



The Knesset
Research and Information Center

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Chess classes in the education system

This document was prepared pursuant to a request by Knesset Member Elazar Stern and will present summary information about chess classes in the education system in Israel and in various education systems around the world.

Those who seek to promote chess classes in the education system argue that such programs have many benefits for students. For example, it has been argued that chess classes can contribute to improved cognitive abilities, the development of scientific reasoning skills, and values such as patience, sportsmanship, and more. Certain studies have indicated a link between chess classes and improved learning and reasoning skills, which are reflected, *inter alia*, in better math and reading achievements. At the same time, other studies have not found any evidence to suggest that chess classes lead to an actual improvement in scholastic achievement.¹

We note further in this context that the idea of introducing chess to the compulsory school curriculum has been criticized by parties who argue that children should not be required to learn chess if they do not wish to do so and that they should be allowed to study other subjects instead. Furthermore, it was argued that chess should not be given preference over other games, such as card games or construction toys, which can also help develop thinking and memory skills. It was also argued that introducing chess classes to the education system might come at the expense of other areas of study (such as music and arts), to which many educational advantages are attributed.²

¹ John Jerrim et al., *Chess in Schools: Evaluation Report and Executive Summary*, Education Endowment Foundation, July 2016; Giovanni Sala, *Does Chess Instruction Improve Mathematical Problem-Solving Ability? Two Experimental Studies with an Active Control Group*, December 2017; Sala, G., & Gobet, F. "Do the Benefits of Chess Instruction Transfer to Academic and Cognitive Skills? A Meta-Analysis" *Educational Research Review*, 18 (2016): 46–57.

² Library of the European Parliament, *Chess Teaching In Schools in the European Union*, 6 October 2011.

Chess classes in the Israeli education system

Chess is not taught in the Israeli education system as part of the formal curriculum. Our examination of the matter with the Pedagogical Secretariat in the Ministry of Education indicates that the ministry has apparently not reviewed the option of introducing chess to the education system as a formal subject of instruction.³

Enquiries held with relevant parties indicate that **chess is taught in the education system in Israel, mostly in kindergartens and lower grades in elementary schools, as an enrichment class within supplementary study programs funded by parents or local authorities.** Accordingly, the Education Ministry's database of external education programs lists several dozen enrichment programs for teaching chess in the education system.⁴ Israel Chess Federation's response to our letter states that according to their data, over a hundred thousand children and teenagers in kindergartens and schools currently study chess in informal frameworks as part of their studies.⁵

Chess classes in the education system are currently operated by both public and private entities. For example, over 4,000 elementary-school students studied chess this year as part of the Karev Program for Educational Involvement, which is funded by the Ministry of Education, local authorities, and parents.⁶ Mifal Hapais (the Israel State Lottery) in association with Israel Chess Federation has operated the Chess for All Children program for second and third graders in local authorities, with an emphasis on towns in the periphery. This program was conducted this year in some 200 classes in 80 localities (some 6,000 students). Each class that participates in the program is entitled to fifty study hours spread over the course of the school year.⁷ The Alterman Chess Company has run a chess program in kindergartens and elementary schools (first grade) for the past decade; this year, the program was run in 12 local authorities for some 30,000 students.⁸

³ Dr. Moshe Weinstock, Chairman of the Pedagogical Secretariat at the Ministry of Education, email response to the query by the Knesset Research and Information Center, May 2018.

⁴ See: [Ministry of Education database of external education programs](#) [Hebrew].

⁵ Sivan Hadad, VP Operations Israel Chess Federation, in response to the query by Knesset Research and Information Center, May 2018.

⁶ Rami Tal, Chess program director within the Karev Program, in response to the query by the Knesset Research and Information Center, May 2018.

⁷ Sivan Hadad, VP of Operations of the Israel Chess Federation, in response to a query by the Knesset Research and Information Center, May 2018.

⁸ Boris Alterman, CEO of Alterman Chess, in response to a query by the Knesset Research and Information Center, May 2018.



In this context, we note that in 2012, the Knesset Immigration, Absorption, and Diaspora Affairs Committee held a meeting honoring chess player Boris Gelfand to celebrate his second place finish in the World Chess Championship. The meeting summary stated, *inter alia*, that "the committee calls on the Ministry of Education to introduce chess as an elective subject in Israeli schools."⁹ In 2010, the Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee held a similar meeting in honor of Gelfand winning the Chess World Cup. At the end of the meeting, then-Committee Chair MK Zevulun Orlev stated that "the committee will ask the Minister of Education to form a joint team with the Israel Chess Federation to examine the possibility of teaching chess to Israeli students."¹⁰

Chess in Schools around the World

In 2012, the European Parliament made a declaration about introducing the Chess in Schools (CIS) program in the education systems of European Union member states. *Inter alia*, the declaration called on the European Commission and member states to encourage inclusion of the program in the member states' education systems, and called on the European Commission to provide the necessary funding. Note that this declaration is not binding, as EU member states are independent when it comes to organizing their education systems.¹¹ Subsequently, the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education discussed a budget document in 2016, which, *inter alia*, included a proposal to allocate €150,000 to fund a pilot for the Chess in Schools program. This pilot was intended to provide research-based evidence on the advantages of chess and to develop methods of teaching chess in schools.¹² We were unable to find any further indications regarding subsequent stages in the process of approving the funding proposal for this pilot.

