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# How a New York charter school named for a Basketball Hall of Famer is fulfilling hoop dreams

*The aim of the Earl Monroe New Renaissance Basketball School is to give students a chance to thrive at a major university or professional sport.*



**Scooby Axson**

NEW YORK — On a recent Thursday morning in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, nearly 100 ninth-grade students file into a building that used to house a Catholic school to begin another day of class.

But the sign and name on the outside of the building can fool most who don't know what's going on inside. The Earl Monroe New Renaissance Basketball School, named after the New York Knicks legend and Hall of Famer, is one of the city's newest charter schools. Its aim is giving students the best chance to thrive and succeed in an environment of a major university or professional sports team.

Although Monroe's name is attached, that doesn't mean that most members of the student body have dreams of playing professional basketball. It's actually the opposite.

The students selected to attend the school are chosen through a New York City lottery system, providing applicants an equal chance. More than 600 families

registered for 110 spots in the April 7 lottery to fill the second class with plans to add 110 students per school year.

The non-profit, tuition-free school still has to meet New York state educational standards, but these students are learning more than the core basics of math and English; courses in computer science, entrepreneurial business, science and kinesiology, sports journalism, and language also are part of the curriculum.

Students must wear their given uniforms and receive Google Chromebooks to aid in their studies.

“We are teaching them skills and exposing them to the career paths around the game of basketball that’s transferable,” said principal Dr. Kern Mojica.

“The goal is that we are marrying passion and opportunity together. We want our students on a college or career path. We want 100% graduation, but college is not for everyone.”



The school is also evolving into an ICT model (Integrated Co-Teaching), which allows it to have two teachers per classroom, one for general education and one for special education.

This morning starts on an upbeat note. Some of the 13 faculty members on staff notice that the students' smiles are wider than usual; maybe because it's the last day of school before Spring Break. Students file in the front door where they are met by a security guard, who checks them in and uses a hand-held metal detector to check for contraband.

It's on to the gymnasium where a dozen students are working up a light sweat by jogging around the basketball court before settling in for a day packed with classes.

In one class, "Sports Foundations," the first thing that might turn heads is a student getting a lesson in video game design while showing his skills on the popular NBA2K. The class teaches basketball at its core, whether through analytics or video game design and production.

One lecture not only features playing the video game but explores what it takes and how to make money around the game.

"I am learning as I am developing the curriculum," said James Ennis, the 30-year-old instructor. "A lot of them just don't know and a lot of time by the time they learn about these jobs, it's too late, or (they) don't learn about them at all."

Ennis says he doesn't have a hard time getting the attention of the students because of what's at stake for their future.

"What I try to do is project-based learning. Everything is hands on, so they do a lot of presentations. Instead of telling them what this is, I am going to show you. For example, showing them what a podcast and a blog is and having them create their own," Ennis said.



For two of the school's students, Aaliyah Day, 16, and Jeremiah Arce, 14, the chance to mesh basketball with education was more than enough reason to ask their parents if they could apply for the opportunity to enroll.

Day travels an hour each way to get to school, but is glad to continue so she can do something she is passionate about. She got into video games during the pandemic, when time playing basketball was limited.

But while most of her friends will be enjoying time off for Spring Break, Day says her father will make sure the focus is on hoops.

"It's not even my plans, it's my father's plans, because he is going to have me and (my) brother training for the summer, so when we come back, we will be ready for the basketball season," she says.

An uncle introduced Arce to basketball, and as a child he found that the non-stop action suited his personality and active lifestyle perfectly. Because of his interest in basketball-related things, Arce saw a part of his dreams come true when he was selected to enroll.

“When I first got the paper in the mail, I saw all the opportunities I can have like being a reporter, a broadcaster or analyst,” said Arce, who counts creative literacy as one of his favorite classes. “But I am not trying to sit at home and be on the PlayStation all day. The classes relate everything through basketball and every aspect of life.”

But if journalism doesn’t work out, Arce says he wants to invest in the NBA and cryptocurrency.

## **'Expose them to the ecosystem of the game'**

The school is the brainchild of 72-year-old Dan Klores, a Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, who started an AAU club in 2011 and the New Renaissance Basketball Association (RENS) two years later, providing assistance to kids in need. But he wasn’t satisfied and thought back to his childhood growing up in Coney Island, when there were only a handful of specialized high schools, mostly for the arts and sciences.

“I wanted to delve deeply into the social-economic and cultural issues of youth of color,” said Klores, who is the founder of DKC, a public relations and crisis management firm. He also has directed several documentaries, including “Black Magic” and the 30 for 30 film “Winning Time: Reggie Miller vs. The New York Knicks.”

