



SCALING UP CHESS IN SCHOOLS

Part 3 – Lessons from the ACIS Trenches

Abstract

The design of a CIS model must fit local communities and their cultures. To assess whether the Alabama Chess in Schools (ACIS) model is relevant to a given situation, we look at the nature of Alabama's chess community, consider its impact on the ACIS program, and highlight some lessons learned.

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Part 3 – Lessons from the ACIS Trenches

Early indications are that the Alabama Chess in Schools Initiative is working in Alabama.

However, the design of a CIS model must fit local communities and their cultures. From our earlier survey in Part 2 we saw a variety of CIS models being implemented internationally. To assess whether the Alabama Chess in Schools (ACIS) model is relevant to a given situation, we look at the nature of Alabama’s chess community, consider its impact on the ACIS program, and highlight some lessons learned.

The Diverse Alabama Chess Scene

Chess in Alabama is growing at double the 9.6% annual national average cited by the US Chess Federation. From 2009 to 2015 the number of players in rated Alabama tournament games has more than doubled, mostly due to an increase in the number of scholastic players.¹

Birmingham has historically been the state’s most active scholastic chess area. There are two large and two small private chess training organizations that work with schools in various districts in and out of state to establish chess programs. The programs are mostly after school in the elementary grades, but they include some CIS efforts.

In north central Alabama, Huntsville and recently Madison City have established strong scholastic programs. Madison City’s program is the state’s most ambitious public school CIS effort to date within a single school district. The Madison City Chess League (MCCL) grew out of a tight relationship between the local school board, teachers, and the chess community. MCCL supports a robust offering of chess activities including chess in schools, club events, and tournament play.²

Southwestern Alabama has a long-established Mobile-Baldwin County League for middle and high school students who play for a mix of private and public schools, but the elementary class level chess programs are sparser than in other areas of the state. The Tuscaloosa City School system avails itself of an innovative service learning program of the University of Alabama’s Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility. The program, called “Every Move Counts”, places teams of university students in classrooms to teach chess once a week in several schools across multiple grades. The state also has a small 501 (c) (3) organization led by retired chess players that offers lessons to students.

¹ Based on statistics compiled by the Alabama Chess Federation using tournament data from the US Chess Federation at uschess.org.

² <http://www.madisonchess.com/chessinschools>

Lessons Learned

Alabama's scholastic chess training approaches and organizations are surprisingly heterogeneous. Understanding this led to the realization that no single, universal chess training model would be right for all schools.

Lesson learned (1): Don't try to compete with CIS models that are already working. It is important to respect the diversity of chess training approaches and focus on filling the chess training voids.

The state's scholastic chess community infrastructure includes individual trainers, tournament organizers, chess training franchisers, chess camp organizers, chess clubs, and the Alabama Chess Federation (ACF), which is the state affiliate of the US Chess Federation. All of these are considered to be stakeholders in ACIS. ACF (as a key sponsor) has promoted the ACIS initiative at tournaments, in newsletters, and on its website. This has encouraged parents and teachers to communicate with school principals and superintendents about adding chess programs at their local schools.

Lesson learned (2): Each of these stakeholders will be asking themselves what they might have to gain or lose as the result of a state initiative. Have those answers ready and communicate with these stakeholders. Recruit them as allies and supporters.

We encountered one established teacher/chess coach who was telling people that he was opposed to the program because it was an example of a big state bureaucracy trying to control programs that should be left to the local school districts. The reality is that once the chess program is launched, the school districts oversee and control their local programs. ALSDE's oversight simply involves a memorandum of understanding to make clear the expectations of the schools in return for the start-up training and funding provided by the state. These included participation in a minimally intrusive research program that will enable measurement of the ACIS's success, and filling in a collaborative spreadsheet that records the accomplishment of specific implementation milestones. For political reasons we needed to make clear that these were commonly accepted best practices in both business and government, not an instance of government overreach.

