June 2005

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Ron Thornburgh
Kansas Secretary of State, Topeka, Kans.
Cox Communications

What kinds of leadership skills are most important?
Effective communication is essential. Leadership is driven by an eagerness to listen to and entertain other viewpoints. I already have my own opinion and do not want my team to echo my thoughts, but to offer their own unique ideas. Then it is my job to sort out the options and provide direction. Once the best path is chosen, a leader must have the courage to assume risk, to shoulder defeat, and to give others credit for any and all success.

What is the first step someone should take to lead an effort to make a difference in education?
The first step is to really understand the problems, issues, and opportunities in the school or community—then get involved. We need more people willing to get tired, dirty, and sweaty to overcome the urgent needs of our children. While study commissions squander time around conference tables talking issues to death, our children and our communities struggle unnecessarily. You already know what you care deeply about—now resolve to make a difference. Getting the job done is more important than waiting for a perfect solution that will never appear.

How can technology—particularly broadband Internet access—play a role in supporting innovative efforts to improve education? Broadband Internet is the single greatest opportunity to ensure that all of our children are on a level playing field when competing for scholarships and jobs. These simple cables, wires, and connectors are the pathway to diversity in our classrooms and a link to experts and opportunities around the world. By using broadband Internet, students in smaller districts have the same resources in foreign-language and Advanced Placement classes as those in larger districts.

What's the most important lesson about leadership in education that we can learn from your experience?
I am not the brightest guy, so my lessons are simple. Surround yourself with great people, commit to their success, and never give up. People, especially children, have an amazing capacity to become what we expect of them. I expect those I work with to dream big and sometimes fail because great success does not come without some hardship. I expect greatness, but, more importantly, given the opportunity, I expect success. My job is to help light a spark and never give up on the ideas and dreams of those around me.

Mayor Laura Miller
Dallas, Tex.
Comcast Communications

Mayor Laura Miller is being recognized for reaching out to the business community and donating countless hours of personal time to educate Dallas youth about the importance of literacy and fitness. The mayor, a former newspaper journalist who has a passion for reading, established the Mayor's Summer Reading Program; the Mayor's 5K Fun Run; and an annual back-to-school fair that provides school supplies, free immunizations, checkups, and health education to underprivileged youth. The mayor created these out-of-school events to foster learning throughout the community, focusing on literacy and fitness in order to give students the skills they will need to succeed in school and beyond, improving their quality of life. Miller has helped more than 250,000 young people to learn the joy of reading and staying fit, and her leadership has been instrumental in improving the children's education. Her programs work toward a better-educated future workforce, stable neighborhoods, and the city's overall growth. The programs were well received in the community, all activities were free to participants, and each was successfully completed with no impact on the city's financial obligations.

Kansas Secretary of State Ron Thornburgh
Topeka, Kans.
Cox Communications

Kansas Secretary of State Ron Thornburgh's leadership has been instrumental in increasing voter turnout, especially among 18- to 24-year-olds, through Kids Voting Kansas, a grassroots, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to educating Kansas youth about the rights, responsibilities, and mechanics of participating in American democracy. Thanks to Thornburgh's tireless efforts, Kids Voting Kansas has been embraced by schools and communities, with 55 communities now participating statewide. Average voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds nationwide is only 15 percent; in areas of Kansas where Kids Voting has been implemented for 10 years or more, an average 65 percent of that age group vote. The Kids Voting Kansas program begins in kindergarten and teaches students civic responsibility by demystifying the polling process. Students learn how to research the candidates, listen to debates, and become responsible citizens. Under Thornburgh's direction, the program has become the largest of its kind in the nation, giving students, teachers, and parents a better appreciation of democracy and the importance of politics in their lives.

Media Literacy
Presented in Partnership with the National PTA

Chris Sperry
Ithaca, N.Y.
Time Warner Cable

Chris Sperry is being recognized in the media-literacy award category for designing, developing, and disseminating multimedia educational materials to help educators integrate media literacy throughout the curriculum. Working with Ithaca College professor Cyndy Scheibe for eight years, Sperry has created Project Look Sharp, a unique approach inspired by teachers' needs...
Chris Sperry
Project Look Sharp, Ithaca, N.Y.
Time Warner Cable

What is media literacy’s role in improving education and what kind of leadership is needed to have a lasting impact?

Thomas Jefferson wrote that this experiment in democracy is dependent on an educated citizenry. Today a majority of Americans never read a book once they leave school, more students can identify The Three Stooges than the three branches of government, and 90 percent of students leave high school with no formal training in how to assess the credibility of Internet sites. Educational leaders need to prioritize a new form of literacy that teaches future citizens to access, analyze, and produce more than just the printed word.

What is the first step someone should take to lead an effort to make a difference in education?
The beauty and curse of teaching is that it is infinitely complex and never complete. Educational reform means cultural change. We need a clear vision, reachable goals, continuous planning and re-planning, and a tremendous amount of energy. We need to be in it for the long haul if we hope to make a difference.

How can technology—particularly broadband Internet access—play a role in supporting innovative efforts to improve education?
Fluid access to a global library of media documents will allow the next generation of educators to do a better job of reaching all students. The Internet is fast becoming our primary toolbox for accessing contemporary, creative, and appropriate “texts” for use in the classroom. The critical decoding of these media documents can impart essential knowledge and skills while training students to be fluent readers of modern communication. With these resources, teachers can do what we do best—interact with each of our students to facilitate individual growth and learning.

What’s the most important lesson about leadership in education that we can learn from your experience?
My work has always been in a collective context. I teach in a democratic school and our media-literacy initiative at Ithaca College is a team enterprise working collaboratively with teachers and administrators. Democracy is based on the premise that the collective wisdom is always superior (in the long run) to individual decision-making. Educational change must be based on listening closely to educators and students, working collectively to meet their needs, and keeping our eyes on the prize of developing a deep, authentic, and just democracy.

and ideas. The project provides media materials that educators can use to teach core content and engage students in complex critical thinking using a collaborative, teacher–developed, standards-based approach. The project has taken on the challenge of finding the right materials, getting them into a usable form, and researching the appropriate background information. Arranged as curriculum kits, the materials cover such topics as Media Construction of War: A Critical Reading of History, which includes comparisons of Newsweek covers from the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, among other activities. The kits are distributed nationally and are being used by hundreds of teachers.