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LeBron James' promise to Akron gets more ambitious

His I Promise School now includes housing, job training and health care

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LeBron's Power Plays is an occasional series examining LeBron James' two decades in the NBA and how he has influenced both professional sports and the larger culture.

AKRON, Ohio — When LeBron James was in grade school, he wondered why the maps in his classrooms showed Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus, but not Akron. Now, 20 years into his NBA career, James is building a whole world in his hometown 40 minutes south of Cleveland, an audacious community revitalization project rooted in education while encompassing everything from housing and health care to job training and a laundry.

James started with a tutoring and college scholarship program in 2011. That led to the ballyhooed opening of the I Promise School in 2018, a public school for third through eighth graders with an extensive support program funded by The LeBron James Family Foundation.

Nearly a half-decade later, the school remains. But what James, his foundation and supporters across the city have come to understand is that success in the classroom is about so much more than the actual classroom.

“It really looks like the LeBron James Family Foundation is looking at all the factors outside of school that affect students the most. Income, housing, trauma and developing really thoughtful strategies to address them using the school as the foundation for that work,” said Megan Gallagher, whose research focuses on education and housing for the Urban Institute, a Washington-based think tank. “When I think about the different models across the United States, what this looks like is that they started out with a plan to educate children. And then, at each layer, they began to understand what it would take. Now they're [getting] those resources.”

“Family matters quite a bit. Community, housing and safety matters, too,” said Brett Theodos, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute concentrating on economic development. “People who don't have sufficient housing stability can move through schools in ways that don't help. It's all connected, and it all matters.”

Here in Akron, James isn't trying to carry a team to an NBA championship. He's locked in a far more difficult campaign to create a better future for this city's children.

The I Promise School, part of Akron Public Schools, is at full capacity, with more than 600 students. That means 600 different stories, many of which deal with trauma from domestic violence, gun violence, inadequate housing and homelessness. For Victoria McGee, that's 600 challenges to earning trust, a vital starting point if I Promise is to achieve long-term tangible success.

McGee, or "Ms. Vic" to the students competing for her hugs, is director of the school's Family Resource Center, which coordinates the services funded by James' foundation. In a tour, she shows off facilities for students and their families, such as the laundry room (called "Loads of Love") and food pantry.

Trauma doesn't consume everything McGee does. But it is an undeniable presence. The I Promise School works with some of Akron's most vulnerable young minds. James recalls the days when instability at home made for even more instability in his academic life. Now, he's trying to narrow the educational and equity gap in Akron. It's an admirable goal but one that has been an uphill battle from minute one.

Low test scores, teacher turnover and a pandemic are but a few of the enormous obstacles the school has faced. Many students who enter the school in third grade are already two grades behind in reading. In September 2022, the school's test scores were among the lowest in Akron. Some parents worried about safety have taken their children out of the school.

McGee says that there was little turnover in the school's first two years. But the 2021 departure of Brandi Davis, the school's original principal, was a turning point.

"That actually brought on the staffing issue. We had people that wanted to leave because she wasn't here," McGee said. "Our seventh grade has been the most challenging because they had the most turnover. We had permanent teachers we hired and the kids were not acting so well. Acting like they do with subs and people were walking out."

These problems are not unique to the I Promise School, of course. The teacher shortage nationwide is well documented. The National Education Association teachers union says standardized testing is racially biased and has "never been accurate and reliable measures of student learning."

McGee, though, is aware of the role standardized test scores play in determining the future of students. And like any educator, she'd love for her students to score as high as possible. She just doesn't necessarily agree with its weight.

"It's a hot-button item for us because it's so much deeper than one test," she said. "We know the education system is broken. As a district and state, they're very focused on test scores, which I really don't think they should be. For myself and [The LeBron James Family Foundation], we want to look holistically ... You can have an excellent student and that student can really get the concept and then freak out when the test is in front of them."

McGee isn't alone in this assessment. For many education professionals who spoke for this story, a common throughline existed. Test scores matter ... to an extent.

“What we really hope for students is they're able to achieve life outcomes that lead them and their families to really explore and have a better opportunity at attaining their own individual dreams,” said Raymond Hart, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school systems. “It's not just test scores. It's what students are able to ultimately accomplish in their lives and livelihood.”

