



162. Preparing Kids for Life Through Playing Chess with Elliott Neff

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And within two years, I had hundreds of students and had to say no to kids because my time was limited. And because my time was limited, I had to figure out a way to help more kids. And that is how we started Chess4Life.

Annalies Corbin: [0:00:31] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the Past Foundation, Annalies Corbin.

We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, super excited about the conversation that we're going to have today. And actually, interestingly enough, today we're going to be talking with Elliott Neff who is the founder and CEO of Chess4Life, which is a platform that teaches kids critical thinking skills, problem solving, EQ, and other important life lessons through the game of chess.

And he's also the author of a book called A Pawn's Journey, Transforming Lives One Move at A Time, all of which are obviously connected and related. And I'm super excited about this conversation because chess is one of those things that we know that kids who love it can figure it out. The problem-solving skills are epic.

And for those of us who struggle, I'm pointing at myself, never quite figure out chess. It's just an ongoing journey for life as a result of it.

So, Elliott, welcome to the program. Super excited to have you.

Elliott Neff: [0:01:59] Thank you, Annalies. I'm excited to chat with you as well. And as you mentioned, chess is a fun game. Some people might feel intimidated by the game. Yet, in reality, it's an amazing educational tool.

Annalies Corbin: [0:02:12] Yeah, it really is. And we see this with strategy games generally, right, it is a topic that comes up you know fairly frequently when we're talking about how do we get kids engaged in things and how do we keep – teach them problem solving skills and invariably, games will pop up.

So, let's start sort of the high level, Elliott, why chess, why Chess4Life? Obviously, you love it and there's more background. I'm going to let you share that rather than me reading it, you know. But help us understand why this thing? Why this passion?

Elliott Neff: [0:02:45] You know, thank you for asking. And absolutely, it is a passion. It is a joy. I've not had a job in 20 years is the way I like to put it, you know.

And chess is this fun game, which, to summarize, we mentioned, can at first seem intimidating just because of its complexity and it is complex. It really, truly is. There's no denying it, there's no saying it's not. And yet, it's a very understandable game that has these amazing skills that it develops.

So, kids have fun learning this game when it's taught the right way, when it's taught in a way that is understandable and fun and engaging. And as they're doing it, they're developing these problem-solving skills, these real-world transferable skills, you know, these, these social, emotional skills.

A lot of people don't think chess and social. And yet it does, because if you think about it, you are working with someone across the board from you. And if it's set up correctly, you're literally collaborating together, and problem-solving together, and building new friendships, and reaching out your hand and shaking hands, at least pre-Covid.

Annalies Corbin: [0:03:53] Right, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:03:53] As part of the etiquette of tournaments. And you're developing all these amazing skills which transfer in a correlated directly into STEM careers, into programming skills, into real world skills.

In fact, I know we're kind of just jumping right in. But one of the things I like to say, which is kind of a tongue and cheek remark, is we have an organization on a mission to bring the benefits of chess to a million kids a week. And when I do my job right, these kids quit playing chess.

Annalies Corbin: [0:04:24] Right. Exactly. And I tell folks that too, right. We know we got it right when the school or whoever we're working with says we've got this now, thanks so much.

Elliott Neff: [0:04:33] Right.

Annalies Corbin: [0:04:34] That's the wins.

Elliott Neff: [0:04:35] Exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [0:04:35] It is the reality. That is the win. Yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:04:37] It is because chess, you know, well, it can be fun and it's a great competition game. And I competed and loved the game as a kid too.

In terms of a long-term career, to achieve your other goals in life, you probably don't want to try to achieve those biplane chess competitions.

Annalies Corbin: [0:04:56] Right.

Elliott Neff: [0:04:56] You know, it's one of those things that –

Annalies Corbin: [0:04:58] It's not a career for most, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:05:00] No.

Annalies Corbin: [0:05:01] Right, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:05:01] For most, it is not. And for even myself, you know, I competed nationally, was invited internationally. My career in it has been using it as an educational tool. And I never imagined I would do this full time but here I am.

