

Gayle Manchin, First Lady, West Virginia

Karen Stewartson | February 29, 2008

Ask Gayle Manchin to sum up her experience as West Virginia's first lady, and she arrives at two adjectives to describe it: adventurous and extraordinary. A longtime educator, Manchin has used her position as a catalyst to transform West Virginia schools - a natural fit, given her background. "In the beginning I didn't see it as being very different from what I had been doing," said Manchin, who spent nearly 40 years in teaching-related positions. "I guess initially it was kind of a continuation."

In March 2007, her husband - Gov. Joe Manchin - appointed her to the West Virginia Board of Education to serve a nine-year term. Through her recommendation, the state is now consulting with Cisco on providing broadband access to remote areas.

She also advocated for a technology development initiative for higher education institutions - student teachers can get simulation training on classroom management, which is now being used in various schools statewide.

Manchin views technology as a vital resource for schools, particularly in such a rural state. She advocates distance learning and immersing technology in the school curriculum. But she doesn't see computers as a replacement for teachers.

"Teachers still have a great impact in students' lives," she said, "but I do think technology has the power to equalize schools and make sure students have the same access to the world and to learning opportunities."

Manchin said her position as first lady lets her make a significant impact on West Virginia education. "If I look at anything in my career, it's that I was always looking forward," she said. "It wasn't until I was in this position for a while that I realized this truly is a window of opportunity to do more, be more, discover more and accomplish more."

Ultimately she intends to leave a legacy of improvement in West Virginia schools.

"I will be able to look back and have evidence that we have improved the lives of children and families in West Virginia, that we have done it through a better, more equitable education system, a better-skilled work force, a better collaboration between education at all levels - from preschool to higher ed," she said. "It isn't something that I have done individually, or that Joe had done individually. But through passion, or compassion maybe, that we have excited other people to get involved, and by doing that we've been able to make some great strides. I would hope that would be our legacy."