Congressmen Walz, Van Hollen Attend AAG Meeting

Congressmen Tim Walz (D-MN) and Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) both honored the AAG with their presence at the recent AAG Annual Meeting in Washington, to speak on geographic education policy and to hear from attendees.

Walz, a former high school geography teacher, noted that he was gratified to be spending some time with fellow geographers – and joked that he wished he could spend the day going to sessions at our meeting rather than dealing with another day of votes and committee hearings! He also told those gathered that members of Congress need to recognize Geography’s importance, calling geography “the glue that ties a well-rounded, 21st century education together.”

Walz promised to work to educate his fellow members about the importance of better funding for geography through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is on the docket for Congressional action in 2010.

Van Hollen is the Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) – an influential House leadership position – so his advocacy for geography education provides a big boost to our cause. He spoke about his childhood as the son of a U.S. Foreign Service officer and asserted that geography is critical to understanding the places and cultures that directly impact our foreign policy and national security. Van Hollen noted that the ESEA reauthorization is a priority for House Democrats in the coming months and that they would be working with Education Secretary Arne Duncan and the Administration to develop strong and effective legislation. He is also the lead sponsor of the House’s Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (TGIF – H.R. 1240).

Walz and Van Hollen both urged those in attendance to communicate the importance of geography education to their elected representatives – and to get friends and colleagues to do so as well. We at the AAG strongly urge members to reach out to policymakers with your views on this crucial issue – please do not hesitate to contact me for advice on who you should contact and how you can best reach and have an impact on them.

AAG Invites Comments on Draft Blueprint

After Van Hollen’s remarks, Doug Richardson, Susan Gallagher, and I distributed copies of a draft of the “AAG Blueprint for Geography Education” – a concept discussed in Doug’s column in the April AAG Newsletter. The document is meant to follow along with the Obama Administration’s Blueprint for the reauthorization of the ESEA and highlights some key steps that should be taken to best augment and support geography education – including the need for Congress to include core funding for geography as part of the ESEA reauthorization, to enact TGIF; to support of geography in education provisions of the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) reauthorization bill (see below), as well as other efforts than can be taken on the state level.

Our goal is to collect comments on the draft and work with all AAG members and with the leadership of other key geography organizations to release a final version of the Blueprint by the end of May. Those wishing to download a copy of the document should visit http://www.aag.org/blueprint. As the website suggests, any comments on the draft can be directed to Susan Gallagher of the AAG staff at sgallagher@aag.org. We thank you in advance for your input to this important issue!

NSF Reauthorization Remains in Flux

On April 22, Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN), Chairman of the House Science Committee, introduced H.R. 5116 – the reauthorization bill for the National Science Foundation (NSF). The bill – which is better known as the COMPETES Act – has yet to attract support from any of the leading Republicans on the Committee, but discussions have been bipartisan at the staff level and Gordon and his top aides are optimistic that there ultimately will be GOP sponsors once the bill goes through the appropriate hearings.

At a meeting with representatives of national science organizations – which I attended on behalf of the AAG—Louis Finkel, Chief of Staff for the Science Committee, told those gathered that the authorized funding levels in the bill are placeholders and that the White House and panel members are still working out exact numbers. Gordon will ultimately introduce a manager’s amendment with the revised allotments. The bill, which keeps the NSF on a track to double its budget over ten years, may ultimately change to an eleven-year schedule. A faster track would of course be desirable, but Finkel noted that the “miserable” federal budget outlook is coloring everything on the Hill.

The reauthorization – which would be valid for five years – takes place as the NSF is preparing for a change in leadership. Director Arden Bement, who has held his post since November 2004, has announced his resignation effective in May. He is leaving the Foundation to head a new Global Policy Research Institute at Purdue University, where he is the former head of the School of Nuclear Engineering. The bill could also be the last hurrah for Chairman Gordon, as he announced in December that he is not running for reelection in 2010.

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