

Oregon Chess Project

June 30, 2022

Chad Lykins

President, Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation



Description

Oregon Chess Project is a ten-year collaborative initiative to increase Oregon's representation at every level in the scholastic chess community, from those who are learning the rules for the first time to those competing for a world championship.

This document chronicles how scholastic chess changed during the pandemic and outlines a vision for what it can be in the near future.

Participation in Scholastic Chess During Covid-19

Chess is more popular than ever, at least according to many measures. During the pandemic, chess rose as an e-sport, with many streamers (including former OSCF Champions [Andrea and Alexandra Botez](#)) signing lucrative contracts and gathering millions of followers. Online chess platforms [added millions of users](#). Chess equipment sold at a rate even higher than during the Fischer Boom of the 1970s, benefitting Oregon-based companies [Legend Products](#), [The Chess Store](#), and [Best Chess Set Ever](#).¹ When *Queen's Gambit* debuted on Netflix later in the pandemic, chess fever reached heights few thought possible.

Yet at the same time, chess opportunities for children vanished in a way that is without precedent.

The overwhelming majority of Oregon's after-school chess programs shuttered. Volunteers, many of them teachers and family members, become overwhelmed with increased familial and professional responsibilities. The vast majority of them no longer had time for chess, and without in-person events to draw in new cohorts of volunteers, the labor needed to run clubs and tournaments disappeared.

[Chess for Success](#) furloughed staff and shuttered more than half of its 100+ scholastic clubs serving low-income communities in Oregon and Washington. Debbie Human, Media Assistant and Chess for Success Coach for Jefferson School District, said that participation in her district fell to three students when the pandemic forced them to transition to online learning.

OSCF, which relies on volunteers and has a budget less than one-tenth the size of Chess for Success, faced similar reversals, with many clubs suspending operations and most weekend scholastic tournaments being canceled for two years.

Oregon's experience mirrored a broader collapse in scholastic chess throughout the United States. For instance, Charlotte Chess Center (CCC) reported an 80% decrease in participation in scholastic programs, which caused them to lay-off approximately 75% of their staff.²

¹ Private conversation with the owners of each company.

² Perpetual Chess Podcast Episode 201:

<https://www.perpetualchesspod.com/new-blog/2020/11/10/episode-201-fm-peter-giannatos>

Both CFS and OSCF canceled their 2020 state championships, losing vital opportunities to celebrate and build community. CFS and OSCF joined together and co-sponsored championships in 2021, holding the events online. Many families welcomed the chance to play, even if only remotely, but in the absence of regular events and club meetings, participation fell by half when compared to 2019.

Covid did not simply take away in-person lessons and tournaments. It also took Oregon's most experienced and active tournament organizer, Ed Addis. In addition to running several large scholastic events each year and co-founding the OSCF K12 Team Championship, Ed ran a series of free, smaller tournaments and lessons each year in libraries and parks, making rated chess events more accessible to low-income students and those living on the outskirts of the Portland Metro Area. This void in opportunities has not been filled.

Participation in mighty clubs such as Hope Chinese Charter School fell by 50%. Lent K8 went over a year without a chess club. Hayhurst Elementary's chess club, which served 95 students in 2019, was down to less than 10 participants in 2021. The list of chess players who qualified for the 2022 OSCF State Championship was approximately half of what it had been in 2019, despite significantly reduced qualification standards. If the standards had been kept the same, the number of qualified players would have been down 75%.

The [2022 Oregon High School Chess Team Association \(OHSCTA\)](#) State Championship was approximately 35% smaller than in 2019, with many programs unable to send a single team.

[Portland Chess Club](#), where many strong scholastic players compete, closed its door for fifteen months. Their online tournaments drew less than half the number of participants as their in-person events. Eight participants was considered a good turnout, and only rarely did they reach twelve participants. PCC re-opened for in-person tournaments in July 2021 and was getting 40-60% of their normal turnout as of April 2022. The club has survived thanks to donations, decreased rent, a modest stream of revenue from online events, and occasionally renting their space to other users.³

One common challenge faced by PCC and the broader chess community is in convincing tournament directors to run events. Many despised online tournaments, and some tournament directors refused to attend an event that required masks, which were a legal requirement during much of the pandemic. Others could not run events due to being in high risk categories on account of age and preexisting conditions.

