OP-ED:

Game Night
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By Kevin Skelly

Much of what I learned in life came from playing games. It started with Rummy with a babysitter. War, Uno, Phase 10, Go Fish and Hearts (my minor in college, I joke), all helped me understand statistics, mathematics, patterns and logic. Besides card games, Monopoly, Risk and the new favorite, Settlers of Catan, captivated my household when I was a kid and remain addicting now that I am a larger kid. Over Thanksgiving, when our Stratego game was interrupted after two hours by dinner, the rest of the family begged my oldest son and I to stop arguing about who would have won had the game been “allowed” to continue. While I usually implore my children to go to bed, if it’s game night and I haven’t won, the night doesn’t end until I do. We’ve had some very late nights indeed!

Games have taught me plenty about math and its intellectual cousins. Additionally, they teach life lessons that aren’t captured in the Common Core or formal curricula. From games we learn how to win humbly, to accept defeat gracefully, and to navigate the various gray areas that go with die that roll off the table or with the establishment of “house rules.” Games teach strategizing, bluffing, deception and the establishment of alliances, all bound by a set of formal or informal rules. Inevitably, the outcomes of games have spilled over into my relationships with friends and family. How I have participated has affected whether I’m viewed as moral and ethical, or not.

The best poker players know how to read the other players at the table. A good friend shared how effective an older colleague, who grew up in Soviet era, was at sizing up potential customers and business partners because his very survival had depended upon it. Games teach these life skills in much gentler ways. And just as a master storyteller brings you into a character’s life, a good game forces you to understand your opponent.

In most games there are at least as many losers as there are winners. The most skilled player doesn’t always win and more practice doesn’t guarantee victory. There is an element of luck that salves the loser’s wounds and makes the winner feel blessed. I have competed with every ounce of my intellect and energy, lost my cool, been driven crazy by defeat, and then realized how silly I was to lose perspective. So it is with much of the non-game world.

As San Mateo County schools launch into two weeks of vacation between semesters, perhaps a game night is in the offing. Potential benefits include a night without screen time, a chance to
meet your child’s friends and to see how clever your child has become, an avenue to spend
time as a family, and the possibility to show your child you’re smarter than they thought!

*Kevin Skelly, Ph.D. is the superintendent of the San Mateo Union High School District, a position he has held since 2015.*