



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

**County:** Henrico County, Virginia

**Program Title:** Fostering Critical Thinking Through Chess

**Program Category:** Health and Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

**Name:** Eileen Cox

**Title:** Chief of Communications, Henrico County Public Schools

**Signature:** *Eileen M. Cox*

## **1. Summary**

Henrico County Public Schools' Henrico Chess Initiative Expo was created to foster critical thinking, problem-solving and strategic planning among students, families and educators. The event aims to introduce chess and strategy games to the community, increase participation in academic competitions, raise awareness of academic paths and strengthen community engagement. By providing a fun and inclusive event, the Expo promotes academic growth and provides access to extracurricular opportunities for all Henrico families, particularly those with lower rates of previous participation. By hosting the event at the school division's Oak Avenue Complex, a full-service community site, organizers ensure greater accessibility and engagement for Henrico families. The site provides an accessible space to host the event, and space and resources for the sponsoring organizations: The HCPS Division of Family and Community Engagement; the Department of Teaching and Learning; The Department of Gifted Programs; and the Henrico Education Foundation. The event achieves important outcomes: increased positive perceptions of academic competitions among families and students, and increased participation by students and schools participating in extracurricular clubs and division competitions.

## **2. The Problem or Need for the Program**

Henrico County Public Schools has not traditionally offered a division scholastic chess event. Data from a spring 2024 survey gauging interest in a Henrico chess event showed that 188 of 242 respondents would be interested in participating in a division chess tournament or expo. Forty-two respondents indicated they might be interested. One hundred eighty-seven indicated they would be more likely to participate if the event were free; Two hundred six were interested in workshops and lessons; One hundred sixty were interested in a chess tournament competition and 124 expressed interest in training for coaches. The data strongly suggested a

desire for a chess expo event. The high levels of interest in participation, workshops, lessons, competition and coaching, combined with the lack of existing opportunities, made the event an essential addition to HCPS' extracurricular and division competition offerings. Another facet of the program was to further several Henrico County Public Schools' strategic plan goals: to cultivate partnerships by providing relevant, diverse on-site and off-site learning experiences to students through outreach opportunities and resources, and to enhance authentic learning opportunities within schools and across the larger community.

Additionally, there is a noticeable gap in parent and guardian participation in academic competitions and awareness of advanced academic paths available to students. There are disparities in school and student participation rates in division academic competitions and extracurricular school clubs, including KEVA, Rubik's Cube, 24 Math, Primetime RVA, WordMasters, Math League, esports and LEGO robotics. The lack of engagement and knowledge often stems from insufficient communication and outreach efforts, as well as a lack of accessible resources and support for all HCPS families. As a result, many students miss out on opportunities that could significantly enhance their academic development and college and career-readiness. Without active parental involvement and understanding of these opportunities, students are less likely to participate in enrichment academic competitions or pursue advanced educational paths, which can contribute to achievement gaps and limit academic growth and potential. The implementation of the Henrico Chess Initiative Expo enhances parent and guardian participation and knowledge about the benefits of school enrichment, including HCPS extracurricular clubs, division competitions and advanced academic paths. It also addresses the need for significant educational and developmental benefits to students, promoting equity and inclusion and contributing to the growth of a vibrant chess and academic competition community within the division.

### **3. Description of the Program**

The Henrico Chess Initiative Expo serves to introduce chess and strategic games to students and their families, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The event was held at a prominent venue, HCPS' Oak Avenue Complex, making it accessible to all Henrico families. Over the course of the 2024-25 school year, the program seeks to increase student participation in division competitions by 20%. The Expo engaged over 400 students, families and teachers, with representation from more than 41 Henrico schools. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed reported that they strongly agreed that the event provided sufficient resources and information about advanced academic paths. Eighty-one percent were very likely to encourage their student to participate in academic competitions or school clubs after attending the event. Event organizers targeted schools in underserved areas near the event site to ensure accessibility for all families, with special outreach efforts to increase the participation of students from Henrico County's Fairfield, Highland Springs and Varina magisterial districts. Shuttles were provided to increase attendance at the Expo by removing transportation as a barrier. Higher attendance rates contributed to the overall success of the event by ensuring a vibrant, diverse and engaged group of participants. This enhanced the educational and social value of the Expo, as students benefited from interacting with a range of peers. More importantly, offering shuttle services demonstrated the commitment to making the event as accessible as possible, which improved community perceptions and support for the event.

