

ASPEN COMMUNITY SCHOOL LAUNCHES “I BELIEVE” CAMPUS CAMPAIGN WITH \$4.2M CHALLENGE GRANT AND \$.5M IN COMMUNITY DONATIONS

One of the State’s Highest-Performing Schools Looks to Remedy Its Failing Facilities

September 19, 2012 (Woody Creek, CO) — On the heels of its successful bid for a \$4.2m BEST grant from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the Aspen Community School today launched its “I Believe” campus campaign with a half-million dollars in community donations toward its required match. During the kick-off, school officials announced a green building grant and six-figure contributions to the grassroots campaign from the Aspen School District and the school’s own board of trustees and steering committee. The BEST challenge grant and its required \$4.9m match are part of a total fundraising goal of \$11.6m to fund the renovation and construction at the public charter school’s 42-year-old log facilities in Woody Creek. The Aspen Community School (ACS) is a K-8 public school, charges no tuition, and reflects the Aspen School District’s commitment to educational choice. BEST, which stands for “Building Excellent Schools Today,” is Colorado’s competitive grant program to finance school construction and renovation projects.

“It is deeply gratifying to receive this broad show of support,” said school principal Jim Gilchrist. “The Aspen Community School is one of Colorado’s highest-performing schools operating in one of the state’s lowest-performing facilities. We’re excited and ready to give our students — and the community — the school they deserve.”

““I Believe” is a grassroots campaign,” added Skye Skinner, executive director of Compass, which operates the Aspen Community School and two other alternative schools in the Roaring Fork Valley. “We’ve got the state behind us. We’ve got the school district behind us. We’ve got community organizations behind us. We’ve got our board and steering committee — who today stepped up together and donated \$261,000— behind us. Now we need to get the community to join us.”

The Aspen Community School introduced its “I Believe” campaign today with a press conference on the existing school playground. Against the backdrop of the Elk Mountains and the log cabin school, Skinner explained the name of the campaign to an audience that included Superintendent John Maloy and representatives from the Aspen School District Board of Education; Jim Griffin, President, Colorado League of Charter Schools; and representatives from the Colorado Department of Education’s BEST program, among others.

The campaign name comes from the “This I Believe” project that each year’s graduating class of 8th graders undertakes as the culmination of their ACS education. Each student is asked to reflect on their core beliefs in an essay that they present to a panel of students and community members. The theme also provides a framework to share the school’s unique approach to academic excellence — what they as a school believe in: small class sizes, experiential education, strong arts and outdoors experiences, cross-age mentoring, and community.

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This winning formula has earned the Community School national acclaim for its excellence in academics and the arts, making it one of the top-performing schools in the state:

- Governor's Distinguished Improvement Award (2004, 2009, 2010, 2011)
- John C. Irwin Award for Excellence in Academic Achievement (2005, 2007, 2008)
- Recognition as one of Colorado's Top Performing Schools based on three years of sustained academic growth (2001, 2009)
- Academic performance that exceeds state averages by 24 percentage points in reading, 28 in math, and 32 in writing (2011)
- National School of Distinction Award from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2005)

Unfortunately, the school also topped the charts on the CDE's most recent Colorado Facility Index, in which a high tally indicates high need. With a score of 131, Aspen Community School earned the number one spot (i.e. last place) on the entire list of BEST candidates (and scored 24th out of the state's entire system of 1,689 public schools) for the assessment of each school's condition, grant suitability, energy audit, and current replacement value. Across Colorado, the average school score is 45.

"Our students are soaring but our building is failing," said Gilchrist.

CFI was one of the factors taken into account when the Aspen Community School was awarded its BEST grant on August 15. This was the school's third attempt to secure state funding in the BEST program and included a unanimous vote of support by the state Board of Education. The charge was led by Skye Skinner and supported by the Colorado League of Charter Schools; Colorado State Senator Gail Schwartz; and Colorado State Senator Keith King. The school must meet its match by May 1, 2013 to receive the BEST grant funding.

Officials at the Community School emphasized the modesty of their plans for a new campus. The original log school with its distinctive triangular tower will be downsized, renovated, and repurposed as the music building. The school will build structures that are designed to the highest environmental standards of a Colorado High Performance School (LEED equivalent). The campus will see a net growth of ~5,000 square feet of facilities, while the student population will remain constant. Features of the new campus include:

- 27% more classroom space and 50% increase in visual and performing arts spaces
- buildings that are learning tools (such as energy-efficient spaces that students can monitor and study)
- accessibility for those with physical disabilities
- on-site employee housing
- a community hall that converts to a gymnasium or theatre
- pedestrian-friendly campus that separates people from vehicles, and
- improved sanitation, lighting, and ventilation systems

In recognition of these green building plans, the school today was awarded a \$27,500 grant from the Community Office for Resource Efficiency, forming part of its \$.5m in community donations.

Founded in 1970, Aspen Community School is a K-8 public charter school of the Aspen School District. More information on the "I Believe" Campus Campaign is available from Skye Skinner at (970) 923-4646 and sskinner@discovercompass.org.

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