Annalies Corbin: [0:05:19] Well, so okay, so here you are, right. And so, you know, 20 some odd years ago, you start this, you start this thing, this organization, Chess4Life.

And fast forward, if you will today, you know, your 70 plus employees and over 10,000 students trained, just reading through some of the stats that, you know, got sent over ahead of time, that's not a small thing. So, this is not a small organization or a small company or small endeavor at this point.

Elliott Neff: [0:05:51] Correct. And let me actually clarify something there. That 10,000 student number are the ones I've personally trained.

Annalies Corbin: [0:05:58] Ah, so those –

Elliott Neff: [0:05:59] Organization is annually having our tools accessible to well over 300,000 kids a year now.

Annalies Corbin: [0:06:05] Yeah. And that is awesome.

Elliott Neff: [0:06:08] And 39 States and growing. And you know, something I should probably put in here right away is people go, "Why chess?" And, of course, we've touched upon some of these benefits of the game.

But the story as to how I fell into it really tells the why I think well.

Annalies Corbin: [0:06:25] Well, share. We're dying to know.

Elliott Neff: [0:06:25] And this is that – I was – it brings me back to my days of being a – you know, I became a high school state champion in chess because I just cared about chess, and I liked playing, and that I made friends with it, and I had this dream of being champion. And so, I put in tons of effort to get there.

But let me gloss over that. I was high school champion representing Washington State at the national championships and I was coaching my friends and my team members because I wanted our team to do well in team championships. So here you start building that team aspect of helping others and working together.

I just fell into coaching others and enjoyed helping others. And for years, I did that all part-time. Never once did it cross my mind I could do those full-time.

So, I had other careers, I worked in other business after high school and some college. And then I reached this point in my life early, almost mid-20s, I was thinking, you know what's my clicker? I really want to make a difference.

You know, I'm doing all these different things, but it doesn't feel like I have a focus in my life where I can make a difference, even though I enjoyed the things I was doing.

So, I decided, okay, I've got to quit everything, including give away all my chess students who I've been coaching at that point and let me go back to education to prepare for whatever path that is.

So, I'm about to hand off all my students to other chess coaches, literally figuring out who's going to go to, who am I going to recommend to who so that they can help them the best. Even at that point, I already had a hundred and fifty students in some classes and individuals.

And then at the April – it was April, May of this year, 20 years ago and some parents were just thankful for the work I had done and they took me out to dinner. We built friendships, right, through all of this, social connection. And they told me just a few things as we had dinner.

And I remember these conversations and I had several conversations that went along the same lines and they were saying, you know, “Thanks for coaching our kids. We value that. It's great. Our kids are loving it. They're doing well in tournaments. They're progressing.”

And then they said something profound. They said, “You know what? Here's what we've noticed.” One, they said, “Our kids a year ago would come home from school and then they would have all this homework. And about ten minutes into homework, they were like bouncing off the walls and couldn't focus.”

And they said, “Here we are a year later, and they can sit down and focus for even an hour at a time, no problem.” And they go, “We think it's because of the training that they've had with chess to slow down and think and practice and then compete in tournaments that last an hour at a time for each match many times.”

And they said, “On top of that, we've noticed that their grades have dramatically increased.” And they said, “We've noticed that they're no longer afraid to try things. They're willing to fail.”

They said the growth mindset that we have seen here, and they go, we think it's because of the work you've done coaching them in chess. So, thank you for that and that's what we appreciate. It took three of those conversations.

And then I was driving home one night, still planning to get rid of my students when it suddenly hit me. I was like, that's it, I'm making the difference. And literally, that was the light bulb moment that led to me dropping everything within weeks of those conversations and going, I'm just going to do this.

Never imagined I would build a business doing it, just going oh, I'll go teach and I did. And within two years, I had hundreds of students and had to say no to kids because my time was limited. And because my time was limited, I had to figure out a way to help more kids than that is how we started Chess4Life.

