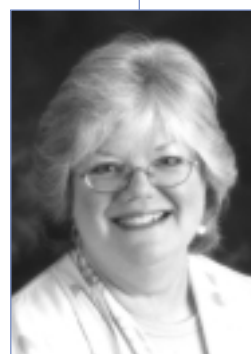


# Parents and Teachers: Team Teaching Media Literacy

Milton Chen is executive director of the George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF), which creates media – films, books, newsletters, and a website (glef.org) – to promote success stories in education and the use of technology. Prior to joining GLEF in 1998, he was center director of the KQED Center for Education & Lifelong Learning (PBS-San Francisco), delivering educational services for teachers, parents, and community groups in support of public TV programming. He is the executive editor of *Edutopia: Success Stories for Teaching in the Digital Age*, author of *The Smart Parent's Guide to Kids' TV*, co-editor of *Children and Microcomputers: Research on the Newest Medium*, and author of numerous articles on educational media. His work has received honors from the Congressional Black Caucus, PBS, Sesame Workshop, the International Communication Association, and Parents' Choice Foundation.



Sarah Armstrong, director of content at the George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF), has been an educator for nearly 30 years. Her classroom experience included integrating technology and telecommunications into the curriculum in the early 1980s. She also worked as an independent consultant on a variety of projects, including professional development, curriculum design, issues of information literacy, and storytelling and technology. She is the author or co-author of several books, including *A Pocket Tour of Kidstuff on the Internet* and *NetSavvy: Information Literacy in the Communications Age*. She contributed a piece to *Future Courses: A Compendium of Thought about Education, Technology, and the Future*. She also serves on the boards of the National Storytelling Network and the Center for Accessible Technology. She is an associate of the Thornburg Center for Professional Development and a frequent national and international speaker. She has been awarded a Gold Disk by California's CUE (Computer-Using Educators, Inc.).



Roberta Furger is currently a writer for the George Lucas Educational Foundation. A journalist for more than 20 years, she has written extensively on technology, education, and parenting issues for a variety of national publications, including *Parade*, *Working Woman*, *PC World*, *Family Circle*, *Family PC*, *Family Life*, and *Child*. Her work has received numerous regional and national awards. Ms. Furger is the author of *Does Jane Compute? Preserving Our Daughters' Place in the Cyber Revolution* and is a contributor to *Edutopia: Success Stories for Learning in the Digital Age*, a publication of the George Lucas Educational Foundation.



## by Milton Chen, Ph.D., Sarah Armstrong, Ph.D., and Roberta Furger

When it comes to media, our children are mass consumers.

On average, each of them spends 1,500 hours a year watching television. Roughly 17 million children and teens have Internet access in their homes, and most of them use it daily for everything from researching school projects to playing online games to sending instant messages or chatting with their classmates. They go to

movies and watch music videos. Headphones and CD players have become so much a part of the middle and high school students' "uniform" that backpacks are now designed to accommodate the gear.

But for all their exposure to mass media, American youth and teens spend precious little time analyzing the messages they're bombarded with every day.

"The reality is that our kids are in constant contact with the media," says Daniel Rossi, director of the Midtown Manhattan campus of Satellite Academy, a four-year public high school with four New York City

locations, who is an advocate for media literacy education. “Their opinions – about violence, about commercialism, about issues of race and gender – are often developed as a result of the media images around them,” he adds, “but many aren’t even aware of it until they slow down and analyze the process.”

Although few states require the teaching of media literacy, educators throughout the country are introducing classroom and even schoolwide initiatives designed to increase students’ awareness and analysis of the media that surround them.

Rossi and his colleagues at Satellite Academy are part of a small but growing cadre of parents, educators, and concerned individuals and groups working to promote media literacy at home and at school and to bridge the “digital disconnect” between the media-saturated home lives of children and their use and understanding of media at school. They’re sponsoring programs and workshops for teachers and parents, many of whom are struggling to keep pace with ever-changing technology. And they’re creating an interdisciplinary curriculum to provide students of all ages with the skills to move from being passive consumers of media to critical listeners, viewers, readers, and producers of all types of media.

These efforts couldn’t happen at a more critical time, says Bob McCannon, director of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, which creates media literacy curricula and works with parents and teachers to further their understanding of this area. “Teaching adults and children how to analyze the media is an essential survival skill for the 21st century,” he says. And as more adults – such as parents, teachers, and staff in community-based programs – work together to address children’s media literacy, a more comprehensive approach can evolve to address students’ media literacy at home, in school, and in after-school and summer programs.

Although few states require the teaching of media literacy, educators throughout the country are introducing classroom and even schoolwide initiatives designed to increase students’ awareness and analysis of the media that surround them.

## Video Production as a Path to Media Literacy

In New York City, the Educational Video Center (EVC) is working with teachers, parents, and community organizers to teach students video documentary production as a path to media analysis. Advocates of media literacy believe the best way to become media literate is to produce media and engage in the editorial choices that professional producers and journalists make. Students quickly learn that media products have a point of view and often use persuasive techniques. At Rossi’s Satellite Academy, students and teachers have been engaged in media production and analysis for more than a decade. Through interdisciplinary units, students learn to analyze everything from print advertisements to television news stories and music videos. These skills then become the foundation for their own video productions.

Although most of EVC’s work is with teachers and students, their parents, friends, and community members join in the dialog during end-of-term screenings of student work and through portfolio roundtables during which students present and comment on their work to a small group of teachers, peers, EVC staff, and others. These events offer parents the opportunity to celebrate their children’s successes, as well as to further their own understanding of the impact of media.

