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A Look Inside the NYC Scholastic Scene

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THE NEW YORK School

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New York City's scholastic chess scene is 'bursting at the seams' with programs and clubs, and city teams keep winning big at national competitions. Some of the people fueling the boom explain what's happening.

BY **JACK MOORE**

Courtesy of US Chess

"BOOM-SHAKA-LAKA." Chess instructor Jonathan Corbblah swipes a piece across the board with a flourish. "Everybody cross your arms and say 'De-fense!'"

"De-fense!," about a dozen piping voices echo through the cafeteria.

It's a Monday afternoon at the Trinity School, a private school in a sprawling half-block Gothic compound on New York City's Upper West Side. It is the oldest continually operated school in the city; tuition runs about $60,000, and it's home to one of the city's many elite chess programs for young players.

Over the next hour and half, the cafeteria is a whirl of activity. The Monday group is mostly beginners, many of them kindergartners, who have only recently learned how all the pieces move. Corbblah, in a fuzzy sweater and Timberland boots, races from table to table observing games between the young players. Suddenly, another young voice calls out, "Coach Johnny, I just checkmated!"

With everyone gathered around the board in question, Corbblah points out how the young player has pinned in his opponent with a bishop at one end of the board and a queen at the other.

"Now twist your mustaches," he says, giving a loud, devious laugh. The students follow suit, twirling nonexistent mustaches and trying to imitate Corbblah's chortle. "You see, chess players must be sneaky," he counsels.

Corbblah, an exuberant 45, has taught chess in New York City schools for more than 20 years, at times juggling simultaneous gigs at public and private schools. With boundless energy, zany catchphrases — and M&Ms frequently dispensed as prizes — he doesn't so much control the chaos of a room full of 5- and 6-year-olds as he rides the wave.

After the checkmate review, it's back to their one-on-one sessions and, later, a worksheet.

"When did you learn chess?" I ask a kindergartner with a mop of curly hair. "Did you just learn to play in kindergarten?"

"No; I learned in Pre-K," he replies, as he goes back to filling out his "Mate in 1" worksheet. His name trails across the top of the page, the letters still uncertainly formed.

'Magnitude era'

New York has long been known as a chess city. There's Bobby Fischer, the Marshall Club, and the chessboards in the parks from Washington Square to Central Park — not to mention the colorful characters who sit at them with their dollar bets and daring tactics.

Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that chess in New York City schools also has a rich backstory. It was back in 1979 that FM Sunil Weeramantry, the stepfather of five-time U.S. champion GM Hikaru Nakamura, first walked through the doors of the Hunter College Campus School, an innovative and highly selective public school for gifted students, and started what is believed to be the first "curriculum" chess class in the city — chess taught by a teacher during the school day, in the same way art, music, or math is taught.

In the early days, he faced some skepticism from school administrators and had to teach himself how to teach chess to a broad student population — coaching the precocious, highly interested players as well as the 50% of students who "could take it or leave it," he says in an interview via Zoom.

Jonathan Corbblah, chess instructor at the Trinity School, along with assistant instructor Kameliia Sharuda inside the school's cafeteria where after-school chess classes are held.

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Courtesy of US Chess

The other big development of the era came in the mid-1980s, when a pioneering nonprofit, Chess in the Schools, opened its doors with a mission of bringing high-quality chess instruction into inner-city schools.

Both Hunter and Chess in the Schools are still going strong, and are now part of a vibrant scene of schools, clubs and tournaments. In fact, everyone seems to agree the scholastic chess scene in New York City right now is booming like never before.

Online streaming and pop culture representations such as Netflix's wildly successful *The Queen's Gambit* have brought chess to new audiences worldwide and nationally — US Chess has seen memberships swell to record numbers.

But the trend seems to be turbocharged in New York City, where the scholastic chess scene is "bursting at the seams," Corbblah says. "It's never, ever been bigger. It's like tulip mania. We're in a magnitude era of chess."

The vibrancy of the New York City chess scene shows in the results: At the 2024 National K-12 Grade Championships in Maryland last December, chess teams from New York City schools dominated in every category.

