

While the air was frigid on the morning of December 15th, 2020, the sun shone bright and the excitement surrounding the KFC Yum! Center was more than enough to force the winter chill into the background. The Yum! Center Plaza, often teeming with sports or music fans, had been transformed. In its place, a number of tents had been erected, branded with the Pepsi Stronger Together logo. The Holiday Market had begun.

The market is only the beginning of a partnership between Pepsi Stronger Together, the Shaquille O’Neal Foundation, Kroger, JCPS and the University of Louisville to provide meaningful support to students at families at Atkinson Elementary, one of the university’s signature partnership schools.

“Pepsi Stronger Together is our brand's series of grassroots initiatives bringing tailored programming to communities across the country,” said Derek Lewis, President of the South Division of Pepsi Beverages. “We activate through three main pillars of community, education, and the environment - as such, we try to listen to what those communities need, working with local organizations to collaborate in the most relevant ways.”



Students and families in attendance for the event were led by volunteers – many of them teachers and staff at Atkinson Elementary. The tour began with a photo-op featuring Louie the Cardinal, followed by writing messages on a “gratitude wall,” and readings for the students by special guests such as the Kentucky Derby Princesses and CEHD Interim Dean Amy Lingo. Parents were gifted with bags full of groceries donated by Kroger, a wrapped

Christmas gift for their student, and a free book donated by the Shaquille O’Neal Foundation.

Atkinson Elementary Principle Mike Losey was also in attendance for the event. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on virtual learning for students, December 15th was the first chance Principle Losey had to meet many of his staff, students, and families in person.

“Today has been incredible. The partnership with UofL and Pepsi has done nothing but great things for our school family. Seeing the amount of excitement from the families and the students... we never could have been prepared for something like this. What a great opportunity for my first year as Principal,” Principal Losey told us. “I met four of our staff members for the very first time in-person today. This has been nothing but great for me personally, and more importantly for our kids and our families. I am so humbled.”

Parents and families of Atkinson students were stunned that the school had received such massive recognition and support.

“So far it has been pretty exciting,” said parent Mary Shackleford. “Atkinson is also my alma mater, and now I have a third grader there. It is so cool to me that our tiny little school got to be a part of something like this.”

The day was perhaps best put into perspective by young Christopher Richards, a kindergarten student at Atkinson. Holding his wrapped gift under one arm and a picture book in the other, Christopher was asked about his favorite part of the day. “All of it,” he said with a smile. “It was awesome.”