The Current Situation

As we emerge from the Omicron wave of early 2022, Oregon faces a critical shortage of volunteers, coaches, and tournament directors. Without labor—both professional and volunteer—there are fewer opportunities for players to train and compete, which in turn has led to

³ Email with Mike Janniro and Wilson Gibbins of Portland Chess Club.

multiple cohorts with reduced participation. Instead of a chess boom, scholastic chess is in a chess recession.

Other chess communities are testing ways to rebuild. For instance, the English Chess Federation has [launched an initiative](#) to rebuild scholastic chess in England. ECF's goals include:

- Improved performance in international junior tournaments (including medals won)
- Increasing the average rating of the top players in each age group
- Increasing the number of title norms achieved

ECF has considerable infrastructure, including a large number of Grandmasters. Oregon does not have the same deep pool of coaches and tournament directors, but efforts can be made to better use the talent we have and to develop new talent.

Sources of Strength

There are signs of resiliency in Oregon's scholastic chess communities. The following examples highlight some of Oregon's sources of strength and the obstacles they have overcome.

[Coquille Chess Club](#) (Coquille) and Bethel Chess Club (Eugene) continue to provide regular tournaments through the pandemic. These events have been in-person when possible and online when necessary. Nancy Keller, Coquille Coach, even had her team compete in a Virtual Worldwide Chess League in 2020.

FIDE Master Chuck Shulien (Portland) describes the unique ways in which online teaching can be more demanding than in-person instruction. "I'm spending more time in preparation.... compared to in person instruction. And the extra screen time is draining in a way which in person instruction isn't."⁴

Shulien finds online lessons also lead to different experiences for different students. On one end of the spectrum, "There are the students who are tuned out and unlike in a physical space, it is more difficult to be certain when or if that is happening." On the other end, "Other students adapt and our lessons are as good or better than in person instruction."

Jerry Ramey of [Southside Chess](#) (Eugene) reports that moving lessons online, "Made me have to study more than I have for a long time, and I feel I am a better teacher now." The experience of teaching online has also improved his in-person lessons. "No more old fashioned demo boards at the clubs. Now I take my computer and a projector. Much better!" As in-person

⁴ Jerry Ramey and Chuck Shulien, personal correspondence, April 2022. My own experience at Rose City Chess confirms these observations. I have spent hundreds of hours creating Lichess studies from Chess Steps materials that were previously only available in paper form. Now that in-person lessons have resumed, these studies greatly improve in-person lessons.

instruction returns, Ramey sees after-school clubs playing a large role in introducing chess to beginners, while online lessons serve intermediate and advanced players.

[Portland Chess Club](#) spent the pandemic shifting from in-person to online events as case numbers and regulations changed, and has recently relaunched some of its signature in-person events. Wilson Gibbins and Dave Murray ran the Oregon Girls Championship in March 2022 and have helped with many other events. Sean O’Connell stepped in to run the monthly Sunday Quad and Tuesday Quad. Mike Morris and Mike Janniro continue to be active in PCC’s daily operations.

[Chess Odyssey](#) is at reduced capacity but continues to offer online classes, with plans of offering tournaments again this year.

Student-led clubs made major contributions throughout the pandemic and are major sources of strength as we move forward. [Chess4Kids](#), a nonprofit organized by Beaverton high-schoolers, provides online lessons to younger kids. Roshen Nair’s [Roshen’s Chess Academy](#) raises significant funds for various chess and non-chess related initiatives while simultaneously expanding access to chess lessons and tournaments. Nesara Shree’s [Chess4Girls](#) is responsible for introducing many girls in Oregon to USCF rated tournaments.

[Rose City Chess](#) is another chess academy born in the pandemic. Rose City Chess began with online tournaments, group lessons, and camps. It has since added after-school clubs and camps that meet in-person, as well as advanced instruction provided by coaches in its [Master-in-Residence and Grandmaster-in-Residence Program](#). Rose City Chess frequently collaborates with and supports other coaches and academies.

The clubs highlighted in this section have been impressive in their resiliency and flexibility in pivoting between online and in-person programs. Even if most of them are serving fewer kids than they did before the pandemic, the fact that they are serving *any* kids is commendable. However, labor constraints limit how many people they can serve. Recruiting and supporting more coaches and tournament directors is a key priority for the Oregon Chess Project.

Inclusivity and Equality

Participation is the first and perhaps most important measure of the health of a chess community. Participation is also a useful measure of inclusivity and equality. OSCF does not track participation by race, gender, or income, but anecdotal observations suggest severe underrepresentation among historically excluded groups, especially Black, Latino, female, and lower-income students.