Across nearly every grade level, from kindergarten to 12th grade, New York City schools — public, private and charter — accounted for at least half the top 10 finishers in each category. In the 8th grade category, seven of the top 10 teams were from New York. In the 6th and 7th grade category, all of them were.

That wasn't a one-off phenomenon. At national tournaments all across the country, New York City schools show up, and turn in impressive performances.

In the K-8 championship at SuperNationals VIII, held in May in Orlando, Florida, seven of the top 10 schools in the team standings hailed from New York City. At the K-6 level, all top six schools were from New York. In the K-1 level, four of the top five finishers were from New York City, including Corbblah's crop of kindergartners and first graders, who took the K-1 championship.

Why does New York City dominate?

Those who follow the scene closely point to the large numbers of "chess schools" across the city and the healthy culture of competition that has been fostered, as well as the abundance of talent (among players and coaches) and a robust ecosystem of organizations hosting regular tournaments for young players to face off over the board.

"The reason New York does so well is because we have such a thriving chess community and we're constantly playing chess against each other — and getting better by playing each other," says Sean O'Hanlon, who helped build the highly competitive chess program at the city's Success Academy network of charter schools and now teaches at Speyer Legacy School, a $60,000-a-year K-8 school on Manhattan's West Side.

His colorful classroom is filled with cartoon illustrations of chess pieces, inspirational quotes from chess champions — and plenty of trophies. His students took home the K-6 Championship in Columbus last year, came in second in the K-8 Championship in Atlanta and took home the K-6 Championship at the May SuperNationals.

Rivalries among New York City school programs can run deep, but such fierce competition helps keep teams conditioned.

Corbblah frames the dynamic with a *Star Wars* reference: "You need the Sith and the Jedi, you know what I mean?" (He also is fond of *Star Trek* references and has appeared on *Jeopardy* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*. In other words, he gets competition.) "The worthy adversary is what sharpens your blade and it also is what keeps the programs going," he says. "New York has tons and tons and tons of them. Every single time one drops, another one pops up."

The Impact Coaching Network is one of the newer and more vibrant players in the current chess scene. ICN aims to create "chess communities" in the schools it works in by building a sense of team identity around chess — aiming to instill a pep-rally spirit into the chess world similar to the way "Friday Night Lights" football in Texas or Ohio can give a whole town something to cheer for.

"We're really trying to focus on that team success, bringing those trophies back to the school, giving those schools something to be proud of, something to celebrate," says ICN co-founder Russell Makovsky.

To be sure, the city's chess ecosystem can feel a little crowded at times. There are professional rivalries, allegations of talent poaching, internecine squabbling — even a few lawsuits. This *is* New York City, after all. But nobody would go on the record airing the dirty laundry for this article. For as big as New York is — and for as bustling as the community chess is — it still feels small in many ways.

In fact, underneath the long-running success story of New York City scholastic chess, there remains the feeling that everything runs on the energy of a relatively small band of passionate, overworked, extremely dedicated people.

"With all good chess programs," says WFM Elizabeth Spiegel, the long-time chess instructor at Intermediate School 318 in Brooklyn, "there's one person who's, like, crazy about it behind the scenes."

Sean O'Hanlon in the chess classroom at Speyer Legacy

PHOTOS, THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS: JACK MOORE

Courtesy of US Chess

'Snap, crackle and pop'

I first meet Spiegel on a winter Saturday morning. A tournament run by Chess in the Schools is in full, frenetic swing, and Spiegel hovers over a chessboard in the middle of a fourth-floor classroom abuzz with activity. Deep in concentration, she scans the scoresheet of the crestfallen eighth-grader in the hoodie across from her who has just finished his game in another classroom. A loss.

"It lacks a certain aggressiveness," she says, evaluating one of his moves. She has shoulder-length brown hair, graying at the roots and streaked with bluish-green highlights. "A snap, crackle and pop."

Throughout the morning, players stream in and out of the classroom, which has been set up as the team headquarters for I.S. 318.

Even as she scrutinizes one player's move, Spiegel's head is on a constant swivel. "Do you need your game looked at?" she calls out as more students enter, clutching their scoresheets. "Who needs their game reviewed?"

