But for the purpose of this discussion it is helpful to identify these groups and their relationship to the development of scholastic chess.

The political community has as one of its implied goals the promotion of the greater good of society. This goal of course may however become subordinate to the real life goal of re-election. Any effort to implement a chess program which ignores this reality may discover the appeals, no matter how well-meaning, ignored when it comes time to set the local, state, or national budgets and agendas which impact educational entities. Political initiatives to put chess in the schools have had some success in places like New Jersey and New York but the results have been limited often due to the lack of available classroom instructors familiar with the game.

The educational community's goal is the training of the next generation in the areas of character development, critical thinking skills, and specific areas of subject matter content. The practical mandates of government and society however have often required that the final evaluation of the effectiveness of the system should be measured by the results of standardized tests. Any introduction of scholastic chess must address how the game can help teachers accomplish the tasks assigned them. The classroom teacher is the key to the longevity and consistency of a scholastic chess program.

The civic and business constituencies are working to help American communities realize that their children are competing on a global basis for career opportunities. A community or state with a reputation for poorly educating its children will have difficulties attracting new

business and industry. The inability to attract workers who have the critical thinking skills necessary for success forces businesses to consider relocation in order to survive. States and communities which fail to provide business opportunities for its citizens face the exodus of its best and brightest to other states – depleting the intellectual resources even more. The educational community, while in many ways insulated by its vocabulary, governance, and structure, is still impacted by the needs of the civic, business, and political communities. Thus educators find themselves under the microscope to help provide solutions to societal problems far beyond the simple transmission of the traditional basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The chess community, while passionate about the game, has not always helped the larger society understand its value as an educational tool. In some ways this is understandable. A player who seeks to excel at chess has little time for pursuits which do not help him/her achieve that competitive level. After all, how many players in the National Basketball Association have the time to coach a high school basketball team? And the efforts to promote tournament chess, while necessary, do not always address the need of the other communities to understand why they should give more than a passing glance at this ancient game.

But a growing number of chess organizations have recognized the value of chess in education and have created structures which provide training for chess coaches to go into the local schools. Obstacles to the expansion of these programs include the availability of chess players, funding for the programs, access to schools, and classroom teachers willing to serve as club sponsors. And even successful programs often have difficulties convincing members of the other four communities to provide ongoing support.

The Role of Chess

Few will be surprised by the statement that chess is not traditionally part of American culture. But this lack of familiarity outside the chess community of the nature and value of chess directly undermines its expansion and impact within the education system. Communicating these values is often difficult for chess players who are not familiar with the demands of the education community. Nothing typifies this more than the scarcity of chess training materials for teachers which does not require considerable adaptation for use in the classroom.

Among the other three communities (political, civic, and business) even less is understood of the inherent values of chess. Occasionally a member of one of these communities will reflect that his/her critical thinking skills can be attributed to chess but even then they will not likely have made the connection between their success and the possibilities of the impact of the game on a larger scale.

An increasing number of educators are making the discovery that chess is a valuable teaching tool. Chess facilitates the development of higher learning skills such as math and critical thinking as well as the development of positive character traits. Schools across the country have discovered:

1. Mathematical concepts are inherent in the game of chess. Geometric shapes, lines and points of intersection, and addition and subtraction are just a few of the concepts that teachers can illustrate from the game.

2. Critical thinking skills are developed in even the youngest players. Students can be taught inductive and deductive reasoning through chess long before they are introduced to those expressions.
3. Life skills are integrated into the growing maturity of players. Playing with a clock can teach time management. Shaking hands before a game and not distracting other players can teach good sportsmanship. Discovering that age, gender, size, and physical abilities (or disabilities) do not determine success can be a real motivation toward improvement.

While all this may be true, it has yet to be widely accepted. Coordinating the five communities involves convincing their decision makers that the educational and economic impact of a scholastic chess program will address their existing needs. The university can play a key role in several ways. Scholarships to students who excel in chess (as well as meeting the required academic standards) are a powerful way of communicating to students and parents that chess is a worthwhile activity. The conducting of research which demonstrates the effects of a chess program on academic success can provide the documentation needed for school boards to adopt a pilot program. The school of education can lead the way in training its student teachers and conducting in-service training with area classroom teachers. Finally, the university can work with local school systems to develop and field-test resources which introduce chess across all curriculums. When the university speaks, school systems tend to pay attention. This credibility is greatly needed for chess to become accepted as an educational tool.

Finding personnel who can make good decisions in the workplace is the goal of every employer. The business and civic communities must be convinced that a chess program will help provide a pool of workers who know how to think. If they understand this, they are more

willing to support such a program by sponsoring such initiatives as scholarships, tournaments, and teacher training. Having a reputation for these initiatives can even serve to promote the community in attracting new businesses to the area.

The political community, which has tremendous influence in how budgets are allocated, is more likely to fund pilot projects or long term scholastic chess programs if they understand that the educational community and the civic and business communities are supportive. Few politicians hope to be elected without a strong educational plank in their platform. Local and state elections could be influenced by the politician's ability to point to a program which has demonstrated its impact on academic success.

