



# SCALING UP CHESS IN SCHOOLS

## Part 2 – Multi-site CIS in Practice

### Abstract

Chess in Schools is an emerging phenomenon globally. We look at recent developments internationally and in the US, including a detailed examination of the Alabama Chess in Schools Initiative (ACIS).

January 11, 2016

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## Part 2 – Multi-site CIS in Practice

By Neil Dietsch

### *The International Scene*

A 2015 survey of CIS by the European Chess Union (ECU) shows pockets of progress on that continent. In a preliminary assessment based on 30 responses of 54 countries in the ECU, Jesper Hall, chairman of ECU's Educational Commission, reports:

- There are many good and successful projects out there!!!
- There are many good concepts and instruction materials.
- Everyone is struggling with finances.
- Heavy research with randomized control groups is needed that could be published in renown scientific publications.

In 2011, the Ministry of Education of Armenia (population 3 million) made chess part of the primary school curriculum along with such standards as math and history for children over the age of six. Chess is compulsory for second, third, and fourth graders.<sup>1 2</sup>

In Poland a teacher-driven CIS model has been established and is well along in practice. A 2014 presentation at the London Chess in Schools Conference described a CIS training and certification partnership between educators and the Polish Chess Federation. As of September 2014 the project encompassed 12 of Poland's 16 provinces, with almost 300 schools, 600 teachers, and approximately 9,000 children.<sup>3</sup>

Russia has a history of chess domination in international chess competitions from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to today. Although many Soviet-era schools had youth clubs where chess was common, the demise of many of the youth clubs after 1991 led many individual teachers, particularly in mathematics, to begin using chess as a teaching aid in the classroom. By 2005 most primary schools in St. Petersburg taught chess in the classroom, using it in multiple parts of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> At the university level, Russia employs an institutional sports model. They offer "chess" majors in the same ways that US universities offer programs in sports management. Several Russian universities offer a basic bachelor degree program for chess trainers that lasts four years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *"Armenia makes chess compulsory in schools". The Guardian. 11/15/2011. Retrieved 12/20/2015.*

<sup>2</sup> *"Armenia Introduces Chess As Mandatory School Subject". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 9/19/2011. Retrieved 12/20/2015.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://londonchessconference.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Chess-Teachers-Training-Program-in-Poland.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Hudson, Michael Andrew, *Storming Fortresses: A Political History Of Chess In The Soviet Union, 1917-1948*, Dissertation, 2013

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fide.com/component/content/article/1-fide-news/9273-chess-education-in-russia.html>

## *The United States*

Has the time come when school superintendents and state departments of education can responsibly undertake significant CIS initiatives in the United States?

There have been a few instances where US cities or counties have established chess in schools programs spanning multiple sites. For example in 2015 the New York-based **Chess-in-the-Schools** program is sustaining its long-running local program.

The school district of Broward County, Florida, is in the second year of implementation of their chess program. The program is a sterling example of support and cooperation of local government, the community, and the school district. Weekly chess classes employ video streaming<sup>6</sup> into all second and third grade classes. The district is in the process of expanding its program to provide after-school programs to other grades. The National Scholastic Chess Foundation, based in Connecticut, is partnering with the Broward County School District and others to provide training to teachers and other volunteers interested in teaching chess after school.<sup>7</sup>

In a moment we shall share the story of how one state department of education is partnering with the chess community in its own CIS endeavor. It is a program launched not just in privileged schools with big budgets. Not just with gifted students. Not with an urban populations loaded with chess masters, but with a student population of mostly Title 1 schools from rural, suburban, and urban Alabama.

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<sup>6</sup> The service is called First Move. Ref: [www.af4c.org](http://www.af4c.org).

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by Charles Webster, Coordinator of Public Affairs for the Broward County School System, in December, 2015.

## The Alabama Chess in Schools Initiative (ACIS)

*“The Alabama Chess in Schools Initiative is firmly aligned with the 2020 Plan which guarantees every child a graduate, every graduate prepared for college, the work force, and for adulthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In addition to content, skills such as problem solving, creativity, time management, collaboration with peers, attention to detail, and self-confidence, are necessary. Chess fulfills these needs.”*

*Dr. Tommy Bice, Alabama’s State Superintendent of Education, 12/16/2015*

The remainder of this section addresses how the strategies previously discussed in Part 1 are being implemented in the state of Alabama. It also lays out practical lessons learned along the way. To the best of our knowledge the Alabama Chess in Schools (ACIS) Initiative is the first statewide initiative attempted in the United States. It is a pilot program and a work in progress, but a description of our experience and methods is presented in the hope that it will be useful to others contemplating a similar mission.

