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Chess, the Game of Royalty, Is Now the Game of Grade Schoolers, Too

By **DYLAN LOEB McCLAIN**

Donna Boyer looked tentatively at the board in front of her then reached out and pushed a pawn forward one square.

Her opponent, Barbara Colasante, responded immediately by pushing one of her pawns to the eighth and final rank, thereby winning the pawn game, a variation of regular chess.

"Yeah," Mrs. Colasante said, thrusting her arms in the air.

An hour earlier, Mrs. Boyer and Mrs. Colasante did not even know the rules of chess. But as they sat in the library at Aldan Basics School in Aldan, in suburban Philadelphia, one morning a week before classes began, the two were learning to play so they could teach the game to their third-grade students this year.

This fall, schools in Philadelphia, and in and around Tampa, Fla., have added chess to second- and third-grade curriculums. In so doing, they are joining schools in New York, Seattle, San Diego and Minneapolis.

In Philadelphia, which has the seventh-largest school system in the country, 18 of the city's 280 public schools have added chess to their curriculums in a pilot program. About 4,000 students are getting chess instruction this year, according to Marjorie Wuestner, executive director of the school district's office of health, safety, physical education and sports administration.

The goal, she said, is to have all second and third graders receiving chess instruction by next year.

Paul G. Vallas, chief executive of the school system, said anecdotal evidence showed that chess is a great educational tool. "Chess seems to improve problem-solving skills," he said. "It improves discipline. It improves memory. It certainly seems to improve mathematical skills." Teaching chess, he added, is meant to enrich the curriculum, not replace another subject.

The chess program being used in Philadelphia, the Tampa area, San Diego and Seattle is called First Move and was created by America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization started in Seattle in 2000.

First Move is intended for second and third graders. It uses an interactive DVD and a series of exercises, like the pawn game, to introduce children to the game.

In addition to focusing on rules and basic strategy, the program weaves in the game's origins and

includes math exercises based on its geometry. To assist teachers, many of whom might have never played before, the foundation hires experienced players to visit the school every two weeks to help answer students' questions.

Earlier this year, the foundation asked the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a research and planning group, to evaluate the design and effectiveness of First Move. The group reported that although there had been problems carrying out the program, "nearly all of the teachers reported that the program was what they expected and that the First Move program has been a valuable use of their time." Amy R. Hicks, who teaches second and third graders at John Stanford International School in Seattle, has taught chess in her classrooms for two years, and said that learning the game was beneficial for her students. "It teaches problem solving, perseverance, being able to learn something new," Mrs. Hicks said. It also teaches concepts of rank and file, horizontal, vertical and diagonal.

The biggest problem, she said, was that some students already knew how to play or learned it more quickly than their classmates. "It is not as productive for them as for the others," she said.

While teaching chess in the classroom is spreading, it is not a new idea.

Chess-in-the-Schools, a nonprofit organization begun in New York in 1986, now holds classes in 120 public schools in the city, said Marley Kaplan, the chief executive.

All the schools are part of the federal Title 1 program, which provides money for districts where many children live in low-income homes. Outside instructors hired by Chess-in-the-Schools work with more than 30,000 students, from elementary through high school grades, once a week.

Chess was added to the curriculum at Hunter College Elementary School in New York in 1981. All students from kindergarten through sixth grade have an hour of chess instruction each week, said Sunil Weeramantry, a master who has been the chess instructor at the school since the program's inception. He said that he has also run programs in the White Plains elementary schools since 1985, in the Greenburgh Central 7 School District since 1996 and in New Rochelle since 1998.

The Burnsville school district near Minneapolis has had a chess program for 17 years, said Brian Ribnick, a teacher in the district who coordinates the program. Every fourth grader is taught chess for an hour a day for one week. Some teachers liked the program so much, he said, that they continue it after the week is over.

In Brownsville, Tex., chess is not taught in classes, but student participation in tournaments has been partly or wholly financed by the school district since 1995. In the 2004-5 school year, the district allocated \$400,000 to pay for chess activities, and more than 1,600 students, mostly at the elementary level, were part of the program.

For some students, the benefits of learning chess can also include helping to pay for college. The United States Chess Federation lists a number of colleges and universities offering scholarships focused on chess players. For example, some scholarships cover tuition and fees for four years at the University of Texas at Dallas and at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

James A. Stallings, director of the chess program at the University of Texas at Dallas, said the school began offering the scholarships 10 years ago to attract better students. Usually, there are 15 to 20 students on chess scholarships enrolled at any time at the university.

The HB Foundation, which runs chess programs for six schools in Minneapolis, also offers college scholarships for students who excel in tournaments.

Whatever intangible qualities learning chess may foster, it is one thing to want to teach it and another to actually do it. To help teachers use First Move, America's Foundation for Chess holds half-day workshops at their schools. The workshops are run by Wendi Fischer, the scholastic director of the foundation and a former high-school history teacher.

At Aldan, Mrs. Fischer came equipped with thick binders of lesson plans, DVD's for each teacher, an audiovisual presentation and a seemingly endless supply of enthusiasm.

Bouncing around the room as she went through the lessons, Mrs. Fischer, who says she is not related to the former world chess champion Bobby Fischer, did almost as much cheerleading as she did instruction.

Francine Johnson, who has been teaching for 24 years and is a second-grade teacher at Aldan, was optimistic, if cautious, about the program. She said: "I do think that it is going to be a good asset. But I'm still a little uncomfortable because I come from ground zero in terms of knowing anything about chess, and it is difficult."

Other teachers who have taken Mrs. Fischer's workshops were also nervous about teaching chess. Anne Coletti, a second-grade teacher at Bardmoor Elementary in Pinellas County near Tampa, said: "I don't like to teach something I don't know. After going to the training, I felt that I could definitely teach this. I liked the way that they had divided it into sections."

As the Aldan workshop ended, Mrs. Fischer offered teachers reassurance. "Don't worry, you'll get this," she said. "Remember, we covered half a semester today. You'll be going much slower with your classes."