As part of a three-year United States Department of Education–funded initiative, students and teachers at Satellite Academy are now working with EVC staff to examine media violence and its impact on their lives. In one group, for example, students analyzed a music video about a young woman who chooses to stay in an abusive relationship. After talking about the video – and about violence in the music industry in general – students decided to create an alternative ending to the video. In the student project, the young woman asserts herself and leaves her abuser.

“Many of our students say that once they participate in our program they can never consume media in the same way again,” says EVC Media Educator Amy Melnick. “When students shoot and edit a videotape, they learn that all media is a manipulation of choices every step of the way.”

## Teaching Students to Deconstruct Media

Halfway across the country in Farmington, New Mexico, eighth-graders at Heights Middle School take a nine-week class on media literacy in which they explore

such issues as the tools of persuasion (humor, flattery, romance, symbols, and the like), the effect of advertising on smoking and drinking among youth, and biases in news articles and shows.

English teacher turned media literacy instructor Jill Ward began teaching the class after attending a conference presented by the New Mexico Media Literacy Project. She's seen firsthand how engaged the students are in discussing and analyzing the media. In one lesson students analyze advertising by cereal companies – on the box, on the Web, in the grocery store, and on TV. The lesson culminates with a project in which students create their own cereal campaign – from identifying the target market to analyzing nutrition information to creating puzzles and games for the back of the box.

The unit is designed to help students “gain an appreciation for the manipulation that goes on in advertising,” says Ward. “I want them to analyze what they see and hear and come to their own conclusions based on logic, rather than emotion.”

To further the conversation about media literacy at home, educators from the New Mexico Media Literacy Project hold workshops for parents while they are working with students and teachers. “We try to saturate a community with information,” says Director McCannon, so everyone – parents, teachers, and students – is focused on media literacy.

Parent nights and handouts help raise parents' awareness, says Ward. But, she adds, the most effective tool for stimulating discussions at home has been the students' own enthusiasm for the topic. “Students take videos I show in class home so their parents can watch them,” she says. “They talk about these issues all the time. Parents say they can't watch TV anymore without their kids analyzing every commercial.”

### Begin the Conversation

Talking about the media children are watching, reading, and listening to is one of the most critical steps toward media literacy, says Shelley Pasnich, producer of a new PBS website for parents titled *Growing With Media*.

It's particularly important that parents have regular, ongoing conversations with their kids, asserts Pasnich. “Ask questions about what they're watching. Talk to them about what they're learning, what they're curious about.”

It's not enough, though, to just talk to children about the media they're *consuming*. Parents, teachers, and other interested adults need to give them opportunities to become *creators* of their own media – and then to talk about those experiences, too.

“Everything we see, read, or listen to is the result of someone's creative work,” says Pasnich. “The more our children participate in the creative process, the greater chance they have to understand what's involved and the more they'll realize that nothing is preordained, nothing just appeared.”

To further the conversation about media literacy at home, educators from the New Mexico Media Literacy Project hold workshops for parents while they are working with students and teachers.

### Starting Now

Are you ready to begin the journey to media literacy? Here are some steps educators, parents, community leaders, librarians, and others can take to bring media literacy to homes and schools.

- **Institute a Family Media Diet.** Parents should plan their family's media consumption in the same way they plan meals to achieve a balanced diet. The three basic tenets of a family media diet are (1) control total consumption, (2) create a balanced media diet, and (3) actively use media for analysis and discussion.
- **Take a break from media.** One of the best ways to appreciate the impact of media on our lives is to live without it. Classes, schools, families, and communities should consider “doing without” all media from time to time and then reflecting on the results. Since so much of media use is habitual, students rarely have a chance to view their media consumption with “fresh eyes.”
- **Incorporate media literacy into the existing curriculum.** Have students assess the accuracy and value of information in the learning resources they use, from books and periodicals to websites. Have students consider questions such as, Who is the intended audience for this resource? What is the author's point of view? How was this work funded? What might be inherent influences and biases based on the author's background and previous work, organizational affiliation, or funding source?

When educators, parents, and community leaders work together as a team to promote media literacy as the 21st-century form of print literacy, incorporating the skills of thinking, reading, and writing, they will be sending a powerful and coordinated message to this “media generation.”

- **Use the media themselves as an object of study.**

Studying the history and development of American and world media can be a fascinating topic in English or social studies classes. Media studies can lead to creative, interdisciplinary projects addressing such wide-ranging topics as journalism coverage of historical events; the science and technology of radio, TV, and now the Internet; and the psychological impact of media on children and adults.

- **Have students make multimedia about media.** With the availability of low-cost computers and editing software, many more students are making their own media products – short films, music videos, PowerPoint presentations – about media. This work is being done for projects in schools and community groups, and informally at home, for fun. In making a media presentation, students must make many of the same editorial choices that professional writers, editors, and producers make when publishing a newspaper or magazine or making a radio or TV show. Students learn that media production is an exercise in selecting content and shaping, revising, and polishing the media product. Students can present their projects at a community event involving parents, teachers, and local businesses and organizations.
- **Consult with librarians on media literacy.** Librarians in school and public libraries can be excellent bridges between the home and school, offering resources, materials, and questions to talk about.
- **Continue the conversation.** When adults talk with each other about children, they often ignore the one experience dominating young people’s lives – media use. When educators, parents, and community leaders work together as a team to promote media literacy as the 21st-century form of print literacy, incorporating the skills of thinking, reading, and writing, they will be sending a powerful and coordinated message to this “media generation.”