

The Case for Geography Education

Through its Geography Education Program, the National Geographic Society works with educators to help students develop geographic literacy.

Over the past decade, America's fortunes have become increasingly intertwined with those of other nations, yet geography has all but disappeared from America's classrooms. Geography has been folded into the social studies or abandoned altogether.

Does that make sense in these times of worldwide responsibilities and developments? How can we address this serious problem?

In 1985, we at the National Geographic Society launched a new Geography Education Program to revitalize

geography instruction in the nation's schools. The Geography Education Program takes a comprehensive approach to curriculum reform. Its projects and products include a network of Geographic Alliances that work to improve geography education



Map courtesy the National Geographic Society

Previous page: The Robinson projections were the basis for this "new" world map, recently made available by the National Geographic Society.

This page: National Geographic Society President Gilbert M. Grosvenor addresses contestants in the California Geography Bee in April 1989.



at state and local levels, teacher training and back-up support services, and innovative classroom materials and state-of-the-art technologies. These efforts are supported by a national public awareness campaign that enlists the public, the media, and policymakers as allies in the push for students' geographic literacy.

In 1988, we backed up this long-term commitment with \$40 million in outright gifts and matching funds to establish the National Geographic Education Foundation, which supports state and local initiatives to improve geography education.

Grassroots Curriculum Change

Because curriculum content requirements and most education reform measures are implemented at the state and local levels, the Geography Education Program has established Geographic Alliances in 27 states to mobilize teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers to push for improved geography curriculums in their states.

Alliances, most of which are based at state universities, host inservice workshops for teachers and act as advocates for change. Alliance coordinators guide education activists through the thicket of their states' policymaking and appropriations networks, teaching them the curriculum reform and fundraising skills they need to enlist institutional and financial support for their projects from governors, state legislatures, and chief state education officers.

To date, nearly a dozen Alliances have received state funding for their teacher-training and curriculum-change projects, and executive appropriations requests are pending before a number of other state legislatures. In Colorado, for example, the state legislature recently passed a budget that includes \$50,000 for the first year of a three-year commitment to match the Society's Education Foundation grant to the Colorado Geographic Alliance. The Indiana Alliance has received three years of state funding, and the Oklahoma Alliance has received two years of state funding. And in Texas,

Geographic Alliances in 27 states mobilize teachers, administrators, and policymakers to push for improved geography curriculums.

Speaker of the House of Representatives Gib Lewis and the state's education agency have joined forces to commit \$50,000 for 1989 Alliance activities and have agreed to introduce legislation to secure multi-year funding for the future.

Other Alliances have formed working partnerships with their states to improve geography education. The Tennessee Alliance, for instance, worked with the state's department of education to prepare teacher certification guidelines and require that all students admitted to the University of Tennessee have one year of world geography or world history. The Alliance reports that enrollments in secondary school geography courses have increased by approximately 300 percent in the last two years. And Kentucky's Alliance has formed a three-year funding partnership among the Society's Education Foundation, the state department of education, and the Kentucky Educational Foundation to develop geography material that will supplement the history curriculum in grades 4 through 6.

Teacher Training

Teacher training is vital to any broad curriculum reform effort. Teachers need—and deserve—encouragement to bolster their confidence and inservice training to boost their creativity and effectiveness. The Geography Education Program supports teachers with a range of educational strategies, lesson plans, and classroom materials designed to strengthen their teaching skills and enhance their students'

achievements. Since 1986, the Geography Education Program has hosted an annual Summer Geography Institute at the National Geographic Society's headquarters in Washington, D.C. Attended by 249 K-12 teachers from states with Geographic Alliances, this intensive, four-week institute of workshops, lectures, training sessions, and special events has three major goals: to put effective teaching strategies and materials to work in classrooms, to create teacher/leaders who are excited about what they do and can transfer their newly gained confidence and skills to other teachers, and to inspire institute graduates to participate actively in their Alliances' curriculum reform efforts.

In return for paid expenses, a stipend, and optional academic credit, institute participants are required to conduct workshops for their colleagues when they return to their school districts. Thus, the lessons learned by institute graduates will be passed along to thousands of other teachers—and millions of students.

Last summer, for the first time, the Geography Education Program offered

a 10-day Instructional Leadership Institute for graduates of Alliance summer geography institutes who have demonstrated enthusiasm for geography and qualities of leadership. This institute infused the Alliance Network with key players to aid in the mission of teacher training, public awareness, and systemic change.

In addition to the Society's Summer Geography Institute and Instructional Leadership Institute, nearly a thousand teachers participate in Alliance-sponsored summer geography institutes around the country. Team-taught by college professors and teacher-consultants trained at the Summer Geography Institute, each two- to four-week residential program features lectures and field trips, classroom materials and lesson plans, and training in conducting inservice workshops for colleagues in teachers' home districts. Throughout the year, Alliance states also host a number of one- and two-day inservice workshops for teachers.

