



## Chess teaching in schools in the European Union

*In some countries around the world, pupils follow compulsory chess classes during school time. The stated aim, claimed by chess promoters, is for children to benefit from the educational merits of this game.*

*In the EU, Member States are solely responsible for the organisation of their education system and the content of teaching.*

*'Chess in schools' projects are being implemented in several Member States, based on different schemes. National and regional chess federations are often involved, particularly to support teachers. These initiatives also sometimes rely on digital platforms aimed at broadening access to chess. An increase in chess club membership has been observed in some cases as a result of the introduction of chess in schools.*

*Estimates of the number of pupils taking part in the different 'chess in schools' projects must be interpreted with caution, due to the uncertain quality of statistics available.*

*Several international chess organisations (e.g. European Chess Union, Kasparov Chess Foundation Europe and World Chess Federation) promote chess teaching in schools.*

*The main obstacles to the introduction of chess in schools are the lack of trained teachers, the low interest of some governments or chess federations and insufficient financial resources. The compulsory character of chess classes, the choice of chess rather than another activity, and the fact that chess might replace other 'more traditional' school subjects, are some of the issues being debated.*

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### Issue definition

Promoters of the teaching of chess in schools claim that learning the game can provide a wide range of educational benefits to pupils.

According to them, chess can improve their concentration, memory, visualisation, logical and critical thinking, planning, decision making and creative thinking abilities. Advocates of teaching chess in schools also generally highlight the likely positive impacts on pupils in terms of attitude (e.g. self-confidence and respect of rules). Moreover, they insist that chess does not require expensive materials.

'Chess in schools' projects have been in place in several countries outside the EU. For instance, in New York City, 400 000 pupils have received chess lessons in the framework of the '[Chess-in-the-schools programme](#)' since 1986 (13 000 in 51 schools in the 2010-2011 school year). These lessons are offered by a non-profit educational organisation. In 2011 Armenia's government made chess compulsory in primary schools (chess is a very popular activity in this country). Around 40 000 children in 1 500 schools will receive two hours of chess classes each week.

Member States (MS) are solely responsible for the organisation of their education system and the content of teaching<sup>1</sup>. There is no study available providing a detailed overview or a systematic analysis of national 'chess in schools' experiments carried out in the EU.



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### The EU and education

Art. 165 TFEU states that the EU 'shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between MS'. The EU may carry out actions to 'support, coordinate or supplement the action of the MS' (art. 6 TFEU).

Incentive measures may be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure. However they may not harmonise the laws and regulations of MS. The Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may also adopt recommendations.

European cooperation in the field of education is voluntary. It is based on a [Strategic framework up to 2020](#), adopted by the Council in 2009. This puts forward four strategic objectives. The second axis concerns the improvement of the quality and efficiency of education, with particular attention to literacy, numeracy levels and to making mathematics, science and technology more attractive. A series of benchmarks are set for 2020 (e.g. the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15% by 2020 (19.8% in 2009)). Implementation relies on the [open method of coordination](#).

## Overview of some initiatives in Member States

### France

Teaching chess in primary schools is one measure in the [action plan](#) aimed at improving pupils' competences in sciences and technologies, launched in January 2011 by the French Minister for Education. Regarding primary schools, the objective is to prevent innumeracy (i.e. inability to understand or apply mathematical principles).

One of the plan's three axes concerns the use of games, particularly chess, for learning during school hours. The Ministry of Education stresses in the action plan that playing chess allows pupils to develop their intellectual capacity.

In this context, also in January 2011, the Ministry of Education renewed its partnership with the French Chess Federation (FCF), aimed

at fostering the practice of chess in schools ([Framework agreement for 2011-2013](#)). This agreement replaces the previous one that covered the [2007-2010](#) period.

The new agreement aims at developing the practice of chess in schools, with particular attention paid to girls and to socially and geographically disadvantaged pupils. Priority is also given to training teachers and to developing teaching resources (e.g. websites and teachers' guides).

The French Chess Federation has committed itself to support schools locally (through local clubs) and to organise tournaments and championships for schools. The FCF is also to contribute to improving the collection of data on experiments carried out locally and the evaluation of the results achieved. A working group with representatives from the Ministry of Education and the FCF will monitor the functioning of the agreement.

Chess kits will also be distributed to schools for free by a foundation (['L'échiquier de la réussite'](#)).

Several initiatives have been developed at a regional level. For instance, in the Corsica school district, in 2011-2012, 7 000 pupils (of around 25 000) in primary schools will receive one hour of chess classes per week during school hours. Teaching material has been made available for teachers and pupils. Fifteen people from the Corsican chess league (CCL) participate in the initiative and provide support to teachers.

