Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess

A Two-Year Community Impact Report
(October 2023- September 2025)

Mission & Background

The National Scholastic Chess Foundation began its partnership with The City of Sunrise in 2014. Together they created The Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess to provide a sustained and institutional commitment to chess with a focus on providing community-based chess programs and initiatives in the City of Sunrise, Florida. Funded each year by a generous donation from the City, chess has become a major part of the social and educational fabric of Sunrise.

The Center's goals include:

- Improving student academic performance in Sunrise schools by facilitating the critical thinking skills associated with chess and "thinking before you move" principles so important to the students
- Increasing familial engagement in schools and the community in Sunrise
- Creating stronger community social and cultural bonding in Sunrise through exposure to chess
- Developing best practices for mentoring and teaching chess in the community
- Promoting new methods to introduce chess to all ages, including seniors and veterans, in Sunrise
- Contributing to a reduction in juvenile interventions by providing alternative activities in Sunrise that reduce risky and negative behaviors among at-risk youth

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Program Highlights: 2023-2025

Open Play Chess: Building a Weekly Tradition

The Sunrise Chess Center has established a thriving tradition with Open Play Chess every Saturday morning from 10 am till 12 noon. Running for over a decade the sessions are now housed at the Sunrise Athletic Complex.

Facilitated by senior instructors Robert McKenzie and Woman FIDE Master Dr. Amelia Hernandez, who alternate leading the program, they nurture newer students while challenging experienced players, creating a welcoming intergenerational community. The program's growth has been remarkable and consistent. During the 2023-24 fiscal year, Open Play drew 904 participants—a 5.2% increase over the previous year. The momentum continued into the 2024-25 season with even stronger numbers.

When other organizations inquire about the program's ongoing success, the answer is simple–our instructors show up every week. Along with the outstanding support from Leisure Services staff, this reliable presence has fostered a robust community of chess enthusiasts spanning all ages and abilities.

Free Scholastic Chess Tournaments: Competition with Heart

The Center’s free scholastic chess tournaments have seen tremendous growth and consistently break attendance records. Tournaments are held in October, January, March and May at Sunrise Athletic Complex.

These tournaments follow US Chess Federation rules while creating a welcoming environment for newer players to experience chess competition. They're organized into elementary and middle-high school sections, and between competitive rounds, instructors offer free game analysis—a service parents consistently cite as tremendous value for their children's development.

Mayors' Chess Challenge: A Growing Movement

The Mayors' Chess Challenge has become the signature kickoff event for the Sunrise chess season. Held each September at the Sunrise Athletic Complex, the event draws players of all ages and abilities and has even featured special guests like elite Grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura who attended our 2023 celebration.

On September 20, 2025, the 11th Annual Mayors' Chess Challenge attracted 130 children and adult players plus their families. The gathering included elected officials, officers from the Sunrise Police Department and Broward Sheriff's Office, and accomplished players including the NSCF Executive Director who traveled from New York for the occasion.

A highlight of the event was the simultaneous exhibition where National Master Nicholas Rosenthal took on 15 players, finishing with an impressive 13 wins and 2 draws. A former Sunrise resident donated an electronic chess board to the Center which allowed us to livestream one of the simul games.

Since its founding by Sunrise Mayor Mike Rhyan, the Mayors' Chess Challenge has spread throughout South Florida with 25 cities hosting their own chess events, demonstrating the lasting impact of bringing chess directly to local communities.

Chess in the Community: Meeting Families Where They Are

The Sunrise Center has made chess a visible and accessible part of community life throughout the city. At Tunes 'n' Trucks nights and other community festivals, the chess tent has become a beloved fixture. An instructor helps facilitate play, primarily focusing on children, though everyone is invited to participate. The chess tent consistently draws the earliest arrivals and the last to leave, creating a perfect blend of family fun and learning that organizers believe is totally unique to Sunrise.

The Center has also participated in the Sunrise Police Department's annual National Night Out celebration and other community events throughout the years. There's something especially delightful about watching parents enjoy the live music and food while their children gather eagerly around instructors in the chess tent.

IKEA Family Chess Night: Corporate Partnership

Thanks to an introduction from Sunrise Leisure Services Director Kevin Pickard, the Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess was invited to host a chess event at the IKEA store in Sunrise. The Center chose Wednesdays when the store offers food discounts for children, making it truly a Family Chess Night.

The first event in July 2024 was successful enough that Family Chess Night became a regular occurrence. Led by National Master Nicholas Rosenthal, the events encourage parents to play with their children as well as having kids play against other children and coaches. Because of the location, the events have attracted numerous children and parents from the local neighborhood, with attendance averaging 20-25 players each month. IKEA management reports this is among the most consistent and popular programs the store hosts.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The NSCF's work in Sunrise began with training over 600 teachers, police officers and other professionals working with children.

