

Chess in the classroom: Good move **By Priscilla Pardini**

Eight-year-old Isaiah Richardson recently had some news to share with his second-grade teacher Kathy Andringa. "My dad's getting promoted," he told her, "just like the pawn."

Andringa couldn't have been more pleased – and not just about Isaiah's dad's new job. She'd been teaching chess in her classroom for only a few weeks and already her students at Sheboygan Christian School in Sheboygan, Wis., were beginning to make connections between chess and other aspects of their lives. "For example, they're taking a skill they learn in chess class – problem solving, or logical thinking, or working on a grid, and relating it to their schoolwork," Andringa said. "It's been amazing."



Kathy Andringa, second-grade teacher at Sheboygan Christian School, uses a chess demonstration board to show her students how the pawn moves.

Isaiah and his classmates are among the more than 15,000 students in second and third grade in 14 states now learning chess through First Move, a curriculum developed by America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization located in Kirkland, Wash., that was founded in 2000 to promote chess in American schools and

culture. The only other Wisconsin school currently using the program is St. John Kanty in Milwaukee.

Wendi Fischer, vice president of America's Foundation for Chess, said First Move uses chess as a learning tool to teach higher-level thinking skills. "Kids see chess as a game, and second and third graders love to play games," said Fischer, a former teacher. "But inherent in the game of chess are skills such as learning to think ahead, see relationships, and see patterns."

There's a particularly strong connection to math, Fischer said. In Lesson One, for example, as students learn about the chessboard they are taught about grids and coordinates. "This is pre-algebra," said Fischer. "They're actually learning to think in terms of the XY axis." That same knowledge also helps students master geography lessons on mapping skills.

Fischer said the program targets second and third graders because at that age children are beginning to build a foundation for higher-level thinking skills. There's also reason to believe that girls who are introduced to chess at an early age may be less likely to lose interest in math and science than their non-chess-playing peers.



Three students have fun playing the "pawn game."

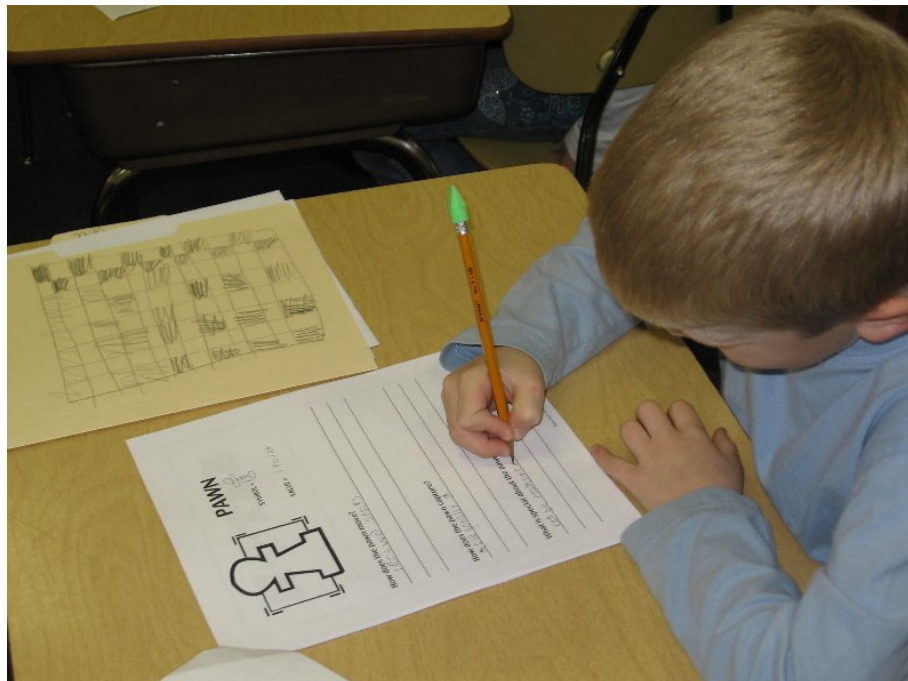
Designed to supplement a school's core curriculum, First Move is taught once a week, in one-hour lessons, for 30 weeks. The program, which comes on a DVD, includes chess sets for the entire class, a demonstration board, teacher training materials, access to an online

chess community, and the services of a personal chess mentor who regularly checks in with the classroom teacher. Each classroom also receives a DVD player. First-year cost of the program is \$600 per classroom.