Annalies Corbin: [0:10:09] Chess4Life, yeah. That is a remarkable story. But it's also one that honestly, you know, when I think about some of the most amazing interviews and on – I love Learning Unboxed because I

have met the most incredible people doing just epically cool stuff, and they're making a difference, and they're loving what they do.

And when you really dig in, oftentimes what you will find is you know, I – there's a passion, right. It's something I love anyway. But I also discovered that I could make a difference by doing that thing, and I was surprised by it.

And so, you know, once you dig in, you find out that's a pretty common, I think component. But I also think that it's probably one of the key reasons why the program is successful, right, because you do in fact love what you do, and you see the value and you connect. And that can connect it to so many different things, right.

Annalies Corbin: [0:10:58] Just powernap.

Elliott Neff: [0:10:59] Yeah, there is. And you know something I would like to add to this because I'm sure that many people listening and others and I've experienced this over the years would go, well, that's awesome. You know, you became a chess master, you can do this.

But actually, what we've discovered is that as we grew over the years and has been brought in more team members to help pass on this benefit to youth, we had this dream that was like we want to impact every kid we can. And then it became quantified as we got more and more progress and we said ultimately the dream became what would it take to impact one million kids per week with life skills through the game of chess, you know.

And we're developing these mindsets, these growth mindsets. Like we like to say in chess and in life, you could win a game. You can draw. That means there's a tie. Or what else can happen? You can learn, right.

There's no losing when the mindset is, hey, if I get checkmated, how did I get checkmated? What can I learn from how my opponent won this game? How can I apply that to improve my skill? And so, you build this growth mindset right into the game in how you teach it, right.

So, we have these life skills. And then to this point about freedom impact for youth and how you make that scalable, one of the things that I discovered as we set about to answer that question, what would it take to impact a million kids a week was we realized something. If you hired a general chess master who does not have a background in education, they were not good teachers.

Annalies Corbin: [0:12:34] No.

Elliott Neff: [0:12:35] They're good at what they do, but they had a hard time explaining to a beginner. And so, the key that we discovered was we built our own curriculum to teach the game of chess in an educational framework to go, here's how we make it engaging, cyclical learning cycle. You know, you revisit these topics, you build upon them, and you're doing it at the appropriate skill level of those youth.

And so, we've actually gotten to the point where we're able to empower educators to bring the benefits to their youth from as early as preschool, all the way up through college, you know. So, for example, we had this school we partnered with literally in the last 12 months and the goal is to bring the benefits to all the youth. So, we literally trained all the teachers in a 90-minute professional development seminar. And it was interactive, highly engaging. We make learning for teachers fun too, right.

Who wants to sit through boring lectures? We had plenty of that in our own learning. It's like, no, the kids don't like it. Well, I'm a big kid, I don't like it either. So, we make it fun and literally after 90 minutes, then next week all the kids and all the teachers had chess integration into their curriculum 15 minutes at a time in the classroom.

And three quarters of those teachers didn't even know the names of the pieces prior to that one time, right?

Annalies Corbin: [0:14:06] Right, when they started, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:14:09] Because it's not about chess, it's about education through this fun vehicle of the game of chess. And so, that's just the snippet of what's been fascinating as we've discovered how to bring these benefits to youth.

And I know I'm talking a lot here but, you know, look like. Another aspect of this that I just love to talk about too, and I picked this up too looking at your podcast as you're talking about how education is, you know, there's nothing wrong with education. It's just so much of what is education was designed for the world a hundred years ago.

Annalies Corbin: [0:14:42] Right. It's not right now. Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:14:43] It's like – exactly. Right? There wasn't a problem then, but the world is shifting. And that's what I see, right. I see technology and AI coming in and what's it doing, right. The kids that we are training today, the world that they're going to be in as they graduate college, maybe 50 percent of the jobs will be obsolete from the ones today and will be morphed into something new.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:08] Right, exactly. They're not going away.

