

AS SEEN IN *Fortune & Entrepreneur*

Extraordinary Women in Business: Denver

Empowering Entrepreneurs

Aspen Academy cultivates incubators, disruptors, and change-makers.



In 2004, a group of parents and teachers were concerned that American education yielded low-performing numbers despite a higher-than-average investment. They asked Kristina Scala, then an entrepreneur and business consultant, to “right a ship that was hemorrhaging.” The result was Aspen Academy, a financial, leadership, and entrepreneurial development school established in 2005 for pre-K through eighth grade, with a mission to inspire students and educators to grow, learn, and lead.

What started with 90 students swiftly grew to 400 in a 90,000-square-foot building led by award-winning teachers who are educators and life coaches. A nonprofit and national leader in innovative education, the school boasts an 8-to-1 student-to-faculty ratio and prepares children to become full-fledged adults with a critical thinking mindset. With 85% of students ranking in the top 10% of U.S. students in math and reading, the academy’s forward-thinking approach is paying off.

“Schools are an extraordinary epicenter of family, personal, and community development opportunities,” says Scala, president and founder of the school, who was also named a 2022 Colorado Titan 100. “They are rich and fertile soil that should inculcate the humans walking the halls,” she adds, pointing out current standards lack flexibility compared to international schools.

An Education of Consequence

It’s scientifically proven, Scala notes, that when children are raised in an environment where personal, civic, and organizational leadership is a behavioral expectation, they become intentional about their lives. To right the ship, she took a different approach to education, looking at global standards where students were thriving and developing an entrepreneurial curriculum that educates for life instead of standardized tests.

“Having parents, teachers, and educators running an organization means children grow up positively and effectively with their eyes wide open. They have agency and ownership of everything they

do,” Scala says. With more than 350 student-led businesses and an average of 206 annual STEAM Lab hours, Aspen Academy provides abundant resources to ensure students can lead themselves, others, and organizations.

Upon graduation, students will have developed and operated 10 businesses. The entrepreneurial development program includes Bear’s Student Enterprises, a fully functioning C-suite business owned and operated by seventh and eighth graders. The enterprise has coffee shops, a student store, and a broadcast division. Balancing out Aspen Academy’s programs is the student civic organization, promoting leadership and encouraging students to make community changes for the common good. To remind them who they will show up “as” and “for” in a world they will one day be leading, each morning’s first block is reserved for youth leadership—a curriculum pinnacle.

Aspen Academy is also committed to developing and improving education for the 55 million K-12 students in the United States. In addition to welcoming schools to spend the day with students and teachers, they mentor several public school startups, including Moonshot edVentures, which awards fellowships and residencies for developing schools or programs for underserved students.

“When you grow up in an environment where the minimum standards call you to bring your best, you evolve and have the potential to be someone who understands their absolute value and infinite potential,” Scala says.