The Alabama Chess in Schools (ACIS) Initiative is a program of the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) designed to expose students and teachers in Alabama public schools to the benefits of chess culture and chess play as part of the school curriculum on a regular basis. Research suggests that the discipline required to be a chess player enhances traits that are beneficial in both academic and social-emotional student development (Dauvergne, 2000; Ferreira & Palhares, 2008; Smith & Cage, 2000; Thompson, 2003). These same research studies suggest that playing chess can result in increased math and reading acuity as well as growth in executive skills. The purpose of this program, therefore, is to establish a motivating learning environment promoting chess as an agent that enables students across all cultures to think critically, take intellectual risks, and strengthen 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills necessary to achieve both academically and in life in a global society. The ACIS Initiative also seeks to strengthen parent and community involvement through chess nights and chess open houses where students teach parents how to play, as well as student and parent led chess tournaments.<sup>8</sup>

In December 2015 the program is completing the first semester of its pilot implementation. All 14 schools are operational and reach approximately 1,500 students.

This program is the first of its kind in the United States, as it is

- 1) teacher-driven,
- 2) designed to include all grade levels (K-12) in different configurations,
- 3) aligned with state curriculum standards,

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<sup>8</sup> This paragraph is an excerpt from a 2015 grant application developed by the Alabama State Department of Education.

- 4) contains components to address the academic needs of students of all ability levels, and
- 5) embedded with an organized research project.

*ACIS Background – Getting Started: Engaging the Communities*

The initiative grew out of discussions between Jerry Nash, National Chess Education Consultant, and several members of the **Alabama Chess Federation (ACF)** board of directors. ACF had been interested in finding ways to expand scholastic chess beyond its traditional promotion and support of tournaments. The author first met Mr. Nash in Nashville at the US SuperNationals V tournament in 2012 and was impressed with his chess in schools vision. The spark that got ACIS started came later when Michael Ciamarra, a chess columnist and coach who had worked as a liaison with the Alabama state government including the Governor, members of the state legislature, and the Alabama State Department of Education. Mr. Ciamarra had promoted chess individually within these communities and made the ACF aware of connections whom he deemed supportive and receptive to the idea of chess in schools. ACF then put together a five-member delegation<sup>9</sup> to meet with the head of the Alabama State Department of Education.

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<sup>9</sup> The delegation included Michael Ciamarra (chess journalist), Frank Camaratta, Jr. (former US Chess Federation board member and former CEO of House of Staunton), Neil Dietsch (ACF President), Balagee Govindan (ACF Vice President), and Jerry Nash (National Chess Education Consultant).

Mr. Ciamarra would later join the ACF board of directors and serve as Director of Public Relations and act as our primary liaison to the political, business, and civic communities.

As president of the Alabama Chess Federation since 2010, Neil Dietsch brought ties to the state chess community as well as a professional background as a consultant and senior project manager for large projects and programs. His experience has (so far) allowed the project to avoid many potential pitfalls inherent to planning and managing implementations in a complex organizational environment.

Jerry Nash has worked for the US Chess Federation for many years. In 2015 he received the UT Dallas Chess Educator of the Year Award. Through his involvement in the World Chess Congress he brings awareness of international CIS practices. Mr. Nash serves as the ACIS architect and has achieved high credibility with the education and chess communities. Many teachers who undergo Mr. Nash's training start out dubious about the concept of teacher-driven training. They often have self-doubts about their ability to learn enough chess to be successful and question how such training can be useful. They leave class with confidence and insight as to how chess will aid them in their core teaching. Listen to a full half-hour presentation by Mr. Nash on his approach to teacher chess

In August 2013, the team met with Alabama State Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Tommy Bice to discuss CIS. Dr. Bice reported that he found the evidence for the benefits of chess compelling and wished to take the next step forward: a chess in schools pilot program. As a result, the team developed a proposal that included possible pilot locations and an inventory of chess community resources available in potential pilot areas.

In the Spring of 2014, Dr. Bice appointed Nancy Johnson as the facilitator of the ACIS Initiative. As the ALSDE facilitator, Ms. Johnson brought deep experience in education as well as a broad understanding of the ALSDE's programs and processes.

### *The Implementation Process*

By the summer of 2015 the ACIS Initiative had:

- 1) formed a steering committee of educators, scholastic chess coaches, and one student,
- 2) established a Five-Year Plan with specific goals,
- 3) designed the program,
- 4) selected Year One pilot schools,
- 5) chosen a student- and teacher-friendly chess curriculum with the potential for safe on-line chess play with other students around the world, and teacher tools to measure student growth,
- 6) developed chess learning centers and chess-related core curriculum lessons aligned to state standards,
- 7) organized a research project around the program to measure benefits,
- 8) purchased chess equipment for pilot schools,
- 9) conducted an orientation for local ACIS program administrators,
- 10) trained pilot school teachers<sup>10</sup>,
- 11) organized both educator and chess-coaching support to teachers in the first year of implementation, and
- 12) taken steps to obtain funding for expansion of ACIS in the following year.

