

# Educational Leadership

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The World in the Classroom Pages 38-41

## How Global is the Curriculum?

**In spite of improvements in global education during the past two decades, educators and policymakers still face challenges—and now an urgent need—to educate globally literate citizens.**

*Andrew F. Smith*

Global illiteracy in the United States has many causes. For most of its history, the United States has been isolated behind oceans and not threatened by its neighbors. Until the second half of the 20th century, the United States was economically self-sufficient and had little political will to get involved in the affairs of other nations.

Rapid and widespread political, economic, and military changes after World War II gave rise to issues that were global in scope, and many people became aware of the impact that events outside U.S. borders had on domestic affairs. Yet the U.S. public education system remained largely unchanged.

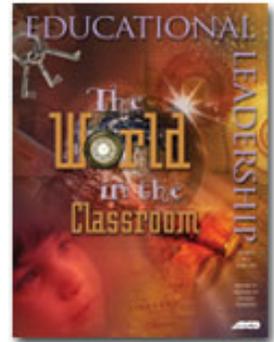
During the mid-1970s, educators and policymakers began to raise concerns about how well U. S. schools were preparing students for this rapidly changing world, and global education began to take shape. Most advocates did not support teaching specific global education courses because they believed that all courses should incorporate global subject matter. Nonetheless, social studies and foreign languages were the courses most amenable to integrating global perspectives.

### Curriculum Shifts

In 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter's President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies<sup>1</sup> issued a report that set in motion four major curriculum shifts in K-12 global education.

### Foreign Language Instruction

Only 8 percent of secondary school students enrolled in foreign language courses in 1979, but today approximately 50 percent do. The rapid expansion of Spanish language programs has occurred at the expense of French and German programs; other language classes, such as Chinese and Japanese—languages commonly spoken but not commonly taught—have expanded slightly. An even more significant development is the increase in foreign language programs in elementary schools—from almost none in 1979 to thousands of programs today.



October 2002

Despite this solid progress, foreign language programs in the United States do not come close to comparable instruction in other countries. Japan, for example, requires four years of English language instruction (many students take more) and offers other languages as electives. Executive Director of the Joint National Committee for Languages J. David Edwards says that U. S. foreign language education during the past 20 years has moved from “scandalous to mediocre.”

## **Geography**

In 1979, geography was all but excluded from the K-12 curriculum. In 1988, the National Geographic Society established an education foundation to promote the teaching of geography. Since then, the Society has spent \$110 million to support the National Geographic Bee, which this past year involved 5 million students, and to develop alliances of geography teachers and college professors concerned with improving instruction in geography from kindergarten through university; these alliances now exist in every state. In addition, four major geography organizations—the American Geographical Society, the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education, and the National Geographic Society—sponsored the development of national geography standards, and 48 states now have standards in geography. In 1994 and in 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress tested geographic knowledge and skills. The latest results showed unchanged average geography scores for 12th graders and low but improved scores for 4th and 8th graders.

## **World History**

In 1979, few states required the study of world history in school. Those that did focused only on Western civilization. In the 1990s, the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles developed world history standards that include substantial global content. The World History Association, founded in 1982, has supported improved instruction of world history in the K-12 curriculum and helped schools develop world history courses. Two years ago, the World History Association, working with the Educational Testing Service, began summer training programs for an advanced placement course in world history, and the Educational Testing Service offered an advanced placement test in world history for the first time this year. More than 20,000 students took the exam, an all-time high for any new advanced placement subject. The National Assessment of Educational Progress will test world history within the next few years.

## **Public Schools with an International Focus**

The fourth curriculum change has been the creation of public magnet schools with an international focus. Virtually no such schools existed in 1979, but today more than 100 have international programs, including, for example, the Bodine High School for International Affairs in Philadelphia. These schools typically require four years of instruction in foreign languages and one or two years of world history. Many specialize in extracurricular international experiences for students and teachers. The Center for Teaching International Relations at the University of Denver has helped improve instruction and promote communications among many of these schools. Similarly, the International Baccalaureate, which was rarely offered in U.

