

A Passion for Learning: Deborah Quazzo's Burning Mission for Education Tech

As an investor and community leader, Deborah Quazzo is an education advocate.



Deborah Quazzo

Venture capitalist Deborah Quazzo says she was lucky to learn valuable lessons early in life. Growing up, she felt deeply that education was a key to life-long happiness and success. She also learned that you have to push for what you believe in.

So as a high school student in Jacksonville, Florida, she challenged the school board for not having any women as members. Eventually, one was appointed: her mother.

After graduating from Princeton with a degree in American history and women's studies, Quazzo joined J.P. Morgan as an investment banker. She later earned an MBA from Harvard and joined Merrill Lynch, rising to become managing director of its Global Growth Group.

At Merrill, she met her current business partner, Michael Moe, who had begun looking at the education tech sector as an investment category in the 1990s. Today, their venture capital fund GSV Acceleration has become a major driver in the multibillion-dollar education and talent technology business.

Quazzo, a long-time client of William Blair wealth advisor Cam McKinney, is based in Chicago. She and her husband Stephen, a well-known real estate investor, are active in the community as philanthropists with a focus on education.

Personalized learning

GSV invests in dozens of education tech start-ups like Clever, ClassDojo, Course Hero and Degreed. Quazzo consults throughout the country and overseas to promote the cutting-edge technology that is transforming K-12, higher education, and enterprise learning programs.

"We like to think about giving all people access to the future through education," she says. "We as a country were not going to get there, given how far behind we were, without the aid of some technologies to give leverage to teachers, faculty and individual learners."

She says the road to success is the personalization of learning through "smart" technology including AI. And that need is as important in the workforce as it is in K-12 and higher ed.

"What you're seeing is the rapid obsolescence of jobs," she says. "AT&T has been very public in saying most of its workforce is not skilled today to do even the jobs they are supposed to be doing, certainly not the jobs they are going to be doing in five years.

"Personalized technology is transcending work and transforming education," she adds. "It really started in K-12 because we had kids sitting in the same classrooms with dramatically different levels of competence and their needs were not being addressed."

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Chicago Public Schools, where she was an advisor for two years, is a great example of a system adopting student-driven technology with great success.

Quazzo cites a 2017 Stanford University study concluding that CPS elementary students made the fastest academic progress of the 100 largest school districts in the country from 2009-2015.

Tech is driving the difference. Lexia Learning Systems, a reading and writing program, was introduced in the Chicago classrooms several years ago by Leap Innovations, a nonprofit nurtured at the city’s tech hub 1871.

Lexia helps students plan, write, edit, and publish digital texts through online activities. Tailored feedback from each student’s use of the program, at their own speed, assists word retention, grammar, punctuation, and organization of the writing.

Another popular tech program is Dream Box, an online K-8 math platform, says Quazzo, who is an angel investor in the company. Algorithms capture every key stroke a child makes when adding numbers, assessing each child’s math skills and using the data to tailor math tutorials and examples for each student to pursue and master.

“Initially there was concern that the technology would eliminate teachers’ jobs,” Quazzo says. “But instead, these

tools allow teachers to use data to guide instruction.”

The result of such personalized learning is striking. “There are clearly lessons to be learned in Chicago,” the Stanford study concluded, citing “rapid and substantial learning gains ... that benefit students of all racial and ethnic groups equally.”

Such personalized tech will be the focus of GSV’s annual education conference in April, an event it has co-sponsored with Arizona State University. The 2017 conference drew 3,500 attendees.

“It’s not just learning. It’s applying AI to better recruiting, keeping people engaged. People are learning differently, acquiring skills differently,” Quazzo says.

China: Education is top focus

The stakes for America couldn’t be higher. Nowhere is the push for education higher than in China, Quazzo says. At a Global Education Summit in Beijing last November, where Barack Obama was the keynote speaker, she saw it firsthand.

“Education is not looked at philanthropically in China,” she says. “It’s looked at as an economic imperative: this is how we win.”

Summit speakers detailed how the internet, big data, AI, VR, and other technologies are integrating into Chinese education and changing

people’s ways of thinking, working, living, and learning. In Asia and China, 15% of the household income is spent on education, versus 2% in the United States, according to government and industry data.

“The Chinese won’t settle for a public school that doesn’t get their kids to the top,” Quazzo says. “They are going to spend every dollar they’ve got to get kids there.”

She cites VIPKID, an online teaching platform where children in China learn English from North American teachers. Founder Cindy Me has grown VIPKID to several hundred million dollars in revenue in just three years as the appetite for Chinese to learn English from native English speakers is high.

Tal Education Group is another Chinese company that provides supplementary learning programs for after-school, weekends, and summers. It is now increasing use of digital products with instruction offered K-12 in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, political science, English, and Chinese.

“Tal has a market cap of \$16 billion, the largest education company in the world, and nobody has heard of them,” Quazzo says. “It’s embarrassing how hungry the Chinese are to have their children learn things compared to the U.S.”