Senate Committee Continues ESEA Hearings

The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee has continued its hearings on various topics related to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in recent weeks. Despite the Committee’s diligent work, Chairman Tom Harkin’s (D-IA) office has yet to release even a preliminary draft bill, and the prevailing wisdom in Washington is that it will be impossible for legislators to complete work on the reauthorization until the 112th Congress convenes in 2011.

As readers of this column are well aware, the ESEA (which is currently known as No Child Left Behind – NCLB) was due for renewal in 2007, so Congress has fallen well behind the specified timetable for action.

In large part, the past delays have been due to political circumstances. Efforts at reauthorization in 2007-08 failed because the newly-elected Democratic Congress was at odds with the Bush Administration as to how to amend the NCLB framework. Once President Obama took office, the HELP Committee and its House counterpart (the Education and Labor Committee) were tied up with the healthcare reform process and panel members were not able to turn their full attention to national K-12 education issues.

Now that they have, Republicans are unlikely to want to push ahead with a quick reauthorization because the GOP stands as No Child Left Behind. The ESEA is likely to face a more measured process and panel members will be able to focus more of their attention to national K-12 education issues.

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Despite the delays in the reauthorization process, we at the AAG have been supporting funding authorizations and implementing programs for the teaching of K-12 geography was supported by over twenty organizations. In addition to diligently responding to requests for information from members of Congress and working in concert with our fellow geography organizations to promote the importance of geography education, we have also reached out to the National Governors Association, many individual Governors, and other state leaders in recent months. The contacts we have made enabled us to inform key policymakers about the upcoming release of the new K-12 geography education standards and will be critical once the ESEA reauthorization is complete and it falls to the states to support geography education.

We are grateful for the support of the AAG membership in these ongoing efforts on behalf of geography education and we will continue to update you on any relevant information related to the Congressional reauthorization process as it develops.

Census Leaders Lauded for Proficiency

On August 10, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke announced that the Census Bureau would be returning $1.6 billion of its $7 billion FY 2010 operational budget to the U.S. Treasury. Locke praised Census Director Robert Groves for “proven management” and a successful communications strategy and also noted that the cooperation of the American public in the decennial census process greatly aided the Bureau’s efforts. The savings included:
- $800 million in unused emergency funding,
- $650 million in reduced door-to-door questioning efforts due to a higher-than-expected return rate on the original mailed questionnaire; and
- $150 million from unneeded activities in hard-to-reach areas including Alaska and certain tribal lands.

Suresh and Marrett at NSF

On August 5, President Obama formally nominated sociologist Cora Marrett to serve as Deputy Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Marrett has been serving as either acting Director or as acting Deputy Director of the Foundation since January 2009. In her current capacity as acting Director, she is the only the second social scientist to lead the NSF. Subra Suresh, who has been nominated as NSF Director, has been approved by the Senate HELP Committee and the full Senate is expected to confirm Suresh in September. The AAG, of course, maintains a close relationship with the NSF and is grateful for the support provided by the Foundation’s leadership to the NSF’s Geography and Spatial Sciences Program. Please see the June edition of the Washington Monitor for more on Suresh and Marrett.

New OBSSR Director

National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Francis Collins announced in July the appointment of Robert Kaplan as Director of the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR). Kaplan, a psychologist, currently holds appointments at the University of California, Los Angeles in the School of Public Health and the David Geffen School of Medicine. He is an expert on the behavioral components of tobacco-induced lung disease and earned his MA and PhD at the University of California, Riverside.

Kaplan will concurrently serve as an Associate Director of the NIH and will report directly to Collins. The OBSSR is one of the key points of contact for geographers who work with and conduct research for the 27 Institutes and Centers that fall under the NIH umbrella. We at the AAG work closely with the OBSSR staff – along with leaders in various Institutes – in our outreach on behalf of geography to the NIH.

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The AAG seeks authors and developers to create a multimedia educational website supporting Understanding the Changing Planet: Strategic Directions for the Geographical Sciences. See www.aag.org/cs/education for more information.