In 1988, more than 700 teachers attended summer geography institutes in Washington and in 13 states, later passing on their new geographic

Photograph by Sisse Brimberg courtesy the National Geographic Society



National Geography Bee winner Jack Staddon and runner-up Michael Shamon discuss the competition with moderator Alex Trebek. Fifteen-year-old Staddon won by correctly naming a flat intermountain area in the central Andes—an altiplano.

knowledge and enthusiasm to more than 63,000 students in their classrooms. Last summer's institute graduates multiplied that ripple effect: by next year, institute graduates will have given more than 1,400 inservice workshops attended by 43,000 teachers who will help more than three million students increase their understanding of the world around them.

In partnership with the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network, the Society also coordinates a specialized program called the Teaching Geography Project designed to strengthen geographic instruction across the curriculum. Materials for the Teaching Geography Project include a teacher's handbook, *A Model for Action*, that helps educators integrate geography into a variety of academic subjects. These resources are backed up by one- or two-day inservice workshops that train teachers to use effective strategies and supply them with innovative classroom materials. Workshop content is tailored to meet the needs of local teachers and curriculums. The Teaching Geography Project serves teachers in all 50 states. There is a particularly strong demand for workshops in states (such as California, Illinois, and New Jersey) that have large populations of school-age children and in states that have new mandates for geography education. In South Carolina, for example, a state-mandated geography course began in September 1988, and a workshop held that month attracted teachers from every school district in the state.

Classroom Materials and Technologies

Today's schoolchildren are technology aficionados, bored with traditional teaching and old-fashioned textbooks. These students pose a real challenge, a challenge the Society is meeting with innovative teaching strategies and high-impact materials and technologies used in thousands of elementary and secondary schools in the United States, Canada, and abroad.

In addition to producing its own publications, maps, globes, and audiovisual materials, the Society collaborates with other innovators, including Apple Computers and Lucasfilm, to create computer software, videodiscs,

and other state-of-the-art educational technologies that supply teachers with powerful new ways to teach and give students exciting new ways to discover the beauty and utility of geography.

For example, National Geographic Kids Network® is a new telecommunications-based science curriculum for students in grades 4 through 6 that will eventually link youngsters in 10,000 schools across the country and around the world via computer, enabling them to work together on scientific and geographic research projects and share the results.

Other new resources available to the Alliances and schools across the country include interactive videodiscs that combine film footage and photographs with text frames (enabling students to retrieve and cross-reference stored data and images), computer software kits, and a 15-minute videotape version of the Society's award-winning multi-image slideshow, "Geography: A Voyage of Discovery."

Geography, taught with these fresh ideas and exciting materials, can help to give students a broad understanding of the world and the cultural, political, economic, and environmental challenges they'll be asked to meet as adults.

Special Events and Celebrations

The Society sponsors a variety of high-profile special events to spark students' interest in geographic themes. In May, for example, months of intense school- and state-level competitions among students in grades 4 through 8 from 13,000 schools culminated in the finals of the first annual National Geography Bee, sponsored by the Society's *WORLD* magazine. First-round school winners received a book, an inflatable globe, and a certificate of achievement, while their schools received a world map, and a certificate of appreciation. State-level winners and their teachers traveled to Washington as guests of the Society for the finals. The Geography Bee's grand prize winner, second- and third-place winners received \$25,000, \$15,000, and \$10,000 college scholarships, respectively.

November 12-18, 1989, will mark the Society's third annual national

Geography Awareness Week. Each year, Geography Awareness Week is introduced as a Congressional resolution, signed by the President of the United States, and celebrated by thousands of elementary and secondary students. The Geography Education Program staff works with members of Congress and the administration, plans and promotes Geography Awareness Week activities nationwide, and distributes teacher activity packets and posters to thousands of schools. State Geographic Alliances, school districts, and individual teachers generate Geography Awareness Week activities in local schools, including poster and T-shirt contests, exhibits and field trips, classroom appearances by radio and television weathercasters and local celebrities, Christmas tree tagging projects, and other special events.

Meeting the Challenge

We at the National Geographic Society understand that better geography education cannot, by itself, meet the enormous challenges faced by the nation's education system. But by working to convince the public and policymakers that geographic literacy is important to our nation's future, the Geography Education Program can help build a groundswell of support for international education. By recruiting allies among governors, state education officers, school administrators, and teachers, the program can create a powerful force for broad systemic change. By training teachers and supplying them with materials and back-up support, the program can spark—and hold—their students' interest in geography. And by giving today's restless, computer-literate, and video-savvy students stimulating ideas and challenging materials, the program can help them understand and shape the world they will inherit. □

Author's note: For more information on geography education curriculum reform, teacher training, and classroom materials, contact Bob Dulli, Director, Geography Education Program, National Geographic Society, 17th and M Sts., Washington, DC 20036.

Gilbert M. Grosvenor is President and Chair of the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C.

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