Elliott Neff: [0:15:10] Right, it's changing.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:11] These machines aren't replacing us. It's just new jobs are being created as result, correct, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:15:14] Right. It's like even this friend of mine, connection of ours. They run a fairly large dairy farm. But you think, okay, so how unchanging can you get? Well, guess what? In many ways he says, actually, what I am is I'm a data analyst.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:30] Yeah, yeah. Now, this is what I'm doing instead, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:15:32] Because the technology – exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:35] Yeah, exactly.

Elliott Neff: [0:15:35] It's really that's the new world we live in, where technology, it means it changes what we need. And what are the skills we need? We need to collaborate and problem solve.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:45] Exactly. Right, a hundred percent.

Elliott Neff: [0:15:47] Can you see it? And so, that's what we build through a fun game like chess.

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:50] Right, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:15:50] Okay. Anyway –

Annalies Corbin: [0:15:51] And we need to see every opportunity that didn't work out the way we originally thought it was going to, right. It's not that loss, right? It's not fail. It's an opportunity to learn and iterate yet again.

But you have to have the mindset to say I'm super comfortable in that and to recognize that when that happens, it is in fact an opportunity. It's not step back. It's a step forward in many ways.

And I think that that's also one of the things that I – and I love this connection with chess and strategy games in general, right, because of the idea that if we truly step back and say where is the opportunity, the opportunity is to I'm going to use the F word, even though that's not really what it is, it's that opportunity for us to fail, and to fail often. But more importantly, it's super important to fail fast so that we can learn that much faster, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:16:47] Right.

Annalies Corbin: [0:16:49] And that is the essence of it, that failure is not the big giant F that we perceive it to be. In fact, it's that learning opportunity to excel that much faster.

Elliott Neff: [0:17:01] Absolutely, absolutely. And I'm glad you pointed out the fast portion of this, because the world is shifting so quickly. If you iterate the perfect solution, one, we know it's not going to be perfect.

So, it will never be perfect as much as you want it to be but you need this feedback loop, you need the practical experience. In fact, it's so much so that we've used fail as an acronym now to say first attempt in learning.

Annalies Corbin: [0:17:25] Right, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:17:30] So go fail, right, quick learning.

Annalies Corbin: [0:17:32] Yeah, please do. Yeah, embrace it.

Elliott Neff: [0:17:33] Yeah, do. The faster you fail, the better. In fact, if you launch something and nothing goes wrong, you waited too long. You see.

Annalies Corbin: [0:17:40] Well, and you probably missed something, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:17:43] Yes. You probably did. Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [0:17:44] And so you should be afraid at that point, right. Like what did I miss? What do I not know? What is about to smack me in the face in the worst way possible? I agree a hundred percent.

Elliott Neff: [0:17:55] That's actually – yeah. Let's talk about that skill as it directly relates to the career of computer science.

Annalies Corbin: [0:18:03] Yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:18:04] Right. There, what are they doing? They're consistently – they've got a problem to solve. They figure out a possible solution. They implement it with a feedback loop and test all the things that went wrong.

Annalies Corbin: [0:18:17] Right, right. They try to break it.

Elliott Neff: [0:18:18] And they celebrate everyone – exactly. That's the whole goal.

Annalies Corbin: [0:18:20] Yeah, try to break it.

Elliott Neff: [0:18:21] You put it out there, and you test it, and you try it, and you're problem solving it, right. It's so fascinating that that's exactly what we want to do.

Annalies Corbin: [0:18:29] Yeah. But –

Elliott Neff: [0:18:30] And if you're afraid to have any of that failure, right. If you're a perfectionist who's afraid to fail, you're really in a tough spot.

Annalies Corbin: [0:18:38] Yeah. And you're really holding yourself back, right. And I think that's a conversation that's super important, right. We need to be having it at the community level. Parents need to be having it with their children. Teachers need to be having it with their kids.

But when you shift your practice, right back to something that you were talking about earlier, you know after you know your teacher or professional session, it's really, really important, right, that that conversation change at the most fundamental level, right.

And that we embrace it as part of our own internal pedagogical approach is to say, look, we really, really want to get to the point where we embrace this moment as the moment where we will actually learn the most.

