

A surprising way to intervene, restore, and build community

The impact of athletics at IPS has been nothing short of phenomenal - for students, families, and the community at large.



by Ayesha Cotton, Managing Attorney and Willie McGee, IPS/LJFF Athletic Director

Community Legal Aid is honored to partner closely with LeBron James Family Foundation's I Promise School in Akron. This one-of-a-kind school is a melting pot that services students from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. In addition to a high-quality STEM education, I Promise's strong and resilient students and their families are supported with wrap-around services and trauma support as they work hard to disrupt the status quo, achieve academic and life successes, move past barriers, and shift personal and community narratives. By placing an attorney on-site at IPS, Community Legal Aid's "I Promise Community Lawyering Project" brings the power of the law to the broad array of other wraparound services. The attorney provides direct legal services and education, community engagement, and policy advocacy to help level the playing field for 1,600 hard-working children and their families.

Today's Big Ideas is written as a collaboration by CLA's I Promise Attorney Ayesha Cotton and IPS/LeBron James Family Foundation's Athletic Director Willie McGee. Together they highlight the surprisingly powerful impact of athletics on the IPS families - and how the addition of sports teams dramatically deepened the already broad toolbox the school uses to help its students reach their full potential. If you thought an attorney at school was out of the box - our attorney is also the track coach!

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Anyone who knows Akron knows LeBron James. And most know about his [I Promise School](#). Mr. LeBron (as the students call him) and his team act boldly on the school's vision to "educate the whole person" with a focus on youth who are "already falling behind and in danger of falling through the cracks".

Over the years, a lot has gone right for many of the students and families engaged in the I Promise movement. In short, the school's commitment to wraparound support and family engagement works.

But last year, we all saw a new kind of magic in action. Historically inaccessible kids were reached, school pride exploded, parent engagement levels rose, and connections throughout the IPS family strengthened.

That magic came in the form of athletics.

New for the 2022-2023 school year, the IPS junior high offered students the opportunity to participate in school sports. Last year was the inception of boys and girls basketball, cheer, step, and track and field. For the 2023-2024 year, the school added a soccer team to its lineup. For many students, this has been the first opportunity to participate in organized sports. Because IPS considers participation in sports to be a privilege and honor, students must meet rigorous GPA standards that are higher than statewide requirements. All student athletes must also participate in study groups and community service projects and meet a code of conduct.

The impact of athletics at IPS has been nothing short of phenomenal - for students, families, and the community at large.

At the student level, the athletics experience is reaching and motivating more kids in a more effective way. For some, athletics may be the best motivating force. Missing school may not sound like the worst thing, but missing the game is something different altogether. Putting in effort, showing up, taking care of your body, and getting good grades all suddenly matter more when participation in your beloved sport is on the line. These student athletes are learning the invaluable life lessons that come with participation in team sports: perseverance, responsibility, managing emotions, accountability, dealing with strengths and weaknesses, and facing cuts. These skills are critical for individual and team success, and athletics provide a safe place to practice them as you practice your shots, sprints, and kicks. As first year teams, many took it on the chin last year. But they learned how to turn that into motivation and are coming back stronger than ever.

At the school level, IPS has always operated under the philosophy "We Are Family". With the introduction of athletics, the feeling of unity is stronger than ever. Suddenly, we are all teammates; everyone knows what it means to support a team. Students now understand what it means to be part of something bigger than yourself.

IPS really brought the spirit! Our fan base is so big, we often call ahead so our rival host teams can prepare. Along with this, our school's sense of pride developed. While being an IPS student is an immeasurable honor, no young person wants to feel labeled as needing extra help. Athletics gives us a new way to define ourselves and find that sense of self-worth. Now, students feel good about wearing their IPS gear out in the community. It's no stretch to see how these feelings can improve self-image and help young people actualize success and well-being.

At the family level, we are engaging parents and guardians in a new way. Parents are now seeing teachers and counselors in the stands, cheering for and caring about their children. Likewise, school personnel see the joy on the parents' faces as they watch their children compete. Relationships that may have felt uncomfortable or distant are changing for the better. Parents are reaching out to school personnel at higher rates. Some are casting a fresh lens on their child's needs - that timely ride, that good night's sleep, and that homework assignment are all looking that much more important. Teachers and staff are also making such different phone calls home. Now rather than revisiting a recurring behavioral issue, we're talking about how much the child needs that team experience and how we can support them to make it happen.

At the community level, we are seeing kids and families build stronger connections both inside and outside the school building. When the students get to know their teacher or counselor as a coach, their comfort with and trust in that adult increases dramatically. As we like to say, "kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Imagine the difference this rapport makes when it comes to all the important academic and socioemotional things that happen in a classroom. Connections outside of school are happening as well. For example, practices take place at local churches and community service at locales throughout the city. This means our kids and families are getting to know pastors, parishioners, and local business owners and seeing new places and faces as safe havens, role models, and sources of support.

Finally, from the systemic level, the addition of sports into an existing wraparound model can dramatically expand the toolbox. With some simple steps and an open mindset, many other educational and youth-serving organizations can realize the same benefits. What might it look like if sports regularly became part of action plans, behavior plans, or IEPs in school? We already know - anecdotally - that all it takes to help some kids regulate is a 15 minute break from class to talk and dribble a ball. How can we capture this impact for every kid who needs it through a systemic response? With just a year of sports under our belts we are already seeing more kids and families asking for help on deeper-rooted issues. Many of these requests are happening at games, matches, and meets. What started as a conversation about a late pickup ends as a conversation about the family's eviction as the root of the problem. This shows us again what we already know - that the more integrated the helpers are into the community they are helping, the more impactful they will be. At IPS, athletics is proving to be a highly effective way to achieve this integration.

There is always a wealth of inspiring stories at IPS - and this is more evident than ever since athletics came to the school. For instance, we have a student who loves basketball. He made the first IPS team but struggled to control his emotions and actions. After several chances, he had to be removed from the team. This was a huge loss for him, but taught him about consequences and accountability. He came back in year two having learned to be more disciplined and accountable. With fresh resolve, he made the team. In his first game, he scored twenty

points. He's better than the coaches suspected - maybe even better than he knew he was. He got a taste of what it feels like to have his teammates depend on him. What it feels like to have people cheer his name. And perhaps most importantly, has been able to identify and verbalize his triggers in this game he's so passionate about. He's even working on the wraparound support side to make sure his family has what they need so he can get to school on time and stay eligible for the team.

Sports as a piece of a child's wraparound support is a no-brainer. It's easy. It's powerful. It's healthy. It's even fun. A lawyer or counselor as a coach may be out of reach in most models - but there are surely many creative ways we can weave the power of athletics into existing relationships and services. As we like to say, figure out how to "use the game, and don't let the game use you". The addition of sports to the equation will mean otherwise unreachable kids are finally reached. And it doesn't get much more powerful than that.

*Name and details withheld to preserve confidentiality

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