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- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
 - [Briefs](#)
 - [Capitol News](#)
 - [Data Center](#)
 - [EdWire](#)
 - [EdNews Podcasts](#)
 - [Healthy Schools](#)
 - [Higher Ed](#)
 - [K-12 News](#)
 - [Rise & Shine](#)
 - [Top News](#)
- [Voices](#)
 - [Comment policy](#)
 - [Guidelines for submissions](#)
 - [News vs. blog](#)
- [Parent](#)
 - [Meet the experts](#)
- [Data](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Contact](#)

- [Special reports](#)
 - [Medical marijuana](#)
 - [Online education](#)
 - [Lobato lawsuit](#)
- [In-depth: Turnaround schools](#)
- [Timely topics](#)
 - [Topic: Recent reforms](#)
 - [Topic: School funding](#)
 - [Topic: State testing](#)
 - [Topic: Vouchers](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Ed Bill Tracker](#)
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 - [Comment policy](#)
 - [Contact Us](#)
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Academy 360 aims to change the conversation

Written by [Ann Schinke](#) on Oct 1st, 2013. | Copyright © EdNewsColorado.org

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It was 7:45 a.m. on a cloudy Monday morning. About 100 children hopped up and down on the cracked asphalt outside their school, pretending to dribble basketballs, toss baseballs and jump rope.



Students at Academy 360 participate in morning movement.

Following the lead of Health and Wellness Coordinator Becky McLean, the children shouted, “I am smart! I am kind! I am a scholar!”

This is how each day starts at [Academy 360](#), a new health and wellness charter school in the Montbello neighborhood in Far Northeast Denver. The 15-minute morning movement session is one small part of the school’s ambitious plan to bolster academics by promoting students’ physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Students, about 95 percent of whom come from low-income families, also get free breakfast and lunch in their classrooms and 45 minutes of physical education and 15 minutes of “guided” recess every day. Sugary drinks and flavored milks are not permitted, and unhealthy snacks like potato chips will likely prompt a note home with suggestions for healthier alternatives. Woven throughout the school day are formal and informal lessons on social-emotional skills such as compassion, tenacity and responsibility.

There is plenty more in the works. Although the school is currently located in leased church space, the long-term plan calls for a facility with a school-based health clinic. There are also plans for parent programs such as weekly exercise classes and talks on topics such as buying healthy food on a budget. Finally, the school, which currently serves kindergartners through second-grade, plans to add a grade on each end every year until it eventually offers preschool through fifth grade with additional programming for younger children as well as prenatal programs for parents.

Ultimately, school leaders and board members hope Academy 360 will help change the conversation around education, showing that healthy students and families are cornerstones of academic success, not optional add-ons.

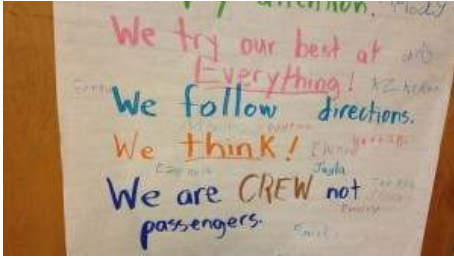
“If we do this well, it does have the opportunity to be a new model of what education can look like,” said board member Dan Schaller, director of outreach and operations at the Denver Preschool Program.

In the classroom

The school’s focus on character education is obvious in the classrooms, with teachers discussing such attributes as graciousness or responsibility during lessons and walls and whiteboard adorned with aspirations such as, “I can be a model of tenacity.” Sally Sorte, the school’s founder and executive director, explained that these

social-emotional themes are embedded deeply in expeditionary learning model used at the school and that teachers try to break it down into a discrete set of skills for students.

When two kindergartners had a tiff in Teacher Abbie Mood's classroom, Sean Udell, the school's special education and Response to Intervention coordinator, sat with the boy and girl at the "peace table" near the door and coached them through the conflict using a restorative justice approach.



A poster in a second grade classroom illustrates some of Academy 360's values.

"It sounds like you both were hurt," he said to the pair. "Instead of hitting her back, what could you have said to her?" he asked the boy.

Across the hall, second-grade teacher Dorothy Shapland, who is also the school's director of curriculum and instruction, read the book "Children Make Terrible Pets" to her students. In between making the children giggle with her animated story-telling, she helped the children identify the characters' feelings, and used the story to illustrate the meaning of compassion.

"She's showing compassion," Shapland said of the main character Lucy, a bear who adopts a little boy and then allows him to go home to his family. "She thinks about how someone else is feeling and then she acts on that feeling."

