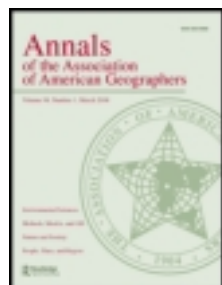


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# Geography and Educational Reform

*Editor's Note:* Ever since the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), educators have been challenged to reshape the nature and the quality of precollegiate education in the United States. The dearth of geography in the precollegiate curriculum is legendary, as is the geographic ignorance of American students (and their parents). Because the current wave of educational reform holds great potential for needed change, I invited several educators to reflect on the role that geographers can play in shaping new school curricula. As the chair of the committee that sparked the current debate on educational reform in America and as an individual with a background in geography, David Pierpont Gardner is exceptionally well qualified to assess the place of geography in the context of overall reform. Christopher Salter describes the successful work he has spearheaded in making geography an integral part of the high school curriculum in California, and John Wolforth provides a comparative perspective by reviewing the place of geography in Canadian schools, where, in some provinces, geography has established a strong presence in recent decades.

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## Geography in the School Curriculum

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**Abstract.** The current national interest in educational reform, quickened by a series of reports on schooling during the past few years, has given us the first opportunity in a generation for real and fundamental reform in our schools. We should take advantage of this opportunity to improve the teaching of geography, especially in light of evidence suggesting that the proportion of seventh through twelfth graders enrolled in geography classes has dropped in recent years and that the academic preparation of many geography teachers in those grades could be strengthened. A number of encouraging new experiments are underway at the state and national levels. These experiments reflect a cooperative approach to the problems of the schools—including the problems of teaching geography—and involve higher education, business, and professional societies. Geography has a particularly important role to play in teaching the next generation about the nations of the Pacific Rim, which are an increasingly powerful economic, cultural, and political force in world affairs. More generally, this is a time of extraordinary opportunity for geographers to promote and advance the essential perspective geography brings to our schools.

**Key Words:** geographic education, educational reform, Pacific Rim.

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**I**N 1981, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education and asked me to serve as its chairman. Our charge was to “assess the quality of education in our nation’s public and private schools, and to make a report to the American people.” From that moment—which brought together the Commission’s 18 representatives from teaching, industry, government, the foundation world, and private life—until now, much of my life has been a mosaic of responses, reflections, and recommendations on schooling in America. This, however, is the first opportunity I have been given to bring a message directly to

geographers in the context of current educational reform.

In the 18 months that our Commission studied American education, we heard from several hundred witnesses—parents and teachers, school administrators and board members, researchers and students, business and civic leaders. We gathered information by holding public hearings and symposia throughout the country, as well as by promoting and reviewing research on all aspects of education in the United States. As a Commission we met a number of times to ponder this information, discuss its meaning, debate our options, and prepare our

report (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Consider some of our findings:

- Some 23 million Americans are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension. About 13 percent of all 17 year olds in the U.S. can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may be as high as 40 percent (p. 8).
- The amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased (two-thirds report less than an hour a night), and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining (p. 18).
- Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course. Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to "general track" courses in large numbers. The proportion of students taking a general program of study has increased from 12 percent in 1967 to 42 percent in 1979 (p. 19).
- This curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice, explains a great deal about where we find ourselves today. We offer intermediate algebra, but only 31 percent of our recent high school graduates complete it; we offer French 1, but only 13 percent complete it; and we offer geography, but only 16 percent complete it. Calculus is available in schools enrolling about 60 percent of all students, but only 6 percent of all students take it (p. 20).

Given the nature of our findings, we decided to write the report as an open letter to the American people, to increase the chances of its being noticed rather than remaining unread by the very people who ought to be alarmed about its message. The fact that nearly all 50 states have since established state-level task forces, examining the nature and needs of their specific educational systems, is a sign of the impact not only of the Commission's report, but also of the many other studies that reached similar conclusions. The interest of *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in the teaching of geography in the schools is a further indication of the scope and reach of the changes that are now shaping American secondary education.

