

Bringing geography to life!

When Gil Grosvenor, president of the National Geographic Society, called a meeting of Kit Salter and other geographers from California nearly a decade ago, he had no idea that the discussion would have a profound impact on the teaching of geography in the nation's schools.

That initial meeting was called to draw on the work that Salter and others were doing in California to revitalize the teaching of geography, which was to serve as a model for what has become known as the Geography Alliances.

Starting in 1986 in seven states, the Alliances worked with geographers and educators to revive a subject that had lost its appeal and its identity in the schools of the nation. Geographers were well-aware of the problem and had made limited efforts to improve the teaching of geography in the schools. But with inadequate resources and a relatively small Association of American Geographers (only 6000 professionals), these attempts fell far short of the mark and subsequently languished.

Grosvenor recognized the decline in geographic knowledge and the sad state of affairs in the schools, so he took on the mantle of leadership to bring about major changes in the outlook, methods, processes and teaching of geography. His leadership and the backing of his National Geographic Society have already changed the role of geography in our schools.

Four states, for example, now require one year of high school geography in order to be admitted to their respective state universities.

Further, teachers are asking for courses in geography, attending geography institutes and workshops, and bringing to their children some of the excitement that they, themselves, have found in this new approach to the teaching of this "mother science."

Now, after just six years of effort by the Geographic, we are starting to see changes, and they start with the teachers. Rhode Island is a good illustration.

Dr. Anne K. Perry, professor of education at Rhode Island College, and I received a planning grant from the Geographic in 1990 to establish

an Alliance. The following year we received approval of our three-year proposal and a commitment for another three years on successful completion of the first cycle.

The Geographic says that the alliances must start with the teachers. To that end, we sent nine teachers to Washington for four weeks in the summer to be trained at the Geographic, at a cost of \$9000 each, funded entirely by the Geographic.

We trained 21 teachers last summer and an equal number will be trained this summer. The 30 previously trained teacher consultants have conducted workshops for teachers all over the state in which they provide materials developed by the Geographic, demonstrate new teaching strategies on geography and give content material as well.

In the past one-and-a-half years, more than one in five teachers in the state have attended one of these workshops or three all-day conferences. The Rhode Island Geography Education Alliance now has a membership of 2500.

Try to imagine what this has meant for the 30 teacher consultants. Many had 20 years of teaching and were looking forward to retirement from a job that had lost its excitement. But now they find themselves involved in professional activities that have gone beyond their wildest dreams.

Our nation's leaders have recognized geography as a necessary field of study. The nation's governors, with the concurrence of then-President Bush, adopted the National Goals for Education in 1990, and geography—together with math, science, English and history—was designated as one of the five core subjects.

In Rhode Island and in states throughout the nation, there are some exciting things happening in our classrooms. Geography education, with help from the National Geographic Society, is at the forefront of that excitement.

Chester E. Smolski is professor of geography and director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.