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# Chess Club Takes Off Among Poplar Bluff Middle Schoolers

DECEMBER 13TH 2021 BY DEE LOFLIN

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About 100 students signed up for the opening day of Chess Club at the Poplar Bluff Middle School, immediately placing the after-school group next to Junior Beta as the upper elementary's most active.

"I didn't know chess is this popular," fifth grader Elan Hocke commented. Elan previously was a member of a small community club, but since he no longer has the time after riding the bus home, he said he usually just plays chess alone

When Principal Dr. Josh Teeter took over at the Middle School last year, he had plans to launch a club, but COVID-19 protocols prevented it. He also attempted to start one in his former post at Junior High, but said he was never able to put in the time necessary to promote it, plus he was contending with other interests like gaming.

"My goal for this whole thing, you know, if I ruled the world, would be to turn this into an elective class," Teeter said. "Like sports, it gives kids another outlet.

"I struggled in math in Middle School, but no one could beat me at chess," continued Teeter, "so I knew I had brainpower."

The Middle School purchased 30 chessboard sets with instructions included from Wholesale Chess, and borrowed 10 more from another campus. Several students brought their own boards as well.

For the inaugural meeting this month, students who already knew how to play were paired with those who did not. Going forward, Teeter said the format would operate much like class in that there will be whole group as well as individual instruction. Tournament teams may emerge if enough students become serious.

The activity was so well-attended that it already has been divided into two weekly sessions instead of one, with multiple teacher chaperones. Fourth grade meets in the cafeteria from 3-4:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, and grades five and six gather on Thursdays.

“Chess is what smart people do,” Teeter stated. “The kids don’t know this yet. They just think it’s fun.”

According to the principal, there are more possible variations in the first 20 moves of chess than atoms in the observable universe. Students who play for just one hour per week can improve their academic outcomes by 10 percent, he went on, and even higher when they compete at the tournament level.

Teeter noted on the permission slips to parents and guardians that chess could improve a child’s social-emotional development, cognitive abilities, communication skills and strategic planning.

Having played since he was 12 and competitively by age 14, Teeter was one of the founding members of the community chess club earlier this spring alongside Junior High math teacher Brett Russell, and an educator from Westwood Baptist Academy.

With a stroke of luck, Dane Mattson, a grandmaster from Minnesota now residing with his wife in the Doniphan area, began participating with the group. Teeter hopes to invite Mattson, who is employed by Chess.com, to serve as a guest speaker for the students in the future.

Pictured: Fourth graders Baylee Ward and Elijah Mohr of Madison Copeland’s class contemplate the ending sequence of a chess game.

Photo and article by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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