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A philanthropy grandmaster

The philanthropist who brought chess to New York City's public schools dies

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Chess in the Schools (Image from video)

A New York moment:

Chess is ubiquitous in New York City schools nowadays (Success Academy, a large charter school network in the city, requires students [to take chess classes](#) from kindergarten through second grade). That ubiquity is partly due to New York

philanthropist Lewis Cullman, who recently **died at age 100**. In 1986, before the teaching of chess to youngsters as a life skill was popular, Lewis Cullman founded and funded a group called **Chess in the Schools**. The chess program teaches children at Title 1 schools, or schools serving primarily low-income populations.

“I believe that, given the opportunity, every child has the power to both ... succeed in life and help others,” Cullman **had said**. “But I also believe that many children are not given that opportunity.”



Lewis Cullman (Handout)

Cullman thought chess developed important critical thinking skills. He himself was a player, having learned chess from his mother who played “**correspondence chess**” via

post, according to Debbie Eastburn, who now heads Chess in the Schools.

Since 1986, Chess in the Schools has taught chess to more than 500,000 children in low-income neighborhoods in the city. This past school year, the program was in 48 New York City public schools, and taught chess to 6,000 children. The program has hosted 25 free chess tournaments around the city. One day I was walking in Central Park, and as I came around a bend I saw thousands of children playing chess in an open plaza—a Chess in the Schools tournament. It was beautiful.

One problem for the program now is partly based in Cullman's generosity. His **giving philosophy** was to eschew a foundation where his wealth would sit in perpetuity, an arrangement he saw as not much more than a tax shelter. Instead he wanted to give his hundreds of millions away while he was alive. That leaves Chess in the Schools in a bind somewhat, but mainly because of his fundraising and networking on their behalf in the business world.

"He was our biggest ambassador to convince other people about the benefits of chess," said Eastburn. Now she merely has to discover the next generation of philanthropists who want to fund chess in schools—maybe some New York public school alumni who learned chess will keep the momentum going