

Armenia's gambit to become chess superpower



Hayk Bianjyan/AFP/Getty Images



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By Michael Fraiman

Armenia is to make chess classes compulsory for children as young as six in a bid to become a chess superpower.

The country in the South Caucasus region plans to invest nearly US\$1.5-million into teaching chess to primary schoolchildren. In addition to salaries, the investment will fund textbooks, manuals and boards, as well as proper tables and chairs to outfit the schools, the Armenian education ministry announced.

The ministry claims chess will “foster schoolchildren’s intellectual development” and improve children’s critical-thinking skills.

“It’s a growing trend,” according to Ted Winick, president of the Chess Institute of Canada, who also teaches chess to children in Toronto.

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Cuba and Quebec, as examples of the game being successfully integrated into various public curriculum levels, though not as a mandatory class.

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Armenia's decision was made just two months after Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan was re-elected as chair of the Armenian Chess Federation, a position he's held since 2002. Mr. Sargsyan is known for enthusiastically supporting Armenian chess players, who have won the country two gold medals at the biennial Chess Olympiad competition, in 2006 and 2008.

World Chess Federation ranks Armenia as the fourth-best chess-playing country in the world.

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"If you walk into a village coffee shop in an Armenian town, you will see people are playing chess, not card games or other things," said Mig Migirdicyan, chairman of the Hayastan Foundation, a Toronto-based charity that builds schools in Armenia.

"This is very much in their brain."

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Dr. Mark Sabbagh, a professor of developmental psychology at Queen's University and associate editor of the Developmental Psychology Journal, said chess could improve a child's "executive functioning" skills — things such as future planning and self-inhibition.

"Planning, thinking ahead, imagining the strategies of another person are things that, in other contexts, have been shown to be affected by experiences that kids have," he said.

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"It's possible that chess could provide such an experience.... It goes together with someone who cannot always just act on impulse, but reflect."

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But when it comes to adopting the game into a North American curriculum, Dr. Sabbagh said children on this side of the Atlantic have other ways of expanding their executive functioning. Becoming a chess superpower "wouldn't be really consistent with our socio-cultural goals," he said.

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