

Wimauma kids checkmate competition

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WIMAUMA — Less than a year after starting a chess club from scratch, Wimauma Elementary School welcomed home a team carrying a state championship trophy the size of a small child.

But teachers can't be sure that the fifth-grade victors from April's win will be back next year for the national tournament.

That's because many of them are hitting the road with their families in the next few weeks to travel north, where their parents work through the summer and early fall in the fields or on construction sites. Sometimes, the children don't return.

"You never know, things happen up there," principal Roy Moral said. "They might not move back because there's not enough work here."

Sometimes parents have problems with immigration paperwork or get deported, he said. But Moral is ever the optimist.

He's already talking with officials at Shields Middle School in Ruskin to create a new chess club for the winning

teammates when and if they return as sixth-graders in the fall.

Moral started the Wimauma chess club at the end of last school year shortly after taking over as the principal.

He arrived at his new post with a successful track record, having just guided a team at Palm River Elementary to the regional championship.

At Wimauma, he started with first-graders, some of whom knew chess moves from a teacher demonstrating coordinates on a plane. He taught the children strategy and got them ready for a tournament in Brandon last spring. They finished second place out of 12 teams. The fever caught on. Children started teaching their siblings. On the playground, Moral found his chess team showing moves to other children.

The Redlands Christian Migrant Association bought handheld electronic chess sets for children migrating north last summer with their parents.

A month into this school year, Moral's chess team had grown to 40 children. Several teachers volunteered to coach the students after school.

"We teach them to take their time," Moral said. "They are very patient children. I think growing up as a migrant child and having to drive every year up north and back south and helping your family out in the fields, that instills a lot of patience in a child."

With a grant from the **Community Foundation of Greater Sun City Center**, Moral entered the students into Tampa tournaments in late October.

The kindergarten and first-grade team won first place. The second- and third-graders finished fourth; and the

fourth- and fifth-graders took third place.

Then, in mid April, the Orlando state tournament awaited. The team had to stay in a hotel for the three-day event.

They got help from sponsors: Allstate Construction, the company working on the school's repairs, and the Hillsborough Education Foundation.

Organizers figured the children would do well, said Josie Gracia, project director at RCMA. But they had no idea what awaited.

"From the first round, we were in first place and we never looked back," Moral said of the six fifth-graders.

The final day, they were ahead a point and a half. The last four students had to maintain the lead. One child exited the tournament hall with a draw, only a half point. The next child, another draw. The third, a win. Just one more student to go.

The clock crawled for Moral, who was pacing outside the hall. Only the players were allowed inside. The last student's match lasted an hour and 55 minutes.

"The child came out so exhausted, his demeanor looked like he had lost," Moral said. He walked up to Moral and said simply, "I won."

The children didn't know they were state champions until the awards ceremony hours later.

"They take wins and losses, like a lot of things, in stride," he said. "They said, 'We did a great job,' but then the next question was, 'Do we meet next Friday?'"

The seven students in the kindergarten through third grade came in seventh place out of 26 teams. Moral wants the fifth- graders to coach the younger players before they leave.

As for the students, the trophy and the championship were great. But the trip and hotel were an equal part of the excitement.

"The hot tub," said Dandy Bardales, 11. "I couldn't stay out of the hot tub. It was so much fun."

Staff photographer Skip O'Rourke contributed to this report. Sandra Amrhein can be reached at amrhein@sptimes.com or 661-2441.

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How to help

To become a sponsor of the Wimauma Elementary chess club, call principal Roy Moral at 671-5159.

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