The innovative project seamlessly integrates chess, a traditionally extracurricular activity, into the division competition menu, helping enhance critical-thinking, problem-solving and strategic planning skills. Supporting new chess clubs and the communitywide Chess Initiative Expo creates a holistic learning experience that goes beyond standard educational methods. By

engaging not only students but their families and the broader community, the project fosters a culture of strategic thinking and academic excellence. Additionally, the Expo serves as a unique platform to demystify academic competitions and contests and make them more accessible and appealing to a wide audience, breaking down barriers and changing perceptions about the role of competitive learning in education. Division competition organizers attended the Chess Initiative Expo to promote their events, share information with families and engage students. The ultimate goal of the event is to increase participation in extracurricular activities and provide greater access to academic paths. The event was supported by multiple organizations, including the HCPS Division of Family and Community Engagement; the Department of Teaching and Learning; The Department of Gifted Programs; and the Henrico Education Foundation. It included workshops, competitions and resources to further student engagement.

#### **4. Responding to Economic Downturn**

The partnership of several HCPS departments and funding from the Henrico Education Foundation enabled the event organizers to stretch, share and pool their resources. To stay within the event budget, organizers secured use of the Oak Avenue Complex for minimal cost, lined up speaker and workshop facilitators for a nominal fee, and used many staff and student volunteers. The main expenses of the event were 100 chess sets, given free to students, chess workbooks, "Chess Kid" digital subscriptions, additional strategy games awarded as prizes, chess materials and resources for coaches, event flyers and a free pizza dinner. With shared funding and creative economizing, the event stayed within budget constraints and provided many take-home materials and resources to students. Based on the positive impact and success of the event, a new community partner has already offered to assist in funding for next year's event.

## **5. Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

The Henrico Chess Initiative Expo addresses existing racial and socioeconomic disparities by increasing access to academic competitions and extracurricular activities for students and families from underserved communities. The Expo was hosted in a prominent location to ensure accessibility for all, especially targeting the Fairfield, Highland Springs and Varina areas of Henrico County. The event effectively used community partnerships to reach a diverse range of participants, creating a space where all students, regardless of background, could engage in educational opportunities. Through the endeavor, the program worked to break down barriers to participation and promoted inclusivity, making chess and strategic thinking accessible to a broader population.

More than 400 attendees from 41 HCPS schools participated, including students, teachers and families, from across Henrico County. Participation emphasized the division's efforts to make educational opportunities available to all. Eighty-nine percent of attendees reported that the event provided adequate resources and information about advanced academic paths.

## **6. The Cost of the Program**

The Henrico Chess Initiative Expo required a total budget of \$6,134, with funding primarily requested from the Henrico Education Foundation. The costs covered venue expenses, materials for chess games, food for participants and promotional materials. Additional support from the HCPS Department of Gifted Programs and the HCPS Division of Family and Community Engagement helped sustain the event, including securing facilitators and volunteers. The program was designed to be sustainable with the bulk of material resources (chess boards, sets, etc.) reusable in subsequent years. Replicating the program elsewhere

would likely require a similar investment in materials and logistics, making it an attainable and scalable model for other divisions seeking to offer a similar educational event.

**Cost breakdown highlights:**

- Chess materials: chess boards, pieces, clocks, medals and activity books.
- Event logistics: transportation for attendees, venue costs, meals and beverages.

**7. The Results/Success of the Program**

The success of the Henrico Chess Initiative Expo was evident in both qualitative feedback and quantitative outcomes. More than 400 individuals attended the event, which included a keynote speaker, breakout sessions and hands-on chess lessons. Parents and students reported an increased awareness of advanced academic paths, with 89% of attendees agreeing that they received adequate information. Additionally, 81% of participants indicated they were very likely to encourage their children to participate in future academic competitions or school clubs.

**Outcome Measures:**

- A 20% increase in awareness of academic paths and extracurricular opportunities.
- Positive feedback from parents and students about the value of the event.

**8. Worthiness of Award**

The Henrico Chess Initiative Expo is deserving of a VACo Achievement Award because of its innovative approach to promoting critical-thinking and strategic skills in students from all backgrounds. The Expo's focus on accessibility, community engagement and promoting diversity in academic competitions directly aligns with Henrico County Public Schools' strategic goals. The event not only enhances the educational experience of hundreds of participants but

also fosters long-term involvement in academic competitions and extracurricular clubs. The initiative has demonstrated the power of collaboration among school divisions and community organizations to enhance learning and community involvement. It serves as a model for other counties seeking to bridge gaps in educational opportunities and promote inclusivity.

## **9. Supplemental Materials**

[Chess Expo Event Flyer](#)

[Chess Expo Video](#)

[Chess Event Slides](#)

[Chess Event Report](#)

[Chess Event Pics](#)