“There's different ways to assess kids than, ‘OK, here's 100 questions. Make sure you get 60 and then you can move on.’ That's not education,” said Akron mayor Dan Horrigan, who taught at St. Vincent St. Mary High School before James arrived there in the fall of 1999. “I'm not saying test scores can't be part of it. But it's the wrong message as a society that we send to kids that you didn't learn. Then that creates this whole mantra that fuels ‘the failing public schools.’ ... If we're going to look at public education — the resources and needs — that model may need to be altered in a way that really measures a kid's success as opposed to passing a test and you're good. Don't pass a test and you fail.”

When the I Promise School opened its doors five summers ago, it entered a long-running debate about whether success in urban public schools depends on how the students are selected. In Akron, all second graders who test in the bottom 30% of reading scores are entered into a lottery for the third grade classes at I Promise. The number of kids with learning disabilities is capped so that teachers aren't overwhelmed. If selected, a student leaves their current elementary school and attends I Promise for potentially third through eighth grades. (A child doesn't have to enroll if chosen.)

“That's how you're selected, so you can't say, ‘Oh, my gosh! I'm LeBron's third cousin and want to be in the school.’ It doesn't work like that,” said Michele Campbell, The LeBron James Family Foundation's executive director. “Then once you're in the program, we have a million wraparound supports.”

An alternative model, common among private schools, but also used in some public settings, is selective admissions. That process often winds up favoring motivated families at the risk of sacrificing access and equity. If a public lottery school is hoping to compete with private schools or schools with selective processes, it immediately finds itself at a disadvantage.

“For myself at the school-based leadership level, I think a pro of that is, you really get to see who your model works for,” said Muronji Inman-McCraw, principal at Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, which uses a lottery system. “But also the con of that is you can see really clearly who your model doesn't work for.”

“We have to do some real digging and investigating as to why a lottery system is needed in the first place. And how we have failed schools, particularly Black and brown youth, who have to be funneled into this game of chance,” said Byron McClure, director of innovation for 7 Mindsets, a curriculum company.

There are examples of successful lottery systems. One of the more well known is the Harlem Children's Zone charter schools. Its "whatever it takes" model (longer school days, support for students and their families) shares some characteristics with the direction of I Promise. But according to Gallagher of the Urban Institute, that comes with a caveat.

"Other charter schools have popped up with really similar models, but it's hard to tell whether the strategies those charter schools are employing are making a difference. And one of the reasons is because they're not connected to a broader district," Gallagher said. "What's so amazing about this model LeBron James has established is that it's an enhanced experience within the Akron public school system. That allows the world to understand what the benefits are of all these supports. The students are part of the public school system and have the same data being collected on them as other students in the school system. It's an amazing opportunity to help teach the rest of us about what matters."

When the I Promise School opened, students were offered free uniforms, free bicycles and helmets, free transportation up to two miles, and free breakfast, lunch and snacks. Now, the Family Resource Center offers students and their families medical care (including eye care), mental health support, financial literacy programming, and a full-time food pantry with everything from fresh produce to hygiene products.

The key to providing a strong education, I Promise and school districts across the country have learned, is supporting the whole child. The Department of Education has a grant program called Promise Neighborhoods aimed at improving academic and developmental outcomes of students. Another initiative called Promise Build specializes in comprehensive community development with a school anchor. It all stems from the belief that helping the community directly improves educational experiences and outcomes.

"It's also the reason school districts across the country are investing in more social workers and mental health support for students," Hart said. "It's to really make sure they're in a place where they can maximize the learning experience in a classroom."

Serious conversations happen in the Family Resource Center, often leading to tears about domestic violence and losing loved ones to guns and addiction. And what worked in 2019 may not work in 2023, a post-quarantine world where a family's needs differ.

"What we found on this journey, we've been doing this over 11, almost 12 years now, is you can provide those academic indicators to help move that needle academically," said McGee, her eyes glistening. "But if I don't know what I'm going to eat when I get home. If I'm living in my car, if I have a car, and all the other different things that go on."

One family-centered effort is the I Promise Too program, which helps parents earn their high school equivalency diploma and find employment.

"To [get my degree] while my kids were around, and show them, 'I'm not just telling you to go to school. I'm doing it myself,'" said LaShawn Sherfield, an I Promise parent and I Promise Too

graduate. “Because of this, I was able to attend a writer’s conference. I wrote a poem and didn’t think much of it until it was published. I got to meet other writers. It gave me opportunities and opened another lane for me I wasn’t really looking at. I’m older than [James], but he kinda big brother’d me in a sense.”

