

CHESS IMPROVES ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Chess has long been recognized throughout the world as a builder of strong intellects, but only recently has the United States begun to recognize chess's ability to improve the cognitive abilities, rational thinking and reasoning of even the least promising children. Chess brings out latent abilities that have not been reached by traditional educational means. It promotes logical thinking, instills a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, improves communication and pattern recognition skills. It teaches the values of hard work, concentration, objectivity, and commitment. As former World Chess Champion Emmanuel Lasker said, "On the chessboard lies and hypocrisy do not survive long."

In Marina, CA, an experiment with chess indicated that after only 20 days of instruction, students' academic performance improved dramatically. George L. Stephenson, chairman of the Marina JHS math department, reported that 55% of students showed significant improvement in academic performance after this brief smattering of chess instruction.

Similarly, a 5-year study of 7th and 8th graders by Robert Ferguson of the Bradford, PA School District showed that test scores improved 17.3% for students regularly engaged in chess classes, compared with only 4.56% for children participating in other forms of "enrichment activities" including Future Problem Solving, Dungeons and Dragons, Problem Solving with Computers, independent study, and creative writing. A Watson-Glaser Thinking Appraisal evaluation showed overwhelmingly that chess improved critical thinking skills more than the other methods of enrichment.

Educators at the Roberto Clemente School (C.I.S. 166) in New York report that chess has improved not only academic scores, but social performance as well. In 1988, Joyce Brown, an assistant principal and supervisor of the school's Special Education department, and teacher Florence Mirin began studying the effect of chess on their Special Education students. When the study began, they had 15 children enrolled in chess classes; two years later they had 398.

"The effects have been remarkable," Brown says. "Not only have the reading and math skills of these children soared, their ability to socialize has increased substantially, too. Our studies have shown that incidents of suspension and outside altercations have decreased by at least 60% since these children became interested in chess."

Connie Wingate, Principal, P.S. 123 in New York, says of a New York City school chess program, "This is wonderful! This is marvelous! This is stupendous! It's the finest thing that ever happened to this school. I am most sincere. It has been an absolute plus for the students who were directly involved as well as for the rest of the school... If I could say one thing to funders, it would be this. If they ever walked down 140th St. and 8th Ave. and had the opportunity to see where our children come from, they would know that these children deserve every single break that they can get. They are trying, through chess, to apply themselves and do something to better themselves. And that filters into the entire school and community... More than anything else, chess makes a difference... what it has done for these children is simply beyond anything that I can describe. The highest scoring student in our school is a member of the chess team. He became the highest scoring kid in the school after he joined the chess team. All four are in the top quarter of the school, and they weren't before. Academically, they are doing much better in class, and it's in no small part because of chess. Just how they feel about themselves, their self-esteem, makes them all winners."

Jo Bruno, Principal, P.S. 189, Brooklyn, NY: "In chess tournaments the child gets the opportunity of seeing more variety and diversity. There are kids who have more money than they have, but chess is a common denominator. They are all equal on the chessboard. I believe it is connected academically and to the intellectual development of children. I see them able to attend to something for more than an hour and a half. I am stunned. Some of them could not attend to things for more than 20 minutes."

Jerome Fishman, Guidance Counselor, C.J.H.S 231, Queens, NY: "I like the aspect of socialization. You get into friendly, competitive activity where no one gets hurt. Instead of two bodies slamming into each other like in football, you've got the meeting of two minds. It's strategic, and you use logic to plan an attack scheme. Aside from being good for the cognitive development of these youngsters, chess develops their social skills, too. It makes them feel they belong. Whenever we get a child transferred from another school who may have maladaptive behavior, our principal (Dr. Wilton Anderson) suggests chess as a way of helping him find his niche. It also helps kids learn how to be better friends. They analyze the game and talk it over afterwards. I even had a couple of kids who never had much in common start going to each other's houses to play chess and swap Chess Life magazines. We've got kids literally lining up in front of the school at 6:45 am to get a little chess in before classes start."