According to the CCL, in Corsica around 10 to 15% of pupils who receive chess classes in school become a member of a local chess club. The CCL highlights that it has carried out a deliberate strategy of raising public institutions' awareness of the teaching of chess in schools, which has resulted in a huge increase in club membership in the region (250 in 1998, 4 850 in 2010).

In the Créteil school district, a specific task force on the issue of chess teaching in schools was created in 2007. Between 2007 and 2011, around 1 000 teachers were trained in primary

and secondary schools. Teaching material was also provided. Today, around 5 000 pupils from primary to secondary school level receive weekly chess lessons. In 2009, it became possible for pupils in this school district to choose to sit an exam in chess as part of the *baccalauréat* examination (access to higher education depends on passing this state examination).

FCF membership reached [a record high in 2011](#). It grew by 8% in 2010-2011, with an increase of the share of young people (70% are less than 20 years old). This situation is seen by the FCF as a direct consequence of its actions towards schools and the agreement with the Ministry of Education: the increase is particularly important in the regions where the FCF regional branches have implemented actions targeting young people.

According to the FCF, 300 000 children are shown how to play chess each year in primary schools in France (but the Federation does not explain what exactly this figure covers).

### Spain

An experimental programme ('[Ajedrez a la escuela](#)' i.e. 'chess in school') was launched in May 2007 in the Aragón region by the regional government. The objectives of the programme are to provide pupils with some educational benefits (e.g. improve concentration as well as logical thinking abilities and memory), to facilitate the integration of immigrants and to fight against gender discrimination and racism. Pupils receive at least one hour of chess lessons each week, in schools but outside school time. Public pre-primary and primary schools may apply to participate in the programme. Teacher training is foreseen in the framework of the regional teachers' training programme.

Furthermore, [a dedicated internet portal](#) has been set up, where pupils from the whole region may learn and play chess.

Leontxo García, chess correspondent of *El País* newspaper, estimated during the [81th FIDE Congress](#) (2010) that, in Spain chess was taught in around 1 000 schools as a compulsory, optional or extra-curricular subject.

**Figure 1: Statistics on the 'Ajedrez a la escuela' programme in the Aragón region (Spain).**

| Year      | Number of schools | Number of pupils |
|-----------|-------------------|------------------|
| 2007-2008 | 19                | 497              |
| 2008-2009 | 39                | 1035             |
| 2009-2010 | 54                | 1677             |
| 2010-2011 | 66                | 2367             |

Source: Gobierno de Aragón.

### Italy

[MSP Scacchi](#), a national organisation supporting chess in Italy, estimates that around 2% of Italian pupils in primary and lower secondary schools receive chess lessons (i.e. 100 000 children). Most of the time chess is taught in schools as a result of initiatives by the regional branches of the Italian Chess Federation.

In 2009-2010 in Piemonte, 21 000 pupils received chess lessons (12 000 hours) in the framework of the 'chess in schools' initiative. This initiative, described by Italian chess stakeholders as the biggest in Italy, was launched by the [regional branch of the Italian Chess Federation](#). It has received support from various partners, including from the private sector, and from the Piemonte regional government and local administrations. A [regional chess school](#) was also created, whose aim is to give further training to interested children who have received lessons in schools. A digital platform to learn chess was also created ("[Scacchieducational](#)"), targeting pupils between 7 and 10 years old. Moreover, the project involves research on chess teaching and its impacts.

Regional branches of the Italian Chess Federation are also managing 'chess in schools projects') in [Liguria](#) (4 000 pupils) and in [Lombardy](#) (2 000 pupils).

### United Kingdom

Some charities encourage teaching and playing chess in public primary schools (e.g. [Chess in schools and communities](#)). Schools that take part in the scheme receive inter alia free chess sets and free weekly coaching. They are encouraged to incorporate chess lessons into curriculum time 'as this produces the best results'. Schools in 13 towns or boroughs (e.g.

[six schools in Birmingham](#)) participate. In 2011, 81 schools were involved (3 000 children).

Chess in schools and communities recently made a submission to the on-going [review of the national curriculum](#), recommending that children aged six or seven should receive one hour of chess lessons per week.

A Member of the UK Parliament tabled an [Early Day Motion](#) on Chess at the beginning of September 2011. [This motion](#) stresses that chess receives no financial support from the Government. It calls on the Government to give all children the opportunity to learn chess at primary school.

### Sweden

In 2009, [a pilot project on chess teaching in schools](#) was launched in Lund by the Swedish Chess Federation. Today, around 3 700 pupils in 100 schools participate in the project, and around 260 teachers have been taught how to teach chess. Pupils receive classes either during school time (for the older ones) or after school (for the younger ones). Children between 6 and 12 years old are targeted.