The Center continues to support the development of strong chess coaches in South Florida. The NSCF's executive director, National Master Matan Prilleltensky, frequently visits from New York to work with the Center's instructors. National Master Lior Lapid has also presented workshops and small group training sessions to help instructors and coaches improve both their own chess play and their ability to engage and manage children in the classroom. This professional development has been of tremendous assistance in helping the Center maintain and improve the quality of its programs.

Support for Sunrise School Children: Bringing Chess to Classrooms

Throughout both years, the Center maintained consistent support for local schools. Instructors were sent weekly to Sandpiper Elementary School and Piper High School. The Center also provided instruction, teaching materials, online resources, and other support to Nob Hill Elementary School, Bair Middle School, and Franklin Academy for both its elementary and middle school classes.

One particularly heartwarming story emerged from Bair Middle School, where a new student who immigrated from Jamaica in 2024 quickly developed an interest in chess. In his second-ever tournament in March 2025, despite losing his fourth game to a much more experienced player, he managed to come in seventh place and take home a trophy. He was able to share this accomplishment with his mother back in Jamaica, who was very proud.

Chess Queens Initiative: Empowering Girls Through Chess

Thanks in part to an $8,500 grant from the US Chess Women's Committee, the Center operated the Chess Queens Initiative beginning in summer 2022 through the end of the 2023-24 school year. With additional funding from NSCF donors, the program continued for 2024-25. With additional funding from NSCF donors, the program continued for the 2024-25 school year.

Open to players in grades 4 and up, the program's goal has been to encourage more girls to play chess by offering extra coaching and mentoring. Woman FIDE Master Dr. Amelia Hernandez leads the program, with assistance from McKhaila McKenzie, a recent college graduate who became an instructor for the Center. The program followed a regular schedule meeting twice a month after Open Play and typically averages 12-14 girls per session.

As a further way to encourage girl players, the Center added a trophy for Top Girl in each section of its tournaments. A detailed report on the Chess Queens Initiative was prepared for US Chess and shared with the Sunrise City Commission and staff. Among the highlights was a fifth-grade girl from the program, Brooke, who won the elementary section in the Florida State Girls Championship in February 2024.

Student Success Stories: Inspiring Excellence

While the program is not especially focused on creating chess champions, it is inspiring to see some students excel in competition. Two stories stand out from this period.

Jacorey Bynum has become a symbol of what sustained support and mentoring can achieve. At age 10, he learned to play chess in a free program the Center offered at City Park in Sunrise. After a tragic incident in his family, Jacorey became part of a mentoring initiative the Center started and quickly became a strong young chess player. When COVID shut down much of the programming, his progress stalled as there was no support to get him coaching and send him to tournaments.

In November 2023, the Center was able to come back alongside this talented student, now 16. In February 2024, he earned the National Master title from the US Chess Federation, putting him among the top 1% of all tournament chess players in the nation. Over Labor Day weekend 2024, Jacorey added another title: Florida State Chess Co-champion. It was an amazing accomplishment as he tied with players who have much higher ratings, one a FIDE Master and the other an International Master. Jacorey played a simultaneous chess game as part of the September 2024 Mayors' Chess Challenge. Since then, Jacorey has been awarded an inaugural Maurice Ashley Fellowship. Created by Maurice Ashley, the first African American to ever achieve the grandmaster title, the $8,000 award will provide training and subsidize tournament travel as well as offering Jacorey mentoring and networking opportunities.

Another success story is **Yaseen Osman**. A regular participant in our Open Play, Yaseen got his start playing in the Center's free tournaments, passed the USCF 2000 ratings mark—another impressive achievement **demonstrating the program's ability to help develop competitive players**.

Looking Forward

The Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess, supported by the City of Sunrise, continues to engage the broader Sunrise community through the game of chess. The Center has become a model for other cities and service organizations.

The support of Leisure Services staff is key to the program's success. The partnership between the City of Sunrise, the National Scholastic Chess Foundation, and the community has transformed chess from a simple game into a powerful tool for education, social connection, and personal growth.

From weekly Open Play sessions drawing hundreds of participants annually, to free tournaments breaking attendance records, to producing National Masters—the impact of this program extends far beyond the chess board. It has become woven into the social and educational fabric of Sunrise, creating opportunities for children and families to learn, compete, connect, and grow together.

The Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess is a community program of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation. For more information about chess activities in Sunrise, visit: https://www.facebook.com/SunriseChessCenter