



WHAT DOES RESEARCH HAVE TO SAY ABOUT LEBRON'S NEW SCHOOL?



This summer, to great fanfare, the *I Promise School* opened in Akron, Ohio, the hometown of basketball player LeBron James. The NBA star's foundation has committed about \$2 million in the first year, as well as \$2 million or more annually as the school builds to its 1,000-student capacity in 2022. This funding will provide resources to supplement those provided by the school district.

Opened with 240 third and fourth graders, all of whom are struggling academically, the school will eventually serve students in grades one through eight. James has received plenty of praise for his investment. But what does research have to say about the *I Promise* approach? Over the years, NEPC and its fellows have published research on many of the features that the school has included.

- ***I Promise* will receive additional resources from the LeBron James Family Foundation:** Money matters, according to a recent NEPC brief by Fellow William Mathis. "Gains from investing in education are found in test scores, later earnings, and graduation rates," Mathis writes. In a report co-authored by Fellow Bruce Baker, Ohio receives an A for overall funding fairness, but it ranks only in the middle of the pack on indicators like the percent of gross state product put toward education.
- ***I Promise* is a traditional public school, not a private school or charter:** Unlike other celebrities who have supported K-12 schools, James has elected to partner with a school district, opening *I Promise* as a traditional public school. NEPC-affiliated researchers have addressed issues of charter school access,

segregation, innovation, funding, online charters, and performance. This body of research highlights the variation of policies, practices and outcomes among charters, but it also offers cautions about the downsides of public funding being shifted to privately run schools. NEPC-affiliated researchers have also found that public schools match or outperform private schools once demographics are taken into account.

- **Class sizes will be capped at 23 students:** An NEPC brief, *Does Class Size Matter?*, finds that class size is an important determinant of a variety of student outcomes, ranging from test scores to broader life outcomes. Smaller classes are particularly effective at raising achievement levels of low-income and minority children.
- **I Promise will offer longer school days and an extended school year:** School days run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., July through May, with camps offered in the seven weeks between school years. Research indicates that students from low-income families in particular benefit not only from more learning time, but from better use of school time. (Forty percent of Akron children live in poverty). Good uses for additional time may include “off-campus student internships, a second shift for teachers, or strategic partnerships with other public agencies or community organizations to create high-quality teaching and learning opportunities,” according to *Leveraging Time for School Equity: Indicators to Measure More and Better Learning Time*, a report that, along with an interactive website, was created by a group of NEPC-affiliated researchers for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
- **The school has a Family Resource Center:** Such centers are hallmarks of so-called community schools that offer services such as food pantries and GED classes for families. “The evidence base on well-implemented community schools and their component features provides a strong warrant for their potential contribution to school improvement,” an NEPC policy brief finds.
- **The school will have a STEM focus:** In an NEPC review of *A Complete Education*, the Obama administration’s plan to implement a comprehensive education for all students, Beth Warren makes the case that subjects like arts and social studies should not be subordinated to STEM. All of these areas, along with literacy, have an “intrinsic educational value” and could be part of “strongly interdisciplinary approaches.”
- **I Promise alumni who graduate from high school will get free college tuition to the University of Akron:** NEPC Fellow Gary Miron has been evaluating the Kalamazoo Promise, the forerunner of these tuition-guarantee approaches, which offers graduates of the Kalamazoo, MI school district free college tuition at any Michigan public college or university. Miron and his co-authors’ findings include:
 - The program has led to improvements in the climate of Kalamazoo schools,

- The inception of the program is associated with an [increase in the enrollment](#) in Kalamazoo Public Schools, and
- Awareness of the Kalamazoo Promise is associated with [higher levels of student aspirations](#).
- **All of the students admitting to *I Promise* are struggling academically:** While this element of the school is in many ways commendable, decades of research on tracking or grouping students by ability indicate that this practice may lead to a host of undesirable impacts, including a watered-down curriculum, lower expectations, higher rates of discipline problems, and less student engagement, an [NEPC policy brief finds](#).

So are the approaches of *I Promise* in line with research? For the most part, yes: Practices such as providing additional resources, reducing class size, offering wraparound services like food pantries, extending learning time, and offering free college tuition to graduates are all associated with positive outcomes. But the school may face challenges in educating a large population of struggling students rather than creating heterogenous classes of children with higher and lower levels of performance. And the school's STEM focus could end up shortchanging other important subjects such as social studies and the arts.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

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