The flip side of that and my staff talks about this all the time in the work that we do is that in a traditional sort of educational setting, the process that happens as we go and we learn new things and we go all the way through, we may do some problem solving and some collaborative skills, but when we get to this point we're going to test something, right, take a pick on what that's going to look like in any given thing.

But in traditional learning, that's where we stop. We don't go back and modify, right, because we test and we need to pass, we fail or something in between and we just move on to the next thing.

It's not the real world. It's not life. Industry doesn't work that way. You know, if you did, you know you only got, you know, a 60 percent as that computer programmer. We're not going to say, okay, now we're going to let you go on and code something else. We're going to say, whoa, whoa.

Elliott Neff: [0:20:09] Yeah. Yeah, that's absolutely true.

Annalies Corbin: [0:20:09] Right.

Elliott Neff: [0:20:11] That's a great point, because to celebrate failure doesn't mean to accept mediocrity.

Annalies Corbin: [0:20:17] Absolutely, yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:20:20] So in our life principles and things that we teach, win, draw, learn is our core principle. And we pair it with things like always improve. You never have it right. You can always get it better. So, fail fast, learn, and improve.

And then we pair that to the social, emotional aspects and these collaboration skills like better together, recognizing that just like in a chess game, each piece has its unique way of moving, its unique strengths, it's unique abilities. So, in life, every person has their unique strengths, their unique abilities.

And when you learn to celebrate those differences and figure out how partnering together makes it stronger together just like in the chess game, using your pieces together as a team creates a cohesive plan, then you build strength. So, working together.

You know, some people, if they don't know anything about the game of chess, they would still be puzzled at with something I said earlier, which was even after the preschool level, you can do this. So, are you familiar with what head start is?

Annalies Corbin: [0:21:32] Oh, a hundred percent. Yeah, yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:21:34] We've literally partnered with many head starts and have introduced education through chess concepts to thousands of head start. The lowest income, most challenged youth, because of the importance of starting right.

And I want to give, if you like, one quick example of how you can go about doing that, incorporating these mindsets. So, in a chess game, and for those listening who might not know this, the king is the object of the game. If you trap the king, the game is over.

Well, imagine an empty chess board which is the same size as a checkerboard, eight by eight, is traditional and see 64 squares. Well, imagine this activity. You take two students, you discover the king, and you place it inside any square on that board.

Now, this king moves one square anywhere, one square at a time, and now you play a game. And the first game can be as simple as let's take turns moving this king one square and we're going to play around the world. When your king has landed on each edge of the board, we win.

And they take turns. And they collaborate. And they build impulse control because they're waiting. And they're talking together. Great, okay, things – excuse me. Things like, wait, we haven't got that edge yet, right. They're problem solving at an extremely simple level. And how much chess did they need to know to play this? Nothing. They learned one concept, sit in a square, one square at a time, now let's go visit all the edges.

And it's a fun minigame. And that's really the secret, is we built hundreds and hundreds of these mini games that is slowly building new knowledge but incorporating it into immediate, practical gameplay. None of those lecturing, right.

Annalies Corbin: [0:23:32] And you're scaffolding, kids, to be successful, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:23:34] Simple concept.

Annalies Corbin: [0:23:36] That's huge.

Elliott Neff: [0:23:39] Yeah. It is amazing to watch these little kids. And you know, let's talk about for a second if you don't mind another amazing little concept.

You know, when my wife and I were first expecting a child, our first child, I had trained 10,000 kids. So, I knew a lot of families. I got to observe kids on the spectrum.

And so, I went to this one family and who I highly respected how they had raised their two daughters and I said, you know, would you be willing to share your advice? You know, I love what I've seen over the years. You know, what's your secret to raising kids? We're about to have our first.

And I was like, why reinvent the wheel here? I want to learn from the best. So, we go over to their place for dinner. And after dinner, I'm just like – I'm like sitting on the edge of my seat waiting to hear this great insight, right?

And we sit down and they go, you know, do your best to not put a lid on them. He paused. I'm waiting. Waiting. What else? That's it. We're done. I was like, okay, please unpack that a little bit.

