May 7, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
   Education, Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin:

On behalf of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), I am writing in response to your Committee’s call for comments on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). At the outset, I want to applaud the hard work you and your colleagues on the HELP Committee have devoted to this critical topic.

Geography education is of central importance to educating the next generation of American students. For several years now, we have been working to respond to requests for information from members of Congress, including former Chairman Kennedy, to detail the value of geography to a well-rounded K-12 education. One of geography’s greatest concerns is that our discipline is the only one of the ten “Core Academic Subjects” identified in the ESEA that does not have any specific funding authorizations or implementing programs in the law. This limits the ability of the states to implement innovative programs focused on improving the teaching of geography.

To this end, it is our belief that American students would best be served if Congress provides funding specifically for geography programs and teacher training at the K-12 level as part of the ESEA reauthorization. Geographic knowledge and thinking enables students to understand the constantly changing places, people, patterns, and connections in the world today. There has never been a time of more mobility of people, information, and ideas which makes understanding the spatial context of places and interactions very important.

One of the greatest values of geography education is that it is central to preparing students to be informed citizens of the United States and economically competitive in a rapidly globalizing world. This aligns with one of the key priorities of the Obama Administration’s blueprint for ESEA reform: college and career readiness to prepare young Americans for their
future. College curricula are increasingly challenging and call upon knowledge and skills taught in K-12 geography classes. For example, students with a solid background in geography will develop an understanding of how humans think spatially – and how these cognitive abilities impact all aspects of learning and informed decision-making based on data. The scientific knowledge and analytical and technical skills acquired in K-12 geography courses are useful in teaching about and learning STEM disciplines, including sciences, mathematics, and engineering.

Geographic learning unquestionably prepares students for a wide-range of emerging and critical career paths. Students in higher-education settings – at community colleges and four-year institutions alike – can build on skills developed during their K-12 years to better prepare for the future. Geographic technology, including GIS and GPS, has been identified by the U.S. Department of Labor as one of three important and rapidly-expanding career paths. Knowledge of geography is also highly valued in a range of growing environmental and green jobs.

Federal, State, and local governments depend heavily on individuals with geographic skills – including for positions in urban planning, remote sensing, environmental management, transportation, emergency preparedness, and critical jobs in national security positions such as with the Departments of State and Defense and first responder units. Finally, geography is vital to a variety of everyday jobs, including social services, real estate, travel, and teaching.

Employers in all these fields have indicated that there is a paucity of students graduating today with the skills needed to tackle the vital issues that rely on geographic knowledge. If we work as a society to provide the resources needed for the teaching of geography at the K-12 level, we can prepare both young Americans for their future and our nation for the challenges we are facing and will continue to confront throughout the 21st Century.

We have been working closely with colleagues in the geography community to help Congress understand the importance of geography education. Attached to this letter, you will find a resolution supporting geography education that has been adopted or endorsed recently by 14 leading geography and GIS associations. These groups come from the private and public sectors and the education community and collectively represent thousands of geography and GIS professionals.

We are also in the process of developing an “AAG Blueprint for Geography Education” that is designed to complement the Obama Administration’s Blueprint on the ESEA Reauthorization and lays out the primary reasons the federal government should invest in geography at the K-12 level. We will share this document with the Committee once it has been completed – most likely by the end of May.

In conclusion, we urge you to make geography a central part of the ESEA as the HELP Committee works on the reauthorization. A strong foundation in geography makes for a
well-rounded K-12 student population and is critical to our nation’s economy and national security. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of any assistance to you.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Douglas Richardson, Ph.D.
Executive Director