Another student sits down across from her, presenting their game. Spiegel's brow knits. Then she moves into action, sweeping pieces across the board, first recreating her student's moves, then imagining alternate possibilities: What if you moved here instead? What would your opponent have done if you tried this?

"I think you need to be a little bit angry," she tells another student whose scoresheet also betrays a perhaps too-hesitant style. "A little bit of anger is not a bad thing."

Later, another student enters the classroom, boasting that he's just beaten a lower-rated player.

But Spiegel sees warning signs between the moves right away. Perhaps lulled by the gap in their ratings, the student had played an opening he'd never studied before.

"You can't play an opening you're totally unfamiliar with because you think your opponent's an idiot," she says. "That's the kind of thing that will always come back and get you in trouble."

"But he didn't defend it," the student protests.

"I'm not saying he's not an idiot," Spiegel says. "I'm saying, assuming that is very dangerous."

'Recalibrating' at 318

Spiegel, 49, has taught at I.S. 318 in some form for more than 25 years. She first walked through the doors in 1999 as a part-time chess teacher with Chess in the Schools. By the end of her first year there, she took eight students to their first national competition in Tucson, Arizona, where, somewhat unexpectedly, they won the section for players

Left: Scenes from tournaments run by Chess in the Schools in recent years. Below: CIS instructor Joseph Otero introduces the royal game to a class at P.S. 375 in Brooklyn.

PHOTOS: COURTESY CIS

Courtesy of US Chess

with ratings under 750.

"To us at the time, it was like the biggest achievement," assistant principal John Galvin recalls one recent morning, sitting in his third-floor office crammed with trophies won by the chess team stacked so high that they look almost like pipes from a giant church organ. "Nothing breeds success like success," he says. "And then we wanted to just keep that going."

Eventually, Spiegel got her teaching license, and the school hired her full-time as a chess teacher. Nearly 20 years later, she remains likely the only full-time public school teacher who is a dedicated chess instructor teaching chess as part of the curriculum, Galvin says.

"There's lots of music teachers. There's art teachers ... there's ceramics teachers," Galvin says. "But there are not that many chess teachers."

I.S. 318 is a squat three-story building of green panels and grid-like windows in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Inside Spiegel's third-floor classroom, signs advertise Chess Lunch and Early Morning Chess, and a sign in colorful all-capital letters advises: "THINK ABOUT EVERY MOVE."

When the bell sounds, a chatty sixth-grade class enters and takes their seats in a mismatched collection of desk chairs, stools — even a bouncing-ball chair that squeaks insistently as a student bobs up and down on it.

Today, Spiegel is teaching the Catalan, the opening first played in Barcelona in the 1920s that has been adopted by grandmasters ever since.

Elizabeth Spiegel

PHOTO: JACK MOORE

"Don't say anything. Just raise your hand if you play the Catalan game," she says. "Bro," a muffled voice comes from the back row as chatter begins to ripple through the classroom. "Don't say 'bro,'" she says. "Just raise your hand."

Outside the classroom, Spiegel is outspoken about the stratification in the city's scholastic chess scene.

In some ways, the various schools and programs in the city remain on separate orbits. I.S. 318's team mostly attends the free tournaments run by Chess in the Schools. Hunter, a public school for gifted students, has its own tournament schedule, but they come with a registration fee: $50 a pop. Sometimes it's not until national competitions that some of the top New York City teams will actually sit down and play against each other.

Spiegel is equally frank about what she sees as the advantages enjoyed by private schools in the city's chess scene, including the general practice of holding back students in private schools, sometimes known as "red-shirting," which often leads to competitions between private school students who are several months older than their public school counterparts, even though they're at the same grade level. At that age, those few months can be a significant advantage.

At national competitions — which already pose a financial burden, given the need to book plane tickets and hotel rooms — there are even more overt signs of the class divide. Many of the private schools have team rooms filled with lavish perks.

"Our kids are eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and you see a team room down the hall and they've got a catered lunch," Galvin laughs.