A Prime Example

An illustration of the efforts to coordinate the five communities to implement chess within the curriculum may be observed in south Texas in a region known as "the Valley." The Brownsville, Texas, area is an example of what may be potentially accomplished in other areas of the country. While the two key components are the Brownsville Independent School District and The University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College, it must be understood that the other three communities have been essential for the progress made in establishing chess as an educational tool.

The history of the Brownsville school program started with a single elementary school teacher – J.J. Guajardo. He told his students he would teach them how to play chess in the mornings before school if their behavior improved. Within three years this program had produced a state champion – the first of seven consecutive championships in Texas.

Currently thirty-five of the fifty schools in the Brownsville Independent School District have active chess programs. The programs are administrated under the Department of Advanced Academic Services and in 2006-2007 had a budget of \$400,000.00. The department is now planning to increase the budget and introduce chess into the curriculum along with providing teacher training.

The area has adopted a new self-identity. The 97% Hispanic community believes that if their children can compete in this game with the best of New York and other areas of the country, they can achieve anything. This theme has been echoed repeatedly in interviews with parents, teachers, and community leaders.

The University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College has understood this impact and has developed its own chess program. UTB-TSC spends approximately \$200,000.00 per year in staffing, scholarships, travel, and community outreach activities. They have hired a bi-lingual former-elementary teacher, Russell Harwood, to lead the program along with a Grandmaster from Mexico to coach the university's team. They have specifically recruited from Latin America and have given scholarships to strong female players to provide a role model for the Hispanic girls in the area schools.

"I want my university to be known for chess!" This quote from UTB-TSC's President, Dr. Juliet V. Garcia, sums up the determination of the university to provide local and national leadership in the implementation of chess as an educational tool. This is born out in the support she has extended to encourage the chess program to lead the way establishing student teacher training in the Department of Education and working with the area school districts to provide teacher training and a bi-lingual curriculum.

Serving as Scholastic Director for the United States Chess Federation as well as serving in the capacity of a chess consultant, I have had the opportunity to introduce to the university this initiative and to plan and participate in the student teacher training – likely the first of its kind in the United States. I have also partnered with UTB-TSC as well as the area school districts to prepare teacher in-service training and to coordinate work on the curriculum. The benefit to the federation, of course, comes from increased memberships. The benefit to the university and school districts comes from a more consistent program and the increased skills teachers have gained to use chess across curriculums. All of this impacts the increased academic success.

Key Elements

It appears that in many situations across the country, the desire to implement chess in the curriculum exists but the lack of knowledge in how to start that process prevents the initiative from being established. Whether it be from an outside consultant or from a local individual with the understanding and trust of all five communities, strong leadership and commitment is required to coordinate the communities to achieve a successful program.

Key elements of this process include:

- 1) Establishing the initial contacts across the five communities.
- 2) Leading the discussion in the determination of the goals of the project as well as the benchmarks for success.
- 3) Preparing the project components and costs involved.
- 4) Coordinating the communities to carry out their parts of the overall project.
- 5) Providing ongoing support and training to teachers.

- 6) Publishing the results so that the five communities may all share the credit in the program's success.
- 7) Anticipating obstacles and setbacks and providing determined leadership.

Key elements of the program include:

- 1) Local university support and participation.
 - a. University scholarships designated for chess players who meet the university's academic requirements.
 - b. Teacher training.
 - c. Project evaluation.
- 2) Curriculum development which includes classroom teacher-ready lesson plans.
 - a. Across all curriculums, not just mathematics.
 - b. Matched to state and national standards.
 - c. Formatted to the requirements of the state education department.
- 3) Initial and follow-up teacher in-service training.
 - a. Summer or early fall in-service.
 - b. Ongoing contact to answer questions.
 - c. Spring in-service to evaluate and improve the program.
- 4) Funding for schools, teachers, and university staff participating in the project.
 - a. Stipends for project participation and funding for in-service training and teaching materials.
 - b. Funding for chess-related equipment, travel to tournaments, etc.

- c. Funding solicitation through grants, area civic and business groups, and contacts within the local and state political communities.
- 5) Appropriate materials.
- a. In-service training materials.
 - b. Teacher manuals, student workbooks, and access to computer resources.
 - c. Chess sets, clocks, demonstration boards, etc.

Conclusion

Most scholastic chess programs in the United States are one person away from extinction. The elimination of one key teacher, administrator, or volunteer can end even a well-established program. As long as chess remains outside the educational community, this tenuous position requiring an ongoing struggle for support will remain and will hamper efforts to establish the kinds of chess programs which could truly impact education. The time, effort, and resources to coordinate the five communities are critical to bringing chess to its proper place in training the next generation. No single method or strategy will accomplish the goal of expanding chess in American education. But the skills, experience, and resources available provide the confidence that the challenges ahead can indeed be met. I am committed to working with local, state, national, and international entities to extend to other areas the model currently being established in Brownsville, Texas.