



Chicago Chess Foundation

**A PROPOSAL TO BUILD AND STRENGTHEN
CHESS IN CHICAGO'S SCHOOLS**

June, 2015

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OVERVIEW

The Game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement; several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired and strengthened by it, so as to become habits ready on all occasions; for life is a kind of Chess...

The Morals of Chess, Benjamin Franklin

Why focus on chess? Chess has a unique ability to rivet kids' attention and simultaneously teach important life skills. Forty years of research have shown that chess improves test scores, academic performance, concentration, decision-making, creativity, problem solving, and social skills.¹ A 2009 study in Philadelphia focusing on some of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Philadelphia found that chess not only improved students' test scores by as much as 25% in math and 38% in reading, but also improved attendance and behavior.² A 1999 New York study found that chess had significant effects on self-confidence, empathy, mood management, and frustration tolerance. Chess players outscored non-chess players in respect for others by 42%.³

The challenge. Chicago's existing chess program lags far behind other cities. Approximately 1,500 Chicago students presently participate in chess programs, in relation to 23,000 in New York and 4,000 in many smaller cities.⁴ The best estimate is that roughly 10% of Title 1 schools in Chicago have instructional chess programs, compared with percentages ranging from 59% to 100% in cities such as Philadelphia, Miami, and Portland.⁵

Chicago's low participation rates have two primary causes. The first is the absence of a robust system-wide effort to stimulate the development of new programs and to promote competition. Chicago's low numbers are also explained by the size of Chicago's chess stipends. Teacher-coaches in Chicago receive only \$440 for an entire year, much lower than in other cities and inadequate as an inducement to start a club. In New York's top programs, part-time coaches start at approximately \$4000, and coaches who work full time can earn ten times that amount. In Miami, 80% of coaches receive \$3000 or more. Stipends are \$1000 in Portland and Brownsville. Even in Illinois, most high school coaches outside of Chicago receive \$1000 or more, and 65% of them receive \$2000 or more.⁶

The consequence is that there are only two small groups of chess programs in Chicago schools. The first is run by a small number of extraordinarily dedicated teachers and coaches who devote vastly more time to their chess programs than they are paid for and thus serve essentially as volunteers. The second group of programs is run by private chess companies, generally at a cost which is prohibitive for the vast majority of low-income families.

Chicago schools are virtually absent from state and national competitions. Data gathered in 2011, believed to be substantially similar today, showed that only 47 of the city's 524 public elementary schools sent more than a single player to the K-8 championship run by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The numbers at the high school level were even worse. Only eight out of 151 CPS high schools participated in this year's CPS high school championship, down from 40 a few years ago, and only four schools could field a full eight-player team.

Attendance at state championships was even lower. Out of 146 teams competing in the 2011 K-8 championship tournament, none was from a CPS school. By comparison, 30% of the teams attending the 2011 New York State Scholastic Championship were from New York City Schools.⁷ Only ten CPS schools sent teams to the Illinois All Grade state championship although the tournament was held in Chicago and entry fees were waived for students in the city's free and reduced lunch program. At the high school level, six CPS schools attended that year's state championship out of 128 schools attending.

CPS is virtually absent from national championships. Only one CPS school attended the 2011 K-6 championship, sending two players. Not a single CPS school attended the national middle school championship, and only one school sent a team to the national high school championship. By comparison, 11 teams from New York City public schools participated in the national events.

The New York Times said last year, “More students are enrolled in scholastic chess programs and are sent to tournaments across the country from schools in New York, which sends more teams to competitions than any other city; Miami; Seattle; Portland, Ore.; and even Brownsville, Texas. It is unusual for a city as large as Chicago, with 2.7 million people, to have only one school enter a tournament as prestigious as the K-12 (National) Championships. By comparison, Los Alamos, N.M., population 18,000, also sent one school.”⁸

The opportunity. CPS took a significant step recently in an effort to improve its chess program. Chess was moved to the Office of Academic Competition, which has committed to building new programs and increasing opportunities for competition.

If experience elsewhere is a guide, building a robust new program will require substantial support from Chicago’s philanthropic and chess communities. Other cities, like New York, Philadelphia and Portland, OR, have built strong programs by collaborating with a strong partner in the nonprofit chess sector. The Chicago Chess Foundation (CCF) has been established by members of the Chicago chess community and local education advocates to serve this critical partnership role.

About CCF. CCF was formed in 2014 with a mission to provide instruction, training and competitive opportunities in chess to students and coaches at low or no cost. Its Board of Directors includes successful chess coaches, program directors, parents, administrators and members of the financial community. None of its members has a financial interest in chess.

Goals of the partnership. The partnership would focus on two goals: 1) bringing thousands of new students into chess by building new programs and strengthening existing clubs; and 2) building Chicago’s competitive strength by recruiting and

training new coaches and setting up tiered instruction so that students can be taught at increasing levels of difficulty.

WHAT CCF PROPOSES

Help establish new programs. The most demanding task facing CCF and Chicago school administrators will be to help new clubs get started and gain strength over time. The fundamentals of starting a new club are not complicated. Most clubs start with the basics: kids, space, chess sets, and a motivated adult. Most club directors also seek to build competitive programs, which requires multi-tiered instruction, which in turn requires a steady supply of qualified and trained instructors.

Clubs generally follow one of three models: (1) those run by teachers or parents who are not skilled players; (2) those spearheaded by skilled players without formal teaching experience; and (3) “turnkey” clubs run by private chess service providers. Some clubs are combinations. Schools will select which model suits them best, and CCF will do all it can to support them all.

