



# INCREASING COLLEGE COMPLETION FOR GENERATIONAL CHANGE

“We are family” is all one really needs to know to understand the I Promise program created by the LeBron James Family Foundation (LJFF). The foundation’s focus is on family, and family is much, much more than relatives or the people in your home. Family is anyone and everyone who can help a young Akron student succeed. If that student happens to live in a low-income, single-parent home, as did the young LeBron James, then that student does not need to be limited in achieving his or her dreams by household circumstances. All students in the program become part of a much larger family—teachers, mentors, tutors, after-school program directors, coaches, college counselors, community partners and all the other caring adults who engage in the I Promise program. Everyone becomes part of the “We” in “We are family.”

The young LeBron James, one of the most accomplished athletes of all time, needed much more than his considerable talent and a devoted parent to survive, let alone succeed, growing up in Akron, Ohio. He needed family, and he created one along the way. Now James, his immediate family, and his closest colleagues are focused on creating family for a steadily growing group of low-income Akron-area students with a clear goal in mind: tangible, transformational change in the region, not only for these students, but also for their families. As described by LJFF executive director Michele Campbell, “We’re creating a model for generational change here in Akron.”

Generational change cannot start in high school. Campbell, a former assistant dean of student life at the University of Akron, understands that preparation for college success begins in the earliest grades. Generational change also does not occur through isolated acts of generosity and kindness, but rather, needs to be connected to a larger action-oriented agenda for what can be.

Akron students who participate in the I Promise program are not alone in their journeys. The I Promise family supports them at every step in their journeys. Students can feel their extended family cheering them on—in the classroom, on the playing field or stage, on the University of Akron campus, and other familiar Akron sites. The I Promise family is always there, all the time.

I PROMISE school elementary students enjoy the playground.



## I Promise

LeBron James established his family foundation in 2004, during his early career years with the Cleveland Cavaliers. The LJFF started out by undertaking traditional charitable and educational activities. For example, beginning in 2008, the LJFF sponsored an annual “Bike-a-thon” to bring together Akron families for a day of service and fun. The “Bike-a-thon” was a visible reminder of how a bicycle gave freedom to a young James, who would explore Akron beyond his own neighborhood, play basketball with students from other schools, and imagine a life beyond the one he knew. The “Bike-a-thon” was a typical “one and done” event with only short-term expectations and limited impact.

Then James made the decision to move his professional basketball career from the Cleveland Cavaliers to the Miami Heat. However, James was highly-identified with Akron—his image was everywhere. James and his foundation team did some soul searching to understand his responsibility to Akron and how the foundation could make a more meaningful difference. Hosting events was great for community-building, but were they really contributing to consequential change in Akron?

James saw education as “the driving force of change,” even though his own formal education had not included college. James recognized that most people need college degrees to pursue professional success. So, to ensure such success for young people in Akron, he created the I Promise program in 2011 and focused his attention and the foundation’s resources on a class of Akron Public School third-graders. The goal: stay in school. With a keen appreciation of the “life-changing power of education,” the I Promise program brought comprehensive resources, incentives, and support to these students and their families.

Within four fast years, the I Promise program continued to grow—adding a new class of third graders each year. Its programming and interventions also matured along with the students, who are now in middle and high school. In partnership with the University of Akron, the LJFF then made a bigger commitment to these students: A guarantee that all eligible I Promise students will be awarded four-year college scholarships. By 2016, the LJFF established the I Promise Institute at The LeBron James Family Foundation College of Education on the University of Akron campus. As a year-round, around-the-clock resource center, the 7,000 square foot I Promise Institute is a critical vehicle for acquainting younger students with life on a college campus. After all, the goal is not simply to get students to college, but to help them graduate from college. A group of experts, known as The Bureau, was also established to advise on the I Promise program’s research and development needs, and strengthen Akron’s post-secondary pathways to college, military, or workforce.

I PROMISE school students participate in class.



## FAMILIES MATTER

Families were an integral part of the I Promise program design from the start. Through the school's Family Resource Center, parents can earn their GEDs, gain language proficiency from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and access career development support. In this way, the I Promise School is educating entire families. No longer deterred by expenses, parents can access the resources to earn GEDs through the I Promise Too program.

One such parent is Emily Ross, a high-school drop-out and single mother of four, who was working hard to support her family with a minimum-wage job. After her daughter Morgan joined the I Promise program, Emily entered the I Promise Too program, where she was paired with a mentor from the JP Morgan Chase partnership "Chase Your Dreams." The I Promise Too program covers expenses such as course costs, laptops, and exam fees. Having earned her GED, Emily is now working as a Chase bank teller, earning more, and seeing potential for career advancement. Through I Promise Too, prospects for Akron parents are also improving.

Knowing that the I Promise program was changing the life trajectories for now over a thousand third-graders led to the LJFF's most ambitious effort to date: The I Promise School. Created in partnership with Akron Public Schools, Campbell describes the I Promise School as nothing less than "an effort to remake urban education." The I Promise School's motto: "Nothing is Given. Everything is Earned." The inaugural class of 240 third- and fourth-graders were selected by lottery from a pool of qualifying students based on need. Now, LJFF is working to grow the program and extend to eighth grade by 2022. Along with a STEM-focused curriculum and an emphasis on experiential learning, the I Promise School provides comprehensive academic, emotional, and career support for its students. The LJFF has also worked with the Tech for Social Good team of JP Morgan Chase to develop software to track student progress as they work towards earning their college scholarships.

