

Second graders learn language of chess



At La Escuela Fratney, a bilingual school in Milwaukee, students learn to speak both English and Spanish. But those in Cristina Fernandez's second-grade class also are learning to communicate through chess.

Fernandez couldn't be more pleased.

"It's like learning another language," she said of her students' involvement in the First Move chess curriculum she's taught in her classroom this year. "Mentally, they're making new connections,

and learning how to think and problem solve in new ways," she said. "And their ability to concentrate has improved as well."

Designed to supplement a school's core curriculum, First Move is taught once a week, in one-hour lessons, for 30 weeks. The curriculum was developed by America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Kirkland, Wash. The group was founded in 2000 to promote chess in American schools and culture.

Fernandez said her students really enjoyed working their way through the curriculum. She described the DVD-based lessons as effective and entertaining. "The program is specially designed for children, and is very engaging," she said.

Meanwhile, at Sheboygan Christian School, in Sheboygan, Wis., the other Wisconsin school using the First Move curriculum, the program has been in place for two years. Principal Corey Navis said he's convinced the program is boosting student achievement. "You can almost see smoke coming from their ears, they're thinking so hard about their next moves or their strategy," he said of the students. "They're developing a level of critical thinking that every teacher dreams of. And we know critical thinking improves reading and math."

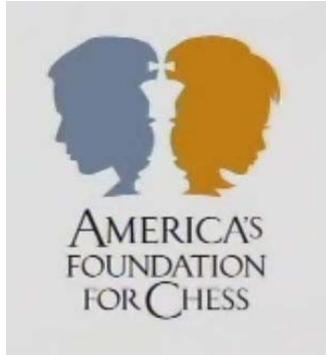


Fernandez said learning to play chess has also taught her students a lot about sportsmanship and appropriate behavior. "Before they start a game, they shake hands," she said. What's more, "They know that berating their opponents is not allowed."

And although shaking hands again at the end of a match while saying "Good job!" might strike some as out of character for typical seven- and eight-year olds, Fernandez said it's "out of character in a good way."

Grants from WSCF underwrote the program at Fratney and Sheboygan Christian. WSCF President Bob Patterson-Sumwalt said the group is interested in making grants to other schools willing to incorporate the program into their curricula.

In addition to the DVD, the First Move curriculum comes with 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.



The program has been designed so that teachers who do not play chess can successfully teach the game to their students. First-year cost of the program is \$625 per classroom, with the cost dropping to \$325 the second year, and to \$175 in subsequent years.

Wendi Fischer, vice president of America's Foundation for Chess, said First Move has also developed a set of guidelines that suggest ways fourth-grade teachers can keep the "chess culture" alive in their classrooms. That includes examples of how to connect chess to a school's core curriculum.

Fischer estimated that by September 2008, roughly 50,000 second- and third-grade students in 23 states would be learning chess through First Move. That includes about 6,000 second- and third-graders in Idaho, whose participation will be funded, in part, with state dollars. There are plans to offer the program, which was piloted in 100 Idaho classrooms during the 2007-'08 school year, statewide within the next few years. Fischer called the Idaho venture "very exciting."

Fischer said First Move uses chess as a 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, seeing relationships, and seeing patterns."

According to Fischer, First Move targets second and third graders because at that age, children are beginning to build a foundation for higher-level thinking skills.

Fischer said the Northwestern Regional Educational Laboratory is poised to launch a large-scale study, designed by the University of Oregon, of the effects of First Move on student achievement. Yet, Fischer is already convinced that the kinds of skills chess players master are exactly the kinds of abilities that help children succeed in the classroom. She sees a particularly strong link to math and believes 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.

Fernandez plans to use the First Move curriculum, which she describes as a "great, great experience for me and my class," again next year with a new group of second graders. She hopes the program will continue at the third-grade level as well. Plans are also in the works to establish a chess club at Fratney, and to begin sending students to local tournaments.

Patterson-Sumwalt said area schools interested in adopting First Move should contact WSCF.