

Idaho Turns to Chess as Education Strategy

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Correction Appended

Once a week, Deborah McCoy, a third-grade teacher in Donnelly, [Idaho](#), unpacks chessboards and pieces and spends an hour teaching her 20 students how to play the game.



Paul Hosefros/The New York Times

Deborah McCoy, new to chess herself, guided her third graders in a chess lesson as part of a pilot program in Donnelly, Idaho.



Paul Hosefros/The New York Times

Mrs. McCoy said of the program: "They learn give and take in chess. There are courtesies that you follow."

Mrs. McCoy does not do this because she is passionate about chess; she barely knew how to play before this school year. But she began teaching it as part of an unusual pilot program under way in more than 100 second- and third-grade classrooms across Idaho.

On Thursday, state officials will announce in Boise that the program will be extended in the fall to all second and third graders — making Idaho the first state to offer a statewide chess curriculum.

The state's \$1.5 billion education budget, passed two weeks ago, includes up to \$60,000 to finance the instruction. Tom Luna, the state's superintendent of education, said participation by teachers would be voluntary, but if reaction to the pilot program is any measure, interest will be great.

There are no studies showing that teaching chess has benefits for children, but there is anecdotal evidence, Mr. Luna said.

“One of the things that we hear is that too much of what we do is based on rote memorization,” Mr. Luna said. “The part I really like about this program is that kids are thinking ahead.”

Mrs. McCoy said she has been pleased with the results.

“So many kids spend their time plugged into video games, iPods, television and so they are more isolated,” she said. “They learn give and take in chess. There are courtesies that you follow. It has been really beneficial for them.”

Idaho has 40,000 second and third graders, and Mr. Luna estimated the instruction will cost about \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year, although it could run as much as \$600,000 “if everybody jumped on it the first year,” he said. The money is expected to come from private financing and from reducing administrative expenses in the school system, though state officials said they had not yet identified where the savings would be made.

Idaho is using a curriculum called First Move, which was developed by America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit, Seattle-based organization that promotes teaching chess in school. First Move is now taught to 25,000 students in 18 states, according to Wendi Fischer, the vice president of the foundation.

Rourke O'Brien, the foundation's president, said the idea to introduce chess into Idaho's school system arose out of a discussion between Erik Anderson, the foundation's founder, and Roy Lewis Eiguren, a lawyer and lobbyist who lives in Idaho.

Mr. Anderson and Mr. Eiguren sit on the board of the Avista Corporation, an energy company based in neighboring Washington. After hearing about the benefits of teaching chess, Mr. Eiguren set up a dinner early last year and invited Mr. Luna, Karen McGee, an education-policy adviser to the governor, and three Republican state lawmakers — Representatives Eric Anderson (no relation to Erik Anderson) and Bob Nonini, and Senator John W. Goedde.

The dinner participants agreed to create the pilot program, and Mr. Nonini volunteered to provide \$600 of his own money to pay for one of the classrooms in his district for a year, Mr. O'Brien said. The rest of the cost, about \$60,000, was paid by the state.

First Move differs from some other chess-in-school programs in that it is taught by classroom teachers and is intended as a curriculum enhancement for second and third graders. It incorporates elements of math, history and vocabulary.

Teachers who wish to use it do not need to know chess. They are trained at seminars over a day or two before the school year starts, and are provided with an instructional DVD, a DVD player, chess sets, boards, online resources and a manual. Every other week, an experienced player is available to answer questions.

Mrs. McCoy said her town was so remote — Donnelly is about a two-hour drive from Boise — that the expert player, Mark Morales, was available only online, but she had found that was adequate. She said it was good for her students to be exposed to a sophisticated game like chess.

“Donnelly is approximately 250 people,” she said. “We are right smack dab in the mountains. Most of our kids live on ranches or in small towns.”

Some of the benefits of the program, Mrs. McCoy said, came in unexpected areas.

“I actually have one student who is originally from Russia and two Hispanic students who have limited English skills, and chess kind of leveled the playing field, and it kind of helped their self-esteem issues,” she said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 22, 2008

An article on Thursday about Idaho’s plan to teach chess to all second and third graders misstated the source of funding, based on information from state officials, for the program, which is estimated to cost \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year and as much as \$600,000 the first year. The state’s education department will provide up to \$60,000, then seek private financing for the rest. The department will not pay for the entire project.