But he said, you know what, our education system as a whole, society as a whole, it's just ingrained to talk about are you ahead, are you behind? We create expectations. And he goes, and kids live up to them or down to them.

Annalies Corbin: [0:25:12] Exactly, exactly.

Elliott Neff: [0:25:13] He goes the more you can avoid any sort of a lid and just recognize their individual giftings and allow it to flourish, and he even said this with his kids in school, and it's a concept that I – the more I thought about it, the more I thought there's something powerful here, he said, can you imagine if we would only celebrate progress, using the learning as we go, but what we do is we measure progress. He goes how much in school you measure how far you missed something?

Annalies Corbin: [0:25:45] Right, right.

Elliott Neff: [0:25:46] Instead of how far you progressed towards something.

Annalies Corbin: [0:25:49] Right, right. That's an interesting way to put it. I love that.

Elliott Neff: [0:25:51] Because if we take the lid off and if we measure progress, he goes what's going to happen to the confidence that allows them to be willing to fail –

Annalies Corbin: [0:25:58] Right.

Elliott Neff: [0:25:59] To get the learning, to then achieve. So, anyway, I digressed a little bit here, but it's –

Annalies Corbin: [0:26:04] No. But I think that's a really, really great point. And I love that because I don't think I've ever had anybody come on and sort of make that point from that direction. So, I actually appreciate that very much. So, thank you for that.

I would like to make sure though before we wrap up our conversation that we do spend just a few minutes talking about the curriculum, the program itself. So, I'm a school, I'm a teacher, I'm a parent. You know, I'm the

community center. And I want Chess4Life to come and be part of my ecosystem. How do I get Chess4Life there?

And B, then once it shows up, what should I expect it to look like? Help me understand that.

Elliott Neff: [0:26:44] Absolutely. So, we partner with groups from schools, to district, school districts, from small to large. We're talking anywhere from a single classroom or an afterschool club, to an emerging model of all students, teachers involved, to district wide access through our application tools.

So, one, in order to learn more, a great thing to do is just to visit our website, chess4life and we have a suite of free tools and resources that you can find or reach out to us and we'll send you some. And you can get started easily with getting awareness of what this looks like.

And then if a school were to partner with us, we provide professional development for any and all staff. We provide tools and a platform that brings the digital access to curriculum content with these hundreds and hundreds of activities so that the curriculum is right there, ready to follow step by step. And the support to take it further. So whether it's an introduction or beyond.

And what it can look like is as simple as a 15 minutes, two to three times a week, integration into curriculum. That's the immersion style model where literally –

Annalies Corbin: [0:28:00] Any curriculum? Any class? Any teacher? Any subjects? We can put this anywhere?

Elliott Neff: [0:28:06] You – there are ways to do it. We've done some of the curriculum integration into specific curriculums like the math curriculums in grade school, elementary school, preschool. And we partner with schools and districts to do customization in order to go okay, now your objective in your state's standards in your school is this, here's some of our units and we can do some customization to say now when you invest 15 minutes in the classroom during this activity, this is mapping directly to these outputs.

For example, at the head start, they use TS Gold quite a bit. And we've worked to have the chess objectives directly mapped to some of those TS Gold standards. You know, they can have reading less on the social, emotional, to cognitive, the language skills, the problem solving, the early – the math skills, right. And so, we do this at the different levels for an integration.

Afterschool clubs, typically that's more of a model where kids come after the school or before school or lunchtime. And in there, you have a variety of ages, grades and such. And so there the model is built into what we call our six keys and these six keys to a fun and engaging program are designed to ensure that the experience makes it fun for all kids, not just a program where chess nerds get together. You see.

Annalies Corbin: [0:29:28] Nothing wrong with chess nerds though but we want to find all kids space, right?

Elliott Neff: [0:29:30] No, there's nothing wrong with that. But we want to help all kids belong. We want all kids to feel welcome, and we want all kids.