### *Pilot School Selection*

The ACIS leadership team initially considered its strategy for selecting schools for the first year pilot. Should we cherry pick our schools from districts where there were chess programs already in place in order to lower the risk during our first year start-up, or should we give priority to "green field" schools where there was no chess program, a high

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training in this half-hour video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xixwu4z-Gyc&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>10</sup> Alabama Education News, Vol.40 No.1, p. 6; <https://www.alsde.edu/sec/comm/AEN/AEN-SEP-2015.pdf>

percentage of Title I students receiving assistance but with enthusiastic teachers and administrators who wanted a chess program? The latter would be more challenging but also more representative of the larger student population that we hoped to reach in the long run. We chose the latter option.

A memorandum announcing the establishment of the ACIS Initiative was posted on the ALSDE website and mailed to all public school superintendents in Alabama with an application attached. Initial pilot schools were selected through a Response for Application (RFA) process with questions addressing the following criteria designed to ascertain maximum buy-in:

1. High level of interest from school and district leadership as well as teacher volunteers,
2. Commitment to at least three years of participation,
3. Administrator and teacher assurances of chess or chess-related core curriculum, instruction at least one to two class periods per week
4. Mandatory teacher attendance at initial and on-going training sessions,
5. Administrator attendance at the initial orientation session,
6. Participation of all schools within a feeder pattern,
7. Permission to conduct related action research, and
8. Perceived need for the program. Applications were evaluated by a panel of chess experts and educators using a rubric composed of the aforementioned criteria.

Student population diversity, varied demographics, and socio-economic need were also considered. Based on initial rubric scores, finalists were invited to participate in an interview conducted by the panel. Final scores were awarded following the interviews, and the three highest scoring districts were selected as Tier One pilot sites with full funding of training, materials, teacher supplements, travel, per diem, and other expenses. Three additional districts were selected as Tier Two pilot sites with funding of training and curriculum only. These schools were designated as Tier Two because although they scored well and were very eager to participate, state funding was limited. They agreed to work to grow the program within their school feeder patterns to achieve full participation next year. Subsequent additions to the current pilot schools will be conducted in the same manner as in year one, with the exception of selecting Tier Two sites. During year two of implementation, only schools that meet all criteria for Tier One will be accepted.

Program scale-up will occur from within existing pilot school feeder patterns and districts and through the addition of a few new school districts in consecutive years. The rate of scale-up will be determined by manageability, availability of funds, feedback from initial participants, and an annual evaluation of program success. The current plan for the 2016-2017 school year is to double the number of teachers and students involved.

### **Number and Demographic Information about Students**

During year one of implementation, participants include 42 teachers in 14 schools across six school districts involving more than 1500 students. Thirteen of the 14 schools are Title

I with diverse student populations. Three school districts are rural, two are suburban, and one is urban. Two of the districts are very large county systems, one is a medium sized county system, two are small county systems, and one is a small city system.

### **Funding**

In its first year ACIS had operated with a five-figure budget. The year two budget is funded by an at-risk grant through the Alabama State Department of Education. For the third year ACIS anticipates making its case for line item funding through the state legislature.

The Alabama Chess Federation also contributes resources and funding to ACIS during start-up. While the 2-4% it contributes is small, it can be tactically effective in situations where quick action by a state bureaucracy is not feasible.

ACIS is very cost effective. Out of pocket costs are approximately \$50 per student per year. Even with fully loaded costs and some funding for extracurricular tournaments ACIS's costs are expected to remain well below the modest \$100 per student per year benchmark reported by New York City's **Chess-in-the-Schools** a decade ago. One reason for the cost difference is the availability of internet-based chess curriculum licenses; these products were not available when the NYC benchmark was established.

### **Results to Date**

Based on a December 2015 review of metrics and live status updates with pilot schools three months into their CIS programs, the enthusiasm of both teachers and students for the program is striking. While there were a variety of the challenges that would be expected in a start-up, the overall results have been very encouraging. The ACIS leadership team anticipates an 86% success rate.<sup>11</sup>

This apparent success at Title I schools with no former chess program has encouraged the ACIS team to open the initiative next year to schools with a broader demographic range. The team will consider schools that have after-school programs in place but want to add a CIS model.

Based on the program's first-year experience, the CIS model will need only minor tweaks as planning for the 2016-2017 expansion begins. Based on discussions and feedback in meetings in December 2015, it is clear that ACIS pilot school teachers, principals, the leadership team, and executive sponsor have judged the ACIS approach to be sound.

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<sup>11</sup> At least 12 of the 14 pilot school chess programs are expected to succeed. In some schools teacher turnover and transfers has led to cancellation of plans for chess for a specific grade, but the CIS program remains active and supported in other grades at the schools. Even with some built in redundancy, teacher turnover and transfers have been the biggest challenge in the implementation's first year.