

# Helping teachers help students enjoy geography

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The concern to improve the education of our young people, whether at the national, state or local levels, is manifesting itself in a variety of ways. One of these is the national program sponsored by the National Geographic Society.

Recognizing that change and improvement will take place when one starts with the teacher, the Geographic has placed its greatest emphasis on the professional development of the classroom teacher. It does this through its support of Geography Alliances that are based in each of the states as well as Canada, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

The purpose of these Alliances is to work with teachers from kindergarten through grade 12, in all schools, both public and private, to improve the teaching of geography. Based at Rhode Island College, the Rhode Island Geographic Education Alliance has been working with its trained 100 Teacher Consultants over the last eight years.

It is amazing what can happen in a classroom with a teacher who is excited about her or his subject. And that is exactly what the goal of our Alliance is - to get the teacher excited about geography, give them opportunities for further study, provide them with up-to-date teaching materials, and then to have them work with other teachers to pass on what they have learned about geography, including that excitement.

And how do you get a teacher excited about geography, a subject that can easily be made stimulating. It starts with our two-week summer institute, with one week in residence at some off-campus location and a week commuting to Rhode Island College.

That first week is very important for it allows fellow teachers to better know each other, share ideas about their work

and even become friends. Our program works because of this close relationship that is engendered among these teachers and the Alliance and because they are treated as professionals, a respect for their work that too few have experienced.

The summer institute also provides newly gained knowledge and the special skills needed to teach other teachers, something most teachers have never done. On completion of the institute, the now-designated Teacher Consultant, to-

## commentary

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gether with a business card, is required to go out and give workshops to other teachers who, in turn, will acquire some of the excitement, skills and knowledge to do a better job of teaching geography to their students. And this is how hundreds of Rhode Island teachers and thousands of students have been reached and who now have developed a new appreciation of this field of study.

Funding for this important work comes from the Geographic Society on a matching basis, so that we have worked to get funding from the state, foundations and private sponsors. Although not as successful as other state Alliances which have raised millions of dollars, with our one-half million dollars raised over the last eight years we have managed to make an impact on the schools of the state.

The teacher, professional development and excitement - these are the key ingredients for success: Professional development opportunities for our Teacher Consultants these next few months, for example, will have these Rhode Islanders studying in Colorado, Maine, Japan, the Geographic in Washington, D.C. and London.

And do they get excited? Talk to teachers who have done the Oregon Trail in Wyoming, sailed

our largest tall ship, the Rose, climbed Mt. Fuji, studied seals off the coast of Alaska, lived with Japanese families, sailed the Mediterranean on a U.S. Navy research vessel and done field work in West Virginia, Oregon, Alabama, Texas and a number of other states.

They have written grants (something they have never done before!), received awards, served on local, state and national geography education committees, traveled widely, written for our newsletter which goes to one-third of all Rhode Island teachers, presented papers at meetings, written for professional journals, acquired technology skills and developed a new sense of pride in their work. All of this through our small state program.

Yes, there are problems in our educational system, but realize also that there are programs which are working successfully to improve the situation. And teachers involved with the Rhode Island Geographic Education Alliance are among the leaders in bringing about this improvement.

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