

## **A Short History on How to Start a High School Chess Course: by Arnie Nermo**

As a teacher of Gifted and Special Education and an avid chess player, I have been interested in Chess as it relates to education for well over 20 years. It all started at William Beagle, a small high-school in Surrey, BC. The way I ran my chess club as a teacher was to run it hard, every single lunch hour...no staff room breaks for me, but plenty of fun, memories and CHESS. Through the years, the numbers would fluctuate between 4 to 30 members. It was during the times that I had 30+ students, I would say to myself, "Why the 'heck' aren't I teaching this as a real course?!" The first hurdle has always been getting past the principals, who quite frankly just didn't care. The real issue for them is that a teacher costs money and so it's more important to have them covering regular classes, not any frills. In an effort to bolster my argument that Chess is not a frill, I researched several leads and found that in Canada, Chess has been taught in the school curriculum in various forms, but usually piggy-backed into the Math curriculum or left for volunteers to bring it into the classroom for short periods of time. My dream was a Chess course that could stand by itself and be taught on an equal footing with Science, Math or Socials Studies. Pursuing this endeavor, I was once invited to Chess legend, Nathan Divinsky's home near UBC. He gave me a video, some kindly advice and later sent me some of the fascinating research that showed the latest educational benefits of Chess. Although I was undaunted and enthusiastic, the dream that I had nurtured just didn't look like it would succeed.

About seven years ago, in a new school, Fleetwood Park, I discovered that all locally developed courses now had to follow new Provincial (Board Approved and Authorized) BAA guidelines and templates. Once more, my chess club was packed, so I started to climb that Everest again. First,



As to the question of whether Chess has a viable place in high-school curriculum, extensive research has shown it to be an activity where even the weakest academic students can match their wits with the strongest and beam with success. It is a proven and valuable self-esteem builder! In addition, Chess demands that participants exercise their best powers of planning, memory, decision-making, judgment, creativity, and concentration. Interestingly, chess is known to assist cognitive development for students in four areas—logic, memory, awareness/analysis, and pattern recognition (Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal WGCTA). It is evident that chess is more than just a game.

Now the course is approved and ready for implementation, I am more than willing to share how I had envisioned teaching it. Just imagine, kids racing down the hallways, pushing past each other to be the first to get to their Chess class. On the whiteboard is projected a huge image of one of Paul Morphy's or Bobby Fischer's immortal games. It's been set to 'mate in four'. Each student's is intently focused on finding a solution that might win the daily door prize. A winner is swiftly declared and now it's down to business. Today's lesson: the King's Indian defense. With the computer

convince the principal, next, write up a course following the provincial BAA guidelines, next, meet with the School Trustees, and then get it past the School Board. Then, get it past the Ministry of Education. Finally, get enough students to take the course as a selection for the following school year.

I worked very, very hard and had almost succeeded about three years ago when I unexpectedly got a 'plum job' offered in a new school district. I felt like Mallory turning back. But then I said to myself, 'Why not offer all the groundwork to other teachers across BC and Canada?'. After putting out the proposal a BAA Chess course I had developed through the BC Teacher's Magazine, Luke Campbell of School District#23 Okanagan, took up the challenge and was finally able to make it to the top.

What is the significance? Now that Chess is listed as a legitimate BAA course in BC (course number YLRA-12F) any teacher can apply to teach it in their school district. It will still take some effort on their part but the precedent is set and so it will be a much easier road. Although the course is the first of its kind in Canada that I know of, it is my hope that teachers in other districts and provinces country-wide may use Luke Campbell's and my experiences to use the course as a template for the introduction and teaching of Chess into their high-school curriculum too.

hooked to the overhead, several games are analyzed in quick succession...then the students break out their chess sets and practice the nuances of this opening with each other. They are particularly keen because a guest chess master from the city's local club has been invited to play a simultaneous tournament with the class on the following day...and he is just as excited to mentor them on its devious variations. Having practiced their opening strategies, the students hope to employ several tactical motifs they've been taught, to give them a winning edge. They have already learned to take algebraic notation of their games and are ready to add to their victories or losses. They are ready to, in Grandmaster Susan Polgar's words, "Win with grace and lose with dignity". Chess is much more than a high school frill subject. The competition is keen, the thinking hard and the rewards...well, they're ones that will last a lifetime.

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