In 2021, the first class of students from the initial I Promise tutoring program graduated from high school and became eligible for the full ride to college that James had promised them. And now there’s a support system for them at the next level.

Every eligible I Promise student has a four-year full scholarship at the University of Akron. Since 2015, the I Promise Institute has maintained a presence on the third floor of Infocision Stadium at the University of Akron, where it provides speakers and workshops – as well as just a place to do homework – for students enrolled there, at Kent State University and for I Promise Too parents attending Stark State College in North Canton, Ohio. Public high school students across the city are invited to attend events that help get them acclimated to college.

The institute has taken on several different shapes. Much like with the I Promise School, the institute is learning in real time. When scholarships were first offered, for instance, high school seniors were required to have a 3.0 GPA, 120 hours of community service and a 20 on the ACT.

“In theory, that’s great. But if you look at some of the stats of the students we’re serving, that 20 ACT really is a barrier for them,” said Toni “Tyga” Montgomery, the institute’s director of strategy, culture and operations. This prompted several conversations with the institute’s university partners about students’ ability to do college-level work. Over time, though, an understanding that quality students weren’t always defined by test scores became the dominant train of thought.

“We had some really good partners who listened to us when we were beating this crazy drum and challenging them to do something they’d never done before and pushed them to think beyond opening doors, but really welcoming students on this campus,” Montgomery said.

For University of Akron freshmen like Diamond Jones and Areyan Lewis, who have been involved in the I Promise world since third grade, the opportunity to attend college and have advocates during each step of the process is life-changing.

“I didn’t come from the richest family, lived in the projects and I go to college now,” said Lewis, a business administration major. “I didn’t think it was possible. My mom didn’t think it was possible for me to go to college. For free at that.”

Jones, a nursing major, said, “I’m the first grandchild of all my cousins to go to college. All my little cousins look up to me. We didn’t have role models in our family who went to college and we could ask them about classes ... Now all of them want to go to college.”

Nearly a quarter of Akron residents live below the poverty line. For the city’s Black residents, the number rises to 32%.

“One of the things we recognize is that schools don’t function in isolation in their communities. They are part of the community,” said Hart. “So strengthening the community is an important part of strengthening our schools.”

So a year after the I Promise School opened, the foundation created I Promise Village a half-mile away. The 22-unit apartment building provides free transitional housing for I Promise families who need stable housing.

The project was developed by Ben Weprin, the CEO of Graduate Hotels. The Dayton native met James and Maverick Carter, the CEO of James’ SpringHill Entertainment company, while on vacation years back and asked how he could contribute to the foundation’s mission. The result was the purchase and renovation of the century-old apartment building. Daily operations and maintenance are the responsibility of the James foundation.

Its purpose is to build relationships and trust among the residents — not just in their new living arrangements but also in themselves. The village includes an on-site academic tutor, Taco Tuesdays and Friday night pizza and other community-building activities. Mental health counseling is available for anyone who lives in the building.

“It’s fun here. It can be overwhelming and tearful, but it’s life,” said Shannon “Mama S” Shippe, the Village’s residential and community director, who lives in a foundation-owned-and-renovated home across the street. “It’s change. It’s about making things better. Like I tell people, this is the opportunity to change your situation. You cannot leave here the same. You can always work on it, even just counseling or family mental health issues. Work on that while you’re here. Let this be your place to make things better.”

Down the street is the newest addition to the I Promise world – a nearly finished apartment complex called I Promise Houses. James often speaks of how the instability of his home life affected his early days in school. He missed 80 days in the fourth grade as he and his mother, Gloria, sometimes moved from couch to couch.

The city sold the two-acre site for a dollar to the East Akron Neighborhood Development Corp., which will own and operate the complex. Most of the financing was covered by the Ohio Housing Finance Agency. The 50-unit project broke ground in 2021 and will open next month with two-, three- and four-bedroom units available.

The coronavirus pandemic slowed the project, with nearly \$3 million of cost increases due to supply chain problems and staffing issues. But the I Promise brand and James’ name made hurdles easier to clear.

