

“How LeBron James’ New Public School Really Is the First of Its Kind”

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Akron’s public schools have a major problem; its at-risk students are falling well behind the rest of the K-12 population in the classroom. The question the district faces now is whether LeBron James can fix that.

James’ I Promise School opened Monday to serve low-income and at-risk students in his hometown, and the public school could be an agent of change in the eastern Ohio city. The institution is the intersection of James’ philanthropic Family Foundation and the I Promise Network he helped kickstart. I Promise began as an Akron-based non-profit aimed at boosting achievement for younger students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Now the movement has the means to educate these students year-round.

What Makes the I Promise School Different

There are aspects of James’ school that are wholly unique. Here’s why the I Promise School stands out.

- I Promise is building from a model that’s shown success.
- I Promise will feature longer school days, a non-traditional school year, and greater access to the school, its facilities, and its teachers during down time for students.
- The school has also anchored its curriculum in math and science-based teaching, dipping into the STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — curriculum that prepares students for the jobs of the future.

It’s clear I Promise is designed to operate at a level beyond the typical public school by creating a more comprehensive experience for students, not just one that begins at 7 a.m. and ends at 2 p.m.

This kind of wide reform is rare to see at a traditional neighborhood school. As far as Akron’s records are concerned, though, it’s another neighborhood public school. That shows how badly James wanted his school to be a no-exceptions public school. I Promise is a full-fledged part of Akron Public Schools, the 29th elementary school in the district. This helps keep the institution inclusive to its local student body.

Funding for Supplies and Teachers

The school’s status as a public institution raises questions about funding. Per the state of Ohio, Akron’s schools were given just \$10,028 in state and local funds per student in 2016 — more than the statewide average, but still a relatively low figure for a city of a little under 200,000.

That’s not a lot of money to operate a school with such grand aspirations, which is where the LeBron James Family Foundation comes in. James’ nonprofit is the leader of a group of more than 120 donors, volunteers, and sponsors working to find the resources needed to keep exceptional educators on staff through a more demanding teaching schedule.

Since I Promise is a public school, that group also must have worked with Akron’s local teachers’ union to create a plan with which the coalition of teachers could agree. A quick look at the benefits available to those staffers shows the steps James is making to attract and retain quality educators.

The I Promise School gives teachers access to psychological services. Every Wednesday afternoon will be reserved for career development. James even hired a personal trainer to work with teachers who want a guided workout. All their supplies also are provided by the school. That was a pleasant surprise for Angela

Whorton, an intervention specialist at the I Promise School. She's been a teacher for 10 years and almost always had to spend her own money to properly stock the classroom.

Ten thousand dollars per student can't cover those services, but the buy-in from the LeBron James Family Foundation can. That will make I Promise a destination for ambitious teachers in 2018 and beyond.

I Promise Is Starting in the Middle and Expanding Outward

The school opened Monday with 240 students spread over two grades — third and fourth. From there, it will add second and fifth grades in 2019 and then expand to a first through eighth grade lineup (there are no current plans to offer kindergarten) by 2022.

I Promise School will be getting pupils who have spent their first three or four years in schools that have been given an "F" for student progress. State data suggests Akron's students as a whole demonstrate below-average literacy skills as K-3 students. This threatens to create lapses in the early stages of the new school as teachers struggle to accelerate student growth to meet I Promise's standards.

There are safeguards in place to address this problem and boost these students.

I Promise is going above and beyond to address the non-academic issues that affect classroom performance. One of I Promise's key tenets is building connections to its students and its community. Creating a comfortable home life is one of the school's core beliefs, and it stretches beyond just the student. Parents can use the institution's job and family services, study through its GED program, or design meals at the on-site food bank to cook at home. There are also counselors on staff to help children deal with the trauma that may arise in their daily life.

"I think the missing link in public education is that family wraparound support," said Brandi Davis, the school's principal. "Because our students come to school and they're worried about things at home. ... We want to create that safe, that secure and that caring and loving environment for our families and our students so that our kids can focus on education."

These students will each receive a bicycle on their first day of class as well — the tool James used to escape dangerous parts of Akron and explore his neighborhood.

LeBron James says opening school in Akron is one of the most important accomplishments in his life. Last December, James laid the mission for his school out to Theresa Cottom of the *Akron Beacon-Journal*:

"We're going to be on 'em like a school should be because we want them to be successful not only in the school, but successful in life," James said. "We're gonna give 'em everything that they need and give them criteria that they all can meet, depending on the individual. But it's going to be pretty cool to see the kids at the school the first day we open."

Now he's seen it come to life, and he's right. It was pretty cool.