Within Oregon, students from excluded groups have tended to receive opportunities to learn and compete that are separate and unequal from their peers. This has been especially evident in the kinds of curriculum and instruction they see in their lessons and in the absence of opportunities for them to compete in rated tournaments.

Prior to the pandemic, OSCF averaged 100+ NWSRS rated tournaments per year. Many events were completely free of charge and many more had scholarships available. In 2016, OSCF began increasing its commitment to reach excluded groups, including those enrolled in Chess for Success programs. OSCF Board Members provided technical assistance to help CFS develop in-house capabilities for running online tournaments and transitioning to online learning. OSCF events also provided thousands of dollars worth of tournament scholarships to students from Chess for Success programs, but other barriers to participation remained.

In 2021, OSCF and CFS held a joint state championship for the first time in history. This was a major milestone for CFS, which had not held a rated championship event in three decades. For many CFS students, this was their first chance to play in a rated tournament. In 2022, CFS held their own state tournament and submitted it for NWSRS rating, an encouraging sign that the 2021 event would not be the last opportunity for CFS students to play rated games.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of tournaments serving underrepresented children remain unrated and unsanctioned by any state or national chess organization. CFS and OSCF leadership met in Spring 2022 and discussed the possibility of using just one rating system (USCF) to bring together both chess communities. CFS expressed enthusiasm and willingness to do this. Further discussions are tentatively planned for Fall 2022.

Investments in curriculum and instruction for low-income and marginalized groups would help level the playing fields at these tournaments. Unlike peer organizations in other cities, CFS coaches are paid close to minimum wage and are often novices.⁵ They also lack a systematic, sound curriculum that is easy to implement for coaches who may not have a chess background. OSCF has provided a list of no-cost and low-cost curriculum choices that are well suited to novice coaches and has offered to help support evaluating the various options available.

Oregon Chess Project will advocate for and support further investments in improving the quality of curricula, instruction, and tournaments that serve underrepresented students. This support will take the form of technical, logistical, and financial aid for any program that fulfills these aims.

Oregon Chess's Gender Problem

A search on 3/15/22 returned [292 USCF chess players in Oregon who played a regular rated game within the last year](#), only [27 of whom identified as female](#). A search for [USCF online rated games returned 162 players](#), [24 of whom identified as female](#). This number was probably much lower 60 days prior, when Rose City Chess and Chess4Girls first started using the USCF system for their events. The comparatively larger share of female players in online chess reflects

⁵ [Chess in the Schools](#) (NYC) and [Progress with Chess](#) (Cleveland) are two examples of scholastic chess nonprofits who make significant investments in program quality. Both buy USCF memberships for their students and run USCF rated tournaments. Chess in the Schools NYC advertises full-time, salaried, coaching positions with medical and dental benefits. Progress with Chess reported in 2019 paying coaches a minimum of \$40 per lesson and maintaining a student:teacher ratio close to 10:1.

the success of Chess4Girls in bringing female players into USCF rated events. Oregon Chess Project will increase OSCF's efforts to include more girls in the chess community.

Oregon's Representation in USCF Top 100 Lists By Age

Oregon's chess organizers all emphasize inclusion and community over competition and personal achievement.⁶ This is a necessary and correct approach to scholastic chess. When this focus on beginner and intermediate players is done correctly, achievement follows as the natural culmination of a dedication to inclusion.

Appearing in the [USCF Top 100 List by Age](#) is a significant accomplishment and one measure of achievement. USCF publishes lists for Age 7 and Under, Age 8, and so on up to Age 18. With 100 students on each list, that equals a total of 1200 students.

Oregon has 1.2% of the population of the United States. A bit of arithmetic tells us that we should expect to hold approximately 14 of the 1200 spots in the Top 100 lists.

A search performed on 3/29/2022 found only 10 Oregon players total on the list. A similar search of the Top 100 Girls by Age returned 6 Oregon players.

There are two reasons for this lack of representation. The first is the existence of two separate and unequal chess communities, which is itself a consequence of a lack of commitment to building strong chess programs that serve underrepresented groups. The second is that OSCF has lagged behind other states in encouraging USCF rated events.