I Promise students receive steady support from their teachers and program-related staff; such consistent, positive attention contributes to the self-confidence of students, especially those who have experienced adult abandonment or neglect. James is their chief cheerleader, and he communicates directly through letters, phone calls, and video messages throughout the year. In his "I'm Just a Kid from Akron" messages, he urges the I Promise students to excel, and gives recognition to those who do so; they know he's paying attention to their efforts, and that he cares.

## Pathway to College

From its early days as a single class of third-graders, the I Promise program has grown to more than 1,300 students from third to tenth grade and will continue to grow as classes are added. The first class of I Promise students will graduate from high school in 2021. A pipeline of I Promise college-ready students is being filled in Akron and will continue to expand exponentially each year. The LJFF and the University of Akron have committed to obtaining and providing full, four-year scholarships for all of the eligible I Promise students who meet both academic and community service requirements. In-state tuition and fees currently total about \$10,000 per year. On its 218-acre campus, the University of Akron offers more than 200 associate, bachelor, masters, and doctoral degrees, and serves a diverse population of 21,000 students via full-time, part-time, and online courses.

The I Promise Institute at the University of Akron is gearing up for the arrival of the first I Promise high school graduates, who will receive ongoing support there. Most I Promise students at the University of Akron will be first-generation college students and will need personalized guidance to ensure degree completion. Over the next few years, the Institute will test and refine interventions with current students at the University of Akron, where half the students are Pell eligible and a reported 15 percent are under-represented minorities.

“

Know who you are serving. Just taking the time to listen requires no dollars”

– MICHELE CAMPBELL

I PROMISE school students engage in an interactive lesson.



In constructing the entire pathway for I Promise students from third grade to college degree completion, the LJFF is not trying to create the perfect model for success but instead is embracing iteration. Realistically, a sense of urgency prevails. In responding to critics, Campbell says “the students can’t wait until we have all the answers. We have them for a very brief time.” To better meet student needs in the here and now, Campbell urges others to simply listen to current students and their families, and “ask, what more do you need?” Most of all, she implored others to “know who you are serving. Just taking the time to listen requires no dollars.”

The LJFF is also bringing I Promise program elements to 38 other Akron public schools, often through the Hard Work Club, an afterschool initiative. To fill other program gaps, the LJFF is working with local institutional partners to build new community capacities, such as tiered mentoring programs. As part of for-credit courses, University of Akron education students learn effective mentoring skills, and then work on-site with middle school students. This intergenerational approach is also used with 330 Ambassadors, a resource comprised of Akron High School students who mentor elementary students. One 330 Ambassador, Aaron Brown, described his mentoring experience through all four of his high school years as “life-enriching,” and said, “it impacted my mindset to work harder and give back.”

To bring its resources to the neighborhood level across Akron, the LJFF has created multiple advisory boards and established relationships with twenty-three (and counting) community partners. To find community partners that are a “good fit” LJFF engages them in a multi-step review process. Campbell has learned that “the We are Family approach is not for everybody.” The community partners that “fit” fully understand that the entire family is always there for the I Promise student—for not just the victories, but, even more importantly, for the disappointments.

## Long-term Orientation

In approaching their work as “generational change,” the LJFF distinguishes itself in planning for the long-term while acting effectively and intensely in the short-term. The organizing design principle of We are Family says that the relationships are for keeps, and not to be taken for granted or tossed away. The promise in “I Promise” is one that is meant to be kept—by the students, and by James, his family, friends, and everyone else engaged in this endeavor to transform Akron lives.

Regardless of where he plays, Akron is home for LeBron James, and, through his family foundation, he is helping young people in Akron achieve their professional and personal dreams. They, too, hope to be champions, and agents of change.

Written by [Jane L. Polin](#),  
Philanthropic Advisor

For more on the I Promise  
program and the LeBron  
James Family Foundation, visit  
[lebronjamesfamilyfoundation.org](http://lebronjamesfamilyfoundation.org).

This case study is one of 12 in a suite of case studies focused on how donors are supporting scholarships to create change. These case studies showcase the rich and varied narratives of giving in the scholarships space, giving insight to the philanthropy landscape and approach for foundations, academics, and practitioners.

The case studies have been developed in companionship with Candid's project [Scholarships for Change](#), a dynamic hub that pulls together data and knowledge to tell the story of how philanthropic dollars are supporting transformative scholarships. It includes a mapping tool and a repository of reports and case studies to learn from peers. The site was made possible through the generous support of The Ford Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Please visit [scholarshipsforchange.org](http://scholarshipsforchange.org) to explore further.

GrantCraft harnesses the practical wisdom of funders worldwide to improve the practice of philanthropy. Visit [grantcraft.org](http://grantcraft.org) to access our free resource library.

©2019 Candid. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, [creativecommons.org/licenses/by0nc/4.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by0nc/4.0).