

POWER BOOK

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Atkinson makes Girls' Dropout Prevention a priority

BY BRUCE GOLDBERG

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This probably required a few hankies to get through:

Middle-school girls who were part of the Girls' Dropout Prevention Initiative fostered by The Women's Foundation of Colorado (WFCO) came to a retreat to tell board members what the program had meant to them.

NONPROFITS & FOUNDATIONS

INDUSTRY LEADER

LOUISE ATKINSON

PRESIDENT & CEO

THE WOMEN'S FOUNDATION OF

COLORADO

DENVER

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EDUCATION: BACHELOR OF ARTS,
SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY;
MBA, DANIELS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS,
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER.

AWARDS: 2013 ATHENA AWARD
FINALIST, WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY
OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AWARD,
WHO'S WHO OF COLORADO BUSINESS
LEADERS, THE RANDOLPH P. McDONOUGH
ALUMNI AWARD

"One of the girls made a video, which is just wonderful," said Louise Atkinson, president and CEO of the foundation. "They talked about how grateful they are to have the program, how

they've bonded."

Atkinson joined the WFCO in July 2010

after leaving a successful career in the private sector, rising to high positions at such companies as First Data Corp. (senior vice president in the merchant services group) and TeleTech Holdings Inc. (senior vice president).

She's been a driving force behind the initiative, which was formed in 2011, as well as efforts to alleviate the "cliff effect," which creates a no-win situation for impoverished women who often reject pay raises so that they don't lose government benefits such as food stamps, child care assistance and energy assistance.

"I had a burning desire to focus all of my time on issues that were impacting women and girls," Atkinson said. "I have two girls of my own. My mother lived in a very disadvantaged situation herself, had to work three jobs to educate herself and get a nursing degree."

The foundation researched the high Colorado dropout rate for girls — Atkinson said 6,000 girls in grades 7-12 drop out from Colorado schools each year — and "the track record of a girl dropout versus a boy dropout: Girls make less money than a boy; their economic security as an adult is compromised; they tend to have poorer health; and they end up in poverty," she said.



KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Louise Atkinson, president and CEO of The Women's Foundation of Colorado, took over in 2010.

Middle school is the time to influence them to stay in school, Atkinson said — it's too late in the higher grades. The initiative offers them sports programs, such as soccer, hiking and cycling; guidance towards staying in school and perhaps

steer them into STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education programs; and after-school mentoring "about everything," Atkinson said. "It's really important for girls, especially. I was mentored when I was younger."

The results have been heartening: participants' GPAs rose from 3.27 to 3.52. The girls' behavior — measured by increased engagement, higher self-esteem and more bonding with adults and mentors — has improved. They've achieved higher test scores in reading and math. Some of the more successful girls are serving as ambassadors, and referring friends and siblings to the program.

"These girls have grown, and they're not afraid to talk to you about it," Atkinson said.

Regarding the Cliff Effect, the WFCO has been examining why women are living below the poverty level, how they got there, what keeps them from rising above it and what roadblocks should be removed so they can reach self-sufficiency.

Atkinson also has been a big supporter of the University of Denver, working on many fundraising activities, and mentoring students and graduates.

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