[USCF Top 100 List by Age](#) as of 3/29/2022:

Overall

Age 7 and Under: 0

Age 8: 0

Age 9: 0

Age 10: 1 (Anisha Sripada, #93, 1419)

Age 11: 1 (Saahil Gupta, #91, 1584)

Age 12: 2 (Austin Tang, #28, 2026; Havish Sripada, #38, 1972)

Age 13: 2 (Zoey Tang, #8, 2215; Ishaan Kodarapu, #79, 1878)

Age 14: 0

Age 15: 1 (Roshen Nair, #56, 2096)

Age 16: 0

Age 17: 2 (Shunkai Peng, #9, 2385; Joshua Grabinsky, #17, 2296;

Age 18: 1 (Konner Feldman, #71, 2001)

⁶ Happily, this statement is as true for OSCF and Portland Chess Club as it is for Chess for Success. One major reason for the creation of OSCF was that the CFS State Championship excluded most students from the opportunity to compete. Even private academies such as Southside Chess, Chess Odyssey, and Rose City Chess devote the vast majority of their resources to beginner and intermediate students.

Girls

Age 7 and Under: 0

Age 8: 0

Age 9: 1 (Laasya Lanka, #19, 1115)

Age 10: 1 (Anisha Sripada, #7, 1419)

Age 11: 0

Age 12: 0

Age 13: 1 (Zoey Tang, #1, 2215)

Age 14: 0

Age 15: 1 (Nesara Shree, #98, 943)

Age 16: 1 (Pahlychai Thao, #61, 1185)

Age 17: 1 (Neena Feldman, #41, 1366)

Age 18: 0

The fact that Oregon has *any* players on these lists is encouraging, given that few scholastic players have opportunities to play in USCF rated events. Oregon has long followed Washington's lead in using the NWSRS rating system for all but the highest-divisions of their tournaments, which leads to players in both states having significantly lower USCF ratings than their peers in other parts of the country.⁷

Scholastic players in Oregon receive fewer opportunities to gain USCF rating points than their peers in other states. Oregon might overperform in the Top 100 Lists if more of its scholastic events were USCF rated.

Oregon Chess Project will help all scholastic organizations, including OSCF, OHSCTA, and CFS, transition to USCF ratings.

Oregon's Titled Scholastic Players

Despite the challenges faced by having so few USCF events available locally, Oregon has a number of chess players who compete on the national and international stage. National Master Zoey Tang (8th Grade, Stoller Middle) is currently the #1 rated female her age in the United States, and #2 on the FIDE list. Her brother, USCF Expert Austin Tang (6th grade, Stoller Middle) won the K6 USCF National Blitz Championship in 2019. FIDE Master Shunkai Peng (10th Grade, Sunset High) has won or placed highly in several national and international events. In recent years, several other students have achieved the title of USCF National Master, including Josh Granbinksy (Coquille), Owen McCoy (Eugene), and Seth Talyanksy (Portland).

Oregon's proximity to Seattle makes it possible for elite players to compete in norm events. There are also norm events within a short flight in Las Vegas and California. As we develop

⁷ For evidence on rating deflation in the Northwest, see for instance http://pubs.royle.com/publication/?i=540619&article_id=3232817&view=articleBrowser

tournament directors into FIDE Arbiters, Portland can itself become a center for norm events in Oregon.

Oregon Chess Project: More Kids, More Chess, More Fun

Oregon Chess Project has three broad program categories.

Kids. OCP will dramatically reduce the barriers children face in participating in high-quality chess lessons, after-school programs, chess camps, and USCF rated tournaments run by well-supported coaches and tournament directors.

Tournament Directors. OCP will recruit, train, and support tournament directors who run USCF tournaments, especially those who run tournaments that are open to students outside of their own school or club.

Coaches. OCP will recruit, train, and support coaches who work with scholastic chess players.

Oregon Chess Project: Ten Year Goals

Kids

- 1000 active USCF scholastic members
- 100 active school chess programs
- 500 participants at OSCF Individual Championship
- 300 participants at OSCF Team Championship
- 20 Oregon students on the Top 100 List By Age
- 20 Oregon students on the Top 100 List of Girls by Age
- 30 Oregon students participating in Oregon Girls' Championship
- 25% participation among Black, Latino, and Indigenous Students
- Win a National Championship

Coaches

- Recruit and support 100 volunteer chess coaches
- Recruit and support 10 professional chess coaches serving Oregon, with coverage in Portland, Beaverton, Hillsboro, Eugene, Coquille, Salem, Corvallis, and Bend.
- Expand opportunities for advanced instruction, including instruction for students seeking national and international titles (Expert to Grandmaster)
- Coach Training and Support
- Online coaching for areas without coaches