Still Galvin is sanguine about it all: "Privilege exists in our society at all different kinds of levels," he says, "and it's not surprising that it exists in the chess world, too."

Spiegel, once a regular diarist of the school's chess program on her personal blog, pulls no punches in calling out what she sees as inequities in the system, especially policy decisions by the US Chess Scholastic Council, which, she says, has tended to advantage private schools. Spiegel was once a member of the council, but she was removed in 2018. She says she was told she was taken off the council because there was too much of a New York focus on the panel.

When I tell her she has a reputation of being a truth-teller in the chess community, she gives out a loud guffaw and slaps the desk.

"I used to be harsher than I am," she says. "Since I've had children and gone on antidepressants, I'm a lot nicer."

Still, a few minutes later, when I mention another figure in the chess community, she rolls her eyes and mouths, "He's full of shit."

In 2012, two events helped put I.S. 318 on the map: The documentary *Brooklyn Castle* became a breakout hit, chronicling the rise of Spiegel's chess team as a powerhouse player on the national scene amid the threat of steep budget cuts during the Great Recession.

That same year, Spiegel, with a team of middle-school students, competed in the high school championships and won the top prize. It was a feat never accomplished before — or since.

"That was definitely a peak of my life," Spiegel says.

These days, the trophies don't come quite as frequently. In part that's because I.S. 318 now faces more competition for budding young talent from other chess schools that have emerged in the city's burgeoning scene.

"Our pipeline is being choked off a little bit," Galvin says. Students in elementary schools who show chess talent now have more potential options for middle school — including private schools that can offer financial aid for gifted students.

"We've been successful for so long that no one's going to feel sorry for us," Galvin says. Now, the school is "recalibrating" its approach, Galvin says. "Whether or not we win the Open section isn't really our goal anymore right now. Our goal is to be competitive in many sections."

That new approach was put to the test at last year's National Middle School Championships in Atlanta. In the Open section, I.S. 318 came in sixth overall — behind New York City private school chess heavyweights such as Speyer Legacy and Columbia Grammar and Prep. But in the Under 1400 and Under 1100 sections, I.S. 318 won the top prizes. Spiegel's crew had similar success this year at SuperNationals — I.S. 318 won the top spot for K-8 teams under 1700 and third place in the Under 1100.

"I've done this for 25 years. How much we win or lose doesn't affect me emotionally as much as it might have," Spiegel says.

There are other measures of success. For one, the school's chess team continues to attract interested, eager students. At more than 90 members, it's bigger than it's ever been.

And if talented kids are getting scooped up by private schools, Spiegel is hardly dismayed. "I think that's a good thing," she says — in fact, she's helped connect some

Courtesy of US Chess

of her students to private school chess instructors she knows. "I feel like that's chess as a vehicle of social equity."

She wrote about her new focus in a post on her blog last May after returning from Nationals in Atlanta. "I just no longer measure my performance by the top section," she wrote. "We won't win again, and that's ok. I think being able to win two Under sections every year with random neighborhood kids is what a chess program should aspire to, because that's what a public school is about: offering great education to everyone in your classroom. I can take a random child who doesn't play chess, teach them in a class of 30, and they score 5/7 and feel on top of the world."

'A real team thing'

Sitting at a table in an auxiliary space above St. Luke's Lutheran Church near Times Square, Russell Makovsky recalls his early days of playing chess. His Grandma Margaret was a chess player, taught him how to play and bought him his first set when he was a kid growing up in Mastic Beach, a hamlet on Long Island's South Shore. Every once in a while, his dad would drive him into the city, to the famed boards at Washington Square Park. But he never connected to what he calls a "chess community," and by the time he reached high school, he felt the lure of sports where he found community — tennis, basketball, and cross country.

After earning a business degree, the 2008 financial crisis struck, and he found himself coaching a basketball team at a school on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

"I was really building these incredible sporting teams," Makovsky, 40, recalls. "I was really good at creating culture, enthusiasm, inspiring the kids to be great at something."

But he never gave up his early love of chess.

Then came the "germination" of an idea: to bring the raucous team-spirit energy of scholastic sports to a school chess team. Thus, the Impact Coaching Network. Founded in 2016, ICN started off in just four elementary schools. It's now in 40, and continuing to grow.