Lesson learned (3): Listening and communication are important.

Heterogeneity is not just a hallmark of the scholastic chess organizations across Alabama; it also characterizes chess teaching methods.

Most of the state's traditional scholastic chess coaches customize their own training methods and approaches to teaching chess. It works for experienced chess coaches giving hands-on instruction to one or a few small classes or clubs. This does not work for a teacher-driven strategy where most teachers lack a solid chess background. Even when

a teacher has strong chess knowledge, customized training isn't scalable to a large student population.

There are at least three chess training organizations in the state who are using approaches that are scalable. Three of the largest participants at the state scholastic championship use their own chess curricula. One, privately developed and proprietary curriculum, is focused on making chess a fun experience. Video lessons are a key element. Another uses **The Chess School** (an internet-based version of the highly respected **Think Like a King** curriculum) paired with a supporting network of experienced chess coaches.

The popular **Chess Kid** curriculum that includes puzzles, game play, workout exercises, and videos is in use by one highly regarded elementary school system. Another chess training candidate package worth mentioning is **Learning Chess**, a chess curriculum based in Hungary that is gaining traction in some European schools. It is also being tested in Alabama and Florida. Finally **Championship Chess** has a lower tech offering consisting of PDFs and DVDs that teachers of primary grades with limited chess experience may find preferable for small class sizes or after-school programs. Its detailed lessons are particularly good for beginners and very young students who need face to face contact more than computer-mediated training.

Some of these training methods are scalable; others are not. The scalable curricula offerings are evolving rapidly. Each has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Some may appeal to elementary school kids, but be seen as too childish for older students. One provides a guide which cross-references chess lessons to Common Core³ standards, which may be of particular interest to teachers in states where classroom activities need to be explicitly linked to the state's education standards. Be prepared to review the latest chess training offerings and match them to the anticipated chess environment(s) served by the local CIS program.

Based on exchanges with several chess training companies (specifically Chess Kid, The Chess School, and Learning Chess) about new features needed to support multi-site teacher-driven CIS models, it is clear that chess training products are adapting rapidly to serve this important and growing market niche.

Lesson learned (4): When it comes to chess training methods and curricula, there is no single silver bullet right for all grades and situations, but there are several good choices.

³ *Lesson learned:* If you live in a state where "Common Core" is a political red flag, be careful of the language used. Local educators can provide guidance on precise terms that have meaning and significance to your education community. After all, chess training has been around centuries longer than Common Core. CIS benefits have to do with development of the executive functions of cognition, not the controversial elements of Common Core (i.e., testing and some content selection). Do not let your CIS effort get tripped up by bogus semantic associations.

A final chess curriculum consideration is the setup and on-going administration of the selected package(s). Typically a license with the chess vendor is negotiated for a pool of licenses for a given time period. While the vendor provides support, the licensee will set up accounts for each student and manage the pool of licenses over time.

Who will administer the licenses? The school district? The state department of education? A state or national chess federation? A third party vendor? Are the administrative processes scalable if there is a tenfold increase in schools and students? In the ACIS model this function is performed, at present, by the Alabama State Department of Education. In at least one European program, the national chess federation manages this function as well as being involved in teacher training and promulgating CIS to additional schools.

Lesson learned (5): Plan the supporting data design and administrative processes (associated with chess training licenses) carefully to ensure they are efficient, scalable, and support the metrics to be collected.

During the first year, implementation of ACIS experienced two setbacks. Despite upfront agreements by principals and school district administrators, the implementation of ACIS was delayed by two months due to an unanticipated quirk in one school district's approval process.

Lesson learned (6): Understand the approval process to avoid surprises.

Finally some teachers who were trained in the summer to teach chess were transferred to other positions.

Lesson learned (7): In selecting among CIS pilot applicants, consider risk factors such as:

- *High turnover among teachers or administrators,*
- *Contentious, elected school boards.*