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## Kids play squash, study on campus

By [Emily Alpert](#)

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“Squash: a garden vegetable!” said fifth-grader Rachel King. “Ha!” King is a participant in METROsquash, an after-school program housed in Henry Crown that pairs homework help with sweaty rounds of squash.

She held up a dictionary triumphantly as METROsquash Executive Director David Kay looked on.

“There are all kinds of things that are wrong in the dictionary,” he teased her. He wore a T-shirt that read, “Squash—play it, don’t eat it,” the likely subject of this dispute.

Squash, typically associated with the upper crust, may seem an unlikely sport for kids on Chicago’s South Side. METROsquash was initiated this year and is the first urban squash program located outside the East Coast.

Kay said squash has unique benefits, particularly for under-served students.

“It’s a really good game to learn sportsmanship, because you’re occupying the same space as your opponent,” he said.

In addition, because squash is new to most students, it provides “a real sense of accomplishment to learn one skill at a time.... Eventually they’ll get it, and they take that attitude to the classroom,” Kay said.

“They get competitive and want to win. You see that they’re really working,” said volunteer Nick Sisodia, a 10th-grader at the Lab School. “They improve every week.”

The U of C has made classroom space and Henry Crown squash courts available for the program, which runs four days a week after school. Students compete on the courts for about an hour and then go to the classroom, where tutors help them develop reading and math skills.

“Kids really enjoy the consistency of the program,” said Lucy Michael, a graduate student and the program’s academic coordinator. “They’re not just getting the work done, they’re understanding it.”

“They help us get our grades up and get 100s and A pluses,” King said.

In addition, organizers said METROsquash tutoring builds relationships.

“The tutors are students, and they’re relating to the kids as students,” Michael said. “There’s a kind of camaraderie that you see, where initially you think there’d be this big gap between the U of C students and the kids.”

A talented squash player can also snag the attention of college recruiters.

“No school gives squash scholarships, but it can help your application,” Kay said.

He said squash skills, combined with the boosted test scores and grades that result from METROsquash tutoring, can earn students spaces in quality colleges. In Boston, where urban squash programs originated, graduates have gone on to schools such as Bates College, Wesleyan University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

According to Kay, parents have responded enthusiastically to the program. In one instance, a pregnant mother who went into labor called Kay from the hospital, asking him to pick up her other children for tryouts.

“She really wanted the kids to try out,” he said. “That’s telling of how important this really is.”

Students went through three weeks of tryouts before being admitted to the program.

According to the METROsquash website, “the hardest working and most enthusiastic students are accepted to the program.”

This year the program admitted 12 students in fifth grade from Kozminski Community Academy, located at 936 East 54th Street. In the fall of '06, METROsquash plans to expand to 24 students from two Chicago Public Schools.

On weekends, METROsquash students take part in community service and field trips to places like the Museum of Science and Industry and the Mexican Museum of Fine Arts.

Participants also competed in the Illinois State Juniors tournament in Lake Forest—“a slightly different demographic, to put it mildly,” Kay said—and attended the Windy City Open, the biggest squash tournament in North America.

King showed off the autographs that spangled her METROsquash t-shirt.

“They got to get on a court with the number one squash player in the world,” Kay said.

Michael said METROsquash is a transformative experience, not only for the kids but also for the tutors. She recalled stories relayed by one of her students, a fifth-grader, about the things she worries about in her own school: “the condition of the bathrooms and how she doesn’t feel safe there, or how she’s worried about being kidnapped near her school, because it happened a few years ago.... To listen to these things, after seeing such a bright, confident girl sitting across from me, is kind of like my education into what their life is like,” Michael said.

For an hour or so on the squash courts, however, those worries are set aside.

“David says squash is not a vegetable, but squash is a vegetable!” King said furtively. She giggled and ran back to serve.