

# LeBron James has one more career-defining moment in Ohio — opening a public school

By Tania Ganguli, Los Angeles Times on 08.03.18

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LeBron James (right) finishes a news conference in a classroom at the I Promise School in Akron, Ohio, on July 30, 2018. He partnered with the University of Akron to guarantee all of his school's students college scholarships. Photo by: Wally Skali/Los Angeles Times/TNS

AKRON, Ohio — As he drove to the school he was helping open in his hometown, LeBron James' emotions brought him back to when he was the same age as the kids who were starting school there Monday, July 30.

He remembered school meaning nothing to him. He remembered it being too far away for him to get there, especially when his mother didn't have a car. He missed 83 days of school in fourth grade.

"It was a surprise to me when I woke up and I was actually going to school," James said.

As he got older he learned about the value of an education, and how important that was to break poverty cycles.

That's why Monday mattered so much to James, the NBA's biggest star, who recently left Cleveland for the Lakers.

At 8 a.m., 240 at-risk third- and fourth-graders started at the I Promise School in Akron, Ohio. It is a public, non-charter school, just like the ones James attended as a child, but it seeks to offer all the things kids growing up like James did need to succeed. The LeBron James Family Foundation is the top donor and worked with Akron Public Schools to meet all its standards and regulations. And here, the staff attends to not just the children's education, but also the outside factors that might interfere with that education.

The kids received high-fives from the staff, and they begged their teachers to know if "Mr. LeBron" was going to visit their classrooms. Some parents who'd lost jobs asked if the school could help them find new ones, and a homeless family asked if they could get help, too.

The answers were yes, yes and yes.

"We are going to be that groundbreaking school that will be a nationally recognized model for urban and public school excellence," said Brandi Davis, the principal. "We are letting people know that it is about true wraparound support. True family integration, true compassion."

It began as an idea inside a monthly brainstorming session between James and Michele Campbell, the executive director of James' foundation.

Sometimes her job is to manage the expectations of a man who believes, on and off the court, that he can accomplish anything. In this case, she let slip an idea he latched on to right away, which was that maybe their reach would improve if they created a school, she mused.

"Well, why aren't you doing that?" James asked.

She told him the foundation wasn't ready for that kind of project, but he told her to get started anyway.

"There's nothing that she can't do," James said. "If I tell her to go build a rocket and take it to outer space, Michele can make it happen."

Like the early days of space travel, this was uncharted territory. The school district worked with the foundation. They brought together 120 stakeholders — parents, corporate sponsors, students, teachers, administrators and volunteers — to find out what students in their district really needed. Akron public schools are some of the lowest-performing in Ohio.

They settled on a program that helped teach the skills children need to handle trauma they see in their daily lives, combined with a hard math and science curriculum that would help further their education.

The school's "wraparound" services help reduce stress kids might feel when their parents are struggling financially, including job and family services, a GED program, a food pantry from which they can shop and choose their meals, and help with housing if needed. They have a seven-week summer camp program to help avoid the trouble that comes with too much free time.

Every student gets a bicycle because when James was growing up, he used one to get away from the more dangerous parts of his community. The students also get a Chromebook to complete their homework.

"I wanted to keep it as consistent and as authentic to when I was a kid," James said, while adding generous touches and technology.

The children were randomly selected from a pool of Akron students whose reading levels were a year or two behind where they should be.

"And then we got to make these awesome phone calls to parents to say, 'Hi, would you like to be a part of something new, something different? The I Promise School,'" said Keith Liechty-Clifford, the coordinator of school improvement for Akron Public Schools.

This renovated, stately brick building sits between a McDonald's and a convenience store. Inspirational quotes wallpaper the interior and the entrance is decorated with James' game-worn shoes, which will be sold as a fundraiser. Some walls are painted with murals of such figures as Martin Luther King Jr., Muhammad Ali and Jackie Robinson.

