AAG Washington Monitor

Geography Education Bill Introduced in Senate

On July 11, Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), with co-sponsors Ted Stevens (R-AK), John Warner (R-VA), Chris Dodd (D-CT), Daniel Akaka (D-HI), and Conrad Burns (R-MT), introduced legislation (S. 1376) aimed at expanding geographic literacy among students in kindergarten through grade twelve. Specifically, the bill authorizes an appropriation of up to $15 million a year for the next four federal fiscal years for the U.S. Secretary of Education to issue a grant to a “national nonprofit education organization (or a consortium of organizations) that has as its primary purpose the improvement of the quality of student understanding of geography through effective teaching of geography in the Nation’s classrooms.”

The grantee organization or consortium would be charged with spending twenty-five percent of the award amount to: (1) strengthen and expand the grantee’s relationships with institutions of higher education and state and local agencies with a commitment to geography education; (2) to support and promote research-based training of teachers of geography and related disciplines in kindergarten through grade twelve; (3) to support research on effective geography teaching practices and the development of assessment instruments and strategies to document student understanding of geography; (4) to convene national conferences on geography education to assess the current state of geographic literacy; and (5) to develop and disseminate appropriate research-based materials to foster geographic literacy.

The grantee would use the other seventy-five percent of the funds to award sub-grants to higher education institutions associated with a state geographic alliance, a nonprofit educational organization, or a state or local educational agency. The sub-grant recipients would then be charged with using their funding for purposes such as conducting teacher training programs that use effective and research-based approaches to the teaching of geography at the kindergarten through grade twelve level; applying Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or other geographic technological tools to the teaching of geography, promoting research in geography education, emphasizing research that leads to improving student achievement; fostering comparative studies of world cultures, economies, and environments; and developing effective, research-based geography learning materials.

The legislation was drafted and introduced thanks in part to the hard work of the National Geographic Society (NGS). The bill, in its findings section, points to a nine-country National Geographic-Roper survey of geographic literacy among young adults aged eighteen through twenty-four, in which Americans ranked second to last. We at the AAG look forward to working with the NGS and others to promote the legislation and we’ll keep you apprised of any developments. The full text of the bill can be accessed at www.aag.org/geoedbill.

Climate Change Inquiry Provokes Scientific Community Response

On June 23, Rep. Joe Barton (R-TX), Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, sent letters to three climate change scientists – Michael Mann of the University of Virginia, Malcolm Hughes of the University of Arizona, and Raymond Bradley of the University of Massachusetts – asking the individuals detailed scientific questions about their recent studies, in addition to asking for extensive information about their life’s work. Barton also sent a separate letter to the National Science Foundation (NSF) asking NSF for information on the work of the three scientists as well as a list of all grants the foundation has made in recent years in the areas of climate and paleoclimate science.

Barton’s action is a rare foray by a politician into the peer review process. As an example of the level of inquiry in Barton’s letters, he asked Mann, Bradley, and Hughes for the “location of all data archives relating to each published study” and is requiring them to provide answers to such detailed questions as whether the scientists calculated “the R2 statistic for the temperature reconstruction, particularly for the 15th Century proxy record calculations.”

The reaction from the scientific community in Washington has been firm in its opposition to Rep. Barton’s activities. American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) CEO Alan Leshner has written to Barton expressing deep concern about the congressman’s actions and questioning whether the chairman’s “approach is good for the processes by which scientific finding on topics relevant to public policy are generated and used.” Ralph Cicerone, President of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), asserted in a separate letter to Barton later that “a congressional investigation, based on the authority of the House Commerce Committee, is probably not the best way to resolve a scientific issue.” The NAS also offered to “create an independent expert panel to assess the state of scientific knowledge” in the climate field.

In addition, House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) has been one of Barton’s most active and vocal opponents. Boehlert sent Barton a sharply worded letter criticizing the “illegitimate investigation you have launched.” Boehlert also raised legal issues dealing with committee jurisdiction and called Barton’s actions “chilling.”

Consistent with the AAG’s longstanding support of scientific freedom, AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson wrote to Barton on August 12, asserting: “your unprecedented approach … is not the appropriate method of resolving a matter of scientific dispute.” Richardson also joined a separate letter that has been signed on to by a wide range of scientific societies, disciplinary associations, and prominent members of the university community.