At the end of the day, part of the vision that I've seen with this is, you know how in grade school in PE, for example, you'll have six or eight or different sports from floor hockey to, you know, all these different ones. And they do what, six-week rotations or something or, you know, you'll do this. Some kids like one sport. Some kids like all sports. Some kids like none, but they get exposure to it.

In my view, these benefits of how you think are such that ultimately, it should be a no brainer that kids just have the minimum dosage, an access. And then kids who want to go further with opportunity can do that. Tools are available.

So, I digress a little bit to our vision of seeing where this can go. But in terms of what that looks like with schools, we have it from as little as an afterschool club. One teacher runs to multiple classroom integrations, to one of the districts we work with now has a full-time chess teachers, as an elective in middle school.

One of them, for example, is in his fourth year. He moved from being a math teacher to chess teacher. He was skeptical at first, but he decided to give it a try. And now here we are, four years later, he has eight classes full, 40 kids each. It's an elective in the middle school and wait list of kids who want to join it.

And in that same district, there's now a second and third middle school adding in the chess elective because of these outcomes of giving kids these skills.

Annalies Corbin: [0:31:10] Yeah, it's the win. Yeah, exactly.

Elliott Neff: [0:31:12] It is, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [0:31:13] Yeah, it's a win in that sort of skills category that we oftentimes in education struggle to figure out how to sort of fill in those gaps, right, because sometimes it's really difficult to see that those full collective set of, you know, fully formed human skills ultimately at the end of the day, how they relate to the content we're trying to teach.

And sometimes, that's where we bump up into schools, hire teachers having that difficulty in trying to figure out that transition. And so, I love the fact that you know through this program, you're basically saying, look, here's another tool that you can use in your chess to get your kids there.

Elliott Neff: [0:31:50] Yeah. And on that note, I think it's really important to point out that you know how teachers are amazing with the work that they do. They are some of the most underpaid and overworked individuals who have a heart majority, have a heart for helping these youth. The biggest thing that we looked at was we do not want to be, oh, another thing to squeeze in.

Annalies Corbin: [0:32:13] Correct.

Elliott Neff: [0:32:14] So what we really sought to do, and I think is the key to this, is that if you've got 45 minutes for let's say a math period, if you were to take that to 30 minutes on your regular curriculum and take 15 minutes of that time on the chess activities that directly achieve the goal you're trying to do, what happens? We help build the same activity and kids become more engaged because they have even more fun, they have even more – right. Who doesn't like playing a game instead of doing another worksheet or something, right?

Annalies Corbin: [0:32:46] Right. Yeah.

Elliott Neff: [0:32:47] And so that's the kind of outcomes we start seeing to where kids engage with it and actually learn concepts faster and have more fun and stay more engaged, because of the way of learning, because it's now gamification of learning. And who doesn't want to play games?

Annalies Corbin: [0:33:03] Yeah, exactly. And then the answer is everybody wants to play. So, we love that very much.

Elliott Neff: [0:33:07] Yes. Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [0:33:08] You know, Elliott, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to have this conversation with us, to share the journey of Chess4Life.

We encourage everybody to go to the website. We will also have resources when the episode airs with links back to Elliott and Elliott's great work.

Elliott Neff: [0:33:26] Wonderful.

Annalies Corbin: [0:33:28] And we encourage folks to reach out and to see if you can bring Chess4Life into your own classroom in your own practice. And we thank you for sharing with us today.

Elliott Neff: [0:33:38] Well, thank you, Annalies. And final note I'll just say too, is if you just love to read and you're not sure you like chess at all, check out the book *A Pawn's Journey*. It's a novel inspired by the true-life stories of many students. It has been used in many classrooms from 2nd grade all the way through middle school because of the mindsets of success that are portrayed through this novel.

Annalies Corbin: [0:33:59] Very exciting, so check that out as well. I'll have links to that as well. So, excellent.

Elliott Neff: [0:34:03] Wonderful. Thank you, Annalies.

Annalies Corbin: [0:34:04] Thank you so much.

Elliott Neff: [0:34:05] A pleasure talking to you today.

Annalies Corbin: [0:34:06] You as well. Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.