Governor Chafee Becomes Latest High-Profile Supporter of GeoEd Resolution

In late April, Governor Lincoln Chafee’s office contacted us to indicate that he wanted to add his name to the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education.” He is the third governor to sign on to the document, joining Paul LePage (R-ME) and Rick Scott (R-FL).

Chafee took office as the 74th Governor of the State of Rhode Island in January 2011. He previously served the people of the Ocean State in the U.S. Senate from 1999-2007. Governor Chafee is the only Independent currently serving as governor of a U.S. state and he first held elective office in Warwick, RI, serving as a city councilor and as mayor. We are grateful to the governor for his support of geography education.

First ESEA Reauthorization Bill Introduced in House

As readers of this column are well aware, the possibility exists that Congress will make a serious push in 2011 to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and has been due for reauthorization since 2007. The effort gained some steam in the House in mid-May, as the first piece of legislation related to the reauthorization was introduced, but the process is far from over.

Typically, in a reauthorization process, the House and Senate develop companion bills that build off the format of the existing law. The Senate has been working on the ESEA in this fashion over the last two years. Education Committee leaders are developing a bipartisan bill that would significantly revise several aspects of NCLB and that is focused in part on giving local education systems more flexibility.

The House Education Committee had been working in a similar manner last year, but following the Congressional elections and the ascension of the Republican majority, the focus changed. Susan Gallagher Heffron and I met with the House Committee staff earlier this year to gather information as to their desired approach to the ESEA reauthorization process, and were told that Chairman John Kline (R-MN) intended to develop several smaller bills that focused on revising particular aspects of NCLB. The Committee is moving forward and the first reform bill has been introduced.

The legislation, H.R. 1891, is sponsored by Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA) and is entitled the “Setting New Priorities in Education Spending Act.” Hunter chairs the subcommittee that deals with elementary and secondary education policy, and his bill would eliminate 43 federal K-12 programs. A GOP press release stated the bill would streamline federal education priorities. Hunter asserted “At a time when approximately one-third of American fourth graders can’t read, we must concentrate on education initiatives that have a track record of putting the needs of students first.”

Hunter may face opposition from some in his own party in trying to get the legislation passed through Congress. One of the items that would be cut under H.R. 1891 is the Teaching American History (TAH) grant program, the only federal program that funds K-12 history education. The TAH grants have a champion in Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Alexander will likely ask friends in the House to vote against H.R. 1891 as long as a funding cut for TAH is included. Certainly, the bill would be dead in the water if it passed the House and was sent to the Senate.

While H.R. 1891 does not have direct relevance to geographers, the fact that House Republican leaders seem intent on cutting a huge number of federal education programs creates additional challenges for new initiatives, such as adding dedicated funding for K-12 geography education, inserted into the ESEA reauthorization. We will continue working to build support for our K-12 Resolution, and we encourage AAG members to reach out to political leaders to share your views on the importance of geography education.

Census Budget Defunds Statistical Compendia Branch

The Census Bureau’s Fiscal Year 2012 budget proposal includes a provision that would do away with the Statistical Compendia branch. The proposal would include reassignment for the program’s 24 full-time employees and eliminate its $2.9 million budget.

Many AAG members are familiar with the Branch’s key products, including the Statistical Abstract of the U.S., the National Data Book, and the USA Counties web-based dataset. The Census Bureau indicates that the request “is the result of a review of both ongoing and cyclical programs necessary to achieve Department of Commerce and Census Bureau goals and difficult choices in balancing program needs and fiscal constraints. The availability elsewhere of much of the information in the Statistical Abstract has led the Department and Census Bureau to the difficult decision to terminate the program.”

Several advocates for Census programs told me that the budget move was necessitated by political reality in a time of deep budget cuts. These individuals suggested that Bureau officials had to find cuts somewhere in order to sustain and promote other high-priority Census accounts, including the American Community Survey (ACS). ■

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