

# "CHESS RULES!" AT SOUTHPORT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WITH THE ST. JAMES VOLUNTEER TEAM

Story and photo by Jane A. Williams

---

St. James resident Jeff Mount's chess education program in Brunswick County schools started in 2014. Mark Erskine reached out to Jeff in 2019 after reading about Jeff's chess program in *Cat-Tales*. At the time, Jeff was teaching chess at three different Brunswick County elementary schools and needed volunteers. So, Mark began to teach chess to third, fourth and fifth graders at Southport Elementary School, and eventually became the coordinator for that school's chess program.

The game of chess involves strategic thinking, tactics, problem-solving, concentration, perseverance and patience. These are valuable life skills that take time – and patience – to impart to young children, many of whom have difficult home and personal situations, are distracted by technology and have short attention spans. The ultimate challenge comes down to finding ways to teach a complicated game to elementary school-age kids in a way that's interesting and fun.

The chess teaching team works each week delivering the message 'chess is a great game' to the students. Various tools are used: group lessons, breakout play between students and students vs. teachers, chess puzzles, speed chess. The program is offered during the normal school day as an enrichment class and is considered a privilege. Parents sign-off on the selection and commitment.

Mark's current team of chess teaching volunteers includes St. James residents Scott Dotson, Cheryl Graham (who has assisted Jeff Mount since 2017), Michael Hayes (played in national tournaments until 2019), Joe McGurrian, Terry Ritchey, Carolyn Stadler and Southport resident Bill Fairley, whose grandson attends SES. Many of these volunteers have had prior experience in education or working with children. All love the game of chess.

This year's classes culminated in an SES after-school tournament held on April 15. About 32 students participated. Medals were awarded for third, second and first place in various levels of competition. Why is chess so great for young kids? Take it from Mark: "[Chess] stretches the mind in multiple ways, the equipment is inexpensive, kids can play it without leaving home, they can play it with parents and grandparents, play against a computer or phone app, and it is far more educational than most video games and TV programming. Lifelong skills related to patience, concentration and sportsmanship are learned."

Increasing the number of volunteers allows the program to deliver better coaching and opportunities for more students. The SES chess program would welcome more St. James residents to become chess program volunteers. If you are interested, email Mark Erskine at [markerskine1@gmail.com](mailto:markerskine1@gmail.com)

**Editor's Note:** Mark Erskine was St. James' 2018 Volunteer of the Year.



Back row from left: Scott Dotson, Mark Erskine, Mike Hayes  
Front row: Andy Ackerman, Joe McGurrian, Cheryl Graham, Bill Fairley. Not pictured: Terry Ritchey and Carolyn Stadler

