

Local educators attend conference at special ranch

By KELI JACOBI, News-Times Staff

Visionary filmmaker George Lucas begins every story involving one of his most celebrated characters with one simple sentence: Long ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Fourteen years ago, in a galaxy not so far away, Lucas took his vision (and a considerable amount of the profit made from his popular "Star Wars" series) and applied it to an even loftier goal — improving our nation's educational system.

Created in 1991, The George Lucas Educational Foundation encourages innovation in teaching and research. The foundation's home is Skywalker Ranch, Lucas' sprawling media and educational complex north of San Francisco.

So when El Dorado School District Math Chair Tom Simmons received an invitation to the ranch to mingle with leading figures in the field of math education, he and several others leapt at the chance. The Arkansas delegation — consisting of Simmons, Science Chair Donna White and two members of the El Dorado Education Foundation — were the only representatives of the state at the conference.

"Any time you have the opportunity to be around our nation's movers and shakers ... just having all of them in one place (is a positive thing)," Simmons said. "It was good to step back and take a look at the big picture."

With support from the EDEF, Simmons and White traveled to northern California in late October to network with like-minded individuals. Joining them were Alice Mahony, the foundation's vice-president, and Lila Phillips, executive director.

The Oct. 22 symposium presented a chance for participants to discuss the most current information in the field of elementary mathematics education with national leaders from a variety of backgrounds.

"It was a really open conference with the chance to interact with every speaker and panelist," said White. She agreed with the others that, with his keen intellect and wry sense of humor, Dr. Peter Hilton was among the standouts.

Hilton — former chairman of the U.S. Commission on Mathematical Instruction — addressed the importance of re-evaluating how students learn mathematics and how instructors teach it. Perhaps his most notorious accomplishment was his participation in the team that cracked Nazi codes to prevent critical supplies from getting through to Field Marshall Erwin Rommell's troops during World War II, altering the course of that war and helping to bring about its dénouement.

Other presenters included Julie Sarama and Douglas H. Clements, both professors at the State University of New York in Buffalo, who spoke of the need to support early childhood mathematics through a program that emphasizes both geometric and spatial ideas along with quantitative skills.

Children, the professors said, are intuitively endowed with capabilities in these areas and should be encouraged from an early age to make those connections, particularly through the use of computers.

"I loved the speaker who talked about computer games to help with student's retention of information," said White, adding, "but the other man said he didn't like computers (for teaching). There's so much room for different styles of teaching and no one style is best."

Also on hand was Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.), who is serving his second term as the top ranking Democrat on the House Education and Workforce Committee. Miller was one of the four congressional authors of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Assisting educators in thinking outside the box seemed high on the agenda for much of the conference.

"One speaker was advocating the teaching of algebra in kindergarten," said White, a strong believer in the cross-over relationship between math and science.

"I was particularly excited because they were advocating teaching symbols at an early age. The value of that is when you get to the point when you teach chemistry ... it would be an obstacle you wouldn't have to overcome," she said.

For White and the others, the conference also reinforced their knowledge that though El Dorado faces similar challenges as in other parts of the country, there is much to tout about as well — "the ratio of students to teachers, the facilities in the classrooms and resources available to us," said Simmons. "Compared to a place like California, which seemed to have numerous challenges, we aren't faring so poorly."

Simmons also said that rather than take a dismal look at the district's recent national and state-wide testing scores, he saw much progress to indicate El Dorado was on the right track. "Some people read the test scores and think we're in dire straits and we're not," he said.

Simmons stated that a number of factors must be analyzed when looking at scores, including sheer volume — El Dorado's 4,500-plus area students outdistance the combined total of all other Union County School Districts — and the percentage of graduating seniors who pursue an advanced education with little or no remediation.

"On the Iowa Exam, a national test, our students scored 50 percent or higher in every grade level with one exception," said Simmons, who stressed that El Dorado students are well-prepared by the time they graduate.

"There's been a 56 percent increase in Algebra I scores," he said. "On the ACT, our African-American students who took the core curriculum scored higher than the state or national average."

The math chair added that the Arkansas Benchmark Exam is more rigorous compared to exams administered by other states, setting the bar exceptionally high for all districts.

"At the end of the day, we want the kids who graduate from our schools to ... be imminently prepared to make competent decisions in their lives, to be informed citizens," he said, admitting that there were some areas educators were powerless to alter.

"We can change the achievement level, even if we can't change the home situation. We find when we raise expectations, we get what we ask for."

For more information on The George Lucas Educational Foundation, visit www.glef.org. For more information on *Edutopia*, the foundation's monthly magazine for educators, visit www.edutopia.org.