

# A Sporting Chance

There's a move on to make chess a varsity sport in New York City's public high schools.

BY IRENE BANTIGUE



ON THE FIRST SATURDAY IN May, Eric Zheng arrives at M.S. 582, in East Williamsburg, at 7:30 a.m. A senior and captain of the chess team at Edward R. Murrow High School, Zheng isn't up early to compete. He's overseeing a

tournament that gathers some 600 students of every skill and grade level — all vying for top spots in New York City's scholastic chess scene.

Already a respected tournament director at just 17, Zheng's journey with chess began in his earliest years. What started as simply following in his older brother's footsteps quickly grew into a personal passion.

Among the benefits of chess, he says, are a

like-minded community of peers and a boost in analytical and pattern recognition skills. This enhanced capacity for critical thinking is especially important to him, as he plans to major in electrical engineering in college.

At the tournament, Zheng wears a bright yellow shirt bearing the logo of the event host, Chess in the Schools. Sporting glasses and a welcoming smile, he helps set up the chessboards, collect results, and guide players and parents throughout the sprawling middle school.

"And while you're here," he says, "you can watch other people play chess."

It's a fitting remark from the high schooler, who a week later traveled with his team to

compete at SuperNationals VIII, in Orlando, Florida.

The only previous time Zheng attended SuperNationals was back in elementary school. He missed out on the event as a middle schooler in 2021, when it was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fortunately, money isn't a concern for Zheng. Murrow covers all associated costs — ranging from plane tickets and hotel rooms to entrance fees, which vary from \$100 to \$350 — ensuring that financial constraints don't prevent students from competing.

But Zheng understands that this is a rarity among high schools. He says some dropoff in participation among older students is just the natural process of trying out different sports, but that "what I've actually noticed the most is that a lot of the limitations for competitiveness are more financially based."

Zheng explains that his friends at Brooklyn Tech High School, which also boasts a strong chess team, recently attended the New York State High School Championship. However, they are often unable to attend national competitions due to a lack of funding.

As a result, many otherwise enthusiastic — and capable — high school players miss out on the full academic and social benefits that chess has afforded Zheng.

But some parents are spearheading a movement, hoping to reverse this trend.

## Uplifting the Upper Grades

At the March meeting of the Citywide Council on High Schools, a group of volunteer parents who advocate for New York City's public high school students, Manhattan representative Benjamin Morden introduced a resolution breaking from the council's recent focus on topics such as standardized testing and guidelines around artificial intelligence: He called on Schools Chancellor Melissa Aviles-Ramos and the Public Schools Athletic League, which oversees interscholastic competition in New York City public high schools, to include chess as a sport.

"We can't forget that sports also make schools worth going to for students," said Morden, the father of three daughters who are competitive chess players.

He pointed to the game's rapid rise in popularity over the past six years, noting that chess now has an estimated 600 million players worldwide.

Morden went on to explain that while



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around 1,800 elementary and middle school students registered for the 57th Annual New York State Scholastic Chess Championships, only about 200 students signed up for the high school equivalent.

This steep drop in tournament registration underscores the need for more competitive chess opportunities in the upper grades, he argued.

“It’s normal because kids develop passions for other activities,” he says in an interview via Zoom. “But I’m very convinced that many also drop off from chess because it’s tough to continue with it individually.”

While online platforms such as *Lichess.org* are useful for analyzing individual games, Morden explains, a team environment offers a more effective way to hone skills — while also helping chessplayers, like competitors in any other sport, to see failure as a chance to grow.

If the Public Schools Athletic League recognizes chess as a sport, it would create the opportunity for league play — potentially for both individual and school team championship recognition. Besides improving local scholastic competitions, Morden views this resolution as a means to foster critical thinking and enhance both student attendance and academic performance, among other benefits.

Competitive chess would be open to New York City’s public high school students, and “championships inspire students to excel,” Morden said.

Only one parent objected to the resolution. “I agree that chess is competitive and requires strategy,” said Lisa Stowe, a council representative for Queens. “But I would offer that it’s not a sport. If we’re going to call chess a sport and have PSAL sponsor [it], then I think they should sponsor e-sports and video games.”

Still, the resolution passed by a vote of 8-1. Like all CCHS resolutions, this one is nonbinding and won’t directly affect school policy.