S. schools 20 years ago, is now offered in 420 schools—the largest number of participating schools in any country.

## **Other Opportunities**

### **Extracurricular Activities**

Independent of these formal curriculum shifts, many extracurricular activities have also strengthened U.S. students' understanding of global matters. These programs include student and teacher exchange programs, educational travel programs, Model United Nations, the Great Decisions programs sponsored by the Foreign Policy Association, and the Capitol Forum on America's Future sponsored by the Choices for the 21st Century Project at Brown University.

### **Technology**

Many technological advances that were not even envisioned 20 years ago are now providing new opportunities for direct communication with students and teachers in other countries. Such groups as the International Education and Resource Network facilitate these contacts. Much of this communication does not take place in English, so U.S. students can practice their foreign language skills while they converse with people in other countries. In addition, many Web sites have global education materials and excellent global content for educators and students.

## **Challenges**

As impressive as the above programs are, they reach far too few students, teachers, and schools. Even current extracurricular global programs and courses in foreign language, geography, and world history do not develop global perspectives in a comprehensive manner.

The most serious problem is inadequate teacher knowledge of the subject. Many states license teachers in social studies or history without requiring coursework in geography or world history. In elementary schools, few teachers have had any such courses. Changes in teacher licensing and preparation will help those entering the teaching profession, and those currently teaching should have access to inservice programs.

Currently, about 50 global education projects offer inservice education programs that can serve as models for new efforts. For example, the American Forum for Global Education's New York and the World project offers programs for teachers in New York City; the Center for Teaching International Relations at the University of Denver works with teachers in Colorado; and the California International Studies Project, based at Stanford University, works with colleges and universities to conduct teacher education programs throughout the state.

Another challenge is the lack of research on global education, especially on the effectiveness of particular methodologies, the proper sequencing of global concepts and skills into the curriculum, and the effects of media and newspapers on student knowledge and understanding of the world. We need a national report card on global education to evaluate our successes and failures.

We can meet these challenges. It will take the political will to expend the money and effort to set new, important priorities in the U.S. education system.

State and local boards of education should make the teaching of global content and skills an important component of education for all students. The federal government has begun to take a leadership role by sponsoring International Education Week, which this year will take place November 18–22, and Global Science and Technology Week; these events have involved thousands of students. The federal government should also fund model global education projects and assist states and local schools in the same way that the government fostered science and mathematics education after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957.

In the wake of September 11, we need to reaffirm the importance of a globally literate citizenry. A better educated citizenry would not have responded to the September 11 attacks with such unjust retaliations as vandalizing mosques, harassing innocent Muslim Americans, or attacking Sikhs because their turbans were confused with those worn by the Taliban. We must never again find ourselves in the position, as so many did after September 11, of being unable to answer students' challenging questions.

As educators, we have a responsibility to prepare our students to meet the challenges of our increasingly, sometimes dangerously, interconnected world. It is not likely that the United States will exert global leadership for long with a citizenry that is globally deaf, dumb, and blind.

## **What Should Students Know About the World?**

The American Forum for Global Education has published guidelines to help K-12 educators integrate global and international studies within existing academic curriculums. These guidelines focus on three possible approaches to studying the world.

### **Global Challenges**

Global issues will not resolve themselves without deliberate action on the part of citizens who understand the complexities of these issues.

Students should leave school informed about one or more current global challenges, such as conflict and its control; economic systems; global belief systems; human rights and social justice; planet management: resources, energy, and environment; political systems; population; race and ethnicity; human commonality and diversity; the technocratic revolution; and sustainable development.

### **Culture and World Areas**

Each person has roots in one or more cultures. Cross-cultural learning is crucial for living in a multicultural society and for understanding that other people may view the same events in profoundly different ways.

Students who study diverse cultures objectively can gain insights into their own

and other cultures by examining such topics as the major geographic and cultural areas of the world; the commonalities and differences among cultures; how geography and history affect culture; and how cultures change.

### **Global Connections**

For better or worse, this web of interconnections suffuses economic activities, religious groups, and social and community organizations.

Students should develop such skills as recognizing, analyzing, and evaluating the interconnections among local, regional, and global issues and between their personal lives and global events.

*Source:* Collins, H. T., Czarra, F. R., & Smith, A. F. (1996, June/July). Guidelines for global and international studies education. *Issues in Global Education*, 135/136. Available: [www.globaled.org/guidelines/standards.html](http://www.globaled.org/guidelines/standards.html)

## **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. (1979). *Strength through wisdom: A critique of U.S. capability*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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