"What we've really proved is that if you bring the game of chess in a thoughtful way — with thoughtful educators and [engaging] the community — any school can be great at the game of chess; any child can be great at the game of chess," Makovsky says, in jeans, a hoodie and wool hat, looking every bit the casually rumpled youth sports coach.

"Kids are surrounded by teachers. They're surrounded by educators. But the coaching relationship is very powerful," Makovsky says. "You can get a little bit tougher with the kids. You can get a little bit more emotional, connected. You can drive them a little bit more … Teachers disseminate information. Coaches drive you."

As it happens, many of the coaches, and other personnel at ICN, are former I.S. 318 students. Angel Lopez, who co-founded ICN with Makovsky and now oversees a number of school programs as a program director, is one of them.

Lopez, 35, grew up in a tough neighborhood in the Bed-Stuy area of Brooklyn, he says. "Chess wasn't really big there," he says. It was in Spiegel's class that he first learned chess — and he's the first to acknowledge he didn't take to it right away.

"I'm a big believer that there's a lot of tools that you learn from chess, whether you play competitively or you play casually, that apply to life," he says. "And for me too. When I started, I wasn't the greatest student. I was kind of on a rocky road in school. I saw a big difference with chess."

Now he uses his story to motivate kids in ICN's programs, imparting the lessons of hard work, resilience, and team spirit.

"It's just like being part of a basketball

Impact Chess Network teams and coaches at SN VIII

PHOTO: COURTESY ICN

Courtesy of US Chess

team in our schools or a football team or track team. Our kids go to their schools every day with their shirts on," Lopez says, adding, "It's a real team thing."

Not everyone may see the value — or perhaps the appeal — of the "rah-rah-rah, hands in on three, *Friday Night Lights*" style of chess coaching, Makovsky acknowledges. But he adds, "Our results speak for themselves. We win."

City schools with chess programs run by ICN brought a total of 300 students to the Grade Nationals in December, and won over 30% of the national awards, he says.

Perhaps fittingly for an organization run by an MBA, the organization is fueled by an entrepreneurial spirit and a drive for "relentless" improvement, including in the performance of the young participants themselves.

"We track their ratings, their progress, how well they're doing compared to their peers," Makovsky says. He refers to "measurables" and "immediate feedback loops," using buzzy lingo that could be lifted from the earnings call of a Silicon Valley startup.

"Every time you play a tournament, you get a rating change," Makovsky says. "And the kids know what their rating is now, where they want to be six months from now, where they want to be a year from now, where they want to be five years from now."

In the beginning, the group set its sights on regularly coaching elementary students to reach a 1000 rating. Now, the group is striving to get young players in its elementary school programs over 2000 "at scale," Makovsky says.

ICN, which is a fee-based organization, charges $49 for tournaments, on par with other paid tournaments in the city. The organization regularly provides complimentary access. The cost of running the school programs is set out in financial arrangements with each of the schools and includes some fees paid by parents, parent-teacher associations and booster programs.

Makovsky stresses that any child who wants to participate and shows an aptitude for the game will have access.

He points to one of ICN's greatest success stories as a case in point: Tani Adewumi, whose family came to the U.S. from Nigeria as refugees fleeing Boko Haram, was living with his family in a New York City shelter when he learned how to play in an ICN program. In 2019, he won the K-3 New York State Chess Championship. The story garnered international headlines, and in March he brought his rating past 2400, the final step toward becoming an international master.

"It was a very significant story for, not just our program, but for chess," Makovsky recalls. "I was on the *Today* show with Tani live in front of America, talking about what chess means as a tool for opportunity in education."

While the line between haves and have-nots is often stark in New York City, Makovsky said he believes chess is a "great equalizer." He adds, "We believe every child has the ability to be great at the game of chess. And our goal is to extract that. Give them all the resources, support, opportunities to be great."

The organization remains in an expansion stage. About a year ago, Makovsky and his team moved into the space at St. Luke's, three creaky flights of stairs above the church on 46th Street, the city's famed Restaurant Row.