The remarkable public response to the 1983 education reports—there are more than six million copies of our Commission's report in print alone—has given us the first national opportunity in a generation to bring about real and fundamental reform in our schools. We cannot count on another chance for some time—probably not for another generation at least. We should take advantage of that opportunity to improve the teaching of all disciplines, including the discipline of geography.

And all the evidence points to an urgent need to act. In 1960–61, only 14 percent of America's 7–12 graders were enrolled in geography courses. This was a lower percentage than had been standard for years. By the mid-1970s, however, the figure had dropped to 9 percent. This development means that children not only lose instruction in basic place name geography but also are denied the potential for creative approaches to spatial skills, an understanding of the earth, its resources, and the broad patterns of cultural distinction across regions.

Drawing on 1982 data, we find that of the some five thousand teachers who teach geography in grades 7–12, 20–30 percent had taken no classes in geography when they were in college; 30 percent had minored in geography; 10 percent had majored in geography, and the remainder had taken only one or two courses. Thus, not only is a smaller percentage of the precollegiate population being exposed to this subject, but those who teach it today are less familiar with the subject than one might hope. Clearly, there is a real need for geographers to become concerned about and involved in this matter.

I bring this up for two reasons: On the one hand, I was a student who saw the significance of geography early on and committed undergraduate time to its study. When I graduated from Brigham Young University in 1955, I had a triple major—Geography, Political Science, and History. To my mind, there are very logical connections among these three fields. All human events involve an intersection of time and place, and the geographic dimension fixes the place for social intercourse among peoples, and between humans and their environment. Such understanding is essential in determining the motives, the dynamics, and the costs of much human activity. Our educational system should be profoundly concerned with conveying that understanding to the young.

There is, however, an additional, even more basic reason why it is important to promote the

presence of geography in the American classroom. Historically, we have been a nation pushing outward, seeking new frontiers, dedicated to the exploration of new lands to accommodate our growth and settlement. In the frontier era, geography was a welcome subject because it provided some sense of the world "out there" and gave us information that helped to determine our approaches to the productive use of new lands. As the frontier filled in, however, we became more settled in our view of both ourselves and our world. This change seems to have diminished our capacity to look outward, to see the open horizon, and to be curious about lands beyond our own borders. Geography has always been a rich discipline in its capacity to unfold the wonders of other cultures, other settlement patterns, and other attitudes toward the environment and the earth and its resources.

Children born in the desert lands of Nevada, or the small coves of West Virginia, or even the canyons of Manhattan have been able to look beyond their local worlds as they study the people and places of distant nations and regions. This comprehension of distinct and sometimes vividly divergent ways of life provides children with a wonderful vision of the world and their place in it. It is not only a vision of life lived differently; it is a vision that leads to a better understanding of one's own way of life. To study another place, another society, another people is always to explore one's own universe through contrast and comparison.

For both these reasons—the deepening of students' grasp of the world's complexity and the broadening of vision that geographic studies encourage—I welcome the energetic efforts of geographers to strengthen this educational resource in American classrooms. Activities to improve the teaching of geography in the schools have a statewide, a national, and an international focus. Let me begin at the state level with an example from California.

One of the most promising efforts to emerge from the educational reform movement has been the involvement of higher education, businesses, and professional societies in this endeavor. Cooperation between secondary and postsecondary educators is especially rich in possibilities because schools and colleges already influence each other in a variety of formal and informal ways. For a number of reasons, however, the once-cooperative relationship between secondary and postsecondary education has unraveled some, the victim of

many different kinds of stresses and strains on both higher education and the schools. Today, fortunately, we are seeing a burgeoning effort to establish partnerships between the two in the interests of improving education in the schools.

In California an alliance has been established among teachers from the schools, community college instructors, educational administrators, and college and university faculty. The aim of this California Geographic Alliance is simple: to improve the teaching of geography in the schools. And for the junior and senior high school teachers who have given six or seven hours to 150 students during a normal day, the chance to step onto a university campus for a program that treats them as equals in the struggle to improve education provides spark and renewal. For the university professor who runs the risk of losing touch with the often exhausting—and always demanding—responsibilities of colleagues in the schools, the interaction with high school teachers is a source of fresh perspectives and new ideas. While geography is the focus of the California group described here, the organizational structure could be adopted in virtually all fields. It is an idea worth trying on other campuses and in other schools.

