Improving Academic Achievement of Disadvantaged Children through Chess

Alexandra F. Wiener

One of the most compelling challenges facing educators is eliminating the gaps in academic achievement between different socio-economic groups and providing all students with the intellectual skills and motivation to reach their full potential. In my home State of Connecticut, the academic disparities between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students are profound, with only 12% of economically disadvantaged students performing at the proficient level on recent national tests.

My Action Plan seeks to improve the academic performance of all children, but most particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by introducing them to chess. I chose chess because, as a competitive chess player, I have experienced and observed firsthand its many intellectual, academic and social benefits. Chess affords everyone an equal opportunity to make something of him or herself and become a part of a worldwide community that embraces everyone who sits down at a chessboard, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, wealth, ability or disability.

The benefits of chess are internationally recognized, with more than thirty countries, including Russia, China and Israel, integrating chess into their core academic curriculums. By contrast, only a limited number of public schools in the United States have incorporated chess into their school curriculums, and chess is usually only offered as an afterschool program in more affluent communities. As a result, only a small and select number of American children play chess, and even fewer underprivileged children have that opportunity.

This inaccessibility of chess is unfortunate because numerous studies indicate that chess makes children of both sexes at all socio-economic levels smarter. These studies show that chess students demonstrate gains in critical thinking, problem solving, organizational skills, verbal reasoning, creativity, memory, concentration, motivation, perseverance, and self confidence.
As a result, these students exhibit improved schoolwork and higher grades and test scores.

My first step in implementing my Action Plan upon returning from Brown was to contact the National Educational Chess Association to volunteer to teach in their elementary school chess program for first to third graders. Thereafter, when the Chess Club of Fairfield County opened in January in Norwalk, Connecticut, founded by an acquaintance with a similar vision of introducing chess to a more diverse group of children, I volunteered to be an instructor in their after-school program as well.

While teaching and coaching young chess students is the most gratifying of the activities that I have undertaken to implement my Action Plan, I soon came to recognize that I could only affect a relatively small number of children if I only limited myself to teaching chess in the classroom twice a week. I began to accept public speaking appearances in order to reach a broader audience. As the 2010 National All Girls Co-Champion (16 yrs & under) and the six time Connecticut State Female Scholastic Champion, I am often asked by tournament directors to attend scholastic chess tournaments to share my experiences. Utilizing the public speaking skills I developed at Brown, I have made multiple personal appearances over the past several months, and hopefully have inspired new chess players to strive for excellence and pursue their goals.

Most recently, I appeared at the Connecticut State K-8 Chess Championship to assist as a tournament director and participate in the awards ceremony. Recognizing a fundraising opportunity, I enlisted the assistance of a friend and fellow State Chess Champion to offer autographs, photos and the opportunity to play a five minute blitz game for a donation. We played nearly fifty games of blitz against children and parents alike, raising enough money to purchase 26 high quality tournament chess sets. These sets were then donated to the Connecticut State Chess Association for distribution to needy children.
The Chess Association decided that rather than simply distribute the chess sets, they would establish a scholarship program for students at an inner-city school in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The school will choose twenty students, who will receive free lessons to master the fundamentals of chess during a five week program. I will be mentoring the class. At the conclusion of the program, the students will receive a certificate of completion, one of the donated chess sets and free entry into the St. Thomas Chess Tournament in November 2011. This first group of chess graduates will become the nucleus of the school’s new chess club, which will receive the balance of the donated chess sets. Once the club is established, I will continue to serve as a mentor to the program.

Excited by the creation of this new chess club, I was motivated to engage in further fundraising to establish additional scholarship programs. To further my fundraising objective, I have begun to contact National and International Grand Masters, such as Susan Polgar, Ildar Ibragimov and Sergey Kurdrin, who are among the highest rated chess players in the world. I have requested that these Grand Masters sign a chessboard, which will be auctioned off once the chessboard is filled with sufficient autographs to make it valuable to collectors.

When I first formulated my Action Plan at Brown, I decided to develop strategies to promote chess in the local community, and defer my efforts to lobby the legislature to adopt a statewide chess curriculum. However, after attending the Symposium on Social Change, I concluded that there is no time like the present, so I began to investigate how to gain the attention of public officials in a position to reform educational policy. When I learned that two students are chosen annually by the Governor of Connecticut to serve as representatives on the Connecticut State Board of Education, I decided to apply. Recently, I was chosen as one of twelve semi-finalists to be interviewed by the Board of Education Selection Committee, which will choose five finalists for a final interview by Governor Dan Malloy. If selected, I hope to have the opportunity to educate fellow members on the Board of Education about the value of chess and advocate for the implementation of chess into the public school curriculum.
While I await the outcome of this selection process, I continue to take other actions to raise awareness about the benefits of chess. In March, I appeared on behalf of the National Educational Chess Association at the “Minds in Motion” program sponsored by the Connecticut Association for the Gifted. This day long program was comprised of educational workshops, including chess workshops for kindergarten and first grade students. I ran the workshops with another instructor and was gratified when, at the end of each session, parents of many participants signed their children up for our after-school chess programs. In addition, I have been working closely with the Director of the Chess Club of Fairfield County to develop multi-media strategies to promote chess. I have made recommendations for the club’s website and prepared a slideshow to be presented in local schools to increase the participation of underprivileged children from the community.11 The Director has contacted elementary schools to schedule my slideshow presentation, which I look forward to giving in the coming months. My participation in the Brown Leadership Program has forever changed my life.

Over the past seven months, I have come to recognize that there are no limits to what I can accomplish and that I should never be afraid to set ambitious goals. I am proud that through my Action Plan, so many children, and in particular, economically disadvantaged children, will now be able to join the chess community, make lifelong friends and have unparalleled opportunities for a better future. I remain committed to implementing and achieving the objectives of my Action Plan, as well as pursuing future endeavors to positively impact my community.