A neighborhood in need of help

Across Scranton Street from Academy 360 is Amesse Elementary, a traditional public school that serves as a reminder to its new neighbor of the challenges that lay ahead. Like Academy 360, it serves a large majority of low-income and students of color. In the last few years, it has also gradually slipped to the lowest "red" ranking in the district's five-tier performance framework.

"Sadly, they are one of Montbello's many failing schools," said McLean.

That's in large part why Academy 360 serves Montbello as well neighboring Green Valley Ranch. Its leaders not only wanted to give parents a new school choice, but one cut from different cloth than the typical offerings.

"The mission was very attractive to parents," said Board President Leslie Bayliff.

Funders found it appealing as well. Several have contributed financially to Academy 360, providing start-up grants or money for specific projects or staff members. They include the Colorado Health Foundation, the Gates Family Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Colorado League of Charter Schools and the Colorado Department of Education.

While Academy 360 may enjoy a brief honeymoon as it puts down roots this year and perhaps next, everybody wants to know if it can outshine nearby district schools.



Kindergartners at Academy 360 have cereal, milk, apple slices and sunflower seed butter for breakfast in their classroom.

Sorte is quick to say, “Number one, we’re a rigorous academic school.”

The charter’s expeditionary learning model emphasizes interdisciplinary project-based learning designed to tap kids’ interests. The school supplements its math and literacy curriculum with programs such as Singapore Math and the “Lucy Calkin” workshop approach to teaching writing. Finally, at 8.5 hours, the school day is longer than most.

While Academy 360 tapped various sources for its curriculum and programming, Namaste Charter School, a health and wellness school in Chicago, may figure in most prominently. Sorte believes the nine-year-old school provides solid evidence that Academy 360’s model can work.

“They’ve done a good job in showing how health and wellness can lead to greater academic outcomes.”

Last year, Namaste earned the middle ranking, “good standing” on Chicago Public Schools’ three-level performance rating system. In 2012, 87 percent of its students met or exceeded standards on state tests, beating the district average by more than 10 percentage points. Of Namaste’s 482 students last year, 85 percent were low-income and 26 percent were “Limited English Learners.”

The journey

Academy 360 was just a concept two years ago when Sorte, who was 25 at the time, applied for a fellowship to design a health and wellness charter school. The fellowship was funded by the [Colorado Health Foundation](#) and offered through [Get Smart Schools](#), a Denver non-profit dedicated to expanding the number of charter schools and other autonomous schools.



Sally Sorte, Academy 360’s founder and executive director, talks with students after morning movement.

Sorte, who taught high school in Hawaii through Teach For America and worked at Google before coming to Denver, describes the school-planning process as “long and grueling.”

Tasks included recruiting board members, filling out the lengthy charter application, passing out brochures at grocery stores and knocking on doors to meet prospective families. In addition to doing a month-long residency at [Namaste Charter School](#), she visited the [Harlem Children’s Zone](#) in New York City and [The Odyssey School](#), an expeditionary learning charter school in Denver.

Sorte said at times she felt her age and gender prompted some push-back from the Denver Public Schools board, but she considered it “an opportunity to show it’s not just about the individual, it’s about the team they create.”

Part of that team is her 11-member staff, which went on an overnight camping retreat over the summer. All appear energetic and committed to the mission of educating students’ minds, bodies and characters. Take Udell, who used to teach special education at STRIVE Prep’s Highland Campus. He ran into Sorte, whom he’d met once previously, at a social gathering last June. She updated him on Academy 360’s progress.

“We talked for about three hours and at the end of that conversation I was totally inspired by the vision and so impressed by how much was in line and how much she had reached out to the community... I didn’t want to miss out being a part of it so I sent her my resume from the bar,” he said with a laugh.

McLean, who worked for the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition in 2011, is similarly passionate about her role as the school’s point person for health and wellness. In such, she not only collects health data from families and plans parent wellness activities, she has one-on-one conversations with students about how they feel when they eat too many sugary treats or with parents concerned about children exercising outside in cold weather.

While McLean has many plans to promote and publicize wellness efforts at Academy 360, one of her most ambitious is to have Michelle Obama visit the school. McLean envisions the First Lady eating at the salad bar with students and taking part in a school movement session.

“I think I’m just going to have to pitch the White House a bunch of times, prove that what we’re doing is working,” she said.



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« OCT 2013 »						
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			
TUE 29	Colorado Children's Campaign Annual Luncheon October 29 @ 11:30 am - 1:30 pm Seawell Ballroom					

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