Building on a Strong Foundation
Birthdays are a good time for reflection. The Niswonger Foundation celebrated its seventeenth birthday this year. As we just completed the selection process for the newest class of Niswonger Scholars, it occurred to me that they, too, are in their seventeenth year.

That is the age at which most of us begin to appreciate the significance of what we can accomplish, while becoming increasingly aware that the decisions we make are formative and set the course for the rest of our lives. For our newest Scholars, those are decisions about which college to attend, selecting a career pathway, ensuring that first resume is creditable, and taking the initial steps in what I have been told they call “adulting.” While our new Scholars are among the best and brightest high school seniors, they openly discuss the stress they feel about making decisions that will set the proper course for the future. That kind of stress is healthy, the basis for the same intentional thought the Niswonger Foundation’s leadership is giving to the next seventeen years.

The good news is that we are operating from a position of strength. Our extraordinary school programs are the direct results of what happens when you work in partnership. The sustained work of the consortium of school systems served by the Niswonger Foundation is envied across the nation. This momentum is fed by a belief that Building on a Strong Foundation often means selecting courage over comfort.

The next step is to strategically move into the future. Like our Scholars, that courage must measure every action based on the perceived consequences. While a strong foundation is important for any successful partnership, it is even more valuable when you consider if change should occur, where the greatest vulnerabilities exist, and when “we have always done it that way,” is not an acceptable answer. A real leader understands that a “To Stop” list can be even more valuable than a “To Do” list.

What we learned is that to achieve sustainability for the valuable programs we have created it was imperative to become a charitable foundation. For years, we have known that partnerships were the “bridge building” part of our work. Through this change, we now know how much more powerful our mission “to create opportunities for individual and community growth through education and other sustainable projects” can be with the receipt of private gifts and donations.

For the first time, there is a return envelope in our Annual Report. As you read about the creative, cost-effective and successful work, consider if you will become a more active participant in impacting the lives of over 120,000 children in our region by providing financial support. This year, we more than doubled our financial investment to ensure that students will be “college and career ready” through external gifts and grants.

Like our new Scholars, we are proud of past accomplishments, but recognize that every decision is formative and will make its mark on the future. If there is one thing I have learned, rarely is there an easy way to do something important.

We are Building on a Strong Foundation. Come join us!
Current Year Grant Highlights

- Walmart Foundation – Completed the first year of a $450,000 three-year grant focused on kindergarten through second grade literacy development in Hancock County.

- Annenberg School Fund for Children – Utilized a $50,000 grant in support of literacy enrichment in Hancock County Elementary School and Carter’s Valley School, Hawkins County.

- John Tweed – $130,000 for CareerConnect, a career readiness program in Greene County.

- John Deere, Amsee, LTD, and Plus Mark Corporation – $11,000 in support of CareerConnect.

- Care Foundation of America – Completed year-two of a $1,625,000 three-year grant to support the NiswongerCARE College and Career Advising Program.

- Johnson and Associates, LLC; Pal Barger, Jr.; Delta Dental; and Brotherton Family Foundation – $350,000 in support of NiswongerCARE College and Career Advising.

- Care Foundation of America – Completed year-one of a $562,500 three-year grant in support of NiswongerCARE Online, supporting rural school systems across the State of Tennessee.

- United States Department of Education – Completed year-one of a $8-million-dollar five-year Education, Research and Innovation (EIR) grant to improve middle grades literacy development.
Current Year Partnership Highlights

Literacy Development

• **Literacy Initiative Focused on Effectiveness (LIFE)** combines the best practices in early grades literacy instruction to ensure that students are reading on grade level by third grade. This program is currently serving 18 classrooms in Greene and Hancock Counties. The Hancock County initiative includes a Place-Based-Learning design.

• **Rural LIFE** is serving 18 schools systems/36 middle schools using personalized learning strategies with the goal of focusing on literacy to improve academic achievement for students in grades six through eight. This program is funded by an 8 million dollar/five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Professional Learning

• **Advanced Placement (AP)** support for teachers to attend AP Institutes (20 in the current year; over 500 in the past eight years);

• **Leadership for Blended Learning** supports school use of technology in classrooms;

• **Principal Leadership** support for first-year principals;

• **Regional Summit on Children** uniting education, business, health care, children’s services non-profit organizations, etc. with a mission to understand and support children in poverty;

• **School Success Symposium** united nearly 1000 educators to learn from the region’s best educational practices; and

• **Counselor Convening** provides kindergarten – university counselors with professional learning and best practices opportunities.

• **Keynote Speakers** included Liz Murry, author of Breaking Night…Homeless to Harvard; Jeanette Walls, author of The Glass Castle; and Dr. Tammy Pawloski, authority on teaching children in poverty.