Resource package. A number of CCF Board members have helped prepare a comprehensive package of online resources for those interested in starting or seeking to improve a club.⁹ The resources include the research on the benefits of chess; links to videos of kids, teachers, and experts talking about those benefits; an overview of chess in Chicago and the state, a section on competition including a description of major tournaments and a detailed guide to how tournaments are run, and a discussion of sportsmanship and etiquette.

But the centerpiece of the online resources is a section called “Starting a Chess Program,”¹⁰ which addresses every step in the process including initial planning, equipment, instruction and curricula (including computer-aided instruction), budgeting, volunteer recruitment, publicity, and club management. The Resources section also includes a guide to choosing a private service provider.

For the program to succeed, however, significant real-time staff and volunteer support will also be required. That support will come in various forms.

Startup and ongoing advice. CCF volunteers and staff will provide encouragement and startup advice to new and prospective club directors, coaches, and school administrators. As clubs mature, CCF will continue to serve them by running ongoing training, maintaining a supply of qualified coaches, and keeping clubs on a path to excellence.

Equipment. To the degree its budget permits, CCF will provide free or discounted sets and boards to clubs which need them.

Recruitment and training of club directors and coaches will be essential on an ongoing basis. Successful programs often utilize a mix of teachers, parents, experienced chess players and volunteers. The best programs offer training on how the game is played, in classroom management, and in the nuts and bolts of running a club. CCF would also include instruction in technology, including the use of interactive “smart boards” as a training tool. Other cities provide such training through a combination of weekly sessions and workshops during weekends or school breaks. CCF will work with schools to do the same.

Increase coach stipends. To increase incentives for participation by teachers and coaches, CCF will work to supplement existing chess stipends. The midrange of stipends for chess coaches throughout Illinois is \$1500 to \$3000, and CCF believes those numbers are a reasonable goal. Stipends could be paid from existing funding sources or from other outside funding (See “Funding” below.)

Website and online competition. CCF will build and maintain a comprehensive chess website. It will also oversee efforts to provide online capacity for school versus school matches.

Establish competitive marketplace for service providers. CCF will facilitate the provision of services by setting up a transparent online competitive

marketplace to offer schools the widest possible range of choices in the selection of providers.

Recruit high school and college students. The CCF Fellows Program will aim to provide trained high school and college chess players who would support club directors by serving as coaches, mentors, tournament directors, and club assistants. Fellows at the high school level will receive credit for community service.

Improve and increase opportunities for competition. Competition is central to any strong chess program. Other cities run free weekly tournaments for at least several months each year. Some cities also run intercity leagues. CCF would seek to do both, with separate programs for elementary and high school players. A fundamental concept guiding the planning will be inclusiveness, allowing as many kids as possible to be exposed to the benefits of chess.

Partnerships with other institutions and groups. CCF would set up partnerships with colleges, universities, museums and other cultural institutions to provide settings and opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, neighborhoods and ethnic groups to participate in inter-club competitions, special events and formal tournaments.

CCF board members are already active in or have close relationships with other major chess organizations including the Illinois Chess Association, the CPS Chess Coaches Association, the Illinois Chess Coaches Association, Illinois' Warren Junior Scholars program (which serves the state's top youth players), the Youth Chess Foundation of Chicago, and the leaders of community-wide programs in other parts of Illinois and the country. CCF expects to maintain these relationships to share ideas, build support, and harness outside resources.

Build competitive high end. For Chicago schools to become competitive at the state and national levels, instruction needs to be provided at multiple skill levels. The best players will need instruction from those in the game's top echelon, including "titled players" (Experts, Masters, International Masters and Grandmasters). A handful of titled players presently teach in Chicago schools, and those teams excel. New York City's competitive success is largely attributable to

the much larger number of titled players coaching in New York schools. A major focus of the new program would be to bring stronger coaches into our schools. CCF has ties to most of Chicago's top players, who have supported efforts to build a stronger program and have signaled their willingness to participate.¹¹

Raise funds. The expanded program would be funded by a combination of sources presently available (including the Community Schools Initiative and After School All-Stars available to CPS schools) and private funds to be raised by CCF from corporate sponsorships, private foundations, individual donors, and online campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Administrators, teachers and other experts often describe the value, pride and fulfillment offered by strong chess programs around the country. CCF is prepared to make the long-term commitment necessary to helping Chicago build a first-class chess program of its own.

NOTES

¹ <http://bit.ly/Tq9xQl>

² "An Evaluation of the Chess Challenge Program of ASAP/After School Activities Partnership" by Dr. Joseph DuCette, Temple University (2009) at pp. 1, 2, 8-9, 12-13.

³ Stuart Margulies and Kathleen Speeth, "The Effect of Chess Instruction on Emotional Intelligence." New York: Chess-in-the-Schools, 1999.

⁴ <http://bit.ly/1Jm5F7o>

⁵ <http://bit.ly/1Jm5F7o>

⁶ <http://bit.ly/1Jm5F7o>

⁷ <http://www.chesstour.com/cross.html>

⁸ "Still a Senior in High School, and a Five-Time Champion" (Dylan Loeb McClain, New York Times, December 28, 2013) <http://nyti.ms/1dgGkic>

⁹ <http://bit.ly/1yJsf8N>

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/fLs6uL>

¹¹ <http://bit.ly/15vF0gm>