IN a spare bathroom next to the garage, George Lucas set up his darkroom. He had gotten a 35-millimeter camera about the same time he started high school, and had begun shooting everything from posed portraits of his niece and nephew to trick photos of the family cat, lured into midair by a dangling piece of meat. Before long, he was making backyard war movies on an 8-millimeter handed down by his grandfather.

Anybody who lived near the Lucas place, 14 miles outside of Modesto in California's Central Valley, recognized these ventures as the latest expressions of a quiet boy's creativity. George had already written a weekly newspaper, designed landscapes around his Lionel train set and built a dollhouse for a neighbor girl, scaled right down to a lamp made of a lipstick tube.

Little of this precocity, though, revealed itself in school. A bored, dreamy student, George had struggled with spelling and needed to repeat math the summer after eighth grade. His high school art teacher, looking over George's drawings of space soldiers, admonished him, "Get serious." George's father refused to pay for him to study illustration in college, hoping instead he would take over the family's office-furniture store.

The filmgoing world knows how this particular story ends. George Lucas, the underachieving teenager, grew up to become George Lucas, the phenomenally successful director, auteur of the "Star Wars" series, "Indiana Jones" and "American Graffiti." Maybe his experience tricking the cat into jumping was an early lesson in how to treat actors.

Except that the story has another prong, far less known, and tied to public policy rather than popular culture. Out of his own uninspiring education, the conviction that his abilities were ignored and throttled by conventional schooling, Mr. Lucas, 61, has
assiduously yet quietly built a foundation devoted to education reform over the past dozen years.

This is no exercise in designer charity. The George Lucas Educational Foundation has 30 full-time employees, a $4 million annual budget and a headquarters on the founder's Skywalker Ranch here in the Marin County hills. It publishes a magazine, produces documentaries, supports projects in both public and private schools, distributes an e-mail newsletter and maintains an extensive Web site, glef.org.

All these enterprises espouse a consistent message firmly in the progressive camp, emphasizing the virtues of hands-on field work, practical experience and the use of film, video and digital materials in preference to the usual textbooks and standardized tests.

To hear Mr. Lucas tell it, though, his preferred innovations are in many ways throwbacks. "Our platform is to say that there are time-tested ways of learning," he said in an interview earlier this summer. "Aristotle taught four or five people; he didn't have huge classes. Or you have the mentoring system - the cobbler teaching his assistants. Whether it's Aristotle or learning how to make shoes, you had a reason to learn. Education didn't happen in isolation. Maybe for the very elite, you can learn for the sake of learning. But for millions of students to learn, you need to know why you're learning."

To make those general precepts concrete, the Lucas foundation identifies and illustrates examples from the real world - a teacher in California who uses hip-hop lyrics as a route for his students to understand poets like Dylan Thomas; a school in Washington that makes the field study of rare lizards a way of teaching such fundamental subjects as reading, writing and math.

The fierce passion the Lucas foundation brings to its program has much to do with geography. From his base in the Bay Area, Mr. Lucas had early and deep involvement with the innovators of the Silicon Valley. His staff at the foundation includes veterans of Wired and Red Herring magazines, the public radio station KQED-FM and the Web zine Salon, all of which both chronicled and participated in the digital revolution, and these people's certitude echoes the high-tech industry's mantra of evolve or die.

"We grew up or worked in an area where change is encouraged, where innovation is encouraged, where entrepreneurship is nurtured," said James Daly, the editor in chief of Edutopia, the Lucas foundation's magazine. "And that's not the way it's been in education. If you feel like you're a hamster on the wheel all day, it's easy to stay that way. But when you get to the change agents, the rock does begin to roll uphill."

Largely female, married and middle-aged, not necessarily a recipe for the cutting edge, Edutopia's 85,000 subscribers actually use technology - e-mail, bulletin boards, listservs -
more avidly than teenagers, according to a survey by Grunwald Associates. They perceive themselves as influential on educational issues, even if only in their own classrooms or communities. And by an overwhelming margin, they assail the reliance on standardized tests mandated by the No Child Left Behind law.

To its credit, the Lucas foundation stops short of being tendentious, the captive of its own doctrine. Its agenda reflects not only Mr. Lucas's frustrations with his own education (at least until he entered film school at the University of Southern California) but a very deep family commitment to the field. His parents, both denied college by the Great Depression, presided over a household awash in National Geographics, World Almanac volumes, Landmark histories and biographies, crossword puzzles, all those elements of recreational self-education.

MR. LUCAS's older sister, Kate Nyegaard, has served since 1992 on the school board in Modesto, which has a heavily Latino, bilingual student body. His younger sister, Wendy Lucas, has taught reading in various California schools, some public and some Christian, for 22 years. They are reality checks for the foundation, Mrs. Nyegaard in a formal way as a member of its board.

While Edutopia publishes articles that can only send a chill through a devotee of the written word - "No Books, No Problem," read the headline of an article about a chemistry teacher who devises a curriculum without a text - it has also trumpeted the advantages of a longer school year. One of its finest articles profiled a class in St. Johnsbury, Vt., whose teacher had been deployed to Iraq; another trenchantly explored the plight of biology instructors under pressure to add "intelligent design" to their courses.

Even as an exponent of progressive education, Mr. Lucas himself has not escaped the long arm of standardized testing. There is a short essay about him written for fourth graders called "A Talented Young Man." It appears in a Steck-Vaughn test-prep book.

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