It should be noted that funding is granted under the Erasmus+ program,¹³ which is funded by the European Union, to various projects that promote chess in schools. For example, in 2018, some €50,000 was granted to a two-year project called "Black and White Sport: Chess" which conducted a pilot in several schools in Italy, Spain, Latvia, and Portugal with the aim of

⁹ [Protocol No. 250 of the Knesset Committee on Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs meeting](#), 6 June 2012 [Hebrew].

¹⁰ [Protocol No. 147 of the Knesset Committee on Education, Culture and Sports](#), 25 January 2010 [Hebrew].

¹¹ [Declaration of the programme 'Chess in School' in the educational systems of the European Union \(2013/C 251 E/24\)](#), 15 March 2012.

¹² European Parliament, Committee on Culture and Education, "[Budget Amendments](#)," 31 August 2016.

¹³ The Erasmus+ program works, *inter alia*, to build collaborations for promoting innovation in education and teaching as well as to promote sports.



promoting chess as a mandatory subject of instruction in elementary schools in member states.¹⁴ Furthermore, some €240,000 was allocated in 2014 to fund the three-year Castle Project for promoting chess in elementary schools in Italy, Germany, and Spain through dedicated training of teachers in schools participating in the project (several dozen teachers and classes in the three participating countries.)¹⁵

A 2015 poll by the European Chess Union in its 54 member states (including Israel) found that chess is taught in schools, in various ways, in the education systems of all the countries that responded (33 countries). The poll found that in most countries, including Israel, the number of students who participated in school activities was "high," though the pollsters did not further define the quantitative criterion they used.¹⁶

Examples of chess in schools in different education systems

Below we present the findings from our initial review of chess in schools in the education systems of various countries around the world, with an emphasis on states where chess was formally introduced to the curriculum. It is worth noting that the information in some of the sources refers to previous years and not to this year, and therefore changes may have taken place in the countries we reviewed since the time the information was publicized. **Note that the available sources we found on this subject indicate that, as opposed to the examples given below, in many countries, chess is taught mostly in elementary schools and in supplementary enrichment classes rather than as part of the mandatory curriculum.**

In 2011, chess became a mandatory subject in all elementary schools in **Armenia**. Armenia thus became the first country in the world to turn chess into a mandatory subject. The subject is taught two hours a week over the course of the school year.¹⁷

In October 2017, the **Russian** Minister for Science and Higher Education declared the ministry's intention to instate one weekly hour of chess classes in the curriculum for grades 1–4 within about two years.¹⁸ As part of this effort, a cooperation agreement was signed in January 2018 between Moscow State University of Education and the Russian Chess

¹⁴ Erasmus+, "[Black and White Sport: Chess](#)," accessed 7 June 2018.

¹⁵ Erasmus+, "[C.A.S.T.L.E.: a Chess Curriculum to Advance Students' Thinking and Learning Skills in Primary Education](#)," accessed 7 June 2018.

¹⁶ European Chess Union (ECU), ECU Education Commission, [Survey on Chess in Schools 2015/16 – Initial Findings](#), 25 April 2016.

¹⁷ Library of the European Parliament, [Chess Teaching in Schools in the European Union](#), 6 October 2011.

¹⁸ The Russian Ministry for Science and Higher Education, "[Press Release](#)," 25 June 2017 [Russian].