To truly provide emotional and psychological services for at-risk children and their families requires well-trained and supported teachers. The I Promise School gives teachers access to psychological services. Every Wednesday afternoon will be reserved for career development, and 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.

She's spent her own money here, too, but for personal touches. She bought a black rug that functions like a red carpet and put stars on it so the students feel special walking into the room. The writing utensils in her room are topped with white artificial flowers.

From her classroom on the second floor, Whorton pointed out of a window to a neighboring home's modest backyard. She moved to Akron when she was in eighth grade.

"Through those trees was my backyard," Whorton said. "And I used to dream big. At the time my mom was struggling as a single parent. She promised us that if we had an education we could be and do anything we needed to be."

When they didn't have electricity, Whorton's mom lit candles so she and her brother could do their homework. When the plant where she worked shut down, Whorton's mom went back to school and took two jobs to care for her children. She'd stand in line at the food bank to make sure she had something to feed her kids.

Whorton knows just how valuable the school she works in can be in this community. Sunday afternoon her family got a closer look at the school and she couldn't stop her tears.

"The family wraparound approach is going to help the community," Whorton said. "Right from my window. Looking at my backyard where I used to dream. There's nothing more electric than that."

A two-hour ceremony followed the end of the first day of school, and at its conclusion, James spoke to the crowd. He laughed at someone who shouted "wee wee," his mother's nickname growing up, and he paused for a moment when a man in the back of the audience shouted, "We love you!"

Michael Barkley wore a shirt celebrating the Lakers' 2009 championship, and had his granddaughter with him. Barkley's daughter, Linea Wade, is a teacher at the I Promise School.

James looked back into the crowd for a moment.

"I love you too, man," James said. "I really do. Know no matter if I'm playing in Los Angeles or not, Akron, Ohio, is always home for me. Always."

**Quiz**

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. *As he drove to the school he was helping open in his hometown, LeBron James' emotions brought him back to when he was the same age as the kids who were starting school there Monday, July 30.*
2. *As he got older he learned about the value of an education, and how important that was to break poverty cycles.*
3. *In this case, she let slip an idea he latched on to right away, which was that maybe their reach would improve if they created a school, she mused.*
4. *And here, the staff attends to not just the children's education, but also the outside factors that might interfere with that education.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4

2 Read the paragraphs below.

*They settled on a program that helped teach the skills children need to handle trauma they see in their daily lives, combined with a hard math and science curriculum that would help further their education.*

*The school's "wraparound" services help reduce stress kids might feel when their parents are struggling financially, including job and family services, a GED program, a food pantry from which they can shop and choose their meals, and help with housing if needed. They have a seven-week summer camp program to help avoid the trouble that comes with too much free time.*

HOW is the article's CENTRAL idea developed in these two paragraphs?

- (A) They describe the types of additional support offered by I Promise.
- (B) They show how the academic curriculum at I Promise was designed.
- (C) They suggest that LeBron James struggled with many of the same challenges as a child.
- (D) They explain the challenges faced by students growing up in low-income communities.

3 WHY does the author include information about James' childhood?

- (A) to explain why James leaving Cleveland to play for Los Angeles is a significant event
- (B) to highlight why the experience of low-income kids in Akron is personal to James
- (C) to show the importance of wraparound services for keeping strong teachers in the classroom
- (D) to describe how the LeBron James Family Foundation has gotten involved in public education

- 4 Read the following paragraph from the article.

*When they didn't have electricity, Whorton's mom lit candles so she and her brother could do their homework. When the plant where she worked shut down, Whorton's mom went back to school and took two jobs to care for her children. She'd stand in line at the food bank to make sure she had something to feed her kids.*

WHY does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to help the reader understand the importance of I Promise to the Akron community
- (B) to help the reader understand educational inequity in the United States
- (C) to help the reader understand the challenges associated with growing up in a low-income community
- (D) to help the reader understand the ongoing support James is providing to I Promise

**Answer Key**

- 1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?
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