JSHS STUDENTS START NEW CHESS CLUB

When three 7th graders asked in the fall about a space and time to play chess, high school librarian Mary Laverty said “Sure.” She had a few chess sets among her games and the library was available during 10th period.

Almost immediately, other students joined the new Chess Club and, four months later, there could be anywhere from one to two dozen JSHS students contemplating a chess board.

“I’ve been surprised by how many students come every week – in a good way. It’s so wonderful to see how organically this really took off,” Laverty said. “They’re all just having so much fun.”

The Chess Club was the idea of 7th graders Dario Damore, Donovan McDonough and Wyatt Duffy, students who Laverty knew when she was the librarian at Roberts Street Elementary School. They were simply looking for an opportunity to practice their skills, but word spread quickly to both seasoned and new chess players around the school. The club has a drop-in-and-play format, so there is no formal membership and no one is required to attend.

“I really like to play chess but I don’t really have a chance to play that much at home,” Donovan said. “I was surprised at how many people come every week”

The club is largely student-directed. They come into the library when 10th period begins, pick up a game box and set up their board. Students rotate seats and opponents after each game to ensure everyone has an opportunity to play at least one game. Both opponents and spectators can be heard talking strategy and helping other players think through their best moves. At the end of 10th period, students clean up their sets and put their boxes back on the game shelf before catching the late bus home or heading to sports practice.

“They are so respectful of the pieces and the boards and the library, and they’re really very collaborative with each other,” Laverty said.

If there is a student without an opponent, Laverty will play. Often, math teacher Kyle Beattie, an avid chess player, will also stop in for a game against a student or two. In addition to providing him with playing time, it provides an avenue for him to help students learn important life skills, such as critical thinking, planning, flexibility and leadership, in a fun setting. It also helps him build relationships with students.

“It is another way for faculty to connect with kids outside of the traditional classroom, without any pressure to ‘perform’ academically for a grade.” Beattie said. “Participating in Chess Club also gives the students an opportunity to see me as not just a teacher, but a normal adult with hobbies and interests.”

The club has proven so popular that Laverty has ordered more chess sets to allow more students to play at once, and she has spoken with students about the idea of a chess tournament in the future.