A national tournament for pupils aged 10 has been organised since 1979 (['Schack4an'](#)). The aim of the event is to give a positive image of chess to children and their parents. In 2010-2011, 'fourth grade' classes in 22 of the 25 Swedish districts were invited to take part in the tournament (the SCF's goal is that 100% of fourth grade classes are invited by 2013). The SCF reports that for the 2010-2011 tournament 12 200 pupils took part in the tournament and 24 000 learnt how to play chess (each participating class receives a one-hour lesson on how to play chess and some instructional material).

### Germany

Schools that offer chess as a mandatory subject in the regular curriculum remain the exception. In most cases chess classes are an extra-curricular activity. The President of the German Chess in school foundation (['Deutschen Schulschach-Stiftung'](#)) has recently presented [12 examples of primary and secondary schools](#) in which chess is compulsory. In some of these

primary schools, one hour of mathematics has been replaced by a one-hour chess lesson each week. In one of the secondary schools, in Dresden, it is possible to take chess as a subject for the *Abitur* (i.e. the German examination to access higher education).

A branch of the German Chess Federation promotes chess in schools (['Deutsche Schachjugend'](#)). Another initiative to develop chess in schools is the [Deutsche Schulschachpatent](#), training for teachers on how to teach chess to children. A tournament for primary school pupils from several age classes is organised every year (['Deutschen Schulschachmeisterschaften'](#)).

### Austria

In 1976, chess became an optional subject in primary and secondary schools. There is also a [chess tournament for pupils](#) of various ages, organised by the Ministry of Education. There are around 4 000 chess players under 18 in the country.

### Other Member States

**Figure 2: Number of children involved in 'chess in schools' initiatives in some EU Member States.**

| Member State    | Number of children involved  |
|-----------------|--|
| Bulgaria        | 1 000 (according to the Bulgarian National Sport Academy, 5 000 children follow extra-curricular chess classes). |
| Finland         | 1 000  |
| Greece          | 50 000   |
| Hungary         | 5 000  |
| Ireland         | 1 000  |
| The Netherlands | 10 000   |
| Poland          | Between 10 000 and 20 000  |
| Romania         | 5 400  |
| Slovenia        | 1 000  |
| Slovakia        | 12 000   |

Source: [Chess in schools survey](#), European Chess Union.

Estimates of the number of pupils taking part in the different 'chess in schools' projects must be used with caution. In particular, it is not always clear whether they include only chess as a curricular subject, or also as an extra curricular activity, or both. Chess promoters often have difficulty in gathering high quality statistics (or simply do not collect such data).

### The role of international chess organisations

The World Chess Federation (FIDE) President declared that chess in schools would be one of his main priorities for the 2010-2014 period. In November 2010, [he met with the UNESCO Director General](#) and discussed, inter alia, the chess in schools issue. [The educational benefits of chess](#) were particularly discussed.

In 1984, FIDE created its [Chess in Schools Commission](#) (CIS). This commission aims in particular to assist national chess federations in introducing chess in schools, prepare curricula and courseware for chess education in schools, and prepare training programmes for schools.

Since 2011, the [Kasparov Chess Foundation Europe](#), in partnership with the [European Chess Union](#), has been promoting the 'chess in European schools' project. A public hearing on this project took place in the European Parliament on 20 September 2011 (organised by Slavi Binev, MEP). The objective of this project is to promote the study of chess in primary and secondary schools across the EU, targeting pupils from 6 to 12 years old. The EU-wide launch is planned for 2012.

As underlined for instance by the French action plan for sciences and technologies, not only chess but other games too can help children develop their memory and strategic skills (e.g. card and building games).

Moreover, some have pointed out that introducing chess classes during school time could entail reducing classes in other subjects (such as music or art). These subjects also claim a wide range of educational benefits for pupils.

For instance, the [European Association for Music in Schools](#) (EAS) highlighted during the [consultation on schools for the 21st century](#) that music is crucial for pupils' personal development, fosters their creativity, innovative thinking and adaptation abilities, and develops their initiative and self-confidence.

### Further reading

[Benefits of chess \(several documents\)](#) / FIDE website.

[Le développement des habiletés cognitives de l'enfant par la pratique du jeu d'échecs](#) / Noir, 2002.

### Difficulties faced and debate on chess in schools

In its [2009 annual report](#), the chairman of the Chess in schools commission of the World Chess Federation identified three main obstacles to the introduction of chess in schools (at global level, not specifically in the EU): first, the lack of trained teachers; second, a simple lack of interest from governments or chess federations; and third, lack of financial resources.

Furthermore, projects aimed at making chess classes mandatory have received some criticism, suggesting that it is better for pupils to have the possibility of learning another subject if they do not want to play chess.

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> [Eurybase](#), funded by the [EU's Lifelong Learning Programme](#), describes the organisation of education systems in 31 countries, including EU MS.