

Attacking geographic illiteracy

It has been clearly demonstrated through numerous surveys that US residents are among the most geographically illiterate people in the world. Whether trying to locate our own country or the Soviet Union on a world map, we score among the lowest of the major industrial nations of the world in such a simple exercise. But the future looks brighter, both in the nation and in Rhode Island, thanks to the efforts of the National Geographic Society.

It may be difficult to imagine why our citizens—people who come from all over the world—do so poorly in understanding other parts of the world, as well as our own. Even as Americans travel all over the world as tourists, get involved in wars in other parts of the world and talk in terms of global issues of pollution or new markets, we just do not measure up in knowing about the world and its people.

A major cause is the lack of a good and extensive program of geography instruction in our schools. It is the exceptional student here in Rhode Island who has had any instruction in geography beyond the sixth grade.

At the college level, the condition is just as appalling. For example, less than five percent of the 9000 students at Rhode Island College are ever exposed to the world as viewed through a geographer's eyes by formal course work. Worse, this total is the largest block of students of the three institutions of higher learning in Rhode Island that have geography departments and offer such courses.

What this means is that only a few college students acquire some basic geographic skills and understanding, but most do not. Unfortunately, many of those going into teaching are among the latter. The National Geographic Society (NGS) estimates that only one in three geography teachers in the nation has had a course in geography at the college level.

Teachers being taught

But there is change upon the horizon. Through the efforts of the NGS over the past five years there are now, in 40 Geography Alliance states, more than 63,000 teachers who are actively involved in learning geography themselves and working with teaching their many students. This past year, Rhode Island became one of these states.

Anne K. Petry, professor of education at Rhode Island College, and I received NGS funding last year to establish a network of teachers, administrators, business people, community leaders, parents and others involved in the educational process to improve the teaching

of geography in all of the schools in the state, both public and private, and at all levels, from kindergarten through high school.

To date, we have laid the groundwork for this network. Four Rhode Island teachers have just completed four weeks of intensive geography instruction at NGS headquarters in Washington, D.C., including one week of field work in Virginia. This experience will be repeated for five teachers next summer, also funded by NGS.

Additionally, Professor Petry and I will conduct an intensive geography institute for 20 teachers at both the Alton Jones campus of URI and campus of Rhode Island College. Field work and invited outstanding geography lecturers will be part of this two-week experience. Our grant will pay all expenses for these participants.

Matching funds

To ensure that this is a joint effort on the part of NGS and the individual states, funding must be shared. NGS will match local contributions to the program, up to \$50,000 a year. As of this writing, it appears that we will be in a position to start off this year, in September, with our \$100,000—\$75,000 of that coming from outside Rhode Island.

This three-for-one match of outside money to local money is good for the economy as well as for the education of our young people, since all money will be spent locally for goods and services. But most important, this money will go to improve the teaching of geography in all Rhode Island schools.

The process by which this improvement will take place has already been demonstrated in those states that first entered the program five years ago. Colorado and California, for example, will now require students to have taken a year of high school geography to enter the state university system. This curriculum requirement is a direct outgrowth of the work of the Geography Alliances in those states.

Basically, the process consists of having a grassroots organization of teachers, trained in Washington and at our institutes, who will train other teachers in the new methods of geography instruction. They, in turn, will teach others. In the process, more teachers learn geography and they in turn teach more students the joys of learning about different cultures in different settings.

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