Fischer said the First Move curriculum was created so that teachers who don't play chess can successfully teach the game to their students. In fact, she estimated that 95 percent of the teachers now teaching First Move were not chess players when they started the program. Since all the lessons are on the DVD, classroom teachers function "more as facilitators, and learn with the children," Fischer said.

The program moves slowly. Chess pieces, for example, are introduced one at a time. Each lesson includes instruction on a new skill or concept via the DVD, demonstrations by the classroom teacher, and student activities.

Within three weeks, students are playing the "pawn game," a variation on chess that is played with just the pawns. "As they move their pawns to the other side of the board, capturing the other player's pawns," said Fischer, "the students learn the value of lining their pawns up on the diagonal to support each other and back each other up."



A second-grade student completes a worksheet on the pawn.

In another game, Knight's Corral, students place a knight in the center of the board and then surround it with a "corral" made up of

different colored pawns. The object of the game: to find a way for the knight to “jump out” of the corral and then capture a pawn on every subsequent move. The underlying skill being taught: the ability to think ahead.

By the end of the last lesson, according to Fischer, students not only know how to play chess, “with all the strategies and tactics that go along with the game,” but also “are much better thinkers.”

Corey Navis, principal of Sheboygan Christian School, said he became impressed with the benefits that chess had to offer after the school organized a chess club last year. “I’m not a chess player myself, but I could see that there was deep thinking going on – the kind of thinking that we as educators are always trying to get at,” Navis said. Putting First Move into place seemed like the next logical step. “For an hour a week we believe we are potentially giving kids tools that could change the way they think about the world around them forever,” he added.

A grant from the Wisconsin Scholastic Chess Federation underwrote the cost of the program.

At St. John Kanty, third-grade teacher Victoria Marone teaches the First Move curriculum to 29 second and third graders. “They’re really gung-ho about it,” said Marone, who is learning chess along with her students. “They think it’s cool.” She described the First Move curriculum as “very well structured,” and “very well laid out.” She learned about the program through an article in *Scholastic News* last year. Donations from the St. John Kanty Holy Name Society and the parish’s resale shop paid for the program.

Marone has high hopes for First Move. She’d be thrilled, she said, if her students could learn to “persevere, problem solve, and make the effort to figure something out.”

She believes that learning chess could also boost the self-confidence of her students, many of whom are English language learners and struggle in school. “I’m hoping that learning chess inspires them to realize they can learn hard things,” she said. “If you play chess you do get a reputation for being smart. ”

Fischer says that’s true. “Chess does have a brand association with being smart,” she said. “And at second and third grade, kids like to be smart.”

Still, Fischer knows that increased calls for educational accountability, including more and more emphasis on standardized test scores, might lead some to question the wisdom of spending an hour a week of class time on chess. And, while she admits standardized tests don’t test students on chess per se, she contends that “all the skills chess teaches are on standardized tests.”

According to Fischer, 89 percent of teachers who have used First Move say it is a valuable use of class time; 91 percent describe it as easy to use and teacher-friendly.

Isaiah contends that playing chess is easy, although “you have to think a lot” and “learn strategies so you know how to move the pieces.”

His mother, Nancy Richardson, likes the fact that Isaiah and his classmates are tackling complex chess skills at a young age. “It’s good for their brains,” she said, “to be thinking through problems and solving them, and then applying those skills to other situations.”

What Isaiah mostly likes about chess, though, is that “It’s fun, and I’m really good at it.”