“This is where people forget things sometimes,” said Cheryl Stephens, CEO of the development corporation. “That their celebrity can be to the benefit of other people if they’re willing to share it. One of our funding sources changed their guidelines and [the mayor’s] team helped me figure it out because this wasn’t just the Kid from Akron. It was all of these kids from Akron who will have a better opportunity and option here.”

Crime in the area and theft of materials from the construction site are realities of investing in the area James is trying to revitalize. But Summit County, where Akron is located, has an estimated shortage of 15,000 housing units.

“A lot of our families,” Stephens said, “are in housing we wouldn’t put our enemies in.”

The housing complex includes a garden and basketball courts. Office space is available on the first floor as well as a semi-professional kitchen where classes will be held to promote healthy lifestyles for residents. The James Family Foundation will fund all the wraparound services.

“This is how you create a village of safety. You can’t walk in one of these units and say, ‘Oooh, I wouldn’t live here!’” Stephens said. “Just because you may not have a lot of money doesn’t mean you should live in less than an appreciable manner.”

Next year, residents will get another badly needed service – better access to health care. Three blocks from the housing complex, the foundation is planning a primary care facility called I Promise HealthQuarters. It will include a lab, a subsidized pharmacy operated by AxessPointe, which runs several clinics in the area and is helping to build out the I Promise facility, and mental health care from Coleman Health Services. The site will be open to the entire Akron community.

Another piece of the I Promise world – a job training facility – is opening at the end of March. House Three Thirty (after Akron’s area code) is in the former Tangier Restaurant & Cabaret, a gathering spot that once hosted performances by artists such as Tina Turner and Ray Charles. The foundation purchased the building and funded its renovation with several corporate partners. Retail, dining and event facilities will give I Promise families business experience that will prepare them for future employment opportunities. The building will also house a sports bar and museum with some never-before-seen memorabilia from James’ basketball career. The site is less than a half-mile from the I Promise school, and part of the purpose of the location was to eliminate travel hurdles for teenagers working after-school jobs.

JPMorgan Chase, a longtime partner of the James Foundation, will staff a space to provide financial advice. A Starbucks Community Store will provide job training – and coffee – for I Promise students, parents and family members. A 500-person ballroom suitable for large-scale events, a cigar room, an ice cream parlor and a pizzeria will be on site, with job and management training and creation at their core.

Like with the other wings of the I Promise universe, James is hoping to create a model that can be transferrable to communities nationwide.

“I can think of no more important investment than overcoming generational poverty than investments in children and their education,” said Theodos of the Urban Institute. “Now, will it affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of children? No. Even thousands? With time.

“But this effort matters and it matters that it’s setting an example. And it directly matters to the community that’s benefiting.”

What James is attempting to do in Akron wouldn't be possible without his celebrity or access to corporate partnerships. But what will eventually matter most is how long he stays at it.

“It's not possible to turn around a school or a community to help families in five years. I'd say probably not even 10,” said Theodos. “We're talking 15 to 30 years of committed effort across different sectors, services and domains. In part because it's a learning journey. It's a huge commitment, but it's also a long one.”

This is the most important battle of James' three-decade tenure in the public eye. There are children and parents, most of whom James will never meet, that will be affected by his dedication. There will be kids depending on James who haven't even been born yet. This battle will continue long after his basketball career is over. In many ways, he's committed his life to this cause because that's exactly what it's going to take if James, his foundation and the city of Akron are to see the change they're convinced is possible.

Perhaps that future might include establishing a policy arm. It would take the models that work in Akron and draw up legislation that can begin to curb generational poverty — the same world that James escaped, but so many others currently live in.

“One of the most valuable things that could really scale up this work [even more], if it's of interest to the foundation, is to figure out how to take the lessons from this investment and influence local and state policy,” said Gallagher. “It's not just the dollars. That's a huge part of it, but it's the accountability. It's those eyeballs. It's that platform that LeBron James has to identify big issues and then demand accountability from public officeholders to improve the conditions and processes.”

Education professionals look at what James is attempting to do and the word “daunting” is often thrown around. There will be setbacks and failures along the way. It will require patience and continued investment to see results in year 10 or 15.

“Do you know how many people believe Black people are inherently inferior? That Hispanic students cannot learn? There's funding, resources, turnover, curriculum, and leadership. You name it, it's a barrier. But what I love to see in this is what's possible,” said McClure. “I believe that young people will come back and continue developing young men and women who will then change life in Akron.”