

## Creating and Developing a Strong School Chess Team

One of the best experiences a child can have at school is to be part of a strong, enthusiastic school team. Many kids join teams that are built around a sports program, involvement in the arts like band or drama, or community service projects. Others find teams based on academic pursuits like math, academic quiz bowl, or ... chess! One of the advantages of joining a chess team is that, unlike most other endeavors, kids don't have to wait until middle or high school to participate. Many top chess teams represent elementary schools with players as young as Kindergarteners.

Chess has many levels of competitive play, with tournament sections often designated by school grade. While a tournament for individual competition may have sections organized by grade or US Chess Federation (USCF, see [www.uschess.org](http://www.uschess.org) for more information) rating, school team tournaments are structured by grade level. Typical team sections are: K-1 (Kindergarten & 1<sup>st</sup> graders), K-3 (may overlap with K-1 and, if so, would primarily have 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> graders), K-5 (stronger younger players, primarily 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> graders), K-8 (middle school), and K-12 (high school).

So, how does a school create and develop a chess team, particularly a strong, competitive team? While there is no pat formula, here are suggestions for building and developing a successful, long-term program culled from schools known for their award-winning chess teams.

### ***1. School-Sponsored Chess Classes or Club***

The first step is to have a regularly scheduled chess class or club sponsored by the school. Many elementary schools offer chess classes, while middle and high school may offer clubs for interested kids to meet after school and engage in recreational play. This article will primarily focus on chess classes offered at the elementary level, with tips and incentives that will appeal to the K-5 age group.

If your school does not have an after-school chess program, parents can certainly broach the idea to the administration. There are a number of highly reputable businesses that specialize in teaching chess in the local schools. Excellent coaches can be found at scholastic chess tournaments, summer and holiday camps, and clubs meeting at libraries, bookstores, and churches. They often own or work for these businesses or can refer you to those who do offer lessons in the schools.

Most kids interested in learning in chess at school will not have had much exposure to or formal training in the game, though their parents may have been teaching them at home. An after-school class therefore will focus on the basics for these beginners, while also providing advanced instruction and supervised play for more advanced students, particularly those with tournament experience. Depending on the school and the demand for chess instruction, the classes may be taught by grade level, playing experience, or any combination thereof. The number of coaches for a particular group depends upon the number of kids and their experience. As a general rule, one coach can work with 12-15 kids,

although younger kids (1<sup>st</sup> grade and below) benefit from a smaller class size or an additional coach. An experienced coach can work with up to 20 tournament players, as long as the kids are attentive and well-behaved. Each program will have its own guidelines for instruction.

Middle or high schools with a recreational club may offer only a space to play after school under the supervision of a club advisor. Again, these kids and/or their parents may want to approach the school administration if the parents are interested in hiring a coach to train or mentor their kids during club time.

Not every child enrolled in a chess class or participating in a recreational chess club will want to play on a team, but they may find incentives to join. Sometimes, it's the realization that chess kids bring home many more trophies or ribbons during a school year than their sports counterparts, who usually only receive a participation prize at the end of the sports season. Other times, it's hearing about the adventure of traveling to another city to play in a big national tournament. And occasionally it's because the school's chess parents create a fun environment with holiday or end-of-year parties, recognition ceremonies, or chess-themed trinkets for kids participating in their first tournament to hang on their book bags.

## **2. Parent Involvement**

The most successful school chess teams have consistent parent involvement over consecutive school years. This takes on several forms:

- a) **Support at home** – Like anything else worth learning, chess requires practice beyond the classroom. Ideally, a parent or someone else at home knows the game and can play at least a basic game with the child. If the child is enthusiastic about learning beyond the classroom, the parent may look into hiring a private coach for individualized instruction on strategy and tactics. And when the child shows interest in playing in a scholastic tournament, attending a summer or holiday chess camp, or dropping in at a local chess club, the supportive parent will consider registering him/her in a local event.
  
- b) **Team parent(s)** – A school team takes direction from one or more parents who act as liaisons between the coach(es) and the other parents. Team parents keep everyone informed about upcoming chess events inside and outside of the school, coordinate carpools (as necessary), and lead parental projects like creating team t-shirts and hosting team celebrations. Once an email distribution list is created, it's relatively easy to keep parents in the loop of upcoming events.

