

Our place on the map

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NATIONAL Geography Awareness Week (Nov. 11-17) will have special significance for the schools of Rhode Island. The National Geographic Society has just awarded a \$10,000 planning grant to the two of us, one of seven such awards granted this year, to begin the process by which all of our schools may again bring geography to its full importance in the curriculum.

The planning grant is but the first step in what will be at least a six-year project, with matching funds up to \$100,000 for each year. This potential \$600,000 commitment, half of which will come from the NGS Education Foundation, to be matched by the state, private foundations, local businesses and other funders, will provide students the opportunity to be among the most geographically literate young people in the nation.

Sad to say, Americans are among the worst geographically informed persons when compared with other national groups. A 1988 Gallup Test of more than 10,000 adults in nine comparable countries placed us in the lowest third: Most shocking was the rating of Americans aged 18-24, who scored lowest of all countries, below France, Italy and Mexico, and lowest of all American age groups.

For all of these adults tested, 75 percent could not locate the Persian Gulf (they would do better today); 45 percent did not know where Central America is situated; 57 percent did not know the population of our country; and 75 percent were unable to locate Sweden on a map.

Joan Beck of The Chicago Tribune asks: "How can a people who have fought three great wars abroad in the last half century, who have turned travel into a major industry, who provide a home to the United Nations and who have absorbed immigrants from everywhere in the world, be so geographically dumb?"

A major part of the answer is that we don't teach geography in the schools. Our young people are on a par with any others in the world, but if we don't provide them with the information, tools and skills needed to acquire this knowledge, what can we expect?

The National Geographic Society asks the same question, and has set aside \$20 million to implement the Geography Alliance Program. And by the end of 1992 all states in the nation should become part of this national endeavor.

Our job over the next nine months is to establish a network of classroom teachers, college and university geographers, administrators, state and local education policymakers and other concerned individuals and organizations who will work together to promote the improvement of geography education.

Through a series of meetings and discussions, working with other states which have achieved Alliance status, checking such available resources as personnel, programs and materials, communicating with administrators and

teachers throughout the state about their work in geography and their needs, and examining curricula requirements at various grade levels, we will determine what our local and state needs in geography are, and how best to address these needs.

By next July, a proposal that will outline our program over the next six years will be submitted. That proposal, if accepted by NGS, will grant Alliance status and annual funding from them of up to \$50,000, to be matched by Rhode Island.

Teachers are ready and enthusiastic about getting involved with improved and increased instruction in geography. The maps, videos, visuals, computer programs and other materials to be provided by NGS will certainly capture the interest of the students, and the excitement of the program, together with its recognized potential of marked improvement for teaching geography, make high-level geographic literacy for young Rhode Islanders look most promising.

For too long our young people have been sidetracked from basic geographic knowledge and concepts, and the embarrassing results of this geographic illiteracy are found whenever these young people are tested. With this help from the NGS, the schools of Rhode Island will now be in a position to institute change and improvement in the teaching of geography.

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