AAG Monitors Congressional Activity as President Obama Signals Possible Action on ESEA

Regular readers of this column are well aware that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA – currently known as No Child Left Behind) is long overdue for reauthorization. The law was last enacted in 2002 and should have been redone in 2007. But, as regularly happens in Washington, politics has stood in the way.

There is hope, however, at the beginning of the current 112th Congress that the legislation will make a serious effort to reauthorize the law – or at least key parts of it – in 2011 and that the White House can find some level of agreement with House Republicans on K-12 education policy. This hope was given further momentum during the State of the Union address on January 25, when President Obama signaled that the issue is a critical one for him.

Mr. Obama told Congress about the Department of Education’s Race to the Top program, which has enabled states to apply for federal grants rewarding “innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement.” The President also noted that Race to the Top “has led over 40 states to raise their standards for teaching and learning – standards developed not by Washington, but by Republican and Democratic governors.” And he asserted that “Race to the Top should be the approach we follow for new funding streams are likely to fall on deaf ears. They also told us Chairman Kline is probably going to handle the reauthorization through several smaller bills rather than by passing one all-encompassing piece of legislation. These bills might be focused around specific policy themes – but they also could take shape based on the existing titles (i.e., sections of the law) in the current ESEA.

So what will the landscape look like? While the new House Republican majority seems intent on preventing new funding streams in the ESEA, the possibility does exist that existing funding programs may evolve in a way that would better suit our discipline. Last year, the Administration was interested in creating a funding “bucket” that would draw in sums authorized for all of the core subjects. This bucket would enable states and localities to apply for grants for innovative teaching and training programs without regard to subject. An approach along these lines would seemingly benefit geography in that states or localities might be inclined to seek funding for K-12 geography programs.

Key Senators, however, including Lamar Alexander (R-TN) expressed skepticism about the bucket approach – and Alexander is a leading proponent for the Teaching America’s History grants, which would have been rolled into the larger bucket under the Administration’s concept. For these reasons, we will continue to provide input as requested by Alexander and other prominent Senators about the virtues of a funding authorization dedicated for K-12 geography education. The Senate is likely to pursue a more standard reauthorization process – and their bill will probably look similar to the format for the current ESEA. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), Chairman of the Senate’s education panel, has told colleagues that he would like to finish a bill by April. While this timetable may be optimistic, it shows that there is real momentum to reshape the ESEA this year.

How can AAG members help in this endeavor? We encourage you to contact your members of Congress to share your perspectives about K-12 geography education. While it is important that all members of Congress be contacted, there are eleven new House members in particular who will play a key role in 2011. Reps. Scott Desjarlais (R-TN), Richard Hanna (R-NY), Todd Rokita (R-IN), Larry Buschon (R-IN), Trey Gowdy (R-SC), Lou Barletta (R-PA), Kristi Noem (R-SD), Martha Roby (R-AL), Joe Heck (R-NV), Dennis Ross (R-FL), and Mike Kelly (R-PA) are all new to Congress and have been appointed to seats on Kline’s Committee. If you live or work in one of their districts or have a special tie to one of these members, please consider reaching out to them with your own views on the importance of K-12 geography education.

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Internships at AAG

The AAG is currently accepting applications for internships. Interns participate in AAG programs and projects such as education, outreach, website, publications, and research. A monthly stipend of $500 is provided. Interns will be expected to make their own housing and related logistical arrangements. Applicants should forward their resume, a brief writing sample, and a list of 2-3 references to Candida Mannozzi, cmannozzi@aag.org. Enrollment in a Geography or closely related program is preferred but not a prerequisite for this opportunity.