However, according to a dozen stakeholders in New York City’s scholastic chess community interviewed for this story, it marks the first city-level effort of its kind — raising hopes that dedicated funding for the sport will soon follow.

## Renewed Possibilities

In 1981, when Eliot Weiss founded the chess team at Edward R. Murrow — initially as

an afterschool club — the high school had no varsity sports. Little did Weiss, then a newly minted math teacher, know that his chess team would become Murrow’s closest thing to one.

At first, the team’s progress was gradual; then, it took off. From its founding through 1988, Murrow steadily developed by competing in local tournaments. From 1992 through 1994, they achieved their first three-peat, winning both the state and national championships each year.

Today, Murrow’s chess team boasts eight national titles and nearly 40 city and state trophies combined.

But behind the scenes, Weiss has had to show the same grit as his students to keep the program afloat. Before 2000, the chess team relied on donations from a range of supporters, including Weiss himself; Yoko Ono, whose 1966 artwork “Play it by Trust” features an oversized, all-white chess set symbolizing the futility of war; and the late former Brooklyn borough president Howard Golden.

Since then, an anonymous donor — known publicly only as Rita — has funded the entire team. She happened to hear about Murrow’s financial needs for the national championships as she listened to 1010 WINS while riding in the back of a cab.

“Fortunately, I got money from many different private industries,” Weiss says. “But never did I get a penny from New York City Public Schools, the Department of Education, or the chancellor.”

When Weiss heard about the renewed push to recognize chess as a sport, he took the news “with a grain of salt.”

“Everyone says yes” in terms of general support, he says. “But it’s really just window dressing unless the city puts money into it.”

Globally, interest in the game has surged.

Between October 2020 and April 2022, *Chess.com* saw its monthly active users double from around 8 million to nearly 17 million. This boom was fueled in part by the release of the hit Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit*, which premiered that October. In February 2023, *Chess.com* reported that nearly 38 million games were played on its platform each day — almost triple the daily average from the previous year.

At the same time, New York City lost two major scholastic chess tournaments after the global pandemic: the Scholastic Championships and the annual Mayor’s Cup.

Chess in the Schools — the nonprofit that organized the tournament Eric Zheng directed — had previously partnered with the city to host the Mayor’s Cup, which ran from 2001 to 2018. In a Zoom interview, Shaun Smith, the organization’s director of programs, said, “We actually got more of the high school kids who were not from [Chess in the Schools] to participate in the Mayor’s Cup, because of the cachet it had,” Smith says. “People really wanted to win [it]. There was something special about that.”

But when in-person gatherings resumed after COVID-19, Smith noticed a shift: The city was now focusing less on activities such as chess and more on educational efforts, such as helping students recover from the socioemotional toll of lost classroom time.

Now, with the CCHS resolution, Smith sees renewed possibilities. “There may be a mandate to have the Mayor’s Cup in chess,” he says.

Though Smith shares some of Weiss’s concerns about long-term support, he is optimistic about the growing push to recognize chess as a varsity sport. He stresses that its success will depend on engaging not only high school students, but also committed teachers and administrators.



“The potential is there,” Smith says. “There just needs to be follow-up.”

## ‘Crying Out’

Filmmaker Katie Dellamaggiore first discovered Murrow’s chess team through a *New York Times* feature about one of its national champions, Shawn Martinez. Intrigued, Dellamaggiore dug deeper. But as her creative process unfolded, she ultimately focused on I.S. 318, the middle school where many future chess stars — including Martinez — got their start before moving on to Murrow.

The result was *Brooklyn Castle*, a 2012 documentary that followed five standout members of I.S. 318’s powerhouse chess team. In the film, Assistant Principal John Galvin proudly dubbed the young team “The Yankees of Chess.”

I.S. 318 is unique in that it offers chess as an elective. Elizabeth Spiegel, the school’s full-time chess teacher since the early 2000s, can assign homework and grades, just like any other class.

Spiegel first heard about the PSAL resolution through a parent chat within the school community. “Having a robust tournament program is a prerequisite for having a competitive team,” she says. “If you don’t get to practice, you don’t get better. I’m really excited, especially if it means [students] are going to have big tournaments.”

Galvin emphasizes that expanding opportunities for high school chess players could have a positive — albeit indirect — impact on younger students. Recognition at the city level, he notes, is meaningful and motivating in itself.

“If we give high schools a path to creating a program [through PSAL],” he adds, “it might make becoming a competitive chess player a little clearer to kids.”