Federation, intended, *inter alia*, to develop a chess curriculum for elementary schools.¹⁹ As indicated in various reports, different regions in Russia and even individual schools themselves may add certain subjects to the curriculum. For example, in the Republic of Kalmykia, chess is taught in schools as part of the formal curriculum.²⁰ Furthermore, it appears that chess enrichment classes are taught in schools in most parts of the country. For example, a pilot for chess classes in elementary schools across the country was launched in 2016. The first city to participate was Moscow, with more than 100 elementary schools in the capital joining the program in fall 2016. Another example of such a program is in the Kaluga Oblast region where chess classes are held for one hour a week.²¹

In 2005, the Ministry of Education in **Turkey** decided to allow schools to introduce chess as an elective subject in the curriculum. As part of the program, tens of thousands of teachers were trained to teach chess to millions of students across the country.²²

The Polish Chess Federation operates a project in elementary schools in **Poland** that teaches chess to pupils in grades 1–3. The program was active in 2016/17 in about 1,000 schools, and over 35,000 students were taught chess. The schools join the program voluntarily and are required to allocate at least one classroom where pupils take chess classes one hour a week for two years. Chess classes are taught by teachers who undergo a 72-hour training course, which is part of the program. In 2016, the Polish Minister of Education announced that starting in 2017 chess classes would be used in 13,000 elementary schools as an aid for learning math.²³

Chess is taught in **France** in elementary schools and high schools. A framework agreement between the French Chess Federation and the country's Ministry of Education, which is renewed every three years, codifies the cooperation between the two bodies to promote and develop chess in schools by training teachers, providing access to pedagogical resources, organizing competitions, and supervising and overseeing the various programs and the achievements in this field.²⁴ There are also various initiatives on the regional level to promote chess in schools, *inter alia*, through supplementary enrichment programs. In France, chess

¹⁹ The Russian Ministry for Science and Higher Education, "[Press Release](#)," 31 January 2018 [Russian].

²⁰ Republic of Kalmykia website, "[Announcements](#)," 27 November 2012 [Russian].

²¹ Moscow Chess Federation, "[Press Release](#)," 27 July 2017 [Russian].

²² World Chess Federation (FIDE), *Chess in Schools - Our Global Future*, 2014 Edition.

²³ EuropeChess, "[Education through Chess in Schools Project in Poland](#)," n.d., accessed 7 June 2018.

²⁴ "[Framework agreement between the French Chess Federation and Ministry of Education](#)," February 2018 [French].



has been defined a high-level sport (Sport de haut niveau) since 2000. **Students competing in high-level sports can incorporate their sports activities into their studies and even take a matriculation exam in sports in their discipline of choice.**²⁵ In 2017, for the first time ever, two students in France took a matriculation exam in chess as a high-level sport owing to their achievements in chess tournaments. The oral exam included the history of chess as well as specific strategic moves.²⁶

In 2015, the Lower House of the Parliament in **Spain** approved a non-legislative proposal on the implementation and promotion of the study of chess in schools and public places as a sport.²⁷ The proposal is apparently meant to serve as a call to the Spanish government to implement the Chess in Schools program in accordance with the 2012 European Parliament recommendation (see above). Though we do not have any other official indications regarding the actual implementation of this proposal, media reports indicate that chess in schools has blossomed in recent years. Current estimates suggest that chess programs have been instituted in over 1,000 schools while thousands of other schools offer chess classes as supplementary enrichment.²⁸

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Research in **Austria** promotes a chess program in elementary and junior high schools as an elective in interested schools.²⁹ The program has gained wider popularity in recent years and is currently active in hundreds of schools across the country.³⁰

Chess is taught in state primary schools in the **United Kingdom** as part of the enrichment studies by third-sector entities seeking to promote this subject. For example, the Chess in

²⁵ French Ministry of Sports, Ministère des Sports, "[Help for High-Level Athletes](#)", 5 July 2017 [French]. A matriculation exam in sports requires 20 points: 16 points on the practical exam and 4 points on the theory exam. Students considered high-level athletes can get the 16 points on their practical exam for their performance in their chosen discipline.

²⁶ "[French Chess Federation](#)," accessed 30 May 2018 [French].

²⁷ Congress of Deputies, "[Non-legislative Proposal on The Implementation and Promotion of the Study of Chess](#)," accessed 6 June 2018 [Spanish].

²⁸ See, e.g., Leontxo García, "[Andalusia is Introducing Chess in Elective Hour](#)," *El País*, 8 September 2017.

²⁹ Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research, "[Information on Chess in Schools Program](#)," accessed 6 June 2018 [German].

³⁰ Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research, "[List of Schools Participating in the Project](#)," accessed 6 June 2018 [German].



Schools and Communities organization runs chess programs in some 300 schools where tens of thousands of students are taught chess through a 30–week-long curriculum.³¹

There are chess programs in schools in various states and cities across the **United States**. For example, **New York City** has had a chess program in public schools (mostly elementary and junior high) since 1986. The program is run by an external organization and is not part of the formal curriculum. Since the program began, it has taught chess to hundreds of thousands of students; during the current academic year, it has 6,000 students in some 45 schools.³²

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³¹ Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC), [Chess in Schools: The UK Experience](#) [PowerPoint presentation], February 2016.

³² "[About Us](#)," *Chess in the Schools*, accessed 31 May 2018.