Tournament Directors

- Recruit, train, and support 20 USCF Club Tournament directors serving every area in Oregon
- From the pool of USCF Club Tournament Directors, develop 10 USCF Local Tournament Directors
- From the pool of USCF Local Tournament Directors, develop 5 USCF Senior Tournament Directors
- From the pool of USCF Senior Tournament Directors, develop 2 USCF Associate National Tournament Directors / Fide Arbiters.
- Host 100 USCF rated chess tournaments per year.
- Host a USCF National Championship Event

Oregon Chess Project Initiatives

OSCF Reorganization (Spring - Summer 2022)

- Structure
 - Establish 501c3 called Oregon Scholastic Chess Foundation
- Executive Board
 - Recruit new members to the board who reflect the people who should be better represented in the scholastic chess community
 - Vote on amending bylaws for gender-biased language and to allow non-adult members.
 - Vote in new Treasurer
 - Clarify duties of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary
- Appoint board members or create committees with the following scopes:
 - Director of Chess Education: Recruits and supports coaches and tournament directors.
 - Director of Sponsorships and Donations (Possibly combined with Director of Media/Social Media)
 - Director of School and Club Outreach: Maintain list of active chess coaches and programs across the state. Reach out to schools and invite them to come to the state championships, providing links to ways in which they can qualify.
- Amend state championship qualifying criteria
 - Change to a 12 month qualifying cycle rather than a 9 month qualifying cycle. This encourages students to play in the summer.
 - Temporarily maintain the reduced qualifying standard of 8 games in the qualifying cycle, rather than the prior standard of 15 games.
 - Accept rated games that are NWSRS, USCF regular, and USCF online, so long as at least 8 games are in one rating system.
- Relocate the OSCF State Championship to somewhere on the I-5 corridor
- Upgrade equipment (sell Saitek Clocks and purchase new clocks)
- Conduct census of equipment and update record-keeping on where everything is kept
- Feasibility study of changing awards from large, expensive, environmentally unfriendly trophies to custom medals.(USCF switched from trophies to medals in 2019).
- Create dashboards aligned with Ten Year Goals. Spreadsheet with metrics on clubs, coaches, TDs, players, top 100 lists, ratings, etc. and also one-off goals such as equipment purchase.

TD and Coach Support for USCF Ramp Up

- Secure discounted USCF scholastic memberships and low-labor way of distributing
- Record training videos on running USCF rated events.
- Strategically place TDs in tournaments that allow them to accumulate experience needed for upgrading their credentials.

- Provide financial support for TDs to purchase their own USCF memberships and cover the cost of rating fees, especially (or perhaps exclusively) if they offer free tournaments or free-entry to a large number of players at paid tournaments.
- Pilot Summer Fellowship program to help train high school and college students to run chess clubs and USCF rated tournaments. Rose City Chess has pledged \$5,000 to support up to 5 fellowships for high-school and college students willing to volunteer to teach chess for one week in a summer camp. Invitations will be sent to other academies to do the same. Recruit titled players for the creation of online “accelerator” programs that offer advanced instruction taught by titled chess players (see for instance the [English Chess Federation’s Accelerator Program](#) and Rose City Chess’s Master-in-Residence and Grandmaster-in-Residence Programs).
- Conduct feasibility study of having a virtual TD who can run pairings from a remote location.
- Better support volunteer coaches by having off-the-shelf curriculum choices, email support, and online videos
- Consider offering something similar to ECF’s [Tournament in a Box](#) (\$100, 1 x teacher instructions, Puzzle Workbooks, Stickers, Prizes (patches, buttons, etc), Medals / Ribbons, Pairing Cards, Wall chart for scoring, Posters, Notation Sheets)

Cluster of Excellence Pilot Program

- Pilot the concept of a Cluster of Excellence for one high school and all its zoned feeders, creating a vertical pipeline of chess education from K12.
- Support emerging Clusters of Growth that may not have as broad or deep of coverage, but have the potential to do so in the future.
- Improve work conditions for coaches by reducing travel time between schools
- If the Pilot achieves Year 1 Goals, add a second Cluster of Excellence in Year 2
- District outreach to negotiate lower rental fees for OCP after-school programs

OSCF Collaboration with OCF

- Set well in advance the dates for Oregon Junior Closed and Oregon Girls’ Championship
- Assist in promoting Oregon Girls’ Championship
- Collaborate to use Oregon Open as an opportunity for TDs to collect experience necessary for upgrading USCF credentials
- Assist with Rockefeller, Denker, and Barber nominations