The success of I.S. 318’s chess team, as the documentary highlights, isn’t just about winning tournaments — it also shows how the team overcame school budget cuts.

When asked how to ease the burden of sustaining chess programs at individual schools, Galvin pointed to a broader solution: The city needs to expand its commitment to after-school programming. He argues that schools and nonprofit providers should receive more direct funding to run their own programs.

“If New York City is one of the chess capitals in the world,” Galvin says, “how does it not have a [public] high school chess league? It’s crying out for it.”

## ‘The Infrastructure is Already There’

Two of *Brooklyn Castle*’s central figures, Alexis Paredes and Pobo Efekoro, remain involved in chess in different ways. Both express their support for the ongoing parent-led push to expand scholastic chess opportunities, noting how difficult it was to stay engaged with the game after entering high school.

“There are only positives that come from this,” Paredes, 29, says about the resolution. “[Chess] gives students a whole new avenue to not only grow as players, but also as human beings.”

After the film’s release, Paredes went on to become a master, reaching a peak rating of 2205. Since April 2020, he has also served as the director of Brooklyn programs for Impact Coaching Network, which runs team-based chess at 40 elementary schools across New York City.

Paredes started at Townsend Harris High School in Queens, which didn’t offer chess, before transferring to Edward R. Murrow for the next three years. Reflecting on his high school experiences, Paredes notes that designating chess as a sport could not only encourage older students to take it more seriously, but also spark greater interest among new players.

“They might feel a [stronger] sense of pride,” he says. “Being able to represent a team bigger than yourself is always a sweet experience.”

Pobo Efekoro, who was in seventh grade at the time of filming, is all too familiar with the joy of representing a team. Efekoro went on to become a Division I shotput athlete at the University of Virginia, earning All-American honors five times during his college career. Today, he works at Amazon and offers private chess coaching on the side.

To Efekoro, the ongoing push for chess to be included as a sport makes sense.

“The infrastructure is already there,” he says. “Chess in the Schools has been running tournaments for high school students for years, so you don’t need to reinvent the wheel. It’s almost like the city formalizing something that, from a shadow perspective, has already existed.”

Efekoro adds that when he got to Forest Hills High School, in Queens, his development as a chess player stalled due to the lack of an official program. He increasingly began to coach instead of playing, teaching on the weekends with his alma mater, I.S. 318.

“If I played more, could I have gotten expert?” he says. “Probably. I lost about 10 to 15

tournaments a year because I wasn’t playing somewhere with a high school program.”

To those who question chess’s legitimacy as a sport, the former college athlete offers this perspective: “I still get more frustrated losing a chess game than I did losing at shotput.”

He adds that not enough people talk about how exhausting chess is. “My muscles aren’t tired,” Efekoro says, “but my mind is fatigued.”

## ‘Excited to Win’

Edward R. Murrow’s chess team arrived at the convention center in Orlando — both the venue for SuperNationals VIII and their home for the next few days — in the early evening before holding an evening team practice. The first round was scheduled for 10 a.m. the following day.

Zheng typically plays chess for about 30 minutes a day. But to prepare for the tournament, he increased his practice time to one or two hours daily, playing more blitz — usually managing to complete around 20 games, with breaks.

“With chess, like any sport, you’ve got to warm up,” he says. “If you go into soccer without jogging, you might hurt your legs. If you go into a chess game without playing blitz or solving other puzzles, you might miss some obvious things.”

While Zheng prepared for his biggest tournament yet, many high schoolers stayed behind.

Benjamin Morden, who is advocating for chess to become a varsity sport, says that his two younger daughters remained in New York to study for back-to-back weeks of Advanced Placement exams. He adds that there have been no updates since the resolution passed.

“It’s going to be a process,” he says. “I don’t know if the [various city elections] are impacting policy decisions, but for obvious reasons, it’s always harder to make changes during these periods.”

In the meantime, Zheng looked forward to participating in his first SuperNationals event in nearly eight years. (He placed 28th in the K-12 Under 1600 Section.)

“I’m excited to play against players who are a lot better than me and learn from my experiences,” he says. “And I’m also excited to win.”

On June 4, the Public Schools Athletic League added chess to its 2025 High School Summer Sports, Fitness, and Recreation Program; Morden was reelected to the Citywide Council on High Schools and seeks to extend this change for the next academic year. ♠