Spread across the room sit orderly rows of tables topped with chessboards. One of them is a large rough block of pebblecrete with sun-faded black and white squares — a relic from Washington Square Park that Makovsky salvaged when some of the iconic boards were being removed and replaced.

The organization continues to expand, often the result of schools — or, more often, parents — seeing the group's success and wanting to put it in place at their schools.

"We don't go hunting; they come to us," says Ian West, who had a thriving business teaching chess in Brooklyn before joining forces with Makovsky and ICN. He's now the group's director of programs.

Still, every good entrepreneur understands the fight for market share, the need to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

"There's a lot of egos … A lot of people have been doing chess for a very long time," Makovsky acknowledges. But he doesn't see much cutthroat competition or angling over turf.

"I like to believe we're very well-liked by everybody," he says. "Because we believe in elevating the game of chess for everybody … If the chess community grows, we all grow."

'The best 45 minutes of chess education'

A digital chessboard lights up the screen. A few fingers of sunlight streak in through the edges of the turned-down window shades. It's a Friday morning at P.S. 180 in Borough Park, a neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn of low-slung brick apartment buildings and auto body shops. The thirty or so sixth graders gathered in the darkened classroom are about to get a lesson in castling.

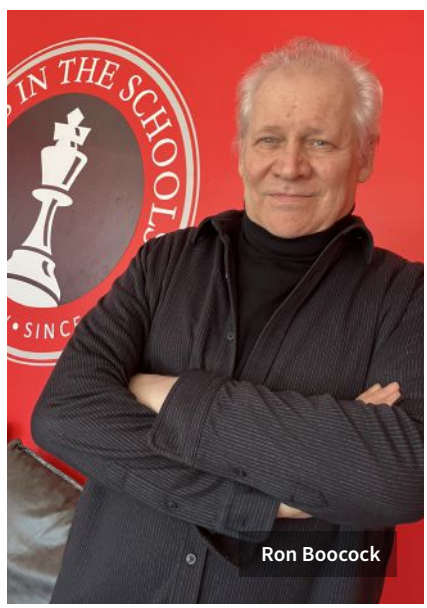
At the computer is IM Yuri Lapshun, a portly, steel-haired man in his 50s with deep-set eyes. He's a long-time instructor with Chess in the Schools — one of several international masters on their roster.

P.S. 180, also known as the SEEALL Academy (Students Educationally Enriched As Learning Leaders), is a "chess school": It's home to a thriving after-school club with a winning record.

Before the class files in, Lapshun shows me a local news clipping on the computer from a few years ago, titled "Brooklyn students take 1st place in National Chess Championships for 2nd year." It's an article recording the chess team's success at the 2023 National Middle School Championships in Round Rock, Texas, where they won first place in the Under 1400 section and second in the Under 1100 section.

During the lesson, Lapshun maneuvers the pieces on the screen, showing the students the rules of castling. In the back of the room, Ron Boocock watches quietly. Boocock, a tall, broad-cheeked man with white hair, is the director of the organization's school program. He visits the schools to observe the teachers and see how the classes are going.

"For us, we want the kids to get the best 45 minutes of chess education," Boocock says in an interview a few days before the school visit.



Ron Boocock

PHOTO: JACK MOORE

Courtesy of US Chess

Chess in the Schools, which was founded in 1986, operates in Title I schools — those with a significant portion of students from low-income families. Instructors teach five classes a day and then help run after-school chess clubs.

"A child comes in, doesn't know what chess is, has no idea," says Boocock, who speaks in a deliberate, quiet voice with a British accent. "So we teach them how to play the game of chess. And then, it grows. It grows from them, not from us. We give them the opportunity."

There may be more organizations teaching chess to New York City students these days, but none of them has had the long track record of Chess in the Schools — or the impact.

Corbblah, the chess instructor at Trinity, likens the organization to "the fertile crescent" for its outsized impact on the city's scholastic chess scene, borrowing the anthropology term for the region that gave birth to some of the world's earliest civilizations.