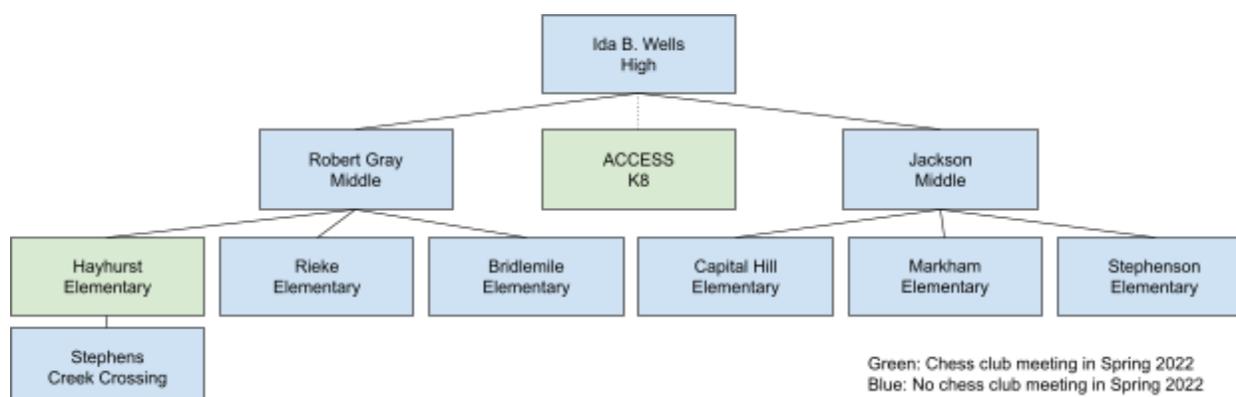
OSCF / OHSCTA

- Support transition from NWSRS to USCF for league games
- Loan clocks and chess sets for OHSCTA championship

OSCF / CFS

- Consult for and support opportunities to improve CFS program quality, both from top-down (Board and Executive Director) and bottom up (teachers, coaches, and families).
- Make standing offer to combine or co-sponsor a joint state championship operated by OSCF
- Seek advice and support for OSCF diversity initiatives
- Proactively seek recipients for OSCF tournament scholarships
- Add registration option to make tax-free contributions to tournament scholarships at all OSCF events.

Cluster of Excellence Pilot: Ida B. Wells



Fall 2022 - Spring 2023

The Pilot Program at Ida B. Well seeks to establish 11 in-person after-school programs that meet at least 10 times per semester, for a minimum of 20 sessions over the academic year. The Pilot also offers Intermediate and Advanced online group lessons in the evenings and monthly tournaments held at a location central to the cluster.

Ida B. Wells High School benefits from having a strong history of scholastic chess, including two recent OSCF K5 Team Champions. It has engaged chess parents and coaches. However, participation between schools is uneven. There have been no active chess clubs in the last decade at Jackson, Bridlemile, Capital Hill, Markham, or Stephenson. Wells, Robert Gray, Hayhurst, and Rieke have all had active clubs, but the pandemic reduced participation by as much as 80%. ACCESS has many students from the Wells cluster and is currently at about 50% participation compared to pre-pandemic levels. ACCESS relocates to SW Portland in Fall 2022.

Local organizations are supportive of chess. Maplewood Coffee and Tea offers its venue as a tournament location. Nordic Northwest has also agreed to host a summer series of tournaments.

Goals for Pilot Project

- Establish weekly after-school chess clubs in all 11 schools and Stephens Creek Crossing in Fall 2022
- Enroll minimum of 10 students per club, with 30% female enrollment and low-income student enrollment matching or exceeding school average
- Supplementary live online lessons for intermediate and advanced students
- Recruit and train a USCF Club TD from each school
- Place teams in the Top 3 in each grade division at 2023 OSCF K12 Team Championship.
- Host a monthly tournament in a location central to the cluster.

Oregon Chess Project Confirmed Partners⁸

Academies and Clubs

Charlotte Chess Center
Chess4GirlsPDX
Portland Chess Club
Puddletown Chess
Rose City Chess

Organizations

Oregon Chess Federation
Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation

Businesses

Best Chess Set Ever
Tempest Clocks
ZMF Chess

Partner Organizations will be recognized on Oregon Chess Project promotional materials and receive extra support from OCP programs.

⁸ This list of confirmed partnerships was last updated in October 2022.