- c) **Communications** – Most parents prefer email, but any means of communicating information about chess events is fine as long as it's shared. Some schools post team events on a school bulletin board, others rely on flyers from their school coaches, and some prefer to refer parents to the GCA website ([www.georgiachess.org](http://www.georgiachess.org)), where all tournament information (Open and Scholastic) is continually updated. Parents feel in the loop most when they receive regular communications from a single source (parent or coach) on a regular basis. A team parent whose child is actively involved in chess competition is usually the best person to monitor and update team communications.

### **3. Team Identity and Spirit**

Anyone who has ever attended a SuperNationals chess tournament would be awed by the sight of thousands of kids coming to play chess from all part of the U.S. Wearing their school's chess team shirts, these kids seem to march (OK, sometimes run) in step as they proudly enter the tournament hall to win national recognition for themselves and for their schools. Hosted only once every four years, the SuperNationals is comprised of the annual National Elementary, Junior High, and High School tournaments in both individual and team competition.

School pride is a powerful bonding agent for kids with a common interest, even if the age range spans five or six years. One of the easiest steps to building a solid team identity and spirit is to create a team t-shirt, either featuring the school's mascot or colors or a chess design favored by the players. Kids love these shirts and often wear them to tournaments, chess camps, and club meetings. If the school dress code permits, they can boost team identity when worn the day of chess class or at school assemblies, especially if the school wants to recognize the team just before they leave to compete in a national chess tournament. Even better, nothing screams school solidarity than a photo of the team in their chess shirts posing with their principal or head of school as they all gather around a large chess team trophy they have just won.

Team identity is also cemented when the school recognizes their chess team's achievements by publishing articles or photos in the school newsletter or email publication or by making school-wide announcements via the PA system or during assemblies. The team parents usually take the lead to promote their team's accomplishments to the teachers, staff, and administration. Schools are generally happy to oblige, especially when they see increased enrollment in the after-school chess classes that they sponsor.

Similarly, team spirit is raised by recognition by the kids' school, teachers, parents, and peers. Generating excitement about chess is the primary reason why team parents would do well to promote their accomplishments! Sharing individual and team achievement by email to teachers usually leads to congratulations one-on-one or even in the classroom before peers. Don't forget to take photos of the kids playing at chess practice or at a tournament – especially if they can pose with a trophy! Kids love seeing their photos on a school bulletin board or shared via email with friends and family members.

Most important to the kids, a special presentation of a team trophy to their principal or head of school will become a favorite school memory. They'll never forget the personal congratulations or the photo that the team parents take to capture the moment.

If the budget permits, parents can purchase small chess-related tokens to distribute to kids when they play their first tournament, participate on a school team, or score some other significant milestone. The USCF website sells keychains with attached chess pieces, leather bookmarks embossed with chess puns, and chess-themed pencils, among other items.

Kids also love parties to celebrate a big team win or to wrap up a semester or school year class. Parents can chip in to buy a giant cookie or cupcake cake decorated to look like a chess board. Small trophies can be ordered as end-of-year prizes ... and as incentives for them to return for the next school year! More than a few kids have signed up for chess class for the first time after seeing the fun that their chess-playing friends had the previous school year.

#### ***4. Regular Tournament Play***

The best way to improve in chess is to play often with different people at equivalent or greater skill levels than oneself. If you're fortunate to live in an area with frequent scholastic chess tournaments, take advantage of the bounty and encourage your child to play at least one a month. Kids love to be with their schoolmates as they "take on" kids from rival schools in the community, and oftentimes friendships will develop between chess kids who otherwise would have never met. Coordinating parental supervision and carpool duty is very helpful, as tournaments often span a full day and some run longer.

Encourage your school's team to travel! If your school is located outside of Atlanta, hop in the car and compete in any number of excellent scholastic tournaments in the greater Atlanta area. If your school is in the Atlanta metropolitan area, take advantage of a weekend trip to Brunswick or Savannah for an overnight excursion. If you can leave Atlanta early enough on Friday, take your child and his/her teammates to the beach for some late afternoon fun and start your chess weekend on a high note! The tournaments are usually one-day events held on a Saturday, but there is often time after the awards ceremonies for an additional trip to the beach. And of course, Sunday is a free day to enjoy the area.

