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Friday, November 4, 2005

Grade schoolers master chess rules

Second-, third-grade classrooms teach game to boost problem-solving, discipline and memory.

By Dylan Loeb McClain / New York Times

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!" Colasante said, thrusting her arms in the air.

An hour earlier, Boyer and Colasante did not even know the rules of chess. But as they sat in the library at Aldan Basics School in Aldan, outside 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 year, 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.

For some students, the benefits of learning chess can also include helping to pay for college. The U.S. 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.

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