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By Page Leggett, Observer Correspondent

School Scrabble clubs build teamwork one tile at a time

Rama Road Elementary's Scrabble Club kids have so much fun with the game, they don't notice they're learning

It's close to lunchtime on a sunny Wednesday afternoon, and Deanna Chillemi's office at Rama Road Elementary School is abuzz.

The seven members of the Scrabble club – all fourth graders – have come during their lunch break, and have 45 minutes to play their new favorite game. Chillemi is site coordinator of Communities In Schools, a dropout prevention organization – and Scrabble coach. The kids pick up Scrabble boards from a bookshelf, grab a couple of dictionaries and begin setting up.

Two Scrabble competitions are going on concurrently. In one game, a student has just spelled “LURM.”

CIS coordinator Gabriela Francisco, Chillemi's counterpart at McClintock Middle, asks gently, “Is that a word?”

The kids say it is. They're ready to move on.

“What does it mean?” she asks.

Although Juanantonio Cruz didn't play “LURM,” he's eager to help his classmate who did. “Um, it means to move around in a wiggly way.”

Francisco tells them to get out their dictionaries. “LURM” isn't there.

“Maybe you were thinking of ‘squirm,’” Francisco suggests to Juanantonio.

“That's what I meant,” he says. The player who tried “LURM” graciously gives up his next turn.

Building teamwork

Chillemi says CIS staff figured Scrabble would help with math and literacy. They didn't foresee how much it would help with sportsmanship and social skills.

“We're building a love of learning,” says Federico Rios, CIS director of elementary school services and immigrant services. Twelve CMS schools have Scrabble clubs. Most are elementary schools; two are K-8. “It's not ‘read this’ or ‘take this test.’ Playing Scrabble helps build teamwork, critical thinking skills and soft skills like socializing. The kids have to learn to take turns.”



Joshua Komer, Charlotte Observer

Ida Christian, right, from McClintock Middle School, is helping the kids at Rama Road Elementary expand their vocabulary with Scrabble. Jaliya Kelly, 9, left, and Tywaun Jenkins, 10, wait to put down their words

Rios says CIS “goes where the district wants us to go,” but CIS’ mission is to serve what he calls “high-needs schools.” Communities In Schools serves more than 6,000 CMS students annually.

“The kids love it,” Chillemi says of Scrabble club. “They usually get 30 minutes for lunch and 30 minutes for recess. But on Scrabble days, they try to finish their lunch in 15 minutes so they can come here and start playing.”

Wait, what? They want to miss *recess* for Scrabble?

They do.

What do the kids like about Scrabble?

Juanantonio says: getting high scores. “It makes me confident in myself,” he says.

He also cops to being competitive.

“Ooh, I want to help her,” Juanantonio blurts out at one point, indicating an opponent who’s struggling to find a word within her tiles.

Then he stops himself when he realizes he’d be helping the competition. “Wait, no I don’t!”

Learning from the best

One person who’s not surprised by the happy byproducts of a Scrabble club is Katya Lezin of Charlotte. She started the Scrabble club at Randolph Middle School when her son was in sixth grade. He is 21 now, and she still runs the club, which came in second place last year in the national competition.

CIS approached her when they began considering Scrabble clubs. She’s *the* local authority on school Scrabble and a noted player herself. She’s even written a young adult novel, “Knight Swam,” about a Scrabble competition. (“Knight Swam,” she explains, is a mnemonic device serious Scrabble players use to remember that each of the letters in those two words, when put in front of “AE,” forms a new three-letter word.)

Lezin did more than train the CIS site coordinators. While at a national tournament, she asked – and got – the North American Scrabble Players Association to donate Scrabble sets to all the CIS schools starting clubs. Merriam-Webster donated 150 Scrabble dictionaries to the budding players.

The Scrabble club kids play in teams of two. “They bring different strengths to the game,” Lezin says. “They have to strategize in pairs. That’s a great life skill. You take your losses and your wins together.”

She says the CIS kids, many of whom aren’t native English speakers, are always delighted to see that some words from their native language have made it into the Scrabble dictionary. “Adios is a Scrabble word,” she says. “That’s gratifying for a native Spanish speaker to discover.”

So is the thrill of victory. Competition is good for these students. Some CIS kids are reading below grade level and need a nudge.

The pizza can wait

The nudge comes from more than just CIS staff. The Rama Road kids invited students from their sister school, McClintock Middle, to play each week. The upperclassmen – a different group of four CIS kids each week – help with identifying words, but they also serve as role models and mentors.

Dedrick Taylor, one of the McClintock students and an aspiring artist, basketball player and scientist, likes serving as a mentor. “They want to know how it is in middle school,” he says. “A lot of them are nervous. I tell them to just get in there and get their schoolwork done.”

“We know how it feels,” Dedrick says. “We connect with them in a certain way.”

There’s so much more than Scrabble going on in Chillemi’s office. These kids are becoming better readers and are on their way to becoming fine citizens.

Even though pizza awaits after Scrabble, these kids are reluctant to end their games.

There’s an end-of-year tournament coming up on June 2, and players want to get in practice time.

WANT TO PLAY?

Communities In Schools’ Federico Rios says more adults are needed to play Scrabble with the CIS kids for the 2015-16 school year. If board games aren’t your thing, there are plenty of other ways you can volunteer with CIS. Contact Rios at federico.rios@cischarlotte.org.

More info: www.cischarlotte.org



Photos by Joshua Komer,
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