National tournaments are an especially exciting opportunity for chess friends to travel together. The Opryland Hotel in Nashville, TN hosts a National Elementary tournament most years, as well as the extremely well-attended SuperNationals tournament, which is held every four years near the end of the school year. (Occasionally a National tournament is held in Atlanta, creating a perfect opportunity for Georgia kids to experience a national tournament at minimal cost.) Most kids love the special nature of a road trip to a distant city where they can enjoy staying in a hotel, eating out for every meal, and sharing the adventure with their chess buddies. If you can afford it, make plans to attend! If money is tight, explore options for a team fund-raising project: car washes, bake sales, seeking outside sponsors, and the like. The experience will be well worth it.

Strong, competitive chess teams, however, do more than to just show up to a tournament! Performance excellence requires extra practices and coach-led training sessions, either during additional after-school sessions or at team members' homes over the weekends. The most dedicated teams will meet for additional training at least several times in the weeks leading up to an important regional, state, or national tournament. As a rule of thumb, a K-1 team can work sufficiently for an hour before the young kids become restless, while older teams can focus for a two hour block. A parent can add fun to the mix by offering snacks after a practice, as well as playtime in a backyard or nearby park. Food and play can do much to entice kids to attend extra practices! And, of course, the entire experience helps to bond the kids into a much tighter-knit team.

### **5. Retaining Players**

One of the biggest challenges a school chess team may face is retaining players. As kids become increasingly involved in sports and other organized activities, they and/or their parents may decide that chess is no longer a top priority. Unlike these other endeavors, however, chess does not require a huge commitment of time each week. Spending only fifteen minutes a day brushing up on key chess strategies or reviewing a game can keep skills sharp.

The use of "byes" in tournaments (excused absences for missing one or two rounds) makes it easy for kids to stay with chess while pursuing other interests and opportunities. Weekend tournaments permit a player to take one or two byes, which can free up a couple of hours to attend a birthday party or play a scheduled game with a sports team. Many tournaments are not critical for all players and a child with other commitments can easily choose to play only a half day of chess, rather than devote an entire day to the competition. This is especially true for beginners who need the additional practice and would like to experience a chess tournament, but in a shortened, less stressful fashion. Top players usually do not elect to take byes, as they are competing for the top prizes which mathematically require contenders to play all tournament rounds. This is especially true for team competition: a top player who wants a bye may have a little explaining to do to his/her teammates who are determined to win a championship!

Another challenge as a child reaches 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade can come from the child's peer group, particularly if the child is the only one in his/her grade actively playing on the chess team. Because there is "safety in numbers," actively encourage groups of three or more kids to continue playing or competing together in chess tournaments. The chess coach can also help these older, more experienced kids feel special by recognizing them as "chess veterans" and enlisting their help in helping younger or newer kids learn the game. They can also take on the role of junior Tournament Directors (TDs) if the chess coach wants to run a small tournament just for the kids in the class, thereby helping them gain practical experience in tournament logistics and management. Kids often rise to the challenge, and many are thrilled to be offered the opportunity to be a role model to others.

## 6. *Building Character Over Results*

It may be a cliché, but teaching kids that sometimes it's not just winning, but how one plays the game, is important for both individual character and team development. Applaud the kids' best efforts and positive attitudes, and they will learn to support their teammates and feel more appreciated and confident in their own playing abilities. It's not easy to shake an opponent's hand after a loss, but a game well played can be respected in its own right. From time to time, a child should be reminded by a parent or respected teacher or coach that it's more important in life to be considered a good, decent person than just a successful player. Remind the kids when they're feeling dejected that they'll "live to fight another day" and that they can take pride in playing better and better with every match, as they learn to examine their mistakes and understand how to improve their game.

Kids who learn to enjoy chess for its own sake are less likely to quit than if they're feeling inadequate from constantly comparing themselves to more talented or experienced players. A strong school chess team should not be built around one superstar player. Sooner or later, the superstar will graduate from the school. In the meantime, the other kids may drift away, feeling unnecessary to the success of the overall team. Instead, focus on the efforts of everyone in the group and help them understand the next steps to improve their games. If the superstar is willing, assign him/her a special role as a team leader to help develop the other kids' chess abilities, as well as someone for them to emulate. In general, it's a good idea to encourage a group of older or experienced students to become team leaders who show the others "the ropes" of tournament play. Younger kids look up to the older ones, especially when the older ones pay attention and take the time to help them along.

Perhaps there is a Zen of chess: When the pressure to win is minimized, the kids can relax a bit and have fun with the game, often with better results and improving skills. And perhaps that, too, is the secret of building a strong, competent player, as well as a strong competitive school team.