Corbblah got his start there. So did Spiegel, the chess teacher at I.S. 318; Sean O'Hanlon, the chess teacher at Speyer Legacy, and chess teacher David McEnulty, who later wrote about his chess-teaching experiences in *Knights of the South Bronx,* which was adapted into a TV movie starring Ted Danson.

In the early 2000s, Boocock was teaching art at a Catholic school in the East Village when he saw an ad in the Sunday New York Times: "'Chess in the schools' — I thought, that's a great idea," he recalls from his office on the 22nd floor of an office building in Midtown Manhattan.

Boocock had lived a sort of wanderer's existence before landing in New York: London, Paris and Berlin. When he started teaching chess, he wondered whether he might finally start running in posher circles.

"I thought, I'll go to schools on the Upper East Side and make tons of money," he says. "The next minute I'm in the South Bronx. Like, what?"

His first day came the week of the Sept. 11 terror attacks: "So I walked into a classroom and I was very nervous, because I was wondering how the kids were going to react, because that was a big one. And I walked through the door and they all cheered and said, 'Yay, chess!' So I said, 'Cool. I'll take the lead from the kids. Let's just enjoy chess.'"

The son of a dockworker, he felt an affinity for the students he was teaching in Washington Heights and the South Bronx. "I'm from Liverpool; that's basically the Bronx of Great Britain, OK?" he says. "And I got out through education — I went to college — and now I'm doing that with these kids."

For years, the organization's free monthly tournaments have been, in many ways, the cornerstone of the city's scholastic chess scene. In the classroom, though, teachers try to meet kids at their level.

"We're not forcing them," Boocock says, launching into a bit of reenactment. "'Do you like chess? Do you want to join the chess club? Fantastic. Would you like to go to a tournament?' It's very holistic. We're not stuffing kids through a pipe."

When Boocock joined the organization, the organization was supported by the munificence of investment banker and New York arts patron Lewis Cullman, who championed the organization as an "Angel Benefactor" and funded many of its programs. Cullman died in 2019.

Courtesy of US Chess

"Fundraising was quite straightforward with Lewis around. Now, it's a bit more challenging," Boocock says.

While the program's offerings for students are free for students, they're not cheap to operate. The organization charges schools some fees, but overall spends more than $1.2 million to run its schools program, and about half that much to put on its free monthly tournaments and run its "College-Bound" program, which engages high school students to help run the monthly competitions, takes them on college visits and helps with the college application process.

The disruptions of COVID-19 on the school system took a toll on the organization. And then there's the search for teaching talent.

At its peak, before the Great Recession, Chess in the Schools operated in more than 100 schools all across the city; they operate in less than half that many now. They had more than 40 instructors on staff; now, there are 12.

In part, that's because the organization shifted its staffing models: All instructors are on salary and receive benefits, in addition to regular training and professional development opportunities. That provides more stability and a better quality of life for instructors, but makes having a larger staff much more expensive. There's also more competition for hiring chess teachers, with so many more organizations all vying for talent to run their programs.

"It's not easy," Boocock acknowledges. "We're doing OK."

Coming up on 40 years in operation, Chess In the Schools organizers are still thinking of new ways to bring chess to New York City's young people, including a recently launched digital offering for kids in schools where the organization doesn't have programs.

Under the direction of CEO Jenny Ingber, who took over in 2023 after running education programs at the American Museum of Natural History, the organization has commissioned a study to evaluate the impact of its chess programming on educational outcomes of students.

"We're still looking for different ways to expand, to grow," Boocock says.

Back at P.S. 180, the lesson on castling has ended; the lights flip back on. Out come roll-up boards and Ziploc bags full of chess pieces. For the rest of the 45-minute class period, the students get a chance to play. Yuri Lapshun and Boocock circulate around the tables, offering guidance, refereeing a few disputes.

Boocock takes on a quiet, philosophical tone when I ask what the kids in the program learn from chess — about the game and about life.

"You're on your own. It's you on a board against someone else," he says. "And you have the same material when you start a game of chess, and then it's about what you've learned and how strong you are as a student. ... The more you take it seriously, the more you enjoy it."

PHOTO: JOHN HARTMANN