

## MEDIA RELEASE



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### ASPEN ACADEMY NAMED 2021 STEM INNOVATION AWARD WINNER

*(Roseville, MN – December 17, 2020)* – Aspen Academy, a public, tuition-free charter school located in Savage, MN, has been named the winner of the 2021 STEM Innovation Award. Principal Melanie Jiskra applied for the award on behalf of Aspen Academy.

The STEM Innovation Award is presented in partnership between the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA) and the Science Museum of Minnesota. The award gives principals the opportunity to share innovative programs and/or projects in their schools. An "innovation database," created from entries for the award, is made available to MESPA members, helping schools across the state replicate their colleagues' successes.

Stu Keroff (pictured to the far left of the photo on the right), a social studies teacher at Aspen Academy, started the Penguin Corps Linux club in the fall of 2019 to teach students about Linux OS and how to use free open source software. The Penguin Corps (named after the mascot of Linux) also learned to disassemble and refurbish computers, a skill which became indispensable when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in March of 2020.



Once the pandemic hit and schools were forced into distance learning, Aspen Academy was faced with the challenge of ensuring all their students would be able to learn while staying safely at home. Jiskra wrote, "Stu Keroff began an online appeal through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the local paper to help source old laptops that the club could refurbish.

Within five weeks, the club provided over 60 computers to families—closing the digital divide.”

In August 2020, rising cases of COVID-19 mandated that Aspen Academy change course from an in-person learning plan to hybrid learning. They decided to teach their hybrid classes synchronously, meaning students scheduled to be at home would be taking classes live with their peers in the school building. With this model even more students would be in need of computers for the school year. The Penguin Corps stepped up, and helped provide over 300 computers to their community, allowing more students to learn remotely and saving hundreds of old computers from the landfill.



“These kids very enthusiastically caught the open-source bug and took on the challenge of wanting to help their fellow students,” said Keroff. The Penguin Corps took every opportunity they could to work on refurbishing computers—sometimes spending their recess time, coming to school early or staying late, and even spent time over the summer on the project.

Keroff and the Penguin Corps want to share their success and delivered several interviews and presentations this year to encourage other schools to try their approach. When asked about the potential difficulties of starting up a program like the Penguin Corps, Jiskra and Keroff emphasized that the most important thing is having a desire to try, “You do not have to be an expert. You simply must want to try something new and want to involve students in the process.” Keroff and the Penguin Corps hope that more schools will be able to offer a cost-effective solution to ensuring students have access to a distance-learning device, while teaching valuable technology and service skills to students.

Aspen Academy will be recognized at the MESPA awards celebration – The MESPYS – this coming spring. In addition, the Science Museum of Minnesota will provide a \$300 certificate towards an education program for Aspen Academy.

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The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is dedicated to promoting and improving education for children and youth, strengthening the role as educational leader for elementary and middle level principals and collaborating with partners in education to assist in achieving those goals. For more information, visit the association's website at [www.mespa.net](http://www.mespa.net).

The Science Museum of Minnesota has a 100-year history of bringing science learning to life through hands-on exhibits, giant screen films, and unparalleled educational opportunities for all ages. For more information about the wide range of education programs for school groups, teachers, kids, families, and adults, visit the museum's website at [www.smm.org/educationprograms/](http://www.smm.org/educationprograms/).