New York Retains High School Geography Exam

In the June edition of this column, I reported that the AAG had urged the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Board of Regents to reject a recommendation that would make the state's global history and geography exam optional. I'm happy to share with you that our efforts have had a positive effect.

Under the Department's proposal, high school students in the state of New York would have been able to substitute an additional math, science, or vocational exam for the global history and geography exam as part of the requirements for graduating with a Regent's Diploma – the highest-level graduation certification in New York, which is required for entrance into many colleges and universities.

Based on input from the AAG and others, the Board of Regents decided not to take steps to make the exam optional. The exam, however, has the lowest-passing rate of any of those required for graduation, and the Board is still debating what it could do to improve student performance.

One idea being considered would “require two units of study in Global History and Geography. The first unit of study would provide students with foundational skills in Economics, Geography, World History, and Civics. This first unit of study would culminate in an end-of-course exam (a Regents exam, pending availability of funding). The second unit of study would build on this foundation to enable students to become critical thinkers and access the content by examining cross cultural themes and patterns during the modern time period. This second unit of study would culminate in a Regents exam that is required for graduation, beginning as early as 2013-14, and that provides the appropriate rigor for college and career readiness.”

We have remained in touch with NYSED staff and continue to provide information on the value and importance of K-12 geography for students expected to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. We will monitor future developments and report on them in this column.

UCAR and Others Call for U.S. Weather Commission

On September 27, an expert panel convened by the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR) gathered on Capitol Hill to urge policymakers to create a U.S. Weather Commission.

Thomas Bogdan, UCAR's president, noted that Congress has never empanelled such a commission despite the vast impact of weather on the economy and on all Americans' lives. He also explained that, “Emerging technologies are providing an opportunity to make forecasts that are more accurate and detailed than ever, and to communicate them instantly to key communities and businesses. We need a U.S. Weather Commission to ensure that our entire weather research and technology enterprise provides maximum benefit to the nation.”

The panel also included Pamela Emch, Senior Staff Engineer/Scientist with Northrop Grumman and Past Chair of the American Meteorological Society Board on Enterprise Economic Development; John Armstrong, Chair of the Committee on the Assessment of the National Weather Service Modernization Program; and William Gail, Co-founder and Chief Technology Officer of the Global Weather Corporation. They echoed Bogdan's comments about the use of increasingly-accurate weather data as a catalyst for economic growth and also pointed to the importance of protecting American lives and property from adverse weather events.

Bogdan asserted that UCAR would urge the 113th Congress, which will be seated in January based on election results, to enact legislation creating a Weather Commission. He suggested that it could be modeled on the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, which existed from 2001-04 under the Oceans Act of 2000 and was chaired by James Watkins, a former Chief of Naval Operations and U.S. Secretary of Energy. The Ocean Commission's mandate was “to establish findings and develop recommendations for a new and comprehensive national ocean policy” and it heard and received testimony from hundreds of leading scientists, organizations, and government officials. It sent a final report to President Bush and to Congress in late 2004.

Union of Concerned Scientists Endorses AAG Resolution

The “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education” remains popular with a wide range of individuals and groups and recently added two more key endorsements.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) was founded in 1969 by faculty and students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to “initiate a critical and continuing examination of governmental policy in areas where science and technology are of actual or potential significance” and “devise means for turning research applications away from the present emphasis on military technology toward the solution of pressing environmental and social problems.” The organization has been closely identified with the fight against global warming in its recent history.

Caterpillar Inc. is the world's largest manufacturer of construction and mining equipment, diesel and natural gas engines, and industrial gas turbines and is a mainstay in the Fortune 100. Their interest in geography education stems from the company's increasing use of GPS systems in their products, including for land-grading accuracy. Caterpillar was created through a merger in 1925 and is based in Peoria, Illinois.

The resolution explains the value and importance of geography education and urges policymakers to include funding for geography education as part of a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act; to include geography and geospatial education in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) proposals; and to enhance geography teacher training. The full text of the document and the full list of endorsers can be accessed at www.aag.org/AAGEducationResolution. We appreciate the support of the Union of Concerned Scientists and of Caterpillar.