Business and professional organizations are also making important contributions. Many cities now have "Adopt-a-School" programs in which a local company assists a local school: chemists and physicists from a research and development firm, for example, volunteer their services to teach science to gifted students as a way of complementing the efforts of regular teachers. Many chambers of commerce, statewide business roundtables, and local businesses are working to promote corporate contributions to education, encouraging their employees to become involved with the schools, and supporting legislative and budget proposals for reform in education. The point is that everyone in our society has a stake in education, and everyone can help.

The National Geographic Society is one such organization that is committed to improving the teaching of geography. To do so, the Society is establishing pilot projects in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles schools, will be running a Summer Geography Institute in Washington, and will be developing and distributing teaching materials from the Society's valuable educational resources. In this effort the Society will be working closely with the California Geographic

Alliance. While the National Geographic Society is particularly well equipped to promote geographic education, other corporate groups could support educators to bring change, new optimism, and improvement to our schools as well.

One of the special strengths of geography is its capacity not only to educate a student about the location of foreign places, but also to teach about the physical and cultural environment of such places. As a nation, we stand in need of lessons on the geography of the Pacific Rim, for we are entering into what has been called the Pacific Century.

Since 1978 the U.S. has shipped more goods across the Pacific than across the Atlantic. Asia buys one-third of our grain exports, nearly one-fifth of our machinery exports, a quarter of our chemical exports, almost a third of our civilian aircraft exports, and more than half of the lumber we send abroad. The dollar total of our current trade with Japan is greater than American exports to France, West Germany, and Italy combined. Japan, in fact, is the largest American export market outside of Canada. The port of Los Angeles now exceeds the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey in terms of net income; in a few years the annual tonnage shipped through the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors is expected to outstrip New York as well. The geography of our trade has obviously shifted enormously.

If we look beyond trade, and turn again to the classroom and educational reform, we move from the mercantile to the social context of the Pacific Century. The U.S. is experiencing a wave of immigration that rivals that of the turn of the century, and California is receiving some 30 percent of those immigrants—a proportion far in excess of the state's 10 percent of the nation's population. The majority of these newcomers arrive from Pacific Rim countries—Mexico, Central and South America, and Asia. Roughly half of California's population growth during the 1970s was due primarily to this pattern of immigration.

Circumstances have combined to offer California special opportunities and special responsibilities. By virtue of its geography, its economy, its history, its character, and its wealth, California is fitted to play a pivotal role in what will surely be one of the greatest centers of trade, commerce, and cultural exchange the world has ever known. Geographers can assist our schools in bringing this news not only to

students in California classrooms, but also to youth in schoolrooms all over America, for this shift in our trade and patterns of cultural infusion will have an impact on the entire American landscape and society.

Set goals as you promote the expansion of geographic education in the American scene. Have as one of your ambitions the inclusion of geographic units on the Pacific Rim so that we can assure ourselves that our next generation has not come through school thinking that the spatial, economic, and cultural patterns of the past are necessarily going to repeat themselves in the future. With the force of geography, you can play a productive role in making students realize that the world has a history of continual shift and flux, mapping new patterns of trade activity, migrations and cultural influence as nations and regions of the world wax and wane in development and significance.

This is a time of extraordinary opportunity for educators who wish to bring their curricula, classrooms, and mission into productive alignment. In virtually every state, commissions are working on curriculum revision, new graduation requirements, and consideration of a core of academically demanding and rewarding courses. It is fitting that geography and geographers play a role in this far-reaching reform effort.

This discipline has a significant and essential perspective to bring to our schools, but that perspective will not make its way into our curriculum unless geographers are willing to promote and advance its presence. The partnership among teachers from all levels in the California Geographic Alliance, and between the Alliance and the National Geographic Society, provides an effective and productive model for the cooperation essential to achieve educational reform. I am pleased that the Alliance has taken root and grown on a campus of the University of California, and I see the activity begun here as being readily transplanted to any campus and community in which there are geographers who care about their schools, their students, and the presence of their discipline in the American schoolroom.

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