



## CHECKMATE, CLASSMATE

By Renee Spencer  
Staff Writer

Last Friday afternoon, the Southport Elementary School cafeteria was crowded—and silent—as nearly 40 students hunched over chess boards to ponder their next moves.

This was a competition—the culmination of 12 weeks of practice—and the stakes were high.

But even as students displayed laser-like focus during their games, they encouraged one another and were eager to applaud their classmates for playing a good game.

While chess has been around since the 7th century, it was only recently introduced into local schools when St. James resident Jeff Mount, who's active with a number of area organizations, had been volunteering at Southport Elementary and South Brunswick Middle and had the idea to teach students to play chess.

He enlisted his friend, Mike Van Allen, to assist him in the mission. When the two began four years ago, they taught only fifth-graders. But after seeing how younger students were picking up the game, they decided that this year they

would expand the program to students in third and fourth grades.

In addition to giving the students a fun way to pass the time, Mount hopes it will prepare them for other activities.

"Part of what we're really trying to do is introduce critical thinking," Mount explained. "The logic behind chess is really fantastic. Programming really is a bunch of 'if, then' statements—and that's what chess is."

In the past, Mount and Van Allen have taught chess to entire fifth-grade classes. But this year, with the help of Southport Elementary School parent facilitator Anna Blevins, they decided to switch things up. Blevins suggested having an application process which would allow them to work with smaller groups of students for longer periods of time. Mount said that the change has really worked out well because it allowed them to teach students to play using algebraic notation.

"It's great because they're able to write down all of the moves, and it's a code," Mount said. "It's like coding, and they have to really think about it and focus on it."

Mount noted that algebraic notation allows the students to replay their old games, as well as the games of Bobby

Fischer, the world chess grandmaster who has been lauded as the greatest chess player of all time.

And as they work on reasoning and logic, the students also seem to be enjoying themselves.

Fifth-grader Ahmad Hewett had never played chess. He had only heard about it, and said while the game was challenging to learn at first, he was drawn to it.

"I like the way the pieces move on the board," he said.

Quinn Magee, also a fifth-grader, explained she likes that it requires a strategy.

"There's a different situational awareness when you're playing chess," she said.

Fifth-grader Hunter Ward says his favorite piece is the Queen.

"She's the most powerful piece on the board," he said.

While Hunter had experience playing the game, he said that belonging to the chess club at Southport Elementary has allowed him to take his game to another level, with strategies like algebraic notation.

Cameron Maguire's son, James, participated in the Southport Elementary School Chess Club during the first semester, and her daughter, Brooke, and

son, Patrick, are planning to participate in the spring.

As triplets, James, Patrick and Brooke, are often competitive. She explained that chess has been a great activity for them.

"It has provided our family with a way to have healthy competition—in a quiet, peaceful way," she said. "It's helping them build confidence, and it has been great."

Van Allen and Mount say seeing the kids learn, grow and build confidence is what it's all about.

"I get a lot of enjoyment out of it," Van Allen said.

After helping Mount teach chess, Van Allen decided he wanted to spend more time giving back and now volunteers to serve as a tutor.

"We have a passion for being able to help kids," Mount said.

Four years ago, when Mount first kicked around the notion of teaching kids chess, he admits that his wife wasn't convinced. She cautioned him that students may not find it as interesting as he did.

His wife attended the tournament last Friday and saw the large turnout.

"She said, 'I cannot believe all these kids love chess so much,'" Mount recalled. "And I can't either. But it's been great."



Photos by Morgan Harper