**Niswonger Online** had record-setting enrollments in an expansive offering of coursework to middle and high school students including courses in, Advanced Placement, Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages, Career/Technical, Mathematics and Physical Education.

• Online courses to other Tennessee rural communities is being provided through a partnership with the Care Foundation of America.

• Dual Enrollment partnership with East Tennessee State University provides over 60 online college level courses and course pathways through Niswonger Online.

**College and Career Advising** – Thirty-one high schools, 29,000 students, receive college and career advising through the NiswongerCARE program. Students are assisted with financial aid applications (FAFSA), college applications, career exploration/college planning, ACT test registration, scholarship searches, Tennessee Promise and Hope Scholarship eligibility and informational meetings for families.

**CareerConnect** completed the second pilot year for students in Greene County and Greeneville City Schools. Now, prepared to expand throughout the region, this career and technology focused program is currently introducing 300 students to soft skills development, career choices and employment opportunities available in their communities.

**Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)** was the focus of 11 middle-grades and high school technology camps in partnership with East Tennessee State University.

For the sixteenth year, the Niswonger Foundation provided curriculum based **Young People’s Symphony Concerts** to over 2000 students in partnership with the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra.

**Story Arts** is the focus of a partnership with the National Storytelling Center to provide live streaming of the International Storytelling Festival throughout the region and to countries around the world. Additionally, this partnership provides for teacher workshops to enhance classroom skills and provides access to storytelling events for underserved children.
A STRONG FOUNDATION OF SCHOLARSHIP & LEADERSHIP

The Niswonger Scholars

The Niswonger Foundation’s Scholarship and Leadership Program is building a strong foundation of leaders, many of whom have already returned to Northeast Tennessee. We know of no other Scholarship and Leadership program like ours in the United States. Niswonger Scholars are selected through a nomination process that seeks to identify the region’s best and brightest future leaders. They are given the opportunity to attend the college or university that will best prepare them for success in their field of study, while participating in our four-year leadership program. Through an emphasis on leadership, business management, community service, and ethical decision making, the Scholars are provided travel, training, internships, and personalized support to become model leaders and citizens of the world. There are 96 individuals who hold the distinction of being Niswonger Scholars.

What makes this program unique to all other scholarships is that the goal is to identify and develop leaders for Northeast Tennessee. These students commit to returning, within seven years, to Northeast Tennessee to work in their chosen career one year for each year they receive our scholarship. The plan is that by enabling these students to pursue their academic passion and by cultivating their leadership abilities, they will be committed to returning to their “roots” and being catalysts for the growth and improvement of their communities.

While Scholars understand that one person’s life can have a great impact, the power of the network of Scholar Alumni is key to building a strong foundation. Through the hands of 72 Alumni, one can witness, firsthand, what happens when greater challenges are faced together. Examples of Alumni involvement include formal and informal meetings, serving as mentors to undergraduate Scholars, assisting with internships and research placements, and presentations at Scholars training. Importantly, most of the selection committee for new Scholars is made up of Alumni. This ensures their support for the success of the new Scholars and a commitment to select those who will bring more strength to the network.

Alumni are taking leadership roles in many career paths. These include medicine, business, nursing, public health, pharmacy, engineering, K-12 and higher education, counseling, and non-profit management. In addition to professional roles, Alumni are exhibiting leadership skills in their communities through civic clubs, non-profit organizations, and the faith-based community. Alumni are serving in roles that support the State of Tennessee. As an example, Nick Darnell, teacher at East Ridge Middle School, in Morristown, was selected to serve on the Governor’s First Teacher Cabinet, and was recently appointed to the State Board of Education.

Current Scholarship and Leadership Highlights…

- Nineteen Scholars studying in fourteen universities with twelve distinct career paths.
- Five new Scholars selected for 2019, representing five school districts and high schools.
- Seventy-Two Alumni contractually committed to “return” to Northeast Tennessee.
- Thirty-six Alumni have already met their contractual commitments to return to the region.
- Fifteen career paths represented by the Alumni who have already returned.

- Forty-seven Alumni pursuing, or having completed, advanced studies in graduate schools across the country.
- This year, Scholars completed 1600 hours of community service, serving in over 40 community organizations.
- Scholars are encouraged, and financially supported, to pursue internships, study abroad, service abroad, campus leadership, and community engagement.
- Niswonger Scholars are carrying out the distinct mission to “Learn-Earn-Return.”
Current Niswonger Scholars

Class of 2022
Aubrie Strange (Samford University)
Sarah Douthat (University of Tennessee-Martin)
Rithvik Vutukuri (Tulane University)
Alexis Harvey (Tennessee Technological University)
Jasmine Martin (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)

