

AAG Newsletter
of the
**Association of American
Geographers**

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Blueprint Needed for Geography Education

On March 13, the Obama Administration released its "blueprint for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)," also commonly known as No Child Left Behind. The ESEA was last reauthorized in 2002. The law has been due for Congressional renewal since 2007, but political clashes have prevented action until now. With the debate over healthcare reform – which has been sucking all of the oxygen out of political Washington – finally over, the Administration has started to turn focus to other policy issues – and the ESEA is near the top of the list.

As AAG members are likely well aware, the Association has been actively engaged with key officials on Capitol Hill regarding No Child Left Behind in recent years. Our biggest concern is that geography is the only "core academic subject" identified within the law that does not receive a specific funding allocation or implementing programs to further teaching of geography at the K-12 level (see Richardson, "Federal Funding for Geography Education?", *AAG Newsletter*, June 2002). AAG staff and members have been working with individual members of Congress as well as the leadership of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) and the House Committee on Education and Labor for several years now to respond to their requests for information, and we have gained some traction.

As with healthcare reform, the ESEA reauthorization process in Congress will be missing a larger-than-life figure this time around. Former Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) served as the lead Democrat on the HELP Committee for many years and negotiated several provisions of the No Child



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legislation with President Bush back in 2001. The new Chairman of the HELP Committee is Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) and he will work hand-in-hand with Rep. George Miller (D-CA), who chairs the House Committee and is a key home-state ally of Speaker Nancy

Pelosi. Harkin's presence could be especially beneficial to the AAG as he is a long-time advocate of increased federal research spending and may well be receptive to our message.

Harkin's Committee has already begun hearings on the reauthorization and recently hosted Education Secretary Arne Duncan for a discussion of the topic. Duncan noted that the current eight-year gap between reauthorizations is the longest in the 45-year history since the ESEA was first enacted and that it is critical that the government act now to fix flaws in the law. Senator Michael Enzi (R-WY), the ranking Republican on the HELP Committee, applauded the Administration's initiative in releasing the blueprint and especially commended the focus on the special needs of rural school districts. He specifically cited the lack of attention to rural needs in No Child, asserting: "No Child Left Behind has been criticized as a one-size-fits-all law, a claim that has rung especially true in rural areas." This line of argument should work well for our discipline – in that we can argue that geography, of all subjects, is especially suited to adapting to places where it is taught.

The general Obama ESEA blueprint does not mention geography or provide any dedicated funding for the teaching of our discipline to K-12 students. The blueprint is general in nature and offers only a big-picture look at the major changes the Administration

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is seeking. These changes include a request to the states to adopt college- and career-ready standards and to reward schools for producing dramatic gains in student achievement. On a promising note for geography, the document does challenge the nation to embrace educational standards that would put America on a path to global leadership.

In addition to reaching out to members of the Administration in the coming weeks and months, the AAG will continue to work with Congress to respond to Congressional requests for information on the importance of teaching geography and the funding of geographic education. We will be hosting several special sessions during the AAG Annual Meeting focused on geography education and on federal education policy. Speakers will include Congressman Tim Walz (D-MN), a former high school geography teacher, and others who will provide insights on how to best inform their colleagues on this issue. Mike Lach, a political appointee in the Deputy Secretary of Education's office on science education, will also address the administration's plans regarding No Child Left Behind at the AAG meeting.

As an integral part of our long-term effort to address the ESEA reauthorization, we are now developing an *AAG Blueprint for Geography Education*, to complement President Obama's initiative, and to lay out a more comprehensive strategy for enhancing geography education in the United States. We urge our members and other organizations engaged in geography education to join us in this project, and its implementation. Special sessions are planned for our Washington, D.C. Annual Meeting to discuss the AAG Blueprint, and we welcome everyone's involvement in these discussions.

Separately, the AAG will also continue to engage with other decision makers, including the National Governors Association (NGA), the Chief State School Officers, and other leading state officials to advance and support key geography education programs. The NGA serves as the leading voice of the states in Washington and is attuned to the critical issues being debated on Capitol Hill, including the reauthorization of the ESEA. Perhaps of greater importance, the National Governors Association runs a Center on Best Practices that can be a key starting point for promoting ideas. We will work through the

NGA and other avenues to bring attention to the importance of geographic education at the K-12 level.

Ultimately, we at the AAG will be looking to our members for assistance and leadership during this process. We suggest that you consider contacting your members of Congress to provide your own perspectives on the need for geographic education and the importance of dedicated federal funding. Those of you joining us in Washington, D.C. for the Annual Meeting may wish to take time to discuss key pending decisions regarding geography education with your Congressional representatives while in the nation's capital. The fight to bring attention to the teaching of geography on the federal level has been an important cause to the AAG in recent years. As we engage in the reauthorization debate this year, we will redouble our efforts and ask you to join us in this crucial undertaking. ■

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