“Then I think to myself, is it possible to start a high school in New York City, a specialized high school but not for the playing of the game. Who needs another school for kids to go play basketball? That’s the last thing we need. ...

“We are going to expose them to the ecosystem of the game.”

Admitting he is a bit “crazy” and thinking he had a five percent chance of it actually working, he set his sights on the Bronx with the hope of being an anchor tenant in the community.

After receiving advice and a blueprint of how to get started, Klores thought it was a perfect scenario to create a public school and approached then-NBA Commissioner David Stern about the idea. Stern, who died in 2020, immediately signed on to be a founding board member.

“Some very big politicians said to me, 'This is a brilliant idea, but if you do it as a public school, you are going to hand over your vision to some district leader, and that ain't going to be good.' ”

It took two years to get a charter, and then another two-year wait to get started after his close friend and point man for the Bronx real estate search, Lewis Katz, who co-owned the New Jersey Devils, then-New Jersey Nets and the Philadelphia Inquirer, died in a plane crash in 2014.



While still navigating the approval process, which was obtained in 2018, Klores asked Monroe, who was a producer on “Black Magic,” to be the school’s namesake, advisor and a legacy trustee.

“It’s a great honor for it to happen. I never really thought about it before it happened,” Monroe says. “I have been a part of this process for eight or nine years. My interest was not my name being a part of the school, my interest was about the school itself. The students that we turn out will make it all worthwhile. “

Monroe, 77, says his interest in education dates to his time at Winston-Salem State University, carried over to his time with the Bullets in Baltimore and his nine-year stint with the Knicks.

Monroe was heavily involved in the Crown Heights Youth Collective in the late 1970s which still provides vital after-school programs for residents as well as job skills training and employment assistance.

“I’ve always been involved with youth organizations,” Monroe said. “I understand that the best way for our youth to really improve themselves and their future is through education.”

And he doesn’t mind if the students don’t immediately recognize or have never heard of his monikers "Black Jesus" or "Earl the Pearl" from his NBA playing days.

“It’s not the persona that I give off. It’s almost like I am one of the guys. It’s a good feeling to know I am associated with kids of today that recognize me,” Monroe said. “The most important thing is that they are there and trying to get to a point of where I was, only in a different space.”

## **Fundraising for the future**

As the enrollment increases every year, topping out at 440 students, there are plans to move to a permanent location in the Mott Haven neighborhood.

Buildings in the neighborhood will be torn down to make way for a \$25 million, 60,000-square foot complex set to be completed in time for the 2024-25 school year.

Fundraising also is a big part of keeping the school afloat. The school already secured \$5 million before the doors opened, thanks to contributions from Nike, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Citibank, the Gates Foundation and the NBA Foundation. Whatever else the school needs will be obtained through public and private funds, plus grants and the state of New York.

But Klores reiterated that the school is not designed to win championships or churn out WNBA or Division I and NBA-level talent, like IMG Academy in Florida or other prep institutions. The school's ultimate aim is to offer a college preparatory curriculum, even if some of the students ultimately bypass that route to enter the work force.

"I have never worked harder. I work 90 hours a week and most of it is on the school. The school is not about anything other than the responsibility for all these kids and their families," Klores said. "It's not about money, it's not about having a hit. We have to create opportunity and their end of the bargain is to begin to grow up and to have the parents become a partner of the school."



The school offers tutoring six days a week, with plans to stay open during July, when students are on summer break. Next year, a college and career counselor will be on hand to guide them through that process. And twice in the past month, the school invited a representative of JPMorgan Chase to talk about the pitfalls of not being financially literate as teenagers.

Almost eight months into the first school year, Mojica says it hasn't been smooth sailing, even though the Monroe School is not held to some of the same constraints as other city schools because it doesn't have unions and has flexibility in scheduling. But he admits because of the high profile of the school, they may be held to greater expectations than most city schools.

That may be the case, but according to the New York Charter Schools Association, more than 80% of charter school attendees are outperforming public school students in year over year improvement in math and English.

Another challenge was finding qualified certified teachers that could fulfill the ultimate mandate of the city.

“There have definitely been bumps in the road,” said Mojica, who played football at the University of New Hampshire and was recruited by current UCLA coach Chip Kelly. “Starting a new school in a pandemic is not easy. Not everyone was connected equally in the pandemic. But we got everything up and running and now that we got our students, it’s about meeting their needs.”

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