Class of 2021
Levi Blazer (Belmont University)
Lorraine Hayes (Wake Forest University)
Emily Ellison (Clemson University)
Brittany Church (Austin Peay State University)
Tyler “Ty” Myers (University of Tennessee-Chattanooga)

Class of 2020
Kori Smith (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
Tanner Shivley (Carson-Newman University)
Christian Dalton (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
Elijah “Bo” Pless (Milligan College)

Class of 2019
Zachary Ward (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
Morgan Thomas (Clemson University)
Trenton Yount (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
Courtney Johnson (Maryville College)
Matthew Widener (East Tennessee State University)

Graduates - Class of 2018
McKenzie Reynolds (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
Hope Adkins (Carson-Newman University)
Dillan Shults (Tennessee Technological University)
Kristen “Alora” Ricker (Milligan College)
Madeline Standbridge (University of Tennessee-Knoxville)
As an operating foundation, the majority of Niswonger Foundation funding is directed to School Partnerships and the Scholarship and Leadership program. Up to ten percent of the total annual operating budget can be used by the Niswonger Foundation to assist with important projects that are identified through proposals from schools, school districts and other not-for-profit agencies. These mini-grants provide for exploration into creative educational activities, start-up projects, one-time unique educational experiences, and assistance with other areas of great need in the community. Over $2,100,000 has been dedicated to grant making in the Niswonger Foundation's seventeen-year history. More than 400 mini-grants have been awarded.

The mission of the Niswonger Foundation is firmly placed in the First Congressional District of Northeast Tennessee. However, the Staff of the Niswonger Foundation recognizes the need for leadership, and an informed voice, in support of a strong educational system in Tennessee and beyond. As examples, staff members are represented as Board Members, and among the leadership, of the following organizations:

- Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) Board
- Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA) Board
- State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) Board and Steering Committee
- Tennesseans for Quality Early Education (TQEE)
- Tennessee College Access and Success Network (TCASN) Board
- Governor's Academy of School Leaders
- Complete Tennessee Board and Steering Committee
- Governor's Books from Birth Advisory Board

The Niswonger Foundation was established in 2001 to make a positive and sustainable difference in education in Northeast Tennessee. This dream was envisioned by Scott M. Niswonger, who founded Landair Transport, Inc. and Forward Air Corporation. These companies were the first two Greeneville-based companies to be taken public in the history of Greene County, Tennessee. Jointly, the companies have combined annual revenue of over one-billion-dollars and employ more than 5000 people.

With the success of his two companies, the philosophy of “Learn - Earn - Return” was created. Using the innovative model of having a private, for-profit logistics company, Landair Transport, support a not-for-profit educational foundation, the goal of bringing rigorous, relevant, and cost effective programs to public education became a mission.

School Partnerships are designed for the specific challenges of rural education. Fundamental to the success of the Niswonger Foundation has been a clear focus on removing constraints to educational innovation and problem solving, thus allowing local school systems to better provide for student needs. These efforts have gained national attention resulting in the receipt of two significant grants from the U.S. Department of Education and numerous other national organizations.

We know of no other Scholarship and Leadership program like ours in the United States. Niswonger Scholars are selected through a nomination process that seeks to identify the region’s best and brightest future leaders. Scholars are given the opportunity to attend the college or university that will best prepare them for success in their field of study, while participating in our four-year leadership program. What makes our program unique is that these students commit to returning to Northeast Tennessee to work in their chosen career, one year for each year they receive the scholarship.

The Niswonger Foundation expands its philosophy of “Learn - Earn - Return” beyond Northeast Tennessee through involvement in numerous state and national educational initiatives. Additionally, the Foundation shares a percentage of the operating funds for grants to other not-for-profit agencies for programs that support the Foundation’s mission:

“To create opportunities for individual and community growth through education and other sustainable projects.”
WITH APPRECIATION TO
CONTRIBUTORS TO THE
NISWONGER FOUNDATION
(JULY 1, 2017 – JUNE 30, 2018)

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THE NISWONGER FOUNDATION was founded by businessman and philanthropist Scott M. Niswonger. Unlike most private foundations, the Niswonger Foundation was established as an operating foundation with its own programs and projects. The Foundation is also approved as a charitable organization. Although a percentage of its operating funds go towards grant making, most funds go into the Foundation’s two primary programs – a scholarship and leadership program for selected college students committed to returning to the region and partnership programs for schools.

AN OPERATING FOUNDATION

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DR. RICHARD KITZMILLER  
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DR. WILLIAM FLANARY, Washington County Schools

MRS. REBECCA ISAACS, Rogersville City Schools

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NISWONGER FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP TEAM
For More Information Contact:

Niswonger Foundation
P.O. Box 1508
Greeneville, Tennessee 37743
(423) 798-7837

www.niswongerfoundation.org