

First Steps for Starting a Scholastic Chess Club

by Elizabeth Spiegel

1. Get your principal's support. Schedule a meeting with him/her to discuss your plans and what you need the school to contribute (e.g., a teacher, a classroom, afterschool snacks, integration into an existing afterschool program, state/nationals money). Have a plan with several options before you go in (See also #2).

Think ahead of time about your pitch for the academic benefits of chess. Unfortunately, there are no high-quality research studies on the benefits of chess rigorous enough to be published in peer-reviewed journals, but if you Google "academic benefits chess" you will find a lot of material. Most principals are under great pressure to improve their standardized test scores, and I think a good argument can be made for chess teaching test-taking skills. In both chess and test-taking, students are asked to sit still and focus for several hours at a time on difficult series of problems.

2. Think about who will teach the class. If you are a teacher or other school staff member who plays chess and are able to volunteer one or two days afterschool, great. If you are not, the school might require a staff member to be with you, and you can either get one to volunteer, convince the principal or PTA to pay someone, or ask the students' families for contributions. If you are unavailable or do not play chess, another idea I've seen work well is to hire a high school student who is good at chess and have him/her teach chess content, assisted by a school teacher who maintains discipline. To find a qualified student, try going to a local tournament or calling a local high school and asking if it has a club. The advantage to this is that high school students are much cheaper than adults, and may even volunteer for free if they have a high school community service requirement for graduation.
3. Make a plan for how you will structure your time in chess club. This can vary greatly, depending on the age of students, their chess level, and the amount of instruction they get outside of club. A typical club might have a lesson (15 minutes), a worksheet (15 minutes), and a notated game (1 hour). As a general rule, the lesson should not be longer than 5 x the children's grade level (i.e., 5 minutes for 1st grade; 15 minutes for 3rd grade). It's good practice to include a notated game in most chess club meetings, assuming your students are old enough to notate and you have the time.
4. Find local scholastic tournaments to take your chess club to – it will build your club's momentum and enthusiasm. You can search for local tournaments on the United States Chess Federation website, [here](#). If your kids get excited about ratings, you can buy an [affiliate license](#) from the USCF. This will enable you to rate the games you play in afterschool, which is a wonderful thing and motivates the kids to take it much more seriously.

5. Buy the right supplies.
 - a) You will need standard tournament chess sets; don't get the cheap small ones or the Simpsons-themed set. Get a few extra, since some pawns will go missing and your chess club will expand.
 - b) It's nice to buy a few chess clocks. If you do, spend the extra money and get Chronos – they will last forever and are worth it. If you are strapped for money but have an iPhone you don't mind the children touching, you can also download a chess clock app very cheaply.
 - c) I like for my students to have scorebooks, but it's just as effective to buy a \$0.99 notebook and record games in that. Alternately, you can print out this [scoresheet](#), kindly designed for me by Maret Thorpe.
 - d) If you want to buy a book to teach from, Winning Chess Strategy for Kids by Jeff Coakley is easily the best chess teaching book ever written.

6. Recruit! You want to have at least 12 kids in your club (unless you play very frequently in tournaments) to keep things fresh. Depending on your kids, their interest level, and their afterschool alternatives, that might mean you have to do frequent recruitment drives. Some ideas:
 - a) Put up posters in school hallways.
 - b) Ask your principal if students can play chess in the cafeteria for a week to drum up interest. Kids in the cafeteria are bored, and many will drift over to watch or play. Offer to donate the sets, but make sure to designate a student to be responsible for making sure the sets are put away in an orderly fashion at the end of each lunch period.
 - c) Ask the principal to announce the names of tournament winners in the morning announcements. This will raise the visibility of your club.
 - d) Recruit kids from non-gifted classes. School success isn't always correlated with chess success, and kids who have less going on are more likely to get obsessed with chess.
 - e) Recruit girls in small groups and get female students to bring their friends. I find that if you get a critical mass of girls, and they travel to tournaments together/stay together/become close, they are less likely to drop out.