

Globe Live. All New. All True. All Live.

Robert Tinker, 75, a founder of the Concord Consortium

By **Kathleen McKenna** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 29, 2017

A scientist by trade and training, Robert Tinker was driven by his belief that there was a strong connection between technology education and equal rights for all learners.

“He understood that people, all people, needed to and should experience the world through technology,” said Chad Dorsey, president and chief executive of the Concord Consortium, an education technology research and development think tank that Dr. Tinker helped found in 1994. “He really believed that technology should not be limited to the elite few. His belief in equity was the most unassailable part of him.”

During his career, Dr. Tinker helped build several organizations that deliver virtual STEM education



During his career, Dr. Tinker helped build several organizations that deliver virtual STEM education to K-12 students.

— science, technology, engineering, and mathematics — to K-12 students. Colleagues say he was known for pioneering the use in classrooms of what is known as probeware — inexpensive, computer-linked sensors that collect data for the study of science, math, and engineering concepts. He was also known for his curiosity about how things worked, and for his strong wish to share that curiosity.

“He was an educator himself by nature and at heart,” Dorsey said of Dr. Tinker, who began his education career as a physics professor at Stillman College in Alabama during the civil rights movement. “He wanted to show people the same wonders of the world that he saw. There was nobody he didn’t want to disassemble a TV with.”

Get **Today's Headlines** in
your inbox:

The day's top stories delivered every
morning.

[Sign Up](#)

Dr. Tinker, who developed many educational software programs and wrote curricula for STEM classes to encourage creative ways of teaching, died of leukemia June 21 in Massachusetts General Hospital. He was 75 and lived in Amherst.

Although he officially retired from the Concord Consortium several years ago, Dr. Tinker stayed closely involved, particularly when funding came through for one of the many projects he had pioneered, Dorsey said.

“There are few people who are better grant writers than Bob Tinker,” Dorsey added. “He

was not a soul who was willing to give up on a dream. And he stayed closely involved until he saw his dreams come to fruition.”

One of those ideas was to launch the consortium itself. “When he first had the idea to create it, he just said, ‘We should apply for a grant.’” Dorsey said. “Then he dived in and secured a million-dollar grant, and we just took off from there.”

Dr. Tinker also helped develop the National Geographic Kids Network and the Virtual High School project, both of which delivered STEM curriculum to classrooms across the country, including in low-income rural and inner-city schools where such tools might not otherwise be available.

In a 1989 interview with the Globe about making technology training more accessible to teachers, Dr. Tinker said tech-savvy students could help their teachers learn, and vice versa. “The goal is to empower kids to experience things for themselves,” he said.

His programs helped grade school pupils find ways to collect and analyze data about topics such as the distribution of pets and acid rain patterns across the United States.

“Many teachers have never seen alternative modes of instruction,” Dr. Tinker said, adding that approaches such as teleconferencing between schools and better software could make improved methods of teaching “so accessible that teachers won’t need a lot of training.”

The youngest of four children, Robert F. Tinker was born in Wilmington, Del., in 1941. His parents were John Tinker, a chemist at DuPont, and the former Janet Casto. Dr. Tinker

attended the Wilmington Friends School before studying physics and chemistry at Swarthmore College, from which he graduated in 1963.

At Swarthmore, he met Barbara Perkins, and they married in 1964. They moved to California, where Dr. Tinker graduated from Stanford University with a master's degree. Then they both took jobs teaching at Stillman, a historically black college in Tuscaloosa, Ala. "Doing esoteric research in a basement at Stanford made no sense in light of incredible injustice and violence in the South," he told the MIT Technology Review [in 2012](#).

While working at Stillman, they became involved in the civil rights movement and voter registration efforts. In an oral history recorded for the Concord Consortium, Dr. Tinker recalled the insights he gained from teaching students at Stillman.

Teaching there was the best education anyone could design, he recalled, because "it showed me exactly how science education could reach far more learners. I've dedicated my life to realizing that dream. . . . There's always been a sense of mission. We make important advances that will affect kids all over the world and — this was my initial motivation — bring cutting-edge educational resources to undereducated kids."

In 1966, Dr. Tinker and his wife moved to the Boston area and he began doctoral work in low-temperature physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He received a doctorate in 1970 and became a physics professor at Amherst College. At the same time, he began writing curriculum for the Technical Education Research Centers in Cambridge, or TERC.

Dr. Tinker later helped found the Concord Consortium, and upon joining the organization full time, he worked to improve education accessibility for people with disabilities and assisted with projects such as the Global Laboratory, which allowed students from many

countries to gather and share scientific data.

During his career, he received many awards and honors, including the Siemens award for the advancement of science in 1990. He also was a consultant to the National Science Foundation.

A service has been held for Dr. Tinker, who in addition to his wife leaves two sons, Dylan of Singapore and Aaron of San Francisco; two sisters, Irene of Portland, Ore., and Dorothy Powell of Haverhill; and five grandchildren.

“He was amazingly kind and intelligent,” his wife said. “He had a very raw, puzzle-solving, curiosity-seeking intelligence. He was always interesting to be with because you could really talk to him about anything.”

In a [remembrance posted](#) on the Concord Consortium website, senior research scientist Sherry Hsi recalled Dr. Tinker’s infectious zeal, and one time when by phone he joined colleagues in a remote live webcast.

“I remember how his super amplified voice boomed over the audience like a television voice from God, enthusiastic about the potential that collaborative learning and mobile devices could have on education,” she wrote.

Kathleen McKenna can be reached at kmck66@verizon.net.

Top 10 Trending Articles

Most Viewed

Most Commented

Most Shared

Patriots’ Super Bowl comeback astounded even NFL Films

I ate like Tom Brady so you wouldn’t have to

Houston tries to determine extent of 'epic' destruction

Family seeks answers after Worcester man dies after fall in nursing home he helped found

Wheelock College, BU discussing merger

Harvey submerges some political divisions in Washington

Worcester police seeking surveillance video in case of kidnapped and strangled 7-year-old girl who was thrown from bridge

Chris Sale returns to striking form as Red Sox shut out Blue Jays

Tom Yawkey was no hero

Relax, Melania Trump is not wearing sky-high heels in a disaster zone

My Account

Manage my Account
Mobile Customer Service
Sign Up For Newsletters

Contact

Help
FAQs
Globe newsroom
Advertise

Social

Facebook
Twitter
Google+

More

ePaper
News in Education
Archives
Privacy policy
Terms of service
Terms of purchase
Work at Boston Globe Media