AAG BLUEPRINT FOR GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION

Views on The Reauthorization of the ESEA in 2010

by

the Association of American Geographers (AAG)

The United States stands at a crucial moment for our national education policy. While educational systems are led at the state and local level, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – the primary federal law for K-12 education – has not been reauthorized for over eight years. As a result, many programs and initiatives created under and modified by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB – the name given to the 2002 reauthorization of the ESEA) have developed flaws or become stagnant and are in need of reform. Additionally, educators, researchers, and policy leaders have pointed out critical investments that went unrecognized or were ignored as Congress developed NCLB.

President Barack Obama and the Education Secretary Arne Duncan have signaled the importance of the ESEA reauthorization by releasing a blueprint on the Administration’s views for needed changes in the law. While the blueprint does not include specific legislative language, it does focus on key priorities for a bill: preparing students for college and careers; developing effective teachers and principals; insuring equity and opportunity for all students; rewarding excellence at the state and school district level; and promoting innovation and continuous improvement for our schools.

These are certainly laudable goals, and we in the geographic community applaud the President and Secretary Duncan for focusing on them. But it is also clear that one of the major flaws in No Child is the lack of attention paid to geography education. While geography is identified as one of nine “core academic subjects” in the law, it is the only one of the nine that does not receive a specific funding allocation or implementing programs to further its teaching at the K-12 level. All of the other core subjects receive millions in federal funding annually – including over $1.25 billion for reading and English programs; approximately $180 million for math and science partnerships; and almost $120 million for Teaching American History grants. While these are certainly worthwhile investments, it is critical that the reauthorized ESEA also contain funding for geography education.

The Value of Geographic Learning

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. Understanding Earth’s physical and human systems provides the context for a comprehensive analysis of critical global issues. Now, more than ever, students must learn geography in order to successfully:

- create innovative solutions to problems using data and visualization tools
- understand how actions taken in one place impact another place
- compete successfully in international economic systems
- adapt to and help shape changing environments
- communicate with and work with people from many diverse cultures

It is our responsibility to ensure students are prepared with geographic knowledge and thinking that will empower them to engage and interact successfully in a global society.

**Preparing Students for College and Careers**

Geography’s greatest value is that it helps prepare students for post-secondary education and a multitude of careers. This aligns with one of the key priorities of the Obama Administration’s blueprint for ESEA reform: preparing young Americans for their future.

College curricula are increasingly challenging and call upon facts 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 knowledge and skills acquired at the K-12 level will be used in a large number of other disciplines including sciences, mathematics, and engineering.

Critically, it is our view that public investments must also be made to promote geographic learning at the post-secondary level. Students in higher-education settings – at community colleges and four-year institutions alike – can build on skills developed during the K-12 years to better prepare for the future. This is because geographic learning unquestionably prepares students for a wide-range of emerging and critical career paths. Geospatial technologies, including GIS and GPS systems, have been identified by the U.S. Department of Labor as one of three important 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-16 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.

Steps to be Taken

For the reasons outlined above, the AAG urges the following steps be taken to ensure we are best preparing America’s students for a lifetime of learning and career success by exposing them to fundamental and cutting-edge geographic tools and concepts:

- Congress must act now to promote geography by including funding allocations and/or implementing programs on geographic education as part of a reauthorized ESEA.
- Congress should also enhance geography teacher training by passing the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (H.R. 1240/S. 749) and/or similar legislation.
- Congress should further support geographic learning by including geography in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) provisions of the reauthorization bill for the National Science Foundation (known as the America COMPETES Act) – which is also up for action in 2010.
- The National Governors Association and other state education organizations should work hand-in-hand with the geography education community to promote cutting-edge standards and best-practice models for geographic learning.
- The geography education community should continue to work to identify both critical gaps in research and the experts who can study and find solutions to pressing questions.
- Federal and State education leaders and the geographic education community should seek out, highlight